

# Landlord Services

**Shepway District Council**

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## Local Authority Housing Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local and national services for the public.

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

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

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- 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.

## Summary

- 1 The Shepway district covers 365 square kilometres along the Channel coast in south east Kent. It includes three distinct areas; the North Downs, the urban areas of Folkestone and Hythe, and Romney Marsh.
- 2 The population of the district is 99,000<sup>1</sup> people and is expected to increase to 107,000 by 2011 due to inward migration. In overall terms density of population is low at an average of 271 people per square kilometre. Therefore, rural isolation and access to services is an issue for some local people.
- 3 The Council is Conservative-led although there is no overall political majority. The Council has adopted a leader and cabinet model of governance and the cabinet comprises five Conservative and two People First councillors. There are three overview and scrutiny committees. The chief executive and five directors, one of whom has responsibility for housing, form the corporate management team (CMT). The Council employs 484 staff, equivalent to 423 full-time equivalents.
- 4 The net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £19.87 million. The capital programme for this year is £9.3 million and at 31 March 2005 revenue reserves amounted to £4.8 million.
- 5 The Council decided in April 2005 to retain its housing stock and landlord function following an options appraisal and consultation with its tenants and leaseholders. The Council's landlord service is managed by Coast and Countryside Housing Services (CCHS), which is part of the Housing, Revenues and Benefits Services Directorate. It manages a housing stock of 1,341 flats, 142 maisonettes, 2,004 houses and bungalows and 33 hostel places for homeless people (sheltered housing represents about 30 per cent of the stock).
- 6 The HRA budget for the service for 2005/06 is approximately £11 million and the balance on the account at the end of 2004/05 was £2.68 million. The capital budget is £4.23 million.
- 7 The scope of our inspection covered stock investment and asset management, housing income management and tenancy and estate management.
- 8 In addition, there are three cross-cutting areas of access and customer care, diversity and value for money.
- 9 We also examined the Council's prospects for improving the services they provide to tenants and leaseholders.

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<sup>1</sup> ONS

## Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Shepway District Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>2</sup>**

	<b>Prospects for improvement?</b>				
Excellent					'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement'  <b>A good service?</b>
Promising		☀			
Uncertain					
Poor					
	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 11 We consider the service to be a 'fair' one-star service. There are a number of positive areas.
- Accessible services to tenants who live away from the main housing office with the three contact centres.
  - An understanding of some diversity issues as they affect older and younger people and evidence of how this information has been used to improve the sheltered housing service and introduce new facilities for young people.
  - Agreement with tenants of a Shepway standard above the Government's decent homes standard that provides tenants with better quality homes, good information with which to plan repairs and maintenance and the resources to maintain this.

<sup>2</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- A significantly improved repairs and maintenance service with good quality workmanship and 99 per cent of repairs completed within the timescales agreed with tenants achieved with its new partnering contracts.
- Quality customer-focused planned maintenance services with good information and choices for tenants.
- Improving performance with the collection of rent through the introduction of a specialist team with performance at 97.6 per cent of the rent due collected last year and on course to improve this year towards top quartile performance for district councils.
- Tackling cases of high level ASB effectively, using the resources of its partners well to help with this work and providing improved security and other measures to design out ASB.
- Estates which are clean, tidy and well-cared for with an effective cleaning and caretaking services that has improved conditions in blocks of flats.

**12** However, there are the following weaknesses.

- Communications with tenants is not consistent. Only 66 per cent of telephone calls are handled successfully and more use could be made of complaints to improve service development.
- There is a confusing range of services standards that are not comprehensively covering all the areas they should or adequately monitored.
- Tenants' involvement is not well-developed because existing arrangements are not representative of tenants and the Council has failed to build on the work done as part of the stock options appraisal.
- An inability to plan services in accordance with the needs of all its tenants, a lack of comprehensive information about its tenants with which to plan services and being at the basic level for the local government equality standard.
- The service to re-let empty homes is inconsistent with a variable quality to repairs and an inaccessible redecoration service for those living away from Folkestone.
- A lack of electrical safety checking in line with good practice and incomplete information in respect of asbestos with which to fulfil its obligations.
- An inconsistent service for people with physical and/or sensory disabilities with long waiting times of more than 12 months for some major adaptations which is outside the ODPM guide.
- Little understanding of the effectiveness of measures to tackle all cases of nuisance, although individual cases are tackled effectively, and how to improve this service, no comprehensive standards for tenants to measure the quality of the services they receive and few opportunities to be involved in setting and monitoring those standards.

## 8 Landlord Services | Scoring the service

- Not having a strategic approach to achieving value for money, limited understanding of how the costs of its services compare with others, and the balance between cost and quality.

### 13 The service has promising prospects for improvement and there are a number of drivers for change.

- There is a track record of improving some key services and this includes some important services such as repairs and maintenance where performance is within top quartile.
- It has effectively implemented the changes needed following the CPA inspection in 2004 and this is leading to better homes for its tenants.
- Performance improvement planning is better with the Council addressing the gaps in the previous plans and targeting the right things that will have an impact on the quality of services for tenants.
- The use of performance information is improving and is being used to manage performance although this is not wholly consistent at the moment.
- Improvements in the corporate capacity of the Council, for example, a significant budget of £185,400 to address key weaknesses that includes management development, is having a direct impact on housing services and the quality of services to tenants.
- The housing service has been successful in attracting additional funding of more than £250,000 that has directly benefited tenants.

