

Ashfield Homes ALMO Re-Inspection

Ashfield District 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 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 (ALMOs) and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

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

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

This service was inspected as part of the Government's arms length housing management (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)

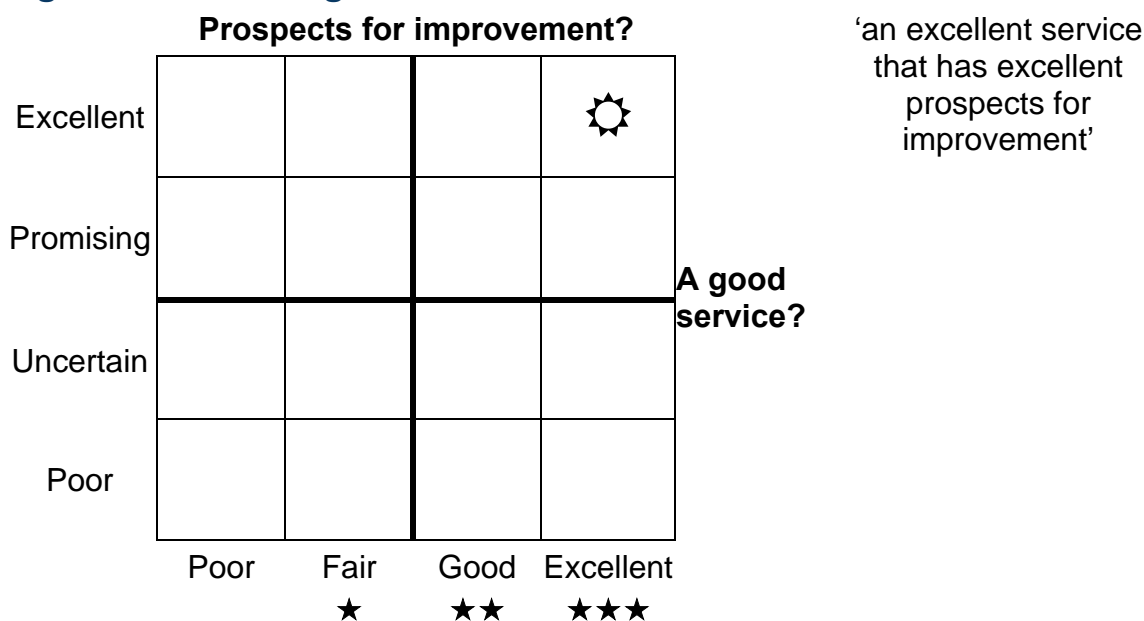
Summary

- 1 Ashfield District Council is a district council in the East Midlands of England. The population is 114,200 of which 1.9 per cent is from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 Whilst unemployment is equivalent to the national average of 2.3 per cent (January 2005), the area is ranked as the 52nd most deprived area in England (out of 354), measured using the indices of multiple deprivation, with 26.7 per cent of the population economically inactive and average earnings being 10 per cent below the national average.
- 3 The Council is led by the Labour Party, which has 18 of the 33 seats, and employs 553 (full-time equivalent) staff and has a revenue budget of £13.2 million.
- 4 There are 49,000 homes in the district. Of these 7,452 are council homes, 1,300 are owned by registered social landlords (RSLs) and 40,000 are privately owned.
- 5 Council homes are managed by Ashfield Homes, an arms length management organisation (ALMO) set up in 2002.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Ashfield Homes as providing an ‘excellent’, three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We have assessed that Ashfield Homes is providing excellent housing services because of the following.
- There is a comprehensive range of well publicised service standards that have been agreed with service users.
 - Access to the service is good and the quality of information provided to service users is very high.
 - Customer feedback is sought across the range of services and consistently high levels of satisfaction are being achieved.
 - There is clear corporate commitment to promoting diversity and staff at all levels have a strong awareness of diversity issues.
 - Diversity issues are being effectively considered in service delivery and measures introduced to ensure services meet the needs of all sections of the community.

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

- A three year, £76 million programme of improvement works, focused on achieving the government decent homes standard, has been very well co-ordinated and delivered in a highly customer focused manner.
- Day-to-day repairs are carried out very quickly and to a high standard.
- There is a programme of proactive planned works externally to homes and surrounding areas.
- Comprehensive systems are in place to deliver gas servicing and gas appliances in all properties have been serviced in the last 12 months.
- Aids and adaptations works are well resourced and delivered promptly following referral.
- Empty properties are being repaired quickly and to a high standard.
- There are robust processes in place for rent collection and arrears recovery, and these are well integrated with the provision of welfare benefits advice and debt advice.
- There is strong performance on the level of rent collected and the level of arrears.
- Estate services are well co-ordinated and estates are well maintained, clean and tidy. Comprehensive estate inspections are in place and environmental improvement programmes are being delivered.
- Tenancy management is comprehensive and there are effective procedures in place for tackling anti-social behaviour. Tackling anti-social behaviour is given a high priority and activities are well co-ordinated with partners.
- There are comprehensive lettings procedures which are being effectively applied. This is reflected in a strong performance in the overall time taken to re-let empty properties.
- Housing register applications are processed promptly, allocations are made efficiently and the quality of information for housing applicants is very high.
- Support services to elderly residents and vulnerable residents are of a high-quality.
- There is a strong focus on delivering value for money, a value for money strategy is in place and benchmarking has been conducted. Some key measures to improve value for money have been implemented. In particular, value for money measures have been implemented in the high value areas of major works and responsive repairs.

8 We did find some specific areas for improvement.

- Local offices do not provide a consistently welcoming environment for service users.
- The information on future improvement works currently available to tenants is limited and leaseholders and owner occupiers are not consistently offered the opportunity to buy into ongoing improvement works.
- The proportion of responsive repairs completed in one visit is not being monitored.
- There is backlog in cyclical painting works.
- The corporate debt policy is not sufficiently linked to council debt recovery activity.
- Analysis of unit costs, external benchmarking and alternative procurement options to inform assessments of value for money is not yet comprehensive.

9 There are excellent prospects for improvements because of the following.

- There is strong track record of delivering service improvement.
- User satisfaction surveys and performance indicators both demonstrate improved performance on what were already high standards.
- Aims and priorities for the future are clear, challenging and robust.
- Action plans cover the key areas for service development and these areas have been identified using best value principles.
- Plans are comprehensive, SMART and address value for money.
- There is a well embedded performance culture supported by a comprehensive performance management framework which together drive and monitor progress, and review impact.
- There is a robust approach to risk management.
- There is strong leadership and well-skilled, well-motivated staff.
- There is a commitment to continuous improvement throughout the organisation.
- A viable business plan is in place and effective human resources policies.
- IT capacity is improving, there is an expanding use of modern procurement methods and there has been success in attracting additional investment.

10 There were only a limited number of barriers to improvement.

- There are a small number of areas where progress has been slower than expected some of which have been dependent on Council decisions.
- IT capacity within stock investment and asset management has limited progress in service improvements in this area.
- The level of scrutiny of the ALMO by the Council has not been consistently robust.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Ashfield Homes

Recommendation

R1 To strengthen the focus on users and tenants by:

- *finalising and delivering proposals for the provision of local offices which create a welcoming environment for service users;*
- *agreeing and publicising to tenants expected programmes for major works for the next three years;*
- *ensuring that Ashfield Homes' corporate debt policy is clearly linked with Council debt recovery activity;*
- *considering arrangements which would enable leaseholders and owner occupiers the opportunity to buy into improvement works; and*
- *ensuring that plans to clear the backlog of cyclical decorations are delivered and that future programmes are adequately resourced.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- improved external maintenance of properties; and
- improved co-ordination of debt recovery.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by December 2006.

Recommendation

R2 Integrate value for money into working practices by:

- *further developing analysis of unit costs, associated benchmarking and investigation of alternative procurement methods, to demonstrate value for money across all service areas;*
- *working with the Council to ensure that there is a robust challenge to grounds maintenance and building cleaning services, evaluating value for money and service quality and seeking improvements for service users; and*
- *ensuring that improved and integrated IT systems are introduced to stock investment and asset management activities.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- potential cost savings and service improvements.

The implementation of this recommendation would have medium impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by September 2006.

Recommendations

R3 Strengthen performance management by:

- *implementing arrangements to monitor the number of day-to-day repairs completed in one visit; and*
- *ensuring that mechanisms are developed to provide comprehensive feedback from estate inspections to all relevant stakeholders.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved ability to assess performance; and
- improved accountability for service delivery.

The implementation of this recommendation would have medium impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by March 2006.

Recommendations for Ashfield District Council

Recommendation

R4 To strengthen the focus on users and tenants by:

- *ensuring progress on decisions for local office refurbishments to enable Ashfield Homes to deliver higher quality local offices;*
- *considering the introduction of a choice based lettings scheme to complement the proposed establishment of local property shops by Ashfield Homes; and*
- *developing clear plans to ensure that housing for older people is supplied to a level that meets demand and is of a quality that meets modern standards.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction; and
- enabling service improvements to meet users needs.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by March 2006.

<i>Recommendation</i>

<i>R5 To strengthen performance management by ensuring that monitoring of the ALMO is consistently robust.</i>
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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction; and
- enabling service improvements to meet users needs

The implementation of this recommendation would have low impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by March 2006.

- 12 We would like to thank the staff of Ashfield Homes who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 19 to 27 September 2005

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Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Ashfield is situated in the East Midlands region in the west of Nottinghamshire, and the north of Nottingham city. The district has good road communications via the M1 motorway and the A38 trunk road. The population of the area is 114,200 which is concentrated mainly in the three towns of Sutton in Ashfield, Hucknall and Kirkby in Ashfield. Of the population, 1.9 per cent are from minority ethnic communities which is well below the national average of 13 per cent.
- 14 The last three decades have seen a serious decline in both of Ashfield's historic industries, coal mining and textiles. The district is affected by poor health and educational attainment and has high crime levels. Whilst unemployment is equivalent to the national average of 2.3 per cent (January 2005), the area is ranked as the 52nd most deprived area in England (out of 354), measured using the indices of multiple deprivation, with 26.7 per cent of the population economically inactive and average earnings being 10 per cent below the national average.
- 15 There are 49,000 homes in the district. Of these 7,452 are Council homes, 1,300 are owned by registered social landlords (RSLs) and 40,000 are privately owned.

The Council

- 16 The Council is comprised of 33 elected members, and is currently controlled by a small Labour majority. A cabinet, with an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, governs the business of the Council.
- 17 The Council's mission is
'... to be recognised, by 2007, as a good council that is ensuring the provision of the comprehensive range of services necessary to continue the regeneration of Ashfield as a more prosperous, healthier, fairer and safer community.'

- 18 The Council's four strategic aims, as identified in the corporate plan, are as follows.
- Economic – to develop a prosperous, dynamic, competitive economy staffed by a highly skilled and motivated workforce.
 - Environmental – to make Ashfield a more environmentally friendly, attractive and safer place to live, work and visit.
 - Social – to help our communities thrive in a spirit of civic pride, tolerance and respect.
 - Personal – to help develop opportunities for all individuals to live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives, particularly by helping them take greater personal responsibility.
- 19 The Council was allocated a 'fair' rating in its comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in November 2003.

The service

- 20 The Council established an arms length management organisation (ALMO) called Ashfield Homes with effect from the 1 April 2002. The initial agreement with the ALMO is for 25 years, with 5 year break clauses. The ALMO board consists of four tenants, four Councillors and four Independents from the local business community.
- 21 The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services, receiving a management fee for this service. It manages the Council's responsive repairs and planned maintenance budget which has been set at £6.15 million for 2005/06. It also manages the capital programme for council homes which is £21.5 million for 2005/06. It employs approximately 200 staff to deliver the service.
- 22 The functions delegated to Ashfield Homes are set out in their section 27 application and can be summarised as:
- arrears management and debt counselling;
 - tenant participation, information and consultation;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
 - similar functions for leaseholders;
 - stock investment and repair ordering;
 - managing lettings, voids and under occupation;
 - estate management, caretaking and support services under supporting people;
 - anti-social behaviour (involving the Council);
 - environmental protection and improvement; and
 - administration of the housing register.

- 23 The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
 - rent collection at local offices;
 - Right to Buy processing, notices and service charge collection for leaseholders;
 - managing the Supporting People programme; and
 - homelessness and general housing advice.
- 24 Ashfield Homes delivers services to tenants in 7,452 Council homes and also 138 leaseholders. Approximately 650 homes are designated for older people, with 420 of these in sheltered housing schemes and 230 other flats and bungalows.
- 25 There has been an increasing demand for council homes in recent years, demonstrated by increasing numbers on the housing register. There were 2,900 on the housing register in 2000 but this had risen to 4860 by April 2005. There has also been a reduction in the level of stock turnover from 12.7 per cent in 2001/02 to 9.8 per cent in 2004/05.
- 26 Support services under Supporting People are provided by Ashfield Homes to 2,562 older people and 73 vulnerable people.
- 27 Ashfield Homes also manages a district-wide neighbourhood warden scheme.
- 28 In September 2002, the Audit Commission inspected Ashfield Homes and judged it to provide an excellent, three-star service with promising prospects for improvement. That assessment enabled Ashfield to receive an initial £26 million, rising to a total £55.3 million, to bring the Council's homes up to the decent homes standard. Ashfield Homes expects to become the first ALMO to deliver its decent homes programme in October 2005.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29 In our previous inspection, we found that Ashfield Homes had continued and enhanced its linkages with partnerships supporting wider Council aims and had a clear and challenging delivery plan, setting out key local and national performance targets, which customers and staff had helped to develop and prioritise.
- 30 In this inspection, we found that there continues to be a clear vision and objectives on what the service is aiming to achieve. These are comprehensively set out in Ashfield Homes' business plan, which also acts as the Council's HRA business plan.
- 31 The vision of Ashfield Homes is:
- 'To ensure present and future customers, service users, and stakeholders of Ashfield Homes enjoy decent housing and a good quality of life in a stable community through the provision of a range of excellent services, which meet their aspirations and which represent value for money.'*
- 32 This vision was endorsed by the Annual Tenants and Residents Conference in 2005.
- 33 The vision supports the Council's corporate objective for housing, which is:
- 'To ensure the adequate provision of decent, well maintained, and affordable housing in decent neighbourhoods for all sections of the community, and to support and enable the socially excluded to play a full role in the community.'*
- 34 As stated, in its housing revenue account business plan 2002, the Council's mission as a housing landlord is:
- 'To provide the opportunity of a decent rented home for all people in Ashfield, unable to afford market prices in neighbourhoods where they choose to live, and where the housing stock is maintained in good repair and provides amenities for the warmth, comfort, health, safety and security of tenants.'*
- 35 This mission was endorsed by the annual tenants and residents conference in 2002.
- 36 Ashfield Homes has decided its own aims, objectives, and values, which aim to deliver the Council's strategic aims and mission as a housing landlord and set out the future developments of the company. These were explained to employees at the employee conference in June 2004, and they are displayed in all the offices of the company.

- 37 The aims and objectives of Ashfield Homes were reviewed and amended by the Board in October 2004 at its annual away day. The following aims and objectives of Ashfield Homes were approved by the Board at its meeting on 30 November 2004.
- Manage the investment in the Council's housing stock to ensure it meets the decent homes standard.
 - By providing excellent housing services contribute to the wider regeneration and sustainability of the communities of Ashfield by entering into partnerships with appropriate organisations.
 - Facilitate the continuous improvement of tenant services.
 - Extend the empowerment of tenants in the management of their homes and the services they receive.
 - Minimise the detrimental effect the organisation has upon the environment.