### 14 Barriers for change include:

- the track record of service improvement has not been consistent and gaps include estate managements services and resident involvement and there is no strategic approach to value for money;
- the direction of travel of performance indicators is mixed and the service is not monitoring some key indicators in its service plans such as performance with gas servicing;
- staff are not aware of how they relate to the Council's key objectives for the service although plans to address this through a new appraisal system are at an advanced stage; and
- the capacity of the housing service is limited to deliver service improvements to tenants with weaknesses in management, ICT not used to best effect and a lack of a structured approach to training to achieve the Council's priorities for the housing service. Progress at a corporate level has not yet impacted significantly on landlord services.

## Recommendations

- 15 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 Improve the customer focus of the service by:*

- *developing a more effective and adequately resourced telephone service by September 2006;*
- *introduce a comprehensive system of complaints and satisfaction monitoring together with a consistent approach to compensation for service failure by April 2006;*
- *review arrangements for tenant involvement to involve many more tenants with planning and monitoring services by September 2006;*
- *work with tenants to review the range of service standards and targets and how these might effectively be monitored and reported by September 2006;*
- *improve access arrangements to the housing office at Shorncliffe Road by June 2006;*
- *achieve a comprehensive database of the diversity needs of tenants and use this to plan services by April 2007;*
- *publish longer-term maintenance plans for tenants' information by September 2006;*
- *introduce a comprehensive asbestos register and make this available to tenants, contractors and staff by September 2006;*
- *introduce comprehensive arrangements to provide debt advice to tenants by September 2006; and*
- *introduce a published programme of estate inspections with local tenants and consider with tenants how this might be linked to funding for estate improvements by June 2006.*

<sup>3</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an increase in customer satisfaction;
- better planning of services; and
- better use of resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs.

**Recommendation**

*R2 Improve the value for money of the service by:*

- *adopting a more comprehensive approach to asset management to ensure resources are invested wisely with the assessment of the sustainability of the housing stock and plan to address stock that may not be viable in the longer-term by April 2007;*
- *reviewing liaison arrangements with the courts and housing benefit, including housing staff presenting cases, to enhance the effectiveness of the arrears recovery service by September 2006;*
- *introducing a planned and strategic approach to improving value for money and involve tenants in the process by September 2006; and*
- *using benchmarking data, where necessary from a range of sources, to identify high cost services and organisations who have lower costs, using this to improve your understanding of costs and how you can improve efficiency in your services with immediate effect.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure that resources are directed at matters of greatest priority as agreed with tenants;
- an improvement in the effectiveness and reduced costs of the rent arrears service; and
- improved efficiency, reduced costs and resources freed to improve services for tenants.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Improve the quality of service planning for the service by:*

- *considering consolidating service plans for the year 2006/07;*
- *enabling housing services to benefit from improvements at a corporate level to improve performance management and service improvement planning for landlord services by September 2006;*
- *improve the quality of service plans for next year with clear, measurable and achievable objectives with milestones to measure success ensuring that objectives that were not achieved in earlier plans are rolled forward;*
- *introduce a service improvement plan for next year that can be shared with tenants and introduce a method for tenants to monitor progress;*
- *introduce a structured approach to improve services working with stakeholders and with regard to best practice elsewhere by September 2006; and*
- *identifying the skill and capacity gaps to deliver the objectives for landlord services and introduce a plan to address this by September 2006.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that planning becomes a systematic way to improve services;
- service planning becomes simpler and more understandable and is easier for staff and stakeholders to relate to; and
- that stakeholders are involved in improvement planning and monitoring progress.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

- 16 We would like to thank the staff of Shepway District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 16 to 20 January 2006.

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 17 The Shepway district covers 357 square kilometres along the Channel coast in south east Kent. It includes three distinct areas, the North Downs, the urban areas of Folkestone and Hythe, and, Romney Marsh.
- 18 The population of the district is 99,000<sup>4</sup> people and is expected to increase to 107,000 by 2011 due to inward migration. In overall terms, density of population is low at an average of 271 people per square kilometre. Therefore, rural isolation and access to services is an issue for some local people.
- 19 The proportion of people over 65 years of age is 26 per cent and higher than the average for Kent at 16 per cent or nationally at 18 per cent. The proportion of young people is growing, currently at 20 per cent of the population. The number of people from black and minority ethnic communities (BME) is relatively low at 2.71 per cent of the population.
- 20 The district is the second most deprived area in Kent<sup>5</sup> and ranked 131 of 345 English local authorities, with 12 per cent of the population living in the three most deprived wards in Central and East Folkestone. Those wards are within the 20 per cent most deprived in the country. People living in those wards face problems of low educational attainment and skills, health and crime. Much of the private housing stock in those wards is in poor condition.
- 21 Unemployment is at 2.9 per cent against a regional average of 1.4 per cent and a national average of 2 per cent. Twenty-two per cent of children live in low income families<sup>6</sup> compared to a regional average of 8 per cent and national average of 12 per cent. 14.8 per cent of the working age population is in receipt of benefits<sup>7</sup> compared to the regional average of 8.6 per cent and the national average of 11.9 per cent.