Is the service meeting the needs of the community and/or users?

Access and customer care

- 38 In our previous inspection, we found that access to the service was good and customer satisfaction had improved in all areas. There was a comprehensive range of service standards and customer feedback was regularly obtained and used to inform service development. Most repairs were carried out by appointment and there was a dedicated call centre for reporting repairs.
- 39 In this inspection, we found that there are clear strengths in the Ashfield Homes approach to access and customer care which significantly outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong corporate approach and service standards are comprehensive. Services are easily accessible and information provided to service users is of a very good quality. Customer feedback is sought across the range of services and consistently high levels of satisfaction are being achieved. The only significant weakness is that local offices do not meet the highest standards.
- 40 There is an impressive and appropriate corporate approach to customer care that is very well understood by staff. This is reflected in the organisations aims and objectives, policy and procedure documentation, training activities, external accreditations and staff briefings. Staff are highly customer-focused and this is reflected in user satisfaction surveys. A tenant satisfaction survey in 2003/04 found:
- 85 per cent said it was easy to get hold of the right person;
 - 85 per cent said staff could deal with their problems; and
 - 92 per cent said they were treated fairly.

- 41 There are clear service standards in place across services and these have been agreed with customers. Service standards for all service areas have been developed and are available in the tenant handbook, the company's website and various leaflets. These have been developed through user surveys and focus groups and agreed by the tenant forum. We only found a very small number of specific service standards which could be more explicit. These are covered in the service sections of this report. The comprehensive range of service standard means that tenants have clear criteria on which to judge the service and this gives increased validity to satisfaction survey results.
- 42 Documents produced for service users are of a consistently high standard. They are professionally produced and written in plain English. Ashfield Homes has plain English software to train staff internally. This helps ensure information produced for service users is understandable.
- 43 There is regular reporting on performance against key access and customer care service at all levels of the organisation and to service users. There are clear targets and any under-performance is clearly identified. This helps ensure standards are maintained or improved.
- 44 Ashfield Homes has reviewed how its services are accessed in consultation with service users and stakeholders. This involved a full analysis of the costs and benefits of different approaches. Some changes have been introduced and further changes are in process or planned. Five local offices were closed in 2004 as part of these changes. Services are now delivered through three district offices and a repairs call centre and some centrally based services. There has been promotion of home visiting services for housing management activities for which there was strong support for during user consultation.
- 45 There are further plans to divide housing management activities into specialist teams for tenancy and estate management (including rent arrears), and allocations and lettings. This also includes plans to transform the local office environment by developing 'property shops'. One of these shops is due to open shortly in a new town centre location. Decisions on the location of two further property shops are dependent on council decisions for refurbishment plans of existing offices.
- 46 The local offices currently used by Ashfield Homes have a number of strengths including the following.
- Two of the three offices are located within town centres and the other is on the edge of a town centre in the main Council offices.
 - All offices currently offer rent and council tax payments facilities as well as advice on access Council services.
 - There is a very wide range of information displayed and available in document form within the local offices.
 - All offices have free-phone access to the repairs call centre, other parts of Ashfield Homes and Council services. Phones have privacy hoods fitted.

18 Ashfield Homes | How good is the service?

- All offices were clean and tidy.
- There is seating, interview rooms of an adequate size and toilet facilities at all offices.
- There are play facilities for children in all interview rooms.
- All offices have Mincom and induction loop systems.

47 These features help ensure effective access to services.

48 However, there are some weaknesses in the local offices.

- One of the offices felt cramped with separate receptions on three sides and a small seating area in the centre. This office, in particular, did not have a welcoming feel. Other offices were adequate in this respect but are still not considered to be of the highest standards.
- There are no play facilities for children in the general reception areas.
- The interview rooms did not have IT connections.
- At two offices, the Ashfield Homes reception did not have a lowered counter area for wheelchair users. However, lowered counter areas were available at nearby Council reception desks.

49 There is an effective call centre in place to receive repairs requests. Repairs call operatives are well trained and knowledgeable in dealing with repairs. There is comprehensive guidance for call operatives on ordering repairs or inspections. However, this is not linked to the Council's repairs IT system in the form of repairs diagnostic software. This will be in place by March 2006 when a new repairs IT module is introduced. Calls are being answered in an average of 16 seconds, which includes a seven second introductory message and only 2 per cent of calls are being lost. This means that tenants do not generally have problems telephoning to report repairs.

50 Ashfield Homes is providing and keeping appointments for 99.5 per cent of eligible repairs. Appointments are booked for AM and PM slots when a tenant calls to report a repair. Confirmation letters are sent to tenants confirming the appointment. There is operative coverage from 7.30am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday and coverage on Saturday morning. Requests for appointments outside of normal hours are therefore accommodated. Appointments are also made for repairs pre-inspections. This allows repairs to be carried out at the convenience of tenants.

- 51** It is a weakness that the current service standards for appointments have not been clearly publicised to service users. At the time of inspection information merely stated that Ashfield Homes would endeavour to provide appointments for responsive repairs. It did not make clear that an appointment would be provided for all responsive repairs where access is required and that arrangements can be made for works to be completed outside of normal hours. The published service standard and website were updated to reflect the current position when we were on-site and Ashfield Homes confirmed that future newsletters would cover availability of appointments. It is important that tenants have clear information on the services they can expect to receive.
- 52** A wide variety of information is available on the company's website and some services can be accessed directly using this method. This includes:
- all the organisation's service standards are available on the website, as are key public documents;
 - repairs can be requested through the website;
 - each service area has an email contact and complaints can be submitted on-line;
 - difficult-to-let properties are advertised on the website;
 - tenants can search for mutual exchanges using an automated matching programme;
 - a number of forms can also be downloaded from the website including the housing application form; and
 - rent payments can be made, tenants can check their rent account and likely levels of housing benefit can be accessed.
- 53** Formal complaints are dealt with appropriately and promptly. From April to July 2005 there were 41 complaints of which 9 were deemed justified. These are reported and monitored centrally. The average time to resolve complaints during 2004/05 was 4.7 days. Performance for April to July was an impressive 2.4 days. Performance on complaints is reported to the Board and the Tenants' Forum and is displayed in local offices. This means that tenants can effectively raise problems they experience with the service. Complainants are surveyed for satisfaction following the resolution of the complaint. These show a satisfaction rating of 68 per cent. It is difficult to achieve high levels of satisfaction in this area.
- 54** Informal complaints are also dealt with effectively but although these are recorded the trends in these complaints are not being monitored. Low-level complaints are dealt with outside the formal complaint system by designated staff within service teams. For example, the repairs service has a customer service officer who deals with complaints to that team. Information on the complaint is logged as is the time taken to resolve the problem. However, trends, in terms of numbers, are not formally monitored. This information can be useful in understanding problems or successes in the service.

- 55 Ashfield Homes actively canvasses views of customers and uses these to review and improve services. An established system of surveys is in place known as 'vision management system surveys'. These cover nine key service areas asking ten questions about each area. Service users are asked to score the service out of ten against each question. Average scores are then produced and monitored. It is a harder challenge to get high approval scores using this method than more traditional methodologies which assess the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These surveys are seen as a key management tool with ongoing monitoring of trends in performance and are used to inform service improvements. For example a 'man in van' approach was adopted by major works contractors to deal with defects following surveys showing some dissatisfaction with this element of the service.
- 56 There are also a number of other surveys outside of the vision management process which are used to monitor improvement and inform service improvement. These include closure surveys on anti-social behaviour cases and complaints.
- 57 Surveys across the range of services provided show consistently high levels of satisfaction. Satisfaction with the housing service overall was 87 per cent when this was last measured in 2003/04. This was a 5 per cent increase on the previous survey conducted two years earlier.

Diversity

- 58 In our previous inspection, we found that there was a good emphasis on diversity and active promotion of participation opportunities for hard-to-reach groups.
- 59 In this inspection, we found that there is still a strong emphasis on diversity and that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in this area. There is clear corporate commitment to promoting diversity and staff at all levels have a strong awareness of diversity issues. Diversity issues are being effectively considered service delivery and measures have been introduced to ensure services meet the needs of all sections of the community. Customer profile information on service users, that can assist addressing diversity issues, is developing rapidly but is not yet comprehensive.
- 60 Ashfield Homes has a clear corporate commitment to promoting diversity. A number of key policies and strategies have been put in place to ensure this approach is appropriate and understood throughout the organisation. These include the following.
- A comprehensive equalities, diversity and inclusion policy –this covers internal practices such as recruitment as well as service related issues.
 - A race equality scheme – this was originally produced in 2002 and then reviewed in 2004, the current scheme covers the period 2004/06.
 - A community cohesion strategy.
 - Refugees and new arrivals guidance.

- Specific service standards published covering racial harassment, equality in housing and domestic violence.
 - Comprehensive anti-social behaviour and harassment policies and separate policies and procedures to deal with racial incidents and domestic violence.
 - All action plans have a specific section for equality and diversity which are prioritised.
- 61** Ashfield Homes is working with partners to monitor and address racial incidents. It is part of a common monitoring project for racial incidents across the county and is a member of the Ashfield Racist Issues Group. Its offices are reporting centres as part of the project. Ashfield Homes is currently delivering a poster campaign as part of its approach to fighting anti-social behaviour and hate crime.
- 62** There are policies and procedures in place to identify vulnerable tenants and to ensure they receive appropriate support. In many instances this will be through Ashfield Homes' in house tenancy support team. Vulnerable tenants are also flagged up on Ashfield Homes' IT systems so that staff know this when they are delivering services.
- 63** A useful gypsy and traveller good practice guide has been produced by Ashfield Homes. This has been particularly well received by partners who are also involved with this client group. The guide was developed in consultation with the gypsy and traveller community. Ashfield Homes is also a leading member of the county-wide gypsy liaison group.
- 64** Ashfield Homes trains all staff and board members on equality and diversity. This is a compulsory course. All staff and board members we spoke to had received this training. A further programme of training is currently being delivered to staff on 'valuing cultural diversity' and 'disability awareness'. This helps ensure all staff understand the importance of diversity and equality and how it affects them in their day-to-day activities.
- 65** Tenants are involved in shaping Ashfield Homes' approach to diversity and equality. There is an equalities focus group and a diversity and special needs group both made up of tenants. Items relating to diversity and equality are also reported to the tenant forum. An annual report to tenants also provides an equalities update article which lists equality and diversity achievements over the last year.
- 66** Ashfield Homes has been carrying out equality impact assessments (EIAs) across all service areas to ensure that policies, strategies and processes do not adversely affect any one group. A total of 42 equality impact assessments had been carried out at the time of inspection. A programme of EIAs has been produced linked to dates for policy and strategy reviews. All board reports have a section on equality impact.

- 67 Information and reporting on customer profiles is not yet comprehensive. Information on residents has been collected from lettings, satisfaction surveys and a specific equalities survey of all residents. This has been pulled together in a recent report, although there has not been regular reporting previously and the report has been made available throughout the organisation including board members. It provides information on the profile of tenants broken down across four areas of the district in relation to ethnicity, age and gender.
- 68 Ethnic origin information is now held on 97 per cent of tenants. An assessment of faith was also made from results of the equality and diversity survey. Information on tenants with disabilities is not yet robust. There is also no information produced on the make up of households. The report does not compare the profile of council tenants with census information for the district as a whole. These weaknesses were recognised in Ashfield Homes' self-assessment process and its performance management group has been tasked with developing more sophisticated monitoring systems and ensuring more regular reporting.
- 69 Information on diversity in relation to specific service areas is also still underdeveloped. Information on lettings and anti-social behaviour activity is broken down by gender, age and ethnicity but this is not yet available in other areas of the service.
- 70 Ashfield Homes seeks to ensure that contractors it uses have a positive approach to diversity. Training on equality and diversity has been provided to contractors. There are a number of targets and performance indicators set for the partners engaged in the major works programme. These include the number of BME and female employees and use of local labour. All contractors must have a comprehensive equal opportunities policy to become approved for use by Ashfield Homes.
- 71 There is a clear and comprehensive approach to providing translation facilities. A telephone interpreting service is available for all staff. This is advertised in the local offices. Frontline staff, including operatives, carry cards so that non-English speakers can identify their first language. All key public documents advertise the availability of translation services and this is identified in the five most commonly used languages in the district. The availability of documents in large print, audio and Braille is also advertised. The website can be viewed in four different type sizes.
- 72 Ashfield Homes maintains a list of customers who need information in different formats and automatically provide this when documents are sent. As a result of the recent equalities survey, two tenants were identified who do not read English. Ashfield Homes has translated the tenant handbook into French and Polish for these two tenants and specifically made them aware of the translation services provided.

- 73 Ashfield Homes has sought to address diversity issues when delivering its major works programme. The form used for pre-works liaison visits to tenants has a section on diversity to complete. This can cover a variety of issues in relation to the work. Most commonly it identifies where works need to be adapted to address mobility issues. For example, lever handle taps are often fitted or showers are fitted instead of baths. Where showers are installed instead of a bath, a specific shower tray is being used that has been designed to avoid the need to install a level access shower area at a later date. Use of this particular tray was agreed with the social services occupational therapy team.
- 74 Diversity issues are also addressed in Ashfield Homes' approach to training. A building skills course operated jointly by Ashfield Homes, a local college and contractors has targeted recruitment on specific groups to help encourage diversity. For example, one round of recruitment was focused on recruiting women to the course and another was focused on the long-term unemployed.
- 75 Ashfield Homes involvement of young people is very positive as this is traditionally a difficult group to engage with. Four Youth Committees have been established with an average of ten young people attending each meeting. Initial concerns from local residents where youth committees were due to meet had to be overcome. A young persons' compact has now been developed with the young people involved.
- 76 Ashfield Homes is also engaging with older persons. There is an older persons' focus group in place and regular roadshows are held to discuss older person services. Ashfield Homes holds good information on the number and location of elderly residents and has redesigned older person support services to ensure they are flexible to individual needs.
- 77 Not all offices used by Ashfield Homes are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. All offices have been surveyed for compliance by the Council. Ashfield Homes' new head office and one of its public offices are fully compliant. Two issues were raised at the other public offices. One requires a lowered counter and both suffered a problem with loop systems used in interview rooms being audible outside of the interview room. Full refurbishment of both of these offices is being planned and these issues are to be addressed as part of these works.
- 78 Sheltered housing schemes were also inspected as part of the Council's survey and a number were found to require some modifications. Money has been set aside for Ashfield Homes to carry out these works. Consideration of providing disabled access to communal areas to general needs flats where this is not currently in place is also being considered as part of Ashfield Homes' action plans.

Stock investment and asset management

- 79 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

- 80 In our previous inspection, we found that there was a clear strategic approach to investment, targeted on meeting the decent homes standard and customers' priorities for improvement. Ashfield Homes had established Egan compliant partnering arrangements with a strong emphasis on securing customer care commitments and facilitating local employment and training initiatives.
- 81 In this inspection, we found that strengths strongly outweigh weaknesses in this service area. A three-year, £76 million programme of improvement works, focused on achieving the Government's decent homes standard, has been very well co-ordinated and delivered in a highly customer-focused manner. There is also a programme of proactive planned works externally to homes and surrounding areas. The only significant weaknesses in this area is the limited information on future improvements works that is currently available to tenants and the backlog in the cyclical painting works, both of which are in the process of being addressed.
- 82 Ashfield Homes has robust and accessible information on the condition of Council homes. It has collected detailed information on 80 per cent of homes over the last five years. This has been achieved through two formal surveys, surveys linked to major works and surveys linked to void inspections. The information has been 'cloned' across the other 20 per cent to present an overall picture of stock condition. Ashfield Homes has a target to have completed 100 per cent surveys of stock condition by January 2006. A rolling programme of completing condition survey of 20 per cent of homes each year is now in place. Stock condition information is held on a database where each home has its own entry. Reports can be produced from the database to inform business planning work programming.

- 83 An assessment of sustainability of bed-sit accommodation across the district was carried out in 2003 as these were the only properties where there were significant lettings problems. The Council commissioned consultants to carry out this sustainability assessment and this report identified issues relating to some of the Council's sheltered schemes and general needs bed-sit accommodation. This information has been used to inform the major works programme. However, progress in addressing some of the longer term issues arising from this report was initially slow although action is being taken now. This is an area where action from Ashfield Homes has been dependent on Council decisions.
- 84 Tenant priorities for major works have been identified through surveys and through consultation with the tenant forum. The priorities identified have been community safety, including high security replacement windows and doors, kitchens, bathrooms, energy efficiency and estate remodelling, including environmental improvements. These issues have been incorporated in the major works programme.
- 85 Ashfield Homes has produced a comprehensive major works compact in consultation with tenants. This sets out in detail the works that will be completed when improvements are carried out and the service standards that should be adhered to. Ashfield Homes agreed with tenants an approach whereby all the works required to a home would be done at the same time. Works identified are above the decent homes standard. For example, items such as tiling, flooring and also showers above baths are included. The compact includes details of the choices that are available to tenants when improvement works are carried out. These choices were agreed by tenant representatives. This means that works are more likely to meet the need of tenants.
- 86 A comprehensive, three-year, programme of work was produced in 2002 reflecting the desire to achieve the decent homes standard, sustainability issues and tenant priorities. This was designed to ensure that the decent homes standard was achieved in all homes by the end of the March 2006. This was linked to a comprehensive asset management plan for the period 2002 to 2006. At the outset of the programme, only 36 per cent homes achieved the decent homes standard. The total value of the programme was £76 million.
- 87 The programming of the works required has been driven by a desire to maximise efficiency but there has been insufficient tenant consultation in this process. The programming of works has been largely decided by the partners in consultation with Ashfield Homes. The basis for programming has been the most efficient and effective way the works programme can be delivered. However, tenants' views on how this could best be achieved were not effectively integrated in the decision making process. While we did not find opposition to the programming from tenant representatives, involving tenants more closely in this process is beneficial.

- 88 Insufficient information has been made available to tenants on what works are likely to take place in their homes beyond the year ahead. The major works programme for the year ahead has been publicised with expected start and finish dates for individual properties. More recently, this information has been available on Ashfield Homes' website. A decision was taken by Ashfield Homes not to proactively publicise the programme beyond a year ahead in case costings or timescales changed, resulting in commitments to tenants not being met. Information on likely work beyond a year ahead is provided to tenants if they made a specific enquiry. However, information on the timing of future works can influence a tenant's decision about carrying out the works themselves or whether they wish to move from their existing home. Therefore, it is important for tenants to have a broad understanding of the probable future works to their homes beyond the immediate year ahead.
- 89 There is an indicative programme of major works for the period from April 2006 to March 2009 but this has not yet been developed into a detailed programme of works for 2006/07. A new asset management plan covering the period 2006 to 2009 is also in place. Future major works programmes will be considerably smaller than over the last three years. Works will be focused maintaining decent homes standards, refurbishment of sheltered schemes, security improvements and disabled adaptations. Ashfield Homes plans to complete all condition surveys before confirming and procuring the programme for 2006/07 and beyond. It also intends to go back to tenants who refused major works in the current programme to offer them the opportunity to be included in the new programme. It is expected that this work will be completed by January 2006 and the new programme will be produced. This work has not been carried out earlier as the technical services team has been focusing on the existing programme which has been delivered ahead of schedule. However, this does mean that tenants do not yet have information on the future programme and that the start on-site during 2006/07 will be later in the year than normal.
- 90 Ashfield Homes has delivered a highly effective programme of works to achieve the decent homes standard in council homes. At the time of our inspection the final properties were being completed and the programme was expected to be completed by the end of October 2005, which is five months ahead of schedule. The programme has been delivered primarily through a partnering contract with three construction partners.
- 91 The partnering arrangements and associated contract monitoring have been extremely effective. There are monthly core group meetings attended by all three partners which oversee the delivery of the programme. These involve challenging examination of performance indicators and satisfaction surveys. The satisfaction surveys are part of the Ashfield Homes' 'vision management' process. There is a strong focus on the results of these and how the services can be improved to increase ratings. This has led to a number of service improvements. For example, weekly sheets giving tenants details of who will be working in their home and what will be done on each day were introduced in response to survey results. There are also sub-groups of this group focusing on design, best value and training. There are also formal monthly on-site meetings with each contractor.

- 92 There are highly effective tenant liaison arrangements. These include the following.
- An open day that takes place six to eight weeks before works commence in an area. This involves a presentation by contractors and Ashfield Homes' staff explaining the major works process and clearly identifying the level of disruption that will occur. Products to be used and the choices available are all on display at the meeting with representatives from product manufacturers.
 - Tenants are then visited individually to discuss the works. This includes production of a kitchen design with the tenant using computer aided design. Tenants are left with a computer representation of how their chosen kitchen will look.
 - Coffee mornings are held in areas where works are due to commence to allow informal contact with and between tenants. This is seen as a further opportunity to allay concerns and for tenants to get to know tenant liaison officers (TLOs).
 - Each contractor employs TLOs and Ashfield Homes has its own tenant liaison officer. These maintain contact with residents throughout the works process. The TLOs meet together as a group to discuss problems and effective practice.
 - Tenants are provided with comprehensive information on the work process in writing, including the major works compact which sets out service standards. The information provided has been agreed with all partners and is therefore consistent across the service. While works are ongoing tenants are provided with weekly worksheets detailing who will be visiting their home on each day and the works that will be carried out.
 - Centres are identified where tenants can go in the daytime if they wish to escape from their homes for a while when works are ongoing.
 - A comprehensive handover pack is provided to tenants at completion of major works. This includes maintenance guides, contact numbers and energy efficiency light bulbs.
 - All tenants receive satisfaction surveys at the end of the process. There is an effective rectification process in place where dissatisfaction is expressed.
- 93 Products being used in the major works programme are of good quality and future maintenance implications have been considered. We viewed a number of homes at random where major works had been completed. Products and works were of a high standard. Products used were considered by staff involved in delivering the responsive repairs service to confirm that they would not be difficult to maintain. Guarantees on defects and the provision of spare parts were incorporated into supply contracts.

- 94 There are robust arrangements to try to minimise the number of tenants refusing major works. Tenants are able to refuse any element of the works except where there are clear health and safety issues. If following the initial consultation process a tenant does not want work completed they complete a refusal form. This prompts a visit from Ashfield Homes' tenant liaison officer who re-emphasises the benefits of works and discusses how disruption can be dealt with. Visits will also be arranged to tenants who have had the work completed if it is felt this would help. There is a spreadsheet in place to record refusals so these can be revisited at future dates. Approximately 10 per cent of elements are being refused. There is a higher incidence for tenants in bungalows where more elderly tenants live. There are also differences between refusal levels on different elements, with rewiring having the highest incidence of refusals.
- 95 There are high levels of tenant satisfaction with the major works programme. Tenants are asked a series of ten questions about the service they receive rating performance from 1 to 10. This system was introduced in April 2003 and the cumulative average score has been measured as a key performance indicator since the introduction. The average score across contractors was 8.2 at the end of 2004/05 which is an increase from 7.3 at the end of 2003/04. Tenants we spoke to also showed a high-level of satisfaction with the work carried out.
- 96 The cyclical painting programme has not been effectively sustained. There is a backlog with the external painting programme. The programme ceased in 2002/03. This was due to a lack of available funding from the Council's housing revenue account and a view that resources needed to be focused on the decent home programme. Pre-painting repairs were carried out during 2004/05 and a painting programme is currently ongoing. The programme incorporates clearing the backlog over a two-year period. The impact is limited by the fact that most council homes have UPVC windows installed and in some have UPVC soffits and fascias. However, the suspension of the external painting programme is evident in some areas where paintwork on doors has deteriorated.
- 97 Ashfield Homes has a comprehensive and proactive approach to planning external repairs. External repairs works to homes and communal areas are being surveyed at the same time as pre-painting repairs. For example, poor quality fencing or pathways are being identified. At the same time certain groups of external repairs reported by tenants are now batched into planned programmes. This has resulted in a rolling programme of planned external repairs. These are being tendered in contracts valued at £50,000 to £60,000. This helps ensure external aspects to properties and communal areas are well maintained.

- 98 Procedures are in place to deal with asbestos but are not yet fully effective. An asbestos database is in place and has been populated through collection of stock condition survey information, and where it has been discovered during works. A specific asbestos survey has been completed for all communal areas in sheltered schemes and flats and this information is on the database. Information on the database is shared with external contractors and is available internally. However, it is not automatically generated on responsive repairs job tickets. This means increased risk, as the operatives carrying out these repairs do not have this information. This is planned but cannot be achieved until the repairs IT system is upgraded.
- 99 Training has been provided to all operatives on how to identify and deal with asbestos. Training has also been provided to contractors. There are clear procedures on when asbestos should be removed and when it can remain in place.
- 100 There are comprehensive programmes in place for regular servicing and testing of mechanical and electrical equipment. A rolling programme of electrical testing for council homes is in place. A database is in place where all electrical checks are logged. Details of tests carried out when properties become void, have rewiring done or have other major works completed are entered on the database. In addition, a member of staff is employed to carry out electrical checks to other homes on a ten-year cyclical programme. There is also regular servicing of the district heating system, lifts and emergency call systems. This ensures that legislative requirements on electrical testing are complied with and that properties are safe for occupation.

Responsive repairs

- 101 In our previous inspection, we found evidence of an effective and efficient repairs service.
- 102 In this inspection, we found that there are significant strengths in the day-to-day repairs service which strongly outweigh weaknesses. Responsive repairs are carried out very quickly and to a high standard.
- 103 Repairs are carried out quickly, disruption to tenants is minimised, and there are high levels of tenant satisfaction. During 2004/05, 99.4 per cent of urgent repairs were carried out within government timescales. The current average time to complete non-urgent repairs is 9.8 days. Satisfaction with repairs is measured as part of the 'vision management process'. The average score for the service in 2004/05 was 8.2 out of a possible 10. Key features of the repairs service which enable this high-level of performance are as follows.
- Call centre staff who have a good knowledge of repairs ordering processes. Staff have been trained in call handling, customer care and repairs diagnosis. There is also a diagnostic manual in place. Accuracy of diagnosis helps speed up the repairs process.
 - Pre-inspections are at a reasonable level at about 10 per cent of jobs which avoids unnecessary delays in the repairs process.

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- There is widespread multi-skilling in the repairs workforce and a positive approach to multi-skilling among operatives. Operatives are multi-skilled to various levels but all are sufficiently skilled to complete related works to their main trade activities, eg it only takes one operative to install a new bath. This helps minimise disruption to tenants and avoid additional visits.
- Operatives are able to vary works on-site and there is good access to materials and tools to carry out works. Operatives have an imprest stock of commonly used materials on their vans. Where works on-site vary from those originally diagnosed, operatives can still complete the works without leaving site. Telephone authorisation has to be obtained for variations over £50 and operatives confirmed that authorising staff are always easily accessible. Where additional materials are required, these can be requested by telephone and will be delivered to the operatives on site by specified drivers from the depot. This also helps to speed the repairs process and minimise disruption to tenants.
- Service standards for repairs are clear, challenging and were agreed with service users. These are detailed on the company's website and in the tenant handbook.
- Estate officers, who perform a caretaker type role, carry out prompt minor repairs to communal areas. These estate based staff are able to respond promptly to repair requests and also hold an imprest stock of materials designed to enable them to carry out the majority of these repairs without having to order additional supplies.
- The focus of post-inspection is on tenant satisfaction as well as technical quality of works. At the time of inspection approximately 15 per cent of repairs were being post-inspected.

104 It is a weakness that the level of repairs completed in one visit is not monitored. This would enable Ashfield Homes to be clearer about level of disruption being caused to tenants and how changes to the delivery of the service impact on this. Limitations of the current repairs IT system means that this has not been possible. Ashfield Homes does intend to monitor performance in this area when IT is upgraded which is due by March 2006.

105 It is also a weakness that the current IT system lacks a computerised repair diagnosis system linked to repairs ordering. As stated above there are repairs manuals in place but a software diagnostic system, linked to repairs ordering, is the most efficient and effective to provide this guidance. Introduction of a computerised diagnostic tool is also linked to the installation of a new repairs IT system.

106 The quality of information to assist tenants in fault diagnosis is limited. There is some information in the tenant's handbook and a comprehensive guide at local offices. Ashfield Homes does intend to place repairs diagnostic software on the website following its introduction in March 2006.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 107 In our previous inspection, we found a fast track procedure for voids requiring minimal repairs. A void repair standard was also in place, though in need of review.
- 108 In this inspection, we found that this is a strong service area with few weaknesses. Empty properties are being repaired quickly and to a high standard.
- 109 There are robust pre-termination procedures in place. Where notice is received there is a pre-termination visit by the housing officer and technical officer. This enables tenancy issues to be resolved and discussion with tenants about the condition the property should be left in. This helps to reduce the level of rechargeable works in void properties.
- 110 Empty properties are promptly inspected and repaired. Inspections take place within 24 hours of receipt of keys. There are clear timescales in place for carrying out repairs which link to the level of disrepair found in properties. These range from one day to a maximum of 15 days. At the time of inspection, the average time to repair empty properties was ten days. The system of fast track repairs to voids that only require safety checks or very minor repairs is still in place. These properties are processed in one day. We inspected a fast track empty property at random and found that work had been done in one day and that the property was in a good ready-to-let condition.
- 111 A decoration voucher scheme is in place to assist new tenants with decorating costs. These are awarded according to the condition of properties. Kitchens and bathrooms are decorated in difficult-to-let homes. Feedback from tenants identified that these were the two rooms which prospective tenants most wanted to clean and decorated when they took up occupation. A further response to this was for stickers to be placed in the bathroom and WCs of all ready-for-let homes confirming that sanitary ware had been cleaned.
- 112 The standard of repairs required in empty properties is identified in internal guidelines and in a published empty property standard. The property standard is sent to prospective tenants with their offer letter which allows them to check against required standards when viewing the property. The published empty property standard has recently been reviewed and updated in consultation with tenants. This covers repairs issues adequately but does not provide details on minimum standards for property facilities. For example, minimum numbers for kitchen units, electric sockets in rooms or whether connection for washing machine fittings should be in place. All voids are post-inspected.

- 113 Ready-to-let empty properties viewed during the inspection were of a high standard and tenant satisfaction with their new homes is relatively high. In addition to the normal post-inspection process, managers within the voids team carry out random checks on ready-to-let voids to assess quality. New tenants are regularly surveyed for their views on the lettings process and their views on the quality of their new home. This is part of Ashfield Homes' vision management system survey process. The average score during 2004/05 was 7.3 out of a possible 10. This is relatively high but not as high as some other service areas. In particular some questions relating to property conditions showed slightly lower scores. These are being regularly analysed and a number of the improvements covered above were introduced in response to this. This along with completion of the decent homes programme is expected to increase satisfaction levels.
- 114 Empty properties are now brought up to decent homes standards as part of the void works. While the major works programme of the last three-year was ongoing, the view was taken that the most efficient way to deliver the programme was to upgrade properties according to the programme and not take in void properties which would be spread across the district. As the programme is now at completion stage, there are not many empty properties which fail the decent homes standard. However, where works were not completed due to refusals, these are completed to the decent homes standard as part of void works.