### The Council

- 22 The Council is Conservative-led although there is no overall political majority. The Council has adopted a leader and cabinet model of governance and the cabinet comprises five Conservative and two People First councillors. One member of the cabinet, the district secretary for housing, has responsibility for both the housing enabling and landlord functions. There are three overview and scrutiny committees.

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<sup>4</sup> ONS

<sup>5</sup> ODPM Index of Multiple Deprivation

<sup>6</sup> ODPM 2001

<sup>7</sup> DWP 2004

- 23 The Council was assessed as weak in its comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in July 2004. Since that time there has been a change in administration and a re-organisation under a new chief executive. The Chief Executive and five directors, one of whom has responsibility for housing, form the corporate management team (CMT). The Council employs 484 staff equivalent to 423 full-time equivalents.
- 24 The net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £19.87 million. The capital programme for this year is £9.3 million and at 31 March 2005 revenue reserves amounted to £4.8 million.

### **The service**

- 25 The Council decided in April 2005 to retain its housing stock and landlord function following an options appraisal and consultation with its tenants and leaseholders. Housing is managed by Coast and Countryside Housing (CCH), which is part of the housing directorate.
- 26 The service under review consists of all aspects of the landlord service for a housing stock of 1,341 flats, 142 maisonettes, 2004 houses and bungalows and 33 hostel places for homeless people (sheltered housing represents about 30 per cent of the stock), which includes the following areas:
- housing income management;
  - tenancy and estate management; and
  - stock investment including asset management and repairs and maintenance.
- 27 The majority of the Council's housing stock was built using traditional methods and comprises a mix of blocks of low rise flats and houses in small to medium-sized estates. Forty-seven per cent was built after 1945 and less than 4 per cent was built prior to 1919. Half the housing stock has been disposed of under the right to buy legislation with 467 properties sold since 1998 and current estimates indicate that the stock will continue to reduce by 20 properties per year. This will mean that the amount of housing revenue income that is available in the future will continue to reduce and this will have a negative impact on the efficiency and cost of the landlord service.
- 28 The housing service is run from a centralised base although there are three corporate local offices at which surgeries are run at various times of the week. The housing service has 74 full-time equivalent staff.
- 29 The repairs and maintenance service is provided by external contractors mainly via partnering arrangements. There has been an increase in real terms of the maintenance allowance to £910.47 per annum per property this year while the management allowance has remained almost static at £408.78 per annum per property. Seventy-seven per cent of the stock meets the Government's decent homes standard (DHS).

- 30 The HRA budget for the service for 2005/06 is approximately £11 million and the balance on the account at the end of 2004/05 was £2.68 million. The capital budget is £4.23 million. This has in part been funded by an above inflation rent increase of 4.4 per cent but rents are still below target rents set by Government.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31 Housing and the landlord service, 'our housing stock and decent homes', is the Council's second strategic housing priority within its Community Strategy (the first is regeneration and urban renaissance). The mission for Coast and Countryside Housing is:

*'working in partnership and communicating with our customers to develop quality housing services and to improve performance.'*

- 32 The Housing Strategy 2005/10 contains four key objectives. The one that relates to the landlord service is:

*'build our service quality including the homes that we provide and the environment that they are in.'*

- 33 The objectives within the HRA business plan 2005/35 for the landlord service are:

- maintain and improve Council housing to ensure it is safe, physically sound and meets the decent homes standard (DHS) as a minimum;
- provide best value housing management and maintenance services;
- make best use of the available housing stock to meet local needs;
- consult, inform and include tenants in the management of housing services and wider community development;
- protect and enhance tenants' homes, reducing crime and the fear of crime;
- provide affordable housing and tackle financial exclusion among tenants and leaseholders;
- adapt council housing and provide services to meet special needs; and
- provide energy efficient and sustainable housing.

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

#### Access and customer care

- 34 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Communications with tenants are of mixed quality and service standards are not comprehensive or monitored accurately. Customer focus is limited except repairs and maintenance but issues of rurality are being tackled with the three dispersed contact centres.