Gas servicing

- 115 In our previous inspection, we found that gas servicing was improving following the introduction of new procedures and the appointment of a specialist external contractor, but was still behind schedule.
- 116 In this inspection, we found that this is a very strong service area. There are comprehensive systems in place to deliver gas servicing and that gas appliances in all properties had been serviced in the last 12 months.
- 117 At the time of inspection, all properties had been serviced in the last twelve months. An effective programme of servicing has been delivered to achieve this 100 per cent record. This has been done without using forced entry. There are robust procedures in place where there are persistent problems of no access. This includes out-of-hours visits, notice stickers on doors and linking with responsive repair requests through identification on the IT system.
- 118 Since April 2005 gas servicing has become part of a comprehensive annual property health and safety check. This was tendered as a three-year partnering contract including a 'pain and gain' incentive linked to vision management survey scores and means that every property is visited and gas servicing, smoke alarms and solid fuel systems are all checked in one visit. It also means that gas pipe work; even in properties where there are no council installed appliance is checked. Appointments are provided for the checks. Health and safety check files are well-organised and up-to-date. These are all held centrally within the technical services team. There is also a post-inspection process in place carried out by qualified Ashfield Homes staff.

- 119 The importance of the health and safety check has been widely publicised. There have been regular articles in tenant newsletter, coverage in the tenants' handbook and service standard leaflets.
- 120 Tenant satisfaction with the health and safety checks is very high. Ashfield Homes' 'vision management system' survey shows an average rating of 9.46 from 10.

Aids and adaptations

- 121 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this service area. The aids and adaptation service is well resourced and works are carried out promptly following referral from care co-ordinators or from occupational therapists (OTs). There is some effective joint working with social services but there needs to be more focus on monitoring overall timescales for major adaptations and in particular addressing long waits for occupational therapy visits.
- 122 Minor adaptations are carried out promptly and without referral to an OT. Ashfield Homes' care co-ordinators have been trained to assess minor adaptations and will visit and make referrals as required. Requests for minor adaptations were processed and carried out in an average of 6.8 days in 2004/05 which is a very good performance. This is a significant improvement on the average of 15 days achieved in 2003/04.
- 123 Joint working with social services is taking place but has not successfully addressed the issue of long OT visit wait times. There is a protocol in place to guide joint working between Ashfield Homes and the OT team. There are regularly meetings with representatives from social services OT team and a leaflet for Council tenants has been jointly produced. It also carries out joint visits with OTs so that queries are reduced when the referral is received. However, there is no monitoring of overall times taken to carry out adaptations where an OT referral is required. Ashfield Homes staff said that OT waits can be up to six months but social services have not provided them with accurate information to share with tenants. Ashfield Homes has not been involved in the county-wide disabled facilities grant (DFG) working group as ALMOs have not been invited. Consideration is now being given to widening the scope of this group and inviting ALMOs. There has also been little liaison between Ashfield Homes' staff and council staff who deliver the Council's disabled facilities grants over how services can be improved.
- 124 Adaptations requested through OT referrals are processed promptly by Ashfield Homes. This was an area of the service which was previously under-funded which resulted in delays in delivering major adaptations. In 2003/04 the average time taken to process and complete adaptations of a value greater than £500 was 151 days. Increased funding and an increased focus on this service area during 2004/05 reduced this time to 40 days. This represents a strong performance. However, Ashfield Homes currently tenders most major adaptations individually. Agreeing a schedule of rates with partners for delivering some of the more standardised aids and adaptations could reduce the lead in times further and reduce costs. This is an issue which Ashfield Homes is exploring. A pilot contract is in development.

- 125** Aids and adaptations are recycled where possible and an adapted property database is in place. Where a tenant moves out aids and adaptations are left in situ where they form part of the structure of the building. They are also left in place when a suitable applicant can be matched from the housing register. Ashfield Homes keeps a record of all its adapted properties and has information on RSL adapted properties. Where applicants requiring the adaptations cannot be found then recycling takes place. This helps to maximise cost effectiveness and maximise benefits to service users.
- 126** Ashfield Homes has assisted in preventing future aids and adaptations through addressing this issue in the major works programme. Mobility and disability issues are identified during the improvement works process and works carried out seek to address the issues identified. This increases cost effectiveness and provides a pro-active service to tenants.
- 127** The availability of aids and adaptations are well publicised. This is done in a variety of ways including newsletters, leaflets, older people's roadshows and through support services for older people. This helps ensure that those who need aid and adaptations do access the service.
- 128** There is a high-level of satisfaction with the aids and adaptations process delivered by Ashfield Homes. Recent 'vision management system' satisfaction surveys show an average score of 8.88 from 10.

Housing income management

- 129** In our previous inspection, we found that there was greater emphasis on debt advice and improved housing benefit performance which was positively impacting on rents performance.
- 130** In this inspection, we found that this is a strong service area where significant strengths outweigh weaknesses. Robust processes are in place for rent collection and arrears recovery, and these are well integrated with the provision of welfare benefits advice and debt advice. There is strong performance on the level of rent collected and the level of arrears.
- 131** There are a wide variety of ways in which tenants can pay their rent. These include payment at local offices and post offices, direct debit, standing order, 24-hour telephone debit/credit card payment line, phone payment to housing staff in normal hours and internet payments. A joint working group with the Council, including tenant representatives is currently in place looking at payment methods. This has agreed the piloting of a weekly direct debit service as it was found that some tenants have concerns about paying monthly. Direct debit has also been promoted in newsletters and a poster campaign. The group is also considering payment facilities in local shops.
- 132** Rent statements are sent out quarterly and tenants can view their rent accounts on the Ashfield Homes' website.

- 133** There is not currently clear explanation to tenants of how their rents are calculated. Rent setting and cash collection are the responsibility of the Council. The lack of information in this area was identified by Ashfield Homes and the Council during the self-assessment process and a fact sheet is currently in production.
- 134** There has been limited separation of service charges from rent payments. This does take place to some extent for sheltered housing schemes but does not take place outside of these apart from a district heating charge in some areas. Separation of service charges for things such as external grounds maintenance and cleaning helps ensure only those receiving the service are paying for it and means it is possible for tenants to make a judgement on the value for money of the service. Because there are not a high proportion of flats in the housing stock managed by Ashfield Homes, the impact of this is reduced. However, there has been insufficient discussion of this issue between Ashfield Homes and the Council.
- 135** There are clear and effective policies and procedures for rent recovery. This includes an arrears strategy and a detailed procedure manual. The arrears procedure is linked to the IT module for arrears recovery. The system automatically prompts actions at different stages of the arrears process. There is a suite of standard letters which are automatically generated and housing officers can amend the standard letters. Standard letters have been agreed with tenant representatives and use layout and colour effectively to maximise impact. All arrears letters are accompanied by a leaflet detailing payment methods and access to welfare benefits and money advice.
- 136** Ashfield Homes has its own anti-poverty strategy and is an active member of Ashfield Debt Task Force. This means that Ashfield Homes' arrears and debt advice policies are linked to wider actions on addressing poverty.
- 137** Ashfield Homes has a corporate debt policy in place but this is not sufficiently linked with the Council's approach to debt recovery. The policy states that Ashfield Homes will seek to negotiate the repayment of other housing debts such as repairs recharges and former tenant arrears. However, there is no mention of the approach to council tax debt which is the most common Council collected debt. An agreed approach to considering repayment of rent arrears and council tax debt can help ensure realistic repayment agreements and help avoid Ashfield Homes and the Council competing for debt repayment.
- 138** Regular and appropriate action is being taken to recover arrears. This includes early action to try to prevent arrears rising. We checked accounts and found that prompt action in line with procedures was being taken. Text messaging and out-of-hours work is also used to increase effectiveness. Good links with the County Court have been established to ensure that where possession action is taken that this happens effectively.

- 139** Performance indicators show a consistently strong performance on rent collection and arrears recovery.
- Rent collected in 2004/05 was 98.8 per cent of that due. In 2003/04 it was 98.6 per cent. This places Ashfield Homes in the top quartile of performers when compared with similar organisations, although quartile comparisons are not yet available for 2004/05.
 - The level of arrears as a proportion of the total annual rent debit was 1.14 per cent at the end of 2004/05. This was a reduction from 1.47 per cent in the 2003/04 and 1.48 per cent in 2002/03.
 - The number of tenants with arrears equal to, or greater than 13 weeks rent stood at 0.6 per cent at the end of 2004/05. A significant reduction from 1.6 per cent in 2003/04 and 2 per cent 2002/03.
- 140** This performance was achieved without increase in the level of former tenant arrears or write-offs. Former tenant arrears were approximately £230,000 at the end of 2003/04 and 2004/05. Former tenant arrears written off as not collectable was 1.43 per cent in 2003/04 but reduced to 0.6 per cent in 2004/05.
- 141** There are robust procedures in place for dealing with former tenant arrears. Cases are initially dealt with internally by a specific officer. They will seek to contact the former tenant and make an agreement to pay. If no contact can be made or payment is not forthcoming then debt collection agencies are used to pursue former tenant arrears. An overall collection rate of 10 per cent was achieved during 2004/05.
- 142** The importance of income management is recognised by Ashfield Homes. This area of the service is subject to an annual internal audit checks to ensure that procedures are working and being delivered effectively.
- 143** There is effective liaison between Ashfield Homes' arrears recovery staff and the Council's housing benefit team. A service level agreement is in place and there are regular meetings to review performance. Ashfield Homes' staff have access to housing benefit IT systems and liaison at operational level works well. Staff also have access to housing benefit calculation software so they can advise tenants on payments while claims are pending. The housing benefit calculator is also available for tenants to access directly on the company's website.
- 144** Profiling of arrears cases and subsequent targeting of recovery activity is not yet fully developed. Arrears are analysed by levels, tenancy type, length of tenancy, property type and tenancy type. However, information on households in arrears is still underdeveloped and recent analysis has yet to significantly impact on how the service is delivered. Ashfield Homes has recently started collecting information on reasons for arrears.
- 145** The rent payment cycle incorporates rent-free weeks to both prevent arrears and enhance arrears recovery. There are four rent-free weeks during the year, two of which are at Christmas. Tenants who are in arrears are asked to continue payment during the rent-free weeks.

- 146** An incentive scheme is in place to encourage people to pay their rent. A prize draw for tenants with clear rent accounts is held twice a year with four prizes of £250. This scheme is publicised with the quarterly rent statements and in the tenant newsletter. Tenants have to pro-actively enter the draw and, therefore by examining accounts Ashfield Homes has been able to confirm the scheme is having an impact on the number of tenants with a clear rent account.
- 147** Rent recovery procedures are well integrated with the provision of debt advice. A protocol is in place with the CAB for the provision of money and welfare benefit advice. CAB receives an annual grant from Ashfield Homes to ensure independent advice is available to tenants. There are formal referral arrangements and Ashfield Homes' staff can make appointments for tenants through direct contact with the CAB. The protocol also covers arrangements for referral by the CAB to Ashfield Homes' tenancy support service. There are quarterly meetings between Ashfield Homes and the CAB to monitor progress including the level of referrals.
- 148** Ashfield Homes has recently enhanced debt advice by employing its own money management advisor. Referrals by housing officers can be made at any time during the arrears recovery process but a referral has to be made prior to proceeding with court action. This worker will proactively visit tenants in their homes or carry out office based interviews. A money management pack for tenants has also recently been produced.
- 149** Arrears procedures also incorporate the need to liaise with other agencies and teams to ensure adequate support is provided to tenants. This includes social services, although there is no formal protocol in place about how this should take place. Ashfield Homes is in the process of discussing this with the County Council. Referrals to the homelessness team are made at specific stages in the arrears recovery process. There are also regular meetings with the Council's homelessness team to discuss performance. Eviction is used as the last option in arrears recovery and is monitored as a key performance indicator and is reported to the board.
- 150** Mechanisms to measure satisfaction with rent collection, recovery and debt advice are not yet comprehensive. There has been some survey work on satisfaction with payment methods and an exit survey of tenants who have used the money management advice service is now carried out. However, there is no satisfaction information on general recovery activity or on the services provided by the CAB. This gap has been recognised by Ashfield Homes and more comprehensive survey work is planned.

Resident involvement

- 151** In our previous inspection, we found evidence of further developments and achievements in tenant participation, including 100 per cent increase in the number of active tenant and resident groups, the development of a 'tenant voices' initiative for tenants who did not want to be part of formal structures and the establishment of a new post of Tenant Liaison Officer to complement the work carried out by the Tenant Participation Officer.

- 152** In this inspection, we found that Ashfield Homes has a strong approach to resident participation and that strengths in this area significantly outweigh weaknesses. Tenant participation is well developed and there are a range of opportunities for tenants to influence services at strategic and operational levels.
- 153** Ashfield Homes has a clear and comprehensive tenant participation strategy. This identifies the existing mechanisms for tenant participation and how these will be developed in the future. This helps guide the organisations approach to tenant involvement.
- 154** Tenant involvement is well promoted. There are separate leaflets as well as information in the tenant handbook, tenant newsletter and displays in local offices. It is also promoted in the sign up process. A specific tenant participation newsletter is produced each quarter and is delivered to all tenants. This gives information on ways to get involved and also advertises training events that have been arranged. Tenant representatives are involved in the production of this and other newsletters. There is also a free-phone tenant participation hotline.
- 155** There is a clear structure for participation at different levels and relatively high levels of involvement in these structures. A participation map which shows how different aspects of participation fit together is included in the tenant participation strategy. Particular aspects of this include the following.
- Seventeen tenant and resident associations (TRAs) each with at least four committee members. These cover 81 per cent of tenants. There is an average attendance of 20 people at each meeting.
 - A central tenant forum with representatives from each (TRA). This is where policy and strategic issues are discussed. At the meeting of the forum we attended there were approximately 30 TRA representatives in attendance.
 - A range of focus groups are in place including an older persons group, an equality and diversity group and a disability and special needs group, a repairs group, an allocations and lettings group and a rents group.
 - Four youth committees and a youth compact.
 - Surveys and questionnaires across a range of service areas.
 - An annual tenant conference.
- 156** These are part of a wide variety of formal and informal structures which promote and deliver tenant participation. Other forms of involvement include older people's roadshows, one-to-one interviews and the 'tenants' voice' initiative.
- 157** There has been significant tenant input into the maintenance programme, some of which is covered earlier in this report. This ranges from involvement in contractor selection through to selecting choices for internal fixtures and fittings.

- 158** There is a relatively high-level of satisfaction with opportunities for participation with management and decision making. The 2003/04 survey of tenants found that 72.3 per cent of residents were satisfied with this element of the service. This is comparatively high as organisations find it difficult to achieve high ratings on this performance indicator. It is also a significant increase on the previous survey two years earlier when there was 63 per cent satisfaction.
- 159** Tenant participation is well resourced. There is a specific tenant participation officer and a tenant liaison officer for co-ordinating involvement in the major works programme. In addition housing management staff have tenant participation responsibilities and all key staff have been trained in tenant involvement. In addition to staffing costs there is a £48,000 budget for tenant participation activities. The use of this budget is largely determined by the Compact Advisory Panel and the Tenants' Forum who also monitor expenditure.
- 160** There is an annual training survey for tenant representatives and this is used to inform training activities. A range of training events have been held internally and tenants have also attended training run externally. Ashfield Homes has also encouraged tenants to study for the CIOH National Certificate in Tenant Participation.
- 161** Ashfield Homes tenant participation compact is comprehensive and is regularly reviewed. The compact explains how tenants can participate and the standards they can expect. The compact was developed in consultation with tenant representatives and reviewed in consultation with a tenant-led compact review group.
- 162** Ashfield Homes is encouraging attendance at board meetings. Meetings are rotated around the district and advertised in the tenant newsletter. There is an open question and answer session at the beginning of the meeting where tenants can ask questions of officers and board members. They are then free to observe the rest of the board meeting excluding any confidential items. At the board meeting, we observed 12 tenants were also in attendance and a number of questions were asked by tenants.
- 163** Tenants are also effectively involved in performance management. Performance reports are discussed at the tenant forum. As well as officers, members of the board attend the tenant forum which is something that was requested by the forum. Performance reports are sent to all tenants twice a year as part of newsletter process. There are also details of performance displayed in local offices and on the company's website.
- 164** Clear outcomes from tenant involvement can be identified across service areas. For example, tenant involvement in the major works process led directly to a decision to widen the range of choices available to tenants having works completed and to the decision to install showers over baths when bathrooms are replaced.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 165** In our previous inspection, we found that the anti-social behaviour policy was not yet consistently applied or effectively monitored.
- 166** In this inspection, we found that there are significant strengths in this service area and that these outweigh weaknesses. Tenancy management is comprehensive and there are effective procedures in place for tackling anti-social behaviour. Tackling anti-social behaviour is given a high priority and activities are well co-ordinated with partners.
- 167** Tenancy conditions are clearly explained at sign-up and comprehensive documentation is provided through the tenant's handbook, tenancy agreement and associated leaflets. These are compiled together in a sign up pack for new residents. A checklist is used to ensure all key information is provided. This process ensures tenants are clear about their rights and responsibilities from the outset of their tenancy.
- 168** Initial tenancy visits have also recently been introduced and these provide a further opportunity to emphasise rights and responsibilities. These also help ensure tenants are settling in effectively and can be used to identify if any additional support is required. This element of the service can help reduce early tenancy failure as well as enhancing general customer care.
- 169** There has not been an effective system for making appointments for initial tenancy visits and monitoring level achieved. At the beginning of our inspection appointments for initial tenancy agreements were not being made at the time of sign up and the level of visits where contact was actually made was not being monitored. The sign up is the most effective time to make an appointment and this was added to the sign up a checklist while we were on-site. Monitoring of levels achieved is important to track performance and the effectiveness of the service and similarly a mechanism for this was established as soon as this was pointed out.
- 170** There are clear and comprehensive procedures for all aspects of tenancy management and these are brought together as part of the 'strategies, policies and procedures' manual. These provide staff with guidance on tenancy management activities such as assignment and succession of tenancy. Clear policies and procedures help ensure consistency of service and assist staff performance.
- 171** Included in the manual are robust procedures for dealing with anti-social behaviour. Our file checks demonstrated that these were being implemented effectively and consistently. A new anti-social behaviour tracking and monitoring IT module is now in place. This helps ensure cases are processed effectively and that trend information on performance is available.

- 172** A central neighbourhood safety team was established in 2004 to provide additional expertise and resources to tackle anti-social behaviour. Cases are initially dealt with by housing officers who receive support from the central team. More serious cases are also dealt with by the central team.
- 173** A range of enforcement measures are used to tackle anti-social behaviour. At the time of inspection there were nine acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs) in place, five anti-social behaviour orders, three injunctions and there had been one recent eviction. Four demoted tenancies were also being sought. The success of different measures is also monitored to inform future activities. For example, ABCs currently have a success rate of 66 per cent. Activities are also publicised to act as a deterrent and to aid enforcement. For example, leaflets are distributed identifying people who have had ASBOs awarded against them and what restrictions these have placed on them. Tenants are urged to contact Ashfield Homes or the police if they witness the terms of the order being broken. There has also been a successful court action where Ashfield Homes used the services of a professional witness. The range of enforcement measures being utilised helps ensure that the most effective action is being taken in each case.
- 174** Mediation services are used as a method of dealing with neighbour disputes. The neighbourhood safety team officer is an accredited mediator but external mediation is also used. A leaflet has been produced promoting mediation services.
- 175** There are relatively high levels of satisfaction with the anti-social behaviour service from those using the service. A satisfaction survey is sent on closure of each anti-social behaviour case. This showed a satisfaction rating of 76 per cent during 2004/05 and the 2005/06 figure to date is 78 per cent. The nature of this service area can make it difficult to get high satisfaction ratings so this represents a very strong performance.
- 176** Ashfield Homes is responding promptly to complaints of anti-social behaviour. The average response time for 2005/06 to date is 1.8 days. Both this figure and the satisfaction rating on anti-social behaviour cases are reported monthly to the performance management group.
- 177** There is a robust approach to dealing with domestic violence. There is a specific policy and procedure on domestic violence. Ashfield Homes' approach on domestic violence has been publicised through a specific leaflet, specific service standards and in newsletters. Ashfield Homes is also a member of the Nottinghamshire Domestic Violence Forum which seeks to co-ordinate activities and share good practice.
- 178** There is also a strong approach to racial harassment. Ashfield Homes has a specific policy and procedure on racial harassment which was developed in consultation with Nottingham Race Equality Council. Ashfield Homes is a member of the Ashfield racial issues group and the Nottinghamshire common monitoring scheme. All Ashfield Homes offices are reporting centre for the racial harassment common monitoring project. Ashfield Homes is currently running a poster campaign against anti-social behaviour and hate crime.

- 179 Ashfield Homes also manages an extensive and high profile neighbourhood warden service. The wardens are provided by a private contractor but managed by Ashfield Homes' Neighbourhood Warden Project Co-ordinator. Ashfield Homes was selected to manage the scheme by the Ashfield Partnership Against Crime which provides part funding alongside the neighbourhood renewal fund. The neighbourhood warden scheme is well-integrated with Ashfield Homes' tenancy enforcement and estate management services and with the work of partner organisations.
- 180 There is strong and effective partnership working in tackling anti-social behaviour. For example, in one area where there have been problems with underage drinking and related disturbances Ashfield Homes is working with the Council's licensing section and the police. The licensing section has been making test purchases on local retailers who sell alcohol to identify those who are selling to underage drinkers. The police targeted their mobile CCTV patrol on the area and Ashfield Homes targeted neighbourhood warden patrols. This led to a significant reduction in the problem.
- 181 There is a protocol in place with victim support to install additional security measures for victims of anti-social behaviour where appropriate. The lettings scheme also allows for households to be moved where this is necessary.
- 182 The partnership approach is also demonstrated by Ashfield Homes involvement in the Ashfield safety partnership and the jointly funded position of neighbourhood safety manager. Ashfield Homes is seen as a key member of the partnership. The position is funded half by Ashfield Homes and half by the Council and acts as the anti-social behaviour co-ordinator for the district. These demonstrate the confidence that partner agencies have in Ashfield Homes' approach to anti-social behaviour work.
- 183 Ashfield Homes has also been involved in developing and promoting diversionary activities to prevent anti-social behaviour. This is another area where it has established effective partnerships. For example, it has been involved in promoting boxing and kickboxing clubs in a number of areas. At the time of inspection it was developing a directory of activities with a local community group. Neighbourhood wardens are important in terms of signposting diversionary activities. They have access to a database of all activities within Ashfield which is provided by the Ashfield Links Forum.
- 184 There have also been a successful series of school roadshows to highlight anti-social behaviour problems. This was initiated by Ashfield Homes and involves partner agencies. A further 11 dates are lined up for school visits. A resource pack on anti-social behaviour for use by teachers has also been produced by Ashfield Homes.

Estate management

- 185 In our previous inspection, many of the estates we visited were very clean and tidy, although we also saw localised problems. There was proactive estate management and effective caretaking staff, with regular estate inspections and resources earmarked to tackle tenant identified environmental improvements.

- 186** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in estate management. Estate services are well co-ordinated and estates are well maintained and clean and tidy. Comprehensive estate inspections are still in place and environmental improvement programmes are being delivered.
- 187** Housing estates in Ashfield are still well maintained, clean and tidy. We visited a number of estates and also discussed estate management with residents. Litter and fly tipping is dealt with effectively and co-ordinated with other activities such as grass cutting. There are service level agreements in place with the Council for the provision of street cleansing, drain services, grounds maintenance, building cleaning and removal of rubbish. There is also a team of estate officers employed by Ashfield Homes who carry out minor communal repairs, additional rubbish clearance and grounds maintenance. These are able to provide a rapid response to issues as they arise.
- 188** Effective quarterly 'estate evaluation' meetings take place. These involve housing staff, tenant representatives, councillors and neighbourhood wardens. A checklist is used to provide a structure to the inspection and all participants are invited to contribute. An action plan for the housing officer to progress is produced at the end of the process. There are monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that evaluations take place regularly and that agreed actions are progressed.
- 189** It is a weakness that there is insufficient feedback to participants and residents generally on the progress of actions arising from estate evaluations. Feedback is not provided until the next estate evaluation. There are some issues where it would be beneficial for participants to be updated more quickly than this. More regular feedback would also demonstrate to participants the effectiveness to being involved in the evaluation process. There was also no mechanism to feedback findings and actions more broadly to residents on the estate. Ashfield Homes is in the process of enhancing the estate evaluation process to improve feedback.
- 190** Housing staff have clear information on the land which is designated as the responsibility of Ashfield Homes. Staff have access to colour coded maps that detail land which is the responsibility of the Council, the County Council and Ashfield Homes. This makes it easier for staff to quickly rectify problems when they occur.
- 191** The full potential of developing garden areas to make places a more attractive place to live has not yet been realised although this is now being explored. The current service focuses on providing basic maintenance of existing garden areas and does this effectively. However, there is potential to provide higher standards of gardens particularly at sheltered schemes and other flats. An enhanced gardening service is being trialled at one of Council's sheltered schemes.

- 192** Empty properties on estates are secured according to the level of risk of vandalism or illegal entry and external areas are maintained by estate officers. The level of security is assessed by housing management staff who can use security alarms, net curtains or metal screens if they believe properties are at risk. The metal screens currently used are unsightly and could create an appearance of blight. Ashfield Homes is due to re-tender its vacant property security screen contract and has confirmed that alternative types of screens will be examined during this process.
- 193** An environmental improvement programme is in place and is being effectively delivered in consultation with tenants. £1.2 million is budgeted for the programme for 2005/06.
- 194** Tenants show a relatively high-level of satisfaction with the area in which they live and more specifically with grounds maintenance. The 2003/04 tenants survey showed 82.8 per cent satisfaction with the area as a place to live. This is a high score, particularly for an area with relatively high levels of deprivation. The most recent grounds maintenance 'vision management system' survey showed an average rating of 7.64 out of 10. This shows scope for improvement but is still a good rating.

Leasehold management

- 195** In our previous inspection, we found an increasing emphasis on leaseholder issues, close liaison with the Council's legal department and a leaseholder forum had been established. There was also welcome pack for new leaseholders including a leaseholder's handbook.
- 196** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in leaseholder services. Ashfield Homes' service to leaseholders is generally effective and in particular it has ensured leaseholders are well informed on the major works programme. However, internal improvement works are not offered to leaseholders. While the leaseholder forum has been successfully re-established sustained involvement of leaseholders still needs to be demonstrated.
- 197** There are currently 138 leaseholders. The Council has retained responsibility for Right to Buy processing, formal service of notices on leaseholders and service charge notification and collection. Many of the general estate management delivered by Ashfield Homes and covered above are also delivered to leaseholders.
- 198** It is a strength that Ashfield Homes held a series of meetings with leaseholders to discuss the major works programme and has produced a useful guide for leaseholders on major works.
- 199** A leaseholder forum has recently been re-established and the last meeting attracted 25 leaseholders. The new internal money management advice service was publicised at the meeting. The previous forum ceased to operate in 2004.

- 200** It is weakness that Ashfield Homes does not generally offer improvements being carried out to neighbouring tenanted homes to leaseholders or to owner occupiers. Offering neighbouring properties of different tenures the opportunity to buy in to improvements can help area regeneration as costs offered are often lower than market rates.
- 201** It is positive that there is one area of the district where external rendering improvement works were offered to owner occupiers and this was linked to the Council's private sector loans scheme. A number of owner occupiers took the opportunity to buy into these works helping the general regeneration of the area.

Allocations and lettings

- 202** In our previous inspection, we found that there was effective marketing of difficult-to-let homes, and a comprehensive welcome pack for new tenants. The allocations points system was, however, over-complex and we found some variation in allocation practices between offices.
- 203** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this service area. There are comprehensive lettings procedures which are being effectively applied. This is reflected in a strong performance in the overall time taken to re-let empty properties. Housing register applications are processed promptly, allocations are made efficiently and the quality of information for service users is very high. However, there is a need for improved customer profile information to enable more effective analysis of refusals and to more effectively target housing options advice. The Council's lettings scheme has been simplified but there is no choice based letting scheme in place.
- 204** There are comprehensive allocation and letting procedures in place which provide clear guidance to staff. These are operated effectively and include pre-allocation of properties and close working between the voids repair team and the lettings team.
- 205** Ashfield Homes can demonstrate a strong performance in the overall time to re-let properties. During 2004/05 the average re-let time was 22.2 days. This is particularly impressive as there is still a small proportion on the stock that is difficult to let and which when let can adversely affect this performance indicator.
- 206** Housing applications are widely available through local offices, Council offices, some external agencies and can be downloaded from the Ashfield Homes' website.
- 207** There is currently limited co-ordination of access to social housing across RSLs. While there is identification of housing options with RSLs in Ashfield Homes' lettings documents, no common system of accessing social housing within the district has been agreed. This means that prospective tenants have to apply separately to all the different housing providers.

- 208** Ashfield Homes is promptly providing nominations to other social landlords. A nominations agreement is in place with RSLs which sets out levels of vacancies to be provided by the RSL and the timescales for Ashfield Homes to provide nominations. These are being achieved in all cases by Ashfield Homes. The Council has retained responsibility for monitoring RSLs' performance in providing the required level of nomination rights.
- 209** Housing applications are processed promptly and effectively. There is a target to process 96 per cent of housing applications within five days. Ashfield Homes has been consistently achieving this target. We also checked a number of cases and found them to have been processed in line with agreed policies and procedures. We did find a minor problem of some closed applications still being filed with the live applications.
- 210** There is a good range of information sent out to housing applicants. A comprehensive pack of information is provided with application forms. This includes a brochure entitled 'choosing a home' which explains the lettings process and other housing options. A twice-yearly magazine is produced for all housing applicants updating them on latest issues and also advertising difficult to let properties. This also updates applicants on the level of points at which properties are being allocated in different parts of the district. A monthly lettings newsletter is produced and is available in local offices and on the website.
- 211** Collection and analysis of information on who is applying for housing through the housing register is underdeveloped. Information is collected and analysed on ethnicity, household composition and demand for different property types. However, the analysis of profiling information is not yet sufficiently developed to enable a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of housing applicants. This will help inform policy and service development to ensure that services best meet the needs of users.
- 212** Ashfield Homes pro-actively administers a local mutual exchange scheme although there is still scope for further development. There is a computerised matching system of exchange applicants which staff carry out and which is available on the Ashfield Homes' website. Mutual exchange signs for display outside homes are available but have not proved popular with service users. However, we found a need for a clearer prompt for mutual exchange forms to be sent following an expression of interest on a housing application form. Use of photographs to promote properties is not currently formally offered. There is also a need for closer monitoring of trends in mutual exchanges to help inform service improvement. For many Ashfield Homes tenants wishing to move, a mutual exchange is the most realistic option. Therefore, it is important that the effectiveness of the mutual exchange scheme is maximised. Ashfield Homes immediately introduced a number of improvements to start to address these issues when they were pointed out.