- 35** The telephone service is not adequate. The performance of the telephone service has not been monitored until recently. Tenants do not find it easy to contact the Council by telephone and the new monitoring arrangements confirm that only 66 per cent of telephone calls to the housing service are successful. Twenty-one per cent of callers abandon their call and 28 per cent are not successfully handled. Therefore tenants and leaseholders are not easily able to contact the housing service by telephone and access services.
- 36** The complaints process is not handled well. There is no summary showing the total number of complaints received, which services these relate to or whether they were responded to within the corporate timescales. In addition, the lessons learned column is limited in what it includes and it does not always make it clear exactly what corrective action is to be taken and who by. Complaints to contractors are not recorded neither are informal complaints outside the formal written process. The complaints report does not cover any compliments received in the same period and there is no satisfaction monitoring of the whole process. The Council is therefore unable to consistently learn from feedback from tenants and tenants cannot be sure if complaints made will have any impact for the future.
- 37** Services standards are not clear and are not effectively monitored. A wide range of standards exist in various documents which means it is not easy for tenants to easily understand the quality of service the Council provides. Many of the standards are not monitored to ensure they are met. The top ten standards agreed with tenants were reported to them in 2004, but this was not repeated in 2005 with different measures reported. The lack of effective monitoring information makes it difficult for managers and tenants to understand and improve service standards.
- 38** Shepway has not built on the success of tenant involvement at the time of the stock options appraisal a year ago. Shepway was able to consult a significant proportion of tenants and leaseholders when it carried out its review of future ownership and management of the housing stock. Many of these tenants wished to be involved with the Council in ways other than through the STLG to help develop, plan and monitor services. For example, a number of tenants came together as a sounding board. This has not been followed up after completion of the stock options appraisal and the enthusiasm of these tenants may have been lost.
- 39** Shepway has not been effective in the ways it involves tenants. The Council is limited in its consultation with general needs housing tenants via the STLG which is not representative of the tenant base. The Council has not explored other ways to involve tenants, for example reading groups or tenants' panels. While it has produced a revised tenants' compact this has been done only in consultation with the STLG. Similarly effective training in respect of diversity is limited in its impact due to the small number of people involved. It cannot therefore be sure it is planning and shaping services in line with tenants' wishes.

- 40 The quality of housing offices is mixed but the spread of contact centres provides accessibility. The housing centre and one local office do not comply with the requirements of the Disabled Discrimination Act and although these are planned the Council has been slow to respond. The doors are not self-opening and are heavy to use. The reception counter in the housing centre is high and although there is a small hinged area it may be off putting for some people. There are limited facilities for children such as toys to keep them occupied while parents speak with staff. The Council maintains contact centres at Hythe, New Romney and Lydd which are open at various hours during the week and two are open on Saturday mornings. While access is limited, the Council is tackling rural issues.
- 41 Printed information and the website are variable in quality. Leaflets, Coast and Countrysider, the tenants' newsletter, and the tenants' handbook are of good quality and written clearly in plain language. New leaflets explaining services to leaseholders are of high quality. There are no leaflets advertising procedures around recharges for some repairs and service charges. The website does not enable tenants to report repairs or pay rent on line. However, the Council does subscribe to an interpretation service, this is advertised and staff are briefed.
- 42 Results from the tenants' survey in 2004 are mixed and the scope of the survey was limited. Satisfaction results were mixed with 77 per cent satisfied with Shepway (55 per cent of BME tenants were satisfied), a fall from 82 per cent in 2001, 70 per cent were satisfied with opportunities to be involved (55 per cent BME tenants) an increase from 65 per cent in 2001. The Council has not explored the reasons why BME tenants are less satisfied. Eighty-one per cent found staff helpful and 70 per cent said staff were able to handle their issues. The survey failed to explore some key areas such as satisfaction with tenants' homes, the outcome of enquiries and how effective Shepway is in taking tenants views into account.
- 43 The repairs and maintenance service is accessible. The Council has introduced new procedures for repairs and maintenance in the last two years that are tailored for tenants' needs. Contractors maintain their own call centres as part of the partnering contracts with staff able to handle calls directly thus reducing the time to report and order repairs. The main contractor's call centre is open from 8am to 8pm weekdays and out-of-hours calls are handled via the Council's 'Lifeline' service with contractors staff on call to respond. Telephone calls to the heating contractor are free and all other calls are at local call rates. Tenants are able to report repairs quickly and easily.

## **Diversity**

- 44 There is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The Council is at the basic level of the equality standard for local government, housing services are not shaped around the diverse needs of all its tenants. It has improved services to younger and older people and is working to understand the needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

- 45 The Council has not embedded diversity into its day-to-day housing services. It has information about the diverse needs of 30 per cent of its tenants but information is not complete or used to plan services. It does not establish the diversity of tenants responding to surveys including satisfaction surveys, where undertaken, so cannot establish if there are disparities between groups in the way it delivers services. Staff and a large number of Council members have taken part in diversity training and this has been rolled out to members of the STLG but the Council cannot demonstrate the ability to plan services around the needs of tenants.
- 46 The Council is unable to tailor services taking account of the diverse needs of all its tenants. It is in touch with older people, especially those in sheltered housing, and many young people but has not developed this area to encompass young families, disabled people with physical and/or sensory disabilities and other minority groups. Until it is able to obtain representation from all diverse groups it is not in a position to know if the services it provides are accessible and tailored to the needs of its tenants.
- 47 Shepway does not perform well against the equality standard for local government and does not comply with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) code of guidance for rented housing. There are five levels of the equality code and Shepway is at level one which is the basic level. Its plan to move to level 2 by April 2007 is not ambitious. Because it cannot show equality in the way it delivers services it cannot demonstrate compliance with the CRE code. It cannot demonstrate how it intends to improve services for all its tenants.
- 48 The housing service does not share training with its partners to improve an understanding of diversity or check their diversity arrangements. It has a range of partnering contracts for repairs and maintenance but has not rolled out diversity training for its contractors as part of this partnership. It hasn't got effective ways in which to ensure its contractors are fulfilling their diversity obligations under the terms of its contracts.
- 49 The Council has an understanding of some key diversity issues as they relate to the housing service. Approximately 50 per cent of council tenants' families have people over state retirement age or a member with a long-term limiting illness. The Council has established a handyperson service for council tenants with the local care and repair agency. The service helps older and disabled tenants with minor repairs, redecoration and minor adaptations. It has carried out a service improvement study of the sheltered housing service that has led to significant service improvements for older people and works with its partners to make services accessible to council tenants. For example, using sheltered housing schemes and a building at Lyminge as a base for services to older people such as luncheon clubs and health clinics.