- 213** Satisfaction with the housing register service is being measured but is not yet comprehensive. The twice-yearly magazine has been used to gather feed back but the response has been limited. There is a question on the new occupier survey on satisfaction with the information provided while on the housing register. This shows a relatively good rating of 7.7 from 10 but does not reflect the views of people on the housing register who have not been housed. Ashfield Homes recognised this gap in its self-assessment process and plans are in place for a more comprehensive survey.
- 214** It is a weakness that Ashfield Homes does not offer the opportunity to view properties while works to empty properties are ongoing. Enabling this can speed up the re-letting process. While there may be health and safety issues at some empty homes during the repair process, in many instances viewings could safely take place. Where this is well-organised it can increase the proportion of properties where tenancies commence immediately following completion of works. Following this being pointed out, an action to examine how this could best be achieved was incorporated into the organisation's improvement plan.
- 215** It is positive that Ashfield Homes offers accompanied viewings for prospective new tenants. Accompanied viewings are provided as standard for difficult-to-let homes and offered to other prospective tenants.
- 216** It is a weakness that the offer of an accompanied viewing has not been sufficiently explicit and that monitoring arrangements are underdeveloped. While accompanied viewings are mentioned in the lettings standard and in the summer 2005 lettings magazine, they are not mentioned in the actual offer letter. Ashfield Homes is also not currently monitoring the level of accompanied viewings alongside offer outcomes and lettings satisfaction results. This would help evaluate the benefits of accompanied viewings and inform future service developments. Ashfield Homes immediately introduced a number of improvements to start to address these issues when they were pointed out.
- 217** There is still a relatively high-level of refusal of offers of Council homes and the analysis of refusals is not yet fully developed. There were refusals at a rate of 37 per cent against offers made during 2004/05. This figure also includes cases where there is no response following an offer being made. A proportion of the refusals are due to multiple offers to a small number of hard-to-let units. Reasons for refusal are collected and there is an awareness that single persons and in particular, single men are more likely not to respond or refuse a property. Ashfield Homes has developed an action plan for addressing this. Part of this is to carry out more regular reviews of certain client groups, eg those with 'care of' addresses.

- 218** The Council's lettings scheme has been recently reviewed, with some improvements introduced, but the benefits of choice based lettings have not yet been fully evaluated. The review has resulted in a simplification of the points system and increased choice of areas down to street level. The Council decided not to introduce a scheme because there is high demand for most Council homes, void turnaround times are good and there were concerns about the cost of administering the scheme. However, there was not a full evaluation of choice based lettings scheme operating in other areas where they have been shown to provide greater choice for service users in high demand areas. The possible links with Ashfield Homes' planned property shops have not been fully explored.
- 219** Ashfield Homes provides a comprehensive sign up process and user satisfaction with the service is high. We witnessed a sign up which was carried out very effectively with all key information being provided. This includes local area profile information and an 'on the move checklist' for new tenants. Part of the welcome pack includes a number of practical items such as energy saving light bulbs and cleaning materials. The new occupier survey measures the level of user satisfaction with the sign up service. Ashfield Homes is currently achieving an average of 8.68 out of 10.

Supported housing

- 220** In our previous inspection, we found that services for older people were focused on the 'independence' agenda and further support for vulnerable people was being developed in partnership with other agencies, including tenancy support officers and extra care provision. However, too many older people were living in bed-sit accommodation with shared facilities.
- 221** In this inspection, we found that there are significant strengths in supported housing which outweigh weaknesses. Support services to elderly residents and vulnerable residents are of a high-quality. However, progress in addressing the level of older people living in bed-sit accommodation and with shared facilities has been slow.
- 222** There has only been limited progress in addressing the number of older people living in bed-sits in the Council's sheltered housing stock and there are still some with shared facilities. Three out-of-date sheltered schemes have been demolished since the last inspection in 2002. Ashfield District Council engaged a consultant to look at the sheltered schemes in the district and a report was produced in November 2003. This highlighted a series of recommendations regarding the future of many schemes with bed-sits. Progress against these recommendations is dependent on Council decisions on the way forward. Progress has been limited. There is now a pilot scheme being developed to convert bed-sits into flats at one scheme. Over half of the Council's sheltered housing stock units are bed-sits, although only a small proportion have shared facilities.

- 223** All sheltered schemes have been modernised to meet the decent homes standard. An evaluation on works in relation to these schemes was carried out prior to commencement. It was found that the remaining schemes have sufficient life in them to justify the relatively small element of works required to achieve decent homes and that possible future refurbishments would not significantly disturb decent homes works.
- 224** Sheltered housing schemes were clean and generally well maintained although furnishings and decorations at some schemes were showing signs of wear and tear. Furnishings at schemes visited did meet current fire safety regulations. There is an improvement programme for communal areas with redecoration and upgrading of carpets, curtains and furniture planned for 2005/06.
- 225** There is a professional and well-organised care co-ordinator service providing support to older people. This is a non-residential service and is flexible according to the needs of the service user. A needs assessment, risk assessment, and support plan are completed for all service users. There is a quarterly review of all support plans and a full re-assessment carried out at least annually, or upon request from the service user. In a recent survey, 95.2 per cent of service users said that they were happy with the care co-ordinator service.
- 226** Effective quarterly newsletters are produced by Ashfield Homes for users of supported housing services for older persons and for users of the tenancy support service. These are well-presented and provide a range of useful information.
- 227** Ashfield Homes has run a series of successful older person roadshows for the last two years. Approximately 500 older persons attended the four roadshows held during 2005. These have been used to discuss the services provided Ashfield Homes. They were also attended by 15 other organisations who deliver services for older people in Ashfield. This has increased awareness of the services provided by care co-ordinators, other parts of Ashfield Homes and external agencies.
- 228** The support centre operated by Ashfield Homes has been accredited by the Association of Social Alarm providers for the last two years and achieved a satisfaction rating of 99.3 per cent in a recent user survey. As part of the requirement for accreditation key performance indicators, such as response times, have to achieve set standards.
- 229** Ashfield Homes provides a high-quality tenancy support service. The service is accessible, well-organised and staff are well trained. The service has received very high ratings from the quality assessment framework validation review carried out by the County Council's Supporting People team. It was awarded five 'A' grades for aspects of the service and one 'B' grade which is the best result in the county. This review included assessment of performance in the percentage of support plans successfully completed and the percentage of supported tenants maintaining their independence. The 'vision management system' score measuring user satisfaction with the tenancy support service is high at an average of 9.6 from 10. This service is helping reduce tenancy failures of people living in Council homes.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 230** In our previous inspection, we found evidence of good attention to value for money, a clear, strategic approach to investment and Egan compliant partnering arrangements. The percentage of work carried out on a planned basis was too low and the schedule of rates for responsive repairs was in need of review. The service compared well against other district councils across a range of performance indicators, although needing to improve in some aspects, in particular in the management of empty homes.
- 231** In July 2004, the Gershon review of public sector efficiency was published focusing on how best to target resources on frontline services by releasing resources through efficient working practices. The review also highlighted the governments aim to make significant efficiency gains in social housing procurement, including both capital works and management and maintenance. These issues are considered in our inspection including examination of how the ALMO approaches procurement and in particular explores the benefits of strategic partnerships and collaborative procurement. This may be with, or through, the Council or with other organisations.
- 232** In this inspection, we found that there is a strong focus on delivering value for money and that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. A value for money strategy is in place and some key measures to improve value for money have been implemented. In particular, value for money measures have been implemented in the high value areas of major works and responsive repairs. However, while analysis of unit costs and external benchmarking is taking place this is not yet fully developed. Similarly, collaborative purchasing and strategic partnerships are being developed but have not yet been explored in all service areas.
- 233** Ashfield Homes has a clear focus on achieving value for money in the services it provides. A clear value for money strategy including an annual efficiency statement is in place. A comprehensive procurement strategy is also in place. Work on addressing the value for money agenda is still developing within Ashfield Homes but these documents do provide clear direction.
- 234** It is positive that Ashfield Homes has benchmarked its costs with some other high performing social landlords and that this shows costs are generally lower or comparable. This was carried out by independent consultants and compared high levels costs across the service. This area of work still needs to develop further both in terms of widening the analysis and in the level of detail. The key messages from the benchmarking work are summarised in a value for money strategy.
- In 2003/04 and 2004/05, average total revenue funded operating costs were lower than the comparator landlord services.
 - The company spends broadly in line with the balance between management and maintenance found in other high performing organisations.
 - The company's staffing costs and costs of management of the repairs service are in line (or slightly below) the comparators.

- The cost of central, corporate and support services (finance, company ICT service, human resources, administration) are lower than comparative organisations.
 - When comparing the proportion of expenditure between staffing and non-staffing, the comparator organisations generally show a much lower proportion on non-pay items. In part, this reflects the extent of SLAs with Ashfield District Council compared to non-ALMO organisations where direct employment of staff to carry out these functions would be in place.
- 235** There is a need to develop more detailed information on unit costs. This is needed to more effectively monitor changes in costs and enable benchmarking in specific service areas. This forms part of Ashfield Homes' improvement plans and is linked to a zero-based budget approach which is currently being adopted.
- 236** There are a number of specific areas where a focus on value for money is demonstrated.
- The three-year partnering contracts used to deliver the decent homes standard in all Council homes have delivered significant savings as well as delivering high-quality services. These contracts had standard partnering features such as shared savings and open book accounting. Assessment of contracts against the increases in the national building costs index indicates an approximate saving of £2 million. This is likely to be greater if compared to unit costs previously being paid for this type of works through traditional procurement methods although an overall analysis has not been completed.
 - The recently established health and safety contract is a three-year partnering contract which has brought together a number of health and safety checks in properties reducing direct unit costs and administrative costs.
 - Increased levels of multi-skilling in repairs and maintenance have helped make the service more efficient.
 - There has been a significant reduction in the number of responsive repairs being carried out. The number of staff carrying out responsive repairs has been reduced by 30 per cent over the last three years. This has been partly due to the impact of the major works programme but also more revenue funded planned works. There is a 50:50 split in the amount of revenue funding spent on planned and responsive maintenance in 2005/06. The budget for 2006/07 shows a 60:40 split which the Audit Commission recommends as the target level. Carrying out repairs in a planned way is generally the most efficient way to deliver maintenance work.

- There has been a focus on achieving value for money in procuring supplies for responsive repairs. All products are tendered together externally every two years. These costs are then compared with the costs that can be achieved through the Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation, a national procurement consortium. Purchases are then based on the lowest costs and currently about 50 per cent of products are purchased through the consortium. Additionally, ten products per month are market tested individually to test value for money. No more than eight weeks of supplies are kept in stock and new orders are placed every four weeks. This ensures that money is not tied up in holding supplies which may not be used for a long time.
- Commissioning costs for major works have been relatively low at approximately five per cent. This has been achieved through partnership working and through economies of scale. Costs have been less than expected with £396,000 being saved on original budgets since the ALMO started.
- A vehicle tracking system for use in repairs vans was introduced approximately a year ago. This enables effective communication between operatives and the depot and ensures vans are being used in the most effective way. This has increased productivity and been a key factor in the reduction in the number of vans from 61 to 52. Savings on vehicles alone have been £50,000.
- A trading account has been maintained for the direct labour organisation and the service is costed using a schedule of rates. The schedule of rates is then priced externally each year by approved external contractors. A matrix of costs from different contractors is then produced. This enables comparison of costs with the in-house team and enables Ashfield Homes to use the cheapest contractor when it procures responsive works externally.
- High levels of appointments have also made the responsive service more efficient as there are less aborted calls.
- Access to housing management services has been restructured to enable improvements in value for money. This has included the closure of a number of local offices and an increasing focus on home visits.
- There has been a significant reduction in sickness levels across the organisation and in particular within the direct labour organisation. This helps increase the productivity of the workforce.
- Service level agreements with the Council have been reviewed with some improvements in value for money being achieved. The service level agreements have been made more specific which enables more effective monitoring. The finance service level agreement was terminated and services brought in house. Ashfield Homes estimates this resulted in a saving of £50,000. Legal services provided by the Council were market tested by Ashfield Homes and found to be competitive.
- Post-inspection of works is linked to the value of works and variations so that more costly works are inspected. All jobs costing over £350 are inspected.

- The out-of-hours emergency repairs service was brought in-house following examination of costs and consultation with tenants. This is expected to make a saving of £80,000 per year.
 - Support services for older persons have been reorganised to create a flexible and efficient service funded through the Supporting People grant. The previous residential warden service was ended in favour of a non-residential care co-ordinator service. This enables the level of support to be tailored to individual needs and to be offered to all older people rather than those only living in sheltered schemes.
 - A system known as 'decision-conferencing' has been used to carry out a cost benefit analysis on aspects of existing service provision and possible improvements. This process weights the benefits of aspects of existing service provision, possible improvements and assesses them against costs. A list of service adjustments and improvements which maximise benefits is then produced and used to inform improvement plans.
 - There has been a strong performance record of delivering contracts to budget on time. For example, total capital spend against planned spend was 98 per cent in 2003/04 and 99 per cent in 2004/05.
- 237** There are areas where the approach to value for money needs further development.
- Invoicing and issuing of job tickets in repairs is still a mainly manual process making it less efficient.
 - There are currently standalone IT modules for planned works, stock condition surveys, asbestos, responsive repairs and gas servicing. This means that updating information between systems is a largely manual exercise. This will be addressed when the new integrated IT system is fully implemented. This is due to be in place by April 2006.
 - The system of allocating works and appointments to operatives is not fully automated. This makes it less efficient.
 - There has been insufficient exploration of payment and claims systems for repairs. The schedule of rates used by Ashfield Homes is regularly reviewed and many rates are composite. However, there are still over 2,000 items on the system and this means processing is still fairly labour intensive. The bonus scheme for operatives is currently under review and in particular there is a proposal to link this to customer satisfaction returns. However, this is also an area which could benefit from further examination of alternatives approaches.
 - Value for money in procuring aids and adaptations has not yet been maximised. Major adaptations are still largely tendered individually and the benefit of longer-term partnerships or a schedule of rates have not been realised. A trial three-month tender is currently being developed for the bulk purchase of level access showers to reduce the inefficiency of individual tenders.

- There is insufficient clarity on the level of multi-skilling Ashfield Homes wants to achieve to optimise efficiency.
- The level of variation of costs on repairs orders needs to be regularly monitored. This information was recently produced for benchmarking purposes and at 14 per cent levels were similar to other high performing organisations. However, current IT systems do enable effective ongoing monitoring of this figure.
- Only a small proportion of tenants are paying rent using cheaper methods of rent payment.
- There is a need for further analysis of value for money testing in responsive repairs. While high-level analysis has shown costs as comparative or lower than with other high performing organisations providers, the matrix comparing costs with external providers shows lower costs on many schedule of rates. The costs are not directly comparable as standard of performance and quantities for external provision are not prescribed. However, it does indicate that further analysis is required.
- Value for money in grounds maintenance and building cleaning services cannot be demonstrated. The services are provided by the Council under the Management Agreement, with Ashfield Homes' role restricted to determining standards and quality. There has not been a clear evaluation of cost and quality in these services and how value for money could be maximised.

Summary

- 238** Overall we judge that the housing services provided by Ashfield Homes are of an excellent standard.
- 239** The performance on customer care is of a high standard. There is a strong corporate approach and service standards are comprehensive. Services are easily accessible and information provided to service users is of a very good quality. Customer feedback is sought across a range of services and consistently high levels of satisfaction are being achieved. The only significant weakness is that local offices do not meet the highest modern standards.
- 240** Strengths strongly outweigh weaknesses in the delivery of major works and planned maintenance. A three-year, £76 million programme of improvement works, focused on achieving the Government's decent homes standard, has been very well co-ordinated and delivered in a highly customer focussed manner. There is also a programme of pro-active planned works externally to homes and surrounding areas. Comprehensive systems are in place to deliver gas servicing and gas appliances in all properties have been serviced in the last 12 months. Day-to-day repairs carried out very quickly and to a high standard. The aids and adaptation service is well resourced and works are carried out promptly following referral from care co-ordinators or from an OT. The only significant weaknesses in this area is the limited information on future improvements works that is currently available to tenants and the backlog in the cyclical painting works, both of which are in the process of being addressed.

- 241** There are robust processes in place for rent collection and arrears recovery, and these are well-integrated with the provision of welfare benefits advice and debt advice. There is strong performance on the level of rent collected and the level of arrears.
- 242** Tenant participation is well developed and there are a range of opportunities for tenants to influence services at strategic and operational levels.
- 243** Tenancy management is comprehensive and there are effective procedures in place for tackling anti-social behaviour. Tackling anti-social behaviour is given a high priority and activities are well co-ordinated with partners.
- 244** Estate services are well co-ordinated and estates are well maintained and clean and tidy. Comprehensive estate inspections are undertaken and environmental improvement programmes are being delivered.
- 245** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in allocations and lettings. There are comprehensive lettings procedures which are being effectively applied. This is reflected in a strong performance in the overall time taken to re-let empty properties. Housing register applications are processed promptly, allocations are made efficiently and the quality of information for service users is very high. However, there is a need for improved customer profile information to enable more effective analysis of refusals and to more effectively target housing options advice. The Council's lettings policy has been simplified but there is no choice based letting scheme in place.
- 246** Support services to elderly residents and vulnerable residents are of a high-quality. However, progress in addressing the level of bed-sit accommodation, some with shared facilities, in older persons housing has been slow.
- 247** There is a strong focus on delivering value for money and strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. A value for money strategy is in place and some key measures to improve value for money have been implemented. In particular, value for money measures have been implemented in the high value areas of major works and responsive repairs. However, while analysis of unit costs and external benchmarking is taking place, it is not yet fully developed. Similarly, collaborative purchasing and strategic partnerships are being developed but have not yet been explored in all service areas.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 248 In our previous inspection, we found that all the areas identified in the earlier inspection had been progressed and that Ashfield Homes was able to improve its high-level of performance during a period of substantial change.
- 249 In this inspection we found that there is a strong track record of delivering service improvement. There is substantial evidence of effective implementation of change, and improvements in outcomes which have had a direct benefit for service users. User satisfaction surveys and performance indicators both demonstrate improved performance on what were already high standards. The changes delivered include improvements in value for money. Progress has been slower than expected in a small number of areas. These are areas where progress has been reliant on Council decisions.
- 250 The tables below shows significant progress against the vast majority of recommendations from the Audit Commission's previous inspection.
- 251 We recommended that the Council should action the following.

AC recommendation	Progress
R1 Ensure timely decisions are taken on proposals to further improve the quality of life for tenants in bed-sit sheltered accommodation and that tenants affected are sensitively and timely consulted on identified proposals.	Some progress. Three sheltered schemes demolished and a proposal for conversions at another.
R2 Develop future planning scenarios to identify the Council's strategic aims and objectives for the ALMO for the remainder of the 25-year contract and ensure the ALMO is allowed to develop appropriate independence to fully realise the benefits that this new status affords.	Robust ALMO business plan in place but Council's strategic aims for the ALMO not clear.
R3 Undertake training for elected members to bring them fully up to speed on the roles and responsibilities of Ashfield Homes.	Achieved
R4 Consider simplifying the current points system used in allocating homes.	Achieved

AC recommendation	Progress
R5 Develop discrete monitoring systems of ALMO financial and activity performance, ensuring appropriate systems of financial control and checks.	Processes developed but limited level of scrutiny.
R6 Ensure rent re-structuring is in place by April 2003.	Achieved

252 We recommended that Ashfield Homes should action the following.

AC recommendation	Progress
R7 Ensure full compliance with the provisions of the new Homelessness Act in allocating homes.	Achieved
R8 Ensure customers receive a consistent response to reports of anti-social behaviour.	Achieved
R9 Ensure all new staff receive a comprehensive induction which includes attention to diversity issues.	Achieved
R10 Review the existing schedule of rates and the void repair standard.	Achieved
R11 Secure access to housing benefit IT systems and verification framework training for appropriate front line staff.	Achieved
R12 Ensure criteria for the appointment of all Board members is put in place.	Achieved
R13 Remove the back-log of gas servicing by 31 March 2003, in accordance with the existing 'catch-up plan'.	Achieved
R14 Ensure the effective introduction of a comprehensive IT system that meets service and business needs by 2004, within the agreed budget.	Introduction of new integrated IT system commenced in 2004. One module still to be implemented - due by March 2006.
R15 Ensure service level agreements are comprehensive, cost effective and focused on customer requirements.	SLAs reviewed and improved but cost effectiveness/quality in building cleaning and ground maintenance requires further analysis.

AC recommendation	Progress
R16 Ensure customers can access ALMO Board meetings on a regular basis.	Achieved
R17 Complete a review of existing office provision in 2003/04 to ensure the most effective and efficient use of resources is obtained.	Achieved
R18 Ensure annual increases in the percentage of planned work carried out achieve 60 per cent by 2005/06.	Budget demonstrates 50 per cent during 2005/06 and target of 60 per cent by 2006/07.
R19 Further training and capacity building to fully equip Board members, senior staff and tenant activists for the demands of their new roles.	Achieved

Source: AC Inspection Report 2002

- 253** Ashfield Homes has been consistently progressing actions in line with its improvement plans. There are comprehensive improvement plans in place across all service areas and progress has been made against these. Plans over the last three years were examined and these clearly demonstrate significant progress with timescales changing on only a small number of items.
- 254** The three most significant areas where progress has been slower than would be expected are as follows.
- The proposal to develop a new approach to services in local offices has been delayed. It was originally envisaged that three new property shops would be in place by April 2005. These will provide a more modern public office environment and increase the focus on lettings. At the time of inspection works were being completed to the first of these shops. The other two shops have been delayed as the Council has not yet reached a decision on the refurbishment of two existing offices where the property shops are likely to be located. A new target date of the end of March 2006 has been agreed.
 - There has been limited progress in addressing the issues of the large number of bed-sits in sheltered accommodation, particularly those with shared facilities. A consultant's report was produced in November 2003 providing a comprehensive analysis of sheltered schemes and making recommendations. Following the demolition of three schemes since 2002, a pilot is now being developed to convert bed-sits at one scheme into one bed flats but progress overall has been slow. Progress in this area of work is dependent on Council investment decisions.

- There is no integrated IT system for stock investment and asset management. The introduction of a new IT system across services has been ongoing since 2004 and is due for completion by March 2006. However, the limitations of the system for stock investment and asset management were recognised a number of years ago and it has not yet rectified. This has created inefficiencies in some areas and limited performance information in some areas.
- 255** There are a significant number of areas where Ashfield Homes has delivered improvements which have discernable benefits for service users. These include the following:
- effective delivery of a large programme of major works to achieve the decent homes standard;
 - reducing delays in the delivery of aids and adaptation works;
 - delivering comprehensive safety checks to all homes in a customer-focused manner;
 - establishing a high-quality tenancy support service;
 - provision of an in-house money advice service and improved co-ordination with external advice agency;
 - introduction of initial tenancy visits;
 - improved consistency and effectiveness of anti-social behaviour work;
 - extended neighbourhood warden scheme;
 - a programme of external environmental works delivered in consultation with service users; and
 - improved information provided to housing applicants.

- 256 There is also clear evidence of improvement through performance indicators including:
- overall tenants satisfaction with the service has risen from 82 per cent to 87 per cent;
 - improvement in levels of satisfaction levels are shown in nearly all service specific surveys;
 - the level of homes that do not achieve the decent home standard has been rapidly reduced;
 - the average SAP rating in properties has increased from 60 in 2003/04 to 66.3 in 2004/05;
 - an increase in the level of urgent repairs completed in government timescales to 99.5 per cent in 2004/05;
 - an increase in the level of appointments made/kept from 98 per cent in 2003/04 to 99 per cent in 2004/05;
 - the level of rent collected has increased since 2003/04 and the level of arrears has reduced;
 - the average time to re-let empty homes reduced from 26.5 days in 2003/04 to 22.2 days in 2004/05; and
 - the percentage of tenants covered by a TRA rose from 73 per in 2003/04 to 82 per cent in 2004/05.
- 257 There are also a number of indications that value for money has been improved. Efficiencies have been delivered in a number of areas as identified above in the value for money section of this report and performance has been either maintained or improved.
- 258 Investment and procurement decisions have taken into account the short and long-term cost of actions and the long-term interest of users. Good examples of this are the three-year partnering arrangements to deliver the major works programme and the restructuring of local office provision.
- 259 Value for money principles are becoming embedded in the core service aims. A value for money strategy, annual efficiency statement and procurement strategy are in place and are impacting on the delivery of service improvements.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 260 In our previous inspection, we found that Ashfield Homes had both a contractual and cultural commitment to continuous improvement and the housing service had a track record of effective performance management and achievement. The Ashfield Homes delivery plan set a solid foundation for continued improvement and an updated plan was being produced in close consultation with staff, customers and board members. This plan also reflected the commitments and aims specified in the 2002 housing revenue business plan, which was jointly produced by officers of the Council and Ashfield Homes.

- 261** We also previously found that personal development reviews had been effectively introduced and were being cascaded to all staff, with staff reporting positive two-way discussions. These had been used to set individual targets relating directly in achieving the aims and objectives of the ALMO delivery plan. However, incompatible IT systems were unsuited to the needs of the ALMO and service level agreements were poorly defined.
- 262** In this inspection we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in the management of performance. Aims and priorities for the future are clear, challenging and robust. Action plans cover the key areas for service development and these areas have been identified using best value principles. Plans are comprehensive, SMART and address value for money. There is a well-embedded performance culture supported by a comprehensive performance management framework which together drive and monitor progress, and review impact. There is also a robust approach to risk management. However, the level of scrutiny of the ALMO by the Council not been consistently robust.
- 263** Ashfield Homes has a clear vision for what the organisation wants to achieve in the short, medium and long-term. These are detailed in the company's business plan and more detail on short to medium-term aims are identified in delivery plan agreed with the Council.
- 264** The Council's view on the role of the ALMO in delivering its housing aims and objectives in the medium and long-term is not currently clear. There is a five-year break clause in the 25-year contract for delivery of services by Ashfield Homes. The break clause could therefore be invoked at the end of March 2007. An external review of the ALMO and of the future options has been commissioned by the Council. This will inform the decision on the future role of the ALMO. Indications from senior councillors were that at this stage nothing had been ruled in or out.
- 265** There are detailed and comprehensive annual actions plans in place to ensure the aims and objectives are being delivered. These are SMART and cover the areas where scope for further improvement has been identified and where users want services provided in a different way. In particular:
- improvements in the quality of local offices, extended opening hours and an increased focus on the lettings service;
 - improving the take up of cost effective rent payment methods;
 - delivering improvements to the Councils sheltered housing stock;
 - re-establishing the external decorations programme; and
 - carrying out more proactive planned maintenance.

- 266 The property shop approach in local offices will deliver improvements in service but the full benefits will not be realised without a choice based letting scheme. The proposed property shop approach will enable better provision of housing options advice and help in letting the small amount of hard to let stock. It can also be used for more effective promotion of mutual exchanges. There is also an intention to invite RSLs and accredited private landlords to use the service to advertise their properties. However, the vast majority of council stock will still be allocated using traditional methods.
- 267 Improvement plans are developed using best value techniques. This has included the following.
- A very detailed analysis of services against the Audit Commissions KLOEs. Following initial work by officers, meetings of either one day or half-a-day were held with staff, residents, external agencies and Derby Homes ALMO to assess services against the KLOEs. From this a gap analysis was produced and these were included in the 2004/05 improvement plans. There is a clear audit trail from issues raised from the KLOEs analysis through to the improvement plans.
 - The use of focus groups to inform service improvement in key service areas including: repairs and maintenance, rent collection, allocations and lettings, disability and special needs and older persons' services.
 - Satisfaction surveys are also a key driver of service improvement. These are sufficiently specific and regular to allow lower scores to be addressed.
 - A partner satisfaction survey has been carried out to obtain external views on partnership working and performance in a number of service areas. This has been used to inform improvement planning.
 - A system known as 'decision-conferencing' has been used to carry out a cost benefit analysis on aspects of existing service provision and possible improvements. This process weights the benefits of aspects of existing service provision, possible improvements and assesses them against costs. A list of service adjustments and improvements which maximise benefits is then produced and used to inform improvement plans.
 - The process for formal complaints includes a specific stage where any learning points are considered and recorded. This information is used to inform improvement planning.
- 268 The inspection process has also been used to inform improvements. On-site feedback was immediately used by Ashfield Homes to develop future improvements some of which were delivered when we were on site. There were a number of examples where changes were made to services immediately following issues being identified in the feedback process or where issues were fed into improvement plans.

- 269** There are a small number of areas where aspects of services would benefit from further external comparison. For example, there is a need to carry out more analysis of how the repairs schedule of rates can be developed to make them more efficient and effective. Development of housing options advice, elements of the lettings service would also benefit from further additional comparison.
- 270** There is a well-embedded performance culture with Ashfield Homes. This was demonstrated in meetings we had with staff and runs through the organisation's documents.
- 271** There is an effective performance management system in place. This includes the production of a comprehensive set of performance indicators for each service area, which are presented in a monthly report. There are indicators for business support, risk management and corporate health as well as service delivery. These are reviewed monthly by a performance management group comprising of the senior management team and section managers. Actions are agreed to improve performance indicators which are below target.
- 272** The performance appraisal system identified in our previous inspection is still operating effectively. Individual targets and objectives are linked to those of the organisation as a whole. There are regular one-to-ones between staff and managers in between performance appraisals to ensure effective management and support.
- 273** Team meetings and core briefings are used to feedback performance and discuss how performance can be improved.
- 274** There is an effective approach to ensuring policies and procedures are regularly reviewed. These are reviewed on a three-year cycle unless they need to be done earlier to meet improvement plans or external requirements.
- 275** There is effective performance management at board level. Regular performance reports are provided to the board which are appropriate and easy to understand. A board meeting we attended was well-organised and there was robust interrogation of reports by board members. This is also demonstrated in minutes of previous board meetings.
- 276** There is also regular reporting of performance to the tenant forum and an annual performance report sent to all tenants.
- 277** Ashfield Homes has a good track record of sound financial management. Regular reports are received by managers and are monitored by the senior management team. The Board also receives regular reports on financial performance. As identified in the above value for money section, Ashfield Homes has consistently delivered services within defined budgets.
- 278** Accounts are not always effectively profiled across the year to take into account seasonal variations. While this has not yet caused specific problems, it makes monitoring expenditure more difficult and is particularly important in respect of maintenance expenditure. Completion of the installation of the new IT system will enable more effective profiling of expenditure.