- 50 The Council has improved access for people with physical and/or sensory disabilities. It has carried out major alterations to improve security and access in seven blocks of flats for people with disabilities with lifts, ramps, automatic doors and larger access platforms on staircases. It also takes diversity issues into account with planned work it carries out in tenants' homes and where the need exists, adapts kitchens and bathrooms to mobility standards. The Council also carries out joint visits with occupational therapists prior to offering new homes to prospective tenants to ensure the properties are suitable. It can therefore point to some improved services for people with disabilities.
- 51 The Council has also been successful in providing additional services to young people. It has provided three additional play and recreation schemes on council estates. The housing service is also working with others to implement a scheme with Charlton Athletic Football Club to provide a football in the community scheme. The Council is therefore of responding to the needs of young people.
- 52 The housing service is positive in its support to victims of domestic violence. It works with the police and the crime and reduction partnership to support victims of domestic violence, takes action through its tenancy agreement and has access to refuges and a floating support service. It provides security in victims' homes including the provision of a 'safe room' that enables victims to seek safety to await assistance from the police. Housing officials take part in the multi-agency vulnerable victims' action group to target services and the Council is piloting a programme to tackle perpetrators' behaviour.
- 53 The housing service is actively tackling the under-representation of people from black and minority ethnic communities in the tenant base. Allocations of accommodation are in line with the proportion of people from BME communities and this is beginning to address this imbalance. It is also part of an initiative amongst East Kent authorities to study the needs of travellers in respect of housing.

### **Stock investment**

- 54 There are a range of strengths and weaknesses. The housing service lacks a proper strategic approach to maintenance but, with the exception of voids, repairs and improvements are carried out well and in a timely fashion.

### **Stock investment - strategy**

- 55 There is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The housing service does not have a strategic approach to the maintenance of the housing stock and lacks comprehensive information on its asset management database. Information about stock condition with which to address the decent homes standard (DHS) is better and it has agreed an improved standard above the DHS with tenants.

- 56 There is no strategic approach to the way the Council manages the housing stock. The Council's approach to asset management is contained in its housing revenue account (HRA) business plan but this refers to a separate strategy that is still in draft form. It does not have a methodology to decide what maintenance is carried out to which stock at what time but sets an annual programme of work in discussion with the STLG each year based partly on the age of the stock and the homes with the highest number of DHS failures. There is no assessment of the sustainability of the housing stock taking into account performance elements such as the turnover of stock, repairs costs, refusal rates and popularity. It relies on the local knowledge of its housing staff. It is therefore not in a position to demonstrate that it is investing its resources in the best way.
- 57 The Council is at risk of losing stock data because data can be contained on a number of databases. Stock data can be on the DHS database and/or the housing management database. Partnering contractors also maintain separate, but different types of housing management databases. The Council manually updates the DHS database from information supplied by the contractors. It has not adequately explored the potential for electronic links to ensure that one database is comprehensively maintained. This could result in abortive work and inaccurate planning.
- 58 The Council lacks some key information about the stock. It does not have a comprehensive asbestos register with accurate information about all of its homes. The Control of Asbestos Regulations requires a landlord to inform those working in its homes of the presence of asbestos and it cannot do this. The Council has assessed the SAP rating of homes (a measure of thermal efficiency) as average but is embarking on a programme to measure more accurately the SAP rating of all its homes to plan programmes to improve thermal efficiency. It therefore lacks key information with which to improve the housing stock and protect tenants and others.
- 59 The Council has failed to create long-term investment plans. The Council has long-term partnering contracts to achieve its objectives with the DHS. Contractors are aware of the volume of work required to 2010 although detailed programmes have not been set. Due to this, tenants are not aware of the Council's plans for investment in the stock for more than the immediate year ahead. A longer-term plan would provide a basis to check the validity of stock condition data as residents would be able to contact the Council if they feel their home has been missed.
- 60 The housing stock has been maintained in good condition and the Council has improved more homes than it promised. Seventy-seven per cent of the stock meets the decent homes standard (DHS). The housing service has established a track record in the last two years of achieving its capital programme to improve the housing stock. Last year it invested £5.6 million of capital resources and this year it will have invested £4 million towards meeting the DHS. It is on course to exceed the programme of work planned by improving in the order of a further 50 homes. Tenants' homes are therefore the subject of significant investment to bring them up to a good standard.

- 61 The Council has addressed the criticisms in the CPA<sup>8</sup> inspection in 2004. Information about the housing stock has been improved with a 20 per cent sample stock condition survey carried out by a specialist consultant and further surveys done by the Council to give information on more than 60 per cent of homes. The information has been externally validated and used to prepare its 30 year business plan. This confirms the Council can achieve and sustain the DHS.
- 62 The standard for stock investment has been agreed with tenants. As part of the stock options appraisal tenants were consulted on the standards that might be achieved under the two principal options available to the Council - stock retention or transfer to a housing association. The Council decided after consulting its tenants to retain the housing stock and can show it can achieve the Shepway DHS plus standard which goes beyond the DHS as follows:
- bathroom and kitchen improvements to a higher standard than DHS;
  - plumbing improvements;
  - security works;
  - external lighting improvements;
  - sound insulation;
  - external works to improve the environment in which homes are set; and
  - disabled adaptations.
- 63 The standard is new following the options appraisal exercise last year but should deliver improvements to tenants' homes of a good standard.
- 64 The Council has gained from its partnering contracts. There is a corporate procurement strategy and the housing service has implemented extensive partnering contracts for the large majority of repairs and maintenance. Shepway can point to significantly improved services with planned and responsive repairs as set out below. There are a range of performance incentives and payments to contractors are subject to performance indicators. Partnering has reduced the burden on the Council as contractors administer the services directly with tenants. Tenants are receiving a quality repairs and maintenance service.

### **Stock investment - planned maintenance and capital programme**

- 65 Shepway is investing significant resources into planned maintenance and performance in this area is a strength. It is able to show it is directing resources to improve tenants' homes.

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<sup>8</sup> Comprehensive Performance Assessment of local authority services.

- 66 Planned maintenance is carried out to a reasonable standard. New kitchens, bathrooms, central heating systems, new roofing and electrical rewiring is carefully carried out, largely by a range of partnering contractors. The work on-site is well-supervised. Kitchens are properly planned to maximise the effectiveness of the units used and a range of choices is given to tenants for units, flooring, worktops and tiles. The layout in larger properties is constrained by the policy to only install a maximum of seven units. This means kitchens in larger properties give the impression of being installed to a lower standard. Kitchens and bathrooms are redecorated after work is completed and tenants are satisfied with the quality of work carried out.
- 67 Planned work is customer-focused. It has reduced inconvenience to tenants with the time spent installing kitchens reduced to less than a week by working to improve the supply chain with its contractors. Work is planned with tenants who are provided with timely information about the nature of work and when it is due to commence. There is good liaison with tenants while work is being carried out. Satisfaction is closely monitored, at 98 per cent, and performance is discussed at regular contract meetings at which the STLG are represented. The housing service has shaped planned maintenance around the needs of tenants.
- 68 Contracts are well-managed and delivered on time within overall budgets. Over the last two years the Council has established a track record of spending its planned and capital budgets. Work is delivered on time within cost targets and senior management receives reports to monitor this situation. The Council is therefore managing the programme to improve tenants' homes well.
- 69 The housing service is improving the quality of planned work with incentives to contractors. Payment is linked to a range of performance indicators that include the satisfaction of tenants with the quality of the work carried out. Shepway are obtaining consistently high levels of satisfaction and are testing this with sample telephone surveys. Shepway can therefore demonstrate that tenants' are receiving good quality planned improvements to their homes.

#### **Stock investment - responsive repairs and voids**

- 70 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The quality and performance with responsive repairs is a significant strength. Performance with void relet times has improved but the quality of the void service to tenants is weak with an inconsistent standard.
- 71 The Council carries out responsive repairs quickly. Performance against target is strong and works are completed to a high standard. The Council's performance is among the best 25 per cent of council landlords. The table below shows performance across the four time categories.

**Table 2 Percentage of responsive repairs completed within target times**

Priority	Year 2004/05	Year 2005/06 to date	Targets for 2005/06
P1	100 %	99.4 %	99 %
P2	97.9 %	99.6 %	94 %
P3	97.4 %	99.2 %	94 %
P4	97 %	98.9 %	96 %

- 72** Tenants receive good quality information about responsive repairs. The new repairs leaflet, an insert into the tenants' handbook, is clear and explains the performance expected of contractors and how the repairs process works. Tenants are therefore well-informed about the responsive repairs service.
- 73** Satisfaction and quality is clearly measured and affects the payment to the contractor. An additional payment is made to contractors where target satisfaction levels are exceeded. This year 99 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the performance of the main contractor exceeding the target of 97 per cent and last year's performance of 92 per cent. Eighteen per cent of work is checked by the Council through post-inspection some of which is through telephone surveys.
- 74** The Council provides good access arrangements for responsive repairs. Appointments are made by the contractor from 8.00am to 5.30pm. While appointment slots are for either a morning or afternoon, tenants can request that school runs and other difficult times are excluded. The contractor is able to offer a reasonable degree of flexibility as repair requests go directly from tenants to the contractor's call centre. In special circumstances the contractor is also offering Saturday appointments. The flexibility of the contractor means that appointments are made to suit tenants.
- 75** The Council is improving its performance with void re-let times. Performance this year is an average of 3.3 weeks to re-let properties from the time they become vacant and this is within top quartile performance for district councils. This is below the challenging target of three weeks but is an improvement on performance last year at 4.5 weeks. The main partnering contract manages the void repair process and co-ordinates work with three other partnering contracts - electrical work, gas safety and cleaning. New tenants are therefore able to gain access to new homes more quickly.

- 76 The quality of voids is variable and new and prospective tenants are not aware of the standard to expect. Voids inspected were found to be acceptable but in two cases repairs were missed by the housing officer and some are not left in a clean condition. The void standard is not published for the information of tenants. The quality of new homes is therefore not to a consistent and high standard and tenants are not aware of the standards to expect.
- 77 Decoration arrangements for void properties are not adequate or consistent. Decoration vouchers are offered to a value of £30 per room which is not adequate for larger rooms. Vouchers are only redeemable at one outlet in Folkestone which may not be accessible for all tenants across the large borough. Other than vouchers, assistance is not consistently available for elderly or disabled tenants who may not be physically able to decorate themselves. Decoration arrangements are not therefore thought through and this element of the service is not customer-focused.
- 78 The Council does not actively manage all element of the void process. The Council does not consistently carry out viewings of properties before they become vacant to arrange back to back lettings or reduce void times from earlier sign-ups. It does not analyse and learn from the reasons for refusals or consider how refusals might be minimised. Without better management, it will have difficulty achieving its property turnaround target and improving on this in the future.

#### **Stock investment - cyclical maintenance and aids and adaptations**

- 79 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. There are no regular electrical safety checks. Performance with aids and adaptations is mixed with minor adaptations carried out quickly but there is a 12-month waiting list for more major adaptations. However, performance with gas servicing has improved and the housing service is effective with the servicing of PVCu windows and doors.
- 80 The Council cannot be sure electrical installations in its homes are safe. There is no regular programme of electrical safety checks - good practice is that these should be carried out as a minimum every ten years. Void properties are checked and there is a programme of electrical rewiring but there are still significant gaps where some properties will not have been checked for many years.
- 81 The service to disabled people is not consistent. Minor adaptations are carried out quickly but there is a waiting list of 12 months for more major bathing adaptations whether they are urgent or not. This is outside the target set by the ODPM. The waiting list has accrued because the Council's budget of £100,000 per annum cannot cope with the demand. Tenants are provided with good information about the availability of the service through the tenants' handbook and other leaflets. Urgent assessments by Occupational Therapists are carried out within one week but assessments for less urgent cases often take longer than the agreed 28 days. Tenants with physical and/or sensory difficulties are often waiting far too long for assistance.

- 82 Smoke and CO<sub>2</sub> detectors are regularly serviced but this is not wholly consistent. Detectors are serviced alongside the servicing of heating systems. There are 89 properties with electrical heating that are outside of the servicing programme. The Council does not have adequate records showing where battery powered detectors have been replaced although they are replaced as part of the electrical rewiring programme. Most tenants therefore have smoke and CO<sub>2</sub> detectors regularly maintained but a few tenants do not and many tenants still have battery powered detectors.
- 83 Performance with gas servicing is improving. Current performance is that 97 per cent of services due in 2,700 homes were carried out within 12 months last year but performance this year is at 98.72 per cent. However, the Council is not following good practice to gain access for gas servicing The Council's policy is to use forced entry (usually considered the last resort) without the leave of the court and does not use other access methods that may be more appropriate.
- 84 The housing service is effective with other types of servicing. It has a partnering contract for a period of five years - extendable to ten years - to maintain windows and doors. The contractor is paid an agreed sum each year linked to inflation. The Council's partnering contractor for gas heating also carries out an annual service of oil fired and solid fuel heating systems. Performance is monitored as for gas heating and access arrangements are similar. Therefore tenants are receiving effective services in these areas.

### **Housing income management**

- 85 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Performance with the collection of rent is good and has improved significantly in the last three years, there is similar performance with the collection of service charges and there is a team of specialist staff to maintain focus on this area. But there is no corporate debt policy, ICT is not used to best effect and assistance to tenants in arrears is limited.
- 86 Performance with the collection of rent has improved over the last two years. A specialist arrears recovery team has been established within housing management. Current rent arrears have been reduced from £403,000 in 2003/04 to £276,000 this year. The collection rate was 97.6 per cent of the debit last year and the team are on course to improve on this performance this year with arrears projected to fall below £260,000. The improvement in performance is moving the housing service close to top quartile performance. The Council is therefore working to maximise income from rent.
- 87 The housing service has given greater priority to the collection of former tenants' arrears. This year began with £152,499 owed by 216 former tenants which has reduced to £129,350 owed by 122 former tenants. This has been achieved partly because of a more timely write off procedure but the housing service has also created a dedicated part-time post to collect these debts. Therefore, the Council is working to reduce debts from former arrears and maximise its income.

- 88 There is a range of payment methods available to tenants but this does not include direct debit for tenants to pay their rent. Tenants can pay rent at local offices, at the Civic Centre, by swipe card at post offices, by standing order, by telephone, credit or debit card or internet banking although payment by credit cards can increase debts with interest payable on outstanding balances. Currently, rent cannot be paid by direct debit, the cheapest method, although this is now due to be introduced from October 2006.
- 89 Priority is also given to the collection of tenants' service charges. The collection rate last year was 97.6 per cent of the amount due and performance so far this year is at 97.5 per cent. All service charges with the exception of grounds maintenance, where the Council has decided not to charge individual service charges, reflect the cost of those services to tenants who receive them. Tenants are therefore paying for services they receive and this cost is not falling on other tenants who do not benefit from these services.
- 90 Priority is given to the collection of leaseholders service charges and there are flexible payment methods. Performance with collection was 96.5 per cent of the money due in 2004/05 and performance this year is similar. Where leaseholders have large service charges to pay, for example for major works, the Council is flexible and will accept payment by monthly instalments over two years. Leaseholders are therefore paying for the services they receive and this is not falling back on either the Housing Revenue Account or the Council's general fund.
- 91 The Council has sensible management arrangements. New tenancies are completed in the tenant's new home and at that time assistance is given with housing benefit with priority to explain the importance of maintaining a clear rent account. Staff are able to verify housing benefit which helps to streamline the process. A follow-up visit takes place within six weeks of the new tenancy. The Council has evicted eight tenants in the current year and the outcome of evictions is reported to the departmental management team to see where lessons might be learnt to improve the service and avoid future evictions. It is also proactive in refunding credit balances. The Council is therefore helping tenants with debts remain in their homes.
- 92 Performance with recharges for repairs is good. A total of 392 rechargeable orders have been raised in the last three years at a value of £45,003.22. The Council has collected £38,629.93 of this amount, a collection rate of 86 per cent. Tenants generally are therefore not paying for damage created by others.
- 93 Assistance from housing benefits has improved. Housing staff are able to view housing benefit records on line and use this information to help them manage rent accounts. Recently housing staff have been provided with a dedicated contact point but they are not routinely provided with details of benefit changes in advance of their implementation. Access to housing benefits improves the management of rent arrears but there is scope for further improvement.

- 94 Information and support to tenants is mixed in quality. The Council does not have a systematic and corporate approach to debt management. There is no corporate debt policy that sets out how it will approach multiple debtors and arrangements for debt counselling are not effective. The Council has an informal agreement with two agencies to provide debt advice to tenants. However, this is not formalised in a service level agreement, performance is not actively monitored or managed and both agencies are unable to cope with the volume of cases presented to them. Because of this, housing staff try to provide debt advice but do not have fully developed skills in this respect. Annual rent increase letters are clear, easily understood and they clearly show which service charges are eligible for housing benefit and the Council has publicised services available to tenants in the Coast and Countrysider magazine. However, rent statements do not have explanations on the terms used and are only issued when requested by a tenant. This is in contravention of the service standards that state they will be issued twice each year. Arrears correspondence does not clearly sign post tenants to advice and support and advice leaflets are not included with the correspondence although information is given to tenants on these services in visits and at interviews. The service is therefore not comprehensive and effective.
- 95 Arrears management is not fully effective. For example there are no individual targets for staff and the Council does not work outside of office hours when it may be possible to contact some tenants not available during the working day. Garage rents are not disaggregated. The housing management ICT system enables case management through an automated escalation process but this module has not been implemented and staff are manually producing letters and performance reports. There is no liaison with the two county courts that serve the district. This means that negotiations have not been made to agree adequate time in court to hear cases and to reduce delays in getting cases to court. Housing staff are accompanied to court by the Council's legal staff but could, with the agreement of the court, present their own cases which would be more efficient. There have not been any benefit take-up campaigns as part of a strategy to maximise tenants' incomes. More effective management would increase income and reduce costs releasing assets for other purposes.

### **Tenancy and estate management**

- 96 On balance, strengths outweigh weaknesses in this service area. Shepway has introduced arrangements in respect of high-level anti-social behaviour (ASB), domestic violence (DV) and other hate crimes and works well with most of its partners but it is not as effective with low level nuisance. Land and property it owns are kept clean and well-cared for, but it has weaknesses in that estate management standards are not agreed and estate inspections are not publicised or carried out with tenants.

- 97** The housing service tackles serious ASB. There are clear procedures and service standards based upon a policy agreed with its partners and the STLG. This sets out the standards to be achieved in terms of timescales and outcomes. Cases are recorded on a database with regular monitoring at senior management level. An example of how this has been used is the identification of hotspots at Reachfields and Dallas Brett Crescent. The housing service obtained five acceptable behaviour agreements (ABAs) with young people and help with improving parenting skills was provided to the families from the joint family management programme, a partnership between housing services and other agencies. Housing services is a partner in the local crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) which has a multi