- 279** Ashfield Homes has actively sought external accreditation of its services. The range of accredited quality management systems and regulatory body standards in place include the ISO9001 Quality Standard, the ISO14001 Environmental Standard, Investors in People, Charter Mark, Association of Social Alarm Providers Award, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister Neighbourhood Warden Accreditation and CORGI accreditation.
- 280** The monitoring of Ashfield Homes' performance by the Council has not been consistently robust. There are quarterly meetings between seniors officers of the Council and Ashfield Homes and the chair of the board, Leader of the Council and portfolio holder for housing. Quarterly performance indicator reports are prepared for these meetings. However, examination of the minutes of these meetings does not show a robust interrogation of issues. The performance of the ALMO has also not been subject to examination by the Council's scrutiny committee. However, there is no indication that this has impacted adversely on performance.
- 281** Relationships between the Council and the ALMO are good. The board self-assessed its relationship with the Council at a recent away day and rated it as five on a scale of zero to five. There are monthly liaison meetings between Ashfield Homes' performance and business and improvement manager and two assistant directors and the Council's housing strategy manager. There are also a number of regular meetings at operational service level.
- 282** The performance and business improvement section within Ashfield Homes has a programme of regular quality control audits. These are delivered across services to check that processes are working effectively. Results are fed back to managers and problems rectified.
- 283** The major works partnerships have been subject to two formal review processes by independent consultants, the 'interim review' and the 'interim challenge'. The interim review concentrated on performance by the construction partners against the clients' requirements at the half way point through the contract whilst the interim challenge concentrated on service delivery and value for money. The interim challenge will also inform the procurement process for the major works partnership 2006 to 2010.
- 284** Service level agreements with the Council have been revised and are now more robust. There is regular monitoring of performance against service level agreements and a number of regular liaison meetings are in place. However, there has been limited central co-ordination of service level agreement development and management by the Council.
- 285** There has been insufficient consideration of outcome based indicators in developing some service level agreements. In particular service standards based on outcomes could be effectively used in cleaning and grounds maintenance. These can also then be effectively translated into service standards for tenants.

- 286 Ashfield Homes has a robust approach to risk management. A risk management strategy, register and action plan is in place. A small section within the organisation co-ordinates health and safety activity and delivers the risk management action plan. Risk management is a standing item on performance management agendas. Staff awareness is raised through training, the core brief, and staff conferences.

Does the service have capacity to improve?

- 287 In our previous inspection, we found that there is a commitment and enthusiasm at all levels to continually improve its services for customers. That board members and senior managers are effectively focused on business needs. That the ALMO needed to establish a separate identity and for the Council to develop its new role which is less controlling, whilst ensuring that robust monitoring mechanisms are formally established.
- 288 In this inspection we found that Ashfield Homes does have capacity to further improve services. There is strong leadership and well skilled and well motivated staff. There is a commitment to continuous improvement throughout the organisation. A viable business plan is in place and effective human resources policies. IT capacity is improving, there is an expanding use of modern procurement methods and there has been success in attracting additional investment.
- 289 There is very strong leadership within Ashfield Homes. A skilled and dynamic management team is in place and this has been a key element in driving services forward. They are very focussed on continuous improvement and delivery of excellent services.
- 290 Ashfield Homes has established a separate identity from the Council. This is particularly evident in the attitudes of staff who strongly identified themselves as distinct from the Council. A survey of partner attitudes towards Ashfield Homes also demonstrates that it is seen as distinct from the Council. There is also clear branding of Ashfield Homes' documentation and outward facing activities such as branding of repairs vans.
- 291 Ashfield Homes is left to manage its own affairs on a day-to-day basis. This is demonstrated in the decisions being made by the board and by senior managers. The one area where Ashfield Homes has been limited in determining how services are delivered is in the area of grounds maintenance and building cleaning. Under the Management Agreement the Council has maintained responsibility for providing these services, with Ashfield Homes' role restricted to determining standards and quality.
- 292 Together, board members have the necessary experience and skills to govern the activities of the organisation and to drive forward further improvements. This was demonstrated in our observation of a board meeting, examination of minutes of board meetings, a focus group we held with board members and board member interviews. However, there can be some discontinuity of Council nominated members as these are subject to annual selection.

- 293** There is a robust process in place to ensure board members have sufficient skills to effectively carry out their role. A consultant is employed to carry out an annual appraisal with each board member and from this development and training needs have been organised. A training programme is in place and the board also has regular away days to discuss particular areas of the service.
- 294** There is a skilled and well motivated workforce in place. The approach to achieving this has included the following.
- An effective communication strategy in place. Each member of staff attends a 'core brief', where key information and messages are shared with all staff each month. There are team and departmental meetings and an employee newsletter. There is an annual employee conference which is held over two days to enable all staff to attend. Policies and procedures are available on the intranet. All of the staff we spoke to were well informed and knowledgeable about Ashfield Homes and its aims.
 - A strong focus on training to ensure that it has the right balance of skills in place. There is a training budget of £180,000. The human resources team has established a training matrix based on departmental requirements assessed through the performance development reviews (PDR). Training available includes job specific training such as weed spraying through to diversity and health and safety training. Training requests are assessed in a pre-course briefing to identify the training needs and benefits. The post course evaluation is used to determine the effectiveness of both the training and trainer.
- 295** An annual staff survey is carried out to understand the views of staff and take remedial action required. Results from the most recent survey, which asked 40 questions, are generally very positive with key indicators showing:
- 93 per cent of employees were proud to work for Ashfield Homes;
 - 92 per cent of employees has trust and confidence in the leadership of the organisation;
 - 84 per cent of employees had been assigned responsibilities which had contributed to their long-term professional development;
 - 99 per cent of employees support the Council actions in their day-to-day action; and
 - 94 per cent of employees were clear about what they needed to do and how their performance would be evaluated.
- 296** The least positive result was that 72 per cent of employees felt they were involved in decisions that affect their work.
- 297** The results of the survey were discussed at board-level and officers are developing actions to address issues where scores were lower.

- 298** There is a very strong culture of continuous improvement within the Ashfield Homes. There is a desire from staff 'to be the best' at all levels within the organisation. Our interviews with staff and focus groups consistently demonstrated a very positive attitude towards improving services. This was also demonstrated in the views of partners and tenant representatives who also identified that Ashfield Homes was continuously looking to improve services.
- 299** Ashfield Homes is also increasing capacity to improve by learning from others and sharing learning within the organisation. Ashfield Homes is a member of various groups where services are discussed with other organisations and has also made specific visits to inform service improvements. In particular they have had regular contact with Derby and Kirklees ALMOs. Complaints are discussed at the performance management group and lessons are therefore shared across service areas. The 'core brief' also shares learning on service improvements across the service.
- 300** A clear human resource strategy is in place. This brings together the approach to recruitment, training and staff organisation. The strength of approach is demonstrated in the management of organisational change and service development. Examples include the following.
- Effective delivery of local office closures.
 - Staff support for ongoing development of separate tenancy and estate management teams.
 - Subcontracting neighbourhood warden scheme due to uncertainty on future funding.
 - Assessment of the technical capacity likely to be required following completion of decent homes works took place before the programme commenced. This led to use of consultants and some agency staff to ensure that the organisation was not left with a large amount of excess technical capacity following the completion of the current programme.
- 301** Ashfield Homes has human resource policies that are linked to local regeneration strategies and the development of local labour markets. It places clear requirements on contractors to use local labour and has corporate targets on local labour use. It also seeks to develop local labour through apprenticeships and training courses. Both the direct labour organisation and major works partnerships have delivered effective apprentice schemes.

- 302** The effective use of IT to deliver service improvements has been mixed. This is largely due to the fact that the implementation of a new IT system has not yet been completed. New effective modules are in place for housing management, rent recovery and allocations and lettings. New financial IT systems have very recently been introduced which have ended the need for circulation of paper reports to managers. Ashfield Homes' website is also being developed to help automate access to services which will also maximise capacity. However, the repairs and maintenance module is still to be introduced and the use of IT in this section is not currently maximising capacity. A number of examples of this are identified in the value for money section above. There are also some areas within repairs and maintenance where additional IT development beyond that of the new system could increase capacity. For example, production and distribution of job tickets. Ashfield Homes is currently considering the introduction of handheld technology for operatives.
- 303** Ashfield Homes has adopted modern procurement methods to expand capacity and improve value for money. This is particularly evident in the delivery of a major works programme through partnering with three contractors. The partnership approach has proved highly effective in delivering value for money. Other partnerships have also been developed including a three-year partnership to carry out health and safety checks to all homes. Procurement consortiums have also been used and this is seen as an expanding area for Ashfield Homes.
- 304** Analysis and benchmarking of costs is still not fully developed in some areas. This means that the organisation cannot be sure it is maximising capacity through methods of procurement in all areas of the service.
- 305** Similarly, more work needs to be done on assessing the potential of collaborative procurement activities with other organisations. This could help to increase capacity. Some initial discussions on more collaborative procurement have taken place with two other ALMOs.
- 306** Ashfield Homes has a clear and comprehensive business plan which overall demonstrates capacity to improve. This also acts as the Council's HRA business plan. The plan demonstrates that the organisation and Council's HRA is viable over a 30-year period on current loan and subsidy arrangements. Sensitivity analysis has been carried out and this does show that changes to loan and subsidy arrangements could cause an HRA deficit by 2021. The business plan does not include allocation of funds for environmental improvements beyond March 2006. While there has been a recent programme of environmental improvements and the level of common area managed by housing is relatively small, this will limit some elements of future improvement if additional funding can not be found. Ashfield Homes is aware of this and is discussing this issue with the Council. the Council does not currently allocate capital receipts from Right to Buy sales to HRA capital investment.
- 307** There is a high-level of awareness and understanding of the opportunities and issues in relation to future funding streams. An important issue for Ashfield Homes and the Council is the possible future freedoms and flexibilities which may be offered to high performing ALMOs.

- 308** Ashfield Homes, alongside the Council, has been very successful in attracting additional investment to improve services. This includes the following.
- The setting up and successful delivery of services through the ALMO has enabled access to £55.3 million additional funding to invest in council homes.
 - Ashfield Homes was chosen to deliver a neighbourhood warden scheme and this was extended to cover the whole of the district. This is funded through the neighbourhood renewal fund and a contribution from partners on community safety partnership.
 - A tenancy support scheme has been established through accessing Supporting People funding.
 - A small additional Supporting People contract has recently been awarded to Ashfield Homes to provide support to homeless families:
 - Ashfield Homes was successful in securing SureStart funding towards an additional tenancy support worker; and
 - Ashfield Homes' neighbourhood safety team receives building safer community funding.

Summary

- 309** Overall, we judge that there are excellent prospects for further improvement in services.
- 310** There is strong track record of delivering service improvement. There is substantial evidence of effective implementation of change, and improvements in outcomes which have had a direct benefit for service users. User satisfaction surveys and performance indicators both demonstrate improved performance on what were already high standards. The changes delivered include improvements in value for money. Progress has been slower than expected in a small number of areas, some of which are areas where progress has been reliant on Council decisions.
- 311** Ashfield Homes manages performance very effectively. Aims and priorities for the future are clear challenging and robust. Action plans cover the key areas for service development and these areas have been identified using best value principles. Plans are comprehensive, SMART and address value for money.
- 312** We also found a well embedded performance culture. This is supported by a comprehensive performance management framework which together drive and monitor progress, and review impact. There is also a robust approach to risk management within Ashfield Homes. However, the level of scrutiny of the ALMO by the Council has not been consistently robust, although this has not impacted on performance.

- 313 Ashfield Homes does have the capacity to further improve services. There is strong leadership and well skilled and well motivated staff. There is a commitment to continuous improvement throughout the organisation. A viable business plan in place and effective human resources policies. IT capacity is improving, there is an expanding use of modern procurement methods and there has been success in attracting additional investment.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator	Ashfield DC 2001/02	Ashfield Homes 2002/03	Ashfield Homes 2003/04	Districts top quartile 2003/04	Ashfield Homes 2004/05 (unaudited)
BVPI 63 average SAP rating	59	60	60	65	66.3
BVPI 66a percentage rent collected	98.7	98.8	98.6	98.6	98.73
BV184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	-	64	58	15	36.27
BV184b change in proportion of non-decent homes	-	11.5	40.4	26.55	55.5
BV185 percentage repairs appointments made and kept	-	96.1	98	83.15	99

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

Before going on-site, and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included the following.

- Ashfield District Council Corporate Plan
- Ashfield District Council Housing Strategy
- Ashfield Homes Business Plan 2005/08
- Ashfield Homes Delivery Plan 2005/06 to 2008/09
- Ashfield Homes Strategy documents from across service areas
- Ashfield Homes Policies and Procedure
- Service user leaflets and newsletter
- Tenants Compact
- Major Works Compact
- Action plans
- Ashfield Homes Self-assessment
- KLOEs gap analysis
- Minutes of Board Meetings
- Minutes of liaison meeting between Ashfield District Council and Ashfield Homes

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

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:

- attending a board meeting;
- running separate focus groups with board members, frontline staff, care co-ordinators, operatives, tenant representatives and external partners;
- interviews with staff, board members, councillors and partners;
- visiting housing for older persons;
- viewing property improvements;
- shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
- visits to all local offices;
- estate inspections; and
- attending tenant forum meeting.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Facilities on website

- 1 There are a number of positive features to Ashfield Homes' website. This includes a facility for tenants to check their rent account, to carry out a provisional assessment of housing benefit entitlement and an automated matching service for mutual exchange applicants.

Customer care in major works

- 2 There are a number of positive features to Ashfield Homes' website. This includes a facility for tenants to check their rent account, to carry out a provisional assessment of housing benefit entitlement and an automated matching service for mutual exchange applicants.

Customer care in major works

- 3 There are highly effective customer care arrangements for major works. While works are ongoing tenants are provided with weekly worksheets detailing who will be visiting their home on each day and the works that will be carried out. A comprehensive handover pack is provided to tenants at completion of major works. This includes maintenance guides, contact numbers and energy efficiency light bulbs.

Annual property health and safety checks

- 4 Since April 2005, gas servicing has become part of a comprehensive annual property health and safety check. This was tendered as a three-year partnering contract and means that every property is visited and gas servicing, smoke alarms and solid fuel systems are all checked in one visit. It also means that gas pipe work; even in properties where there are no council installed appliance is checked. Appointments are provided for the checks. At the time of inspection all properties had been serviced in the last twelve months. This had been done without using forced entry.

Promotion of tenant involvement

- 5 Tenant involvement is well-promoted. A specific tenant participation newsletter is produced each quarter and is delivered to all tenants. This gives information on ways to get involved and also advertises training events that have been arranged. Tenant representatives are involved in the production of this and other newsletters. There is also a free-phone tenant participation hotline.

Involving young people

- 6 Ashfield Homes' involvement of young people is very positive as this is traditionally a difficult group to engage with. Four youth committees have been established with an average of ten young people attending each meeting. Initial concerns from local residents where youth committees were due to meet had to be overcome. A young persons' compact has now been developed with the young people involved.

Anti-social behaviour roadshows in schools

- 7 There has been a successful series of school roadshows to highlight anti-social behaviour problems. This was initiated by Ashfield Homes and involves partner agencies. A further 11 dates are lined up for school visits. A resource pack on anti-social behaviour for use by teachers has also been produced by Ashfield Homes.

Challenging customer surveys used to drive service improvement

- 8 Ashfield Homes actively canvasses views of customers and uses these to review and improve services. An established system of surveys is in place known as 'vision management system surveys'. These cover nine key service areas asking ten questions about each area. Service users are asked to score the service out of ten against each question. Average scores are then produced and monitored. It is a harder challenge to get high approval scores using this method than more traditional methodologies which assess the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These surveys are seen as a key management tool with ongoing monitoring of trends in performance and are used to inform service improvements. For example a 'man in van' approach was adopted by major works contractors to deal with defects following surveys showing some dissatisfaction with this element of the service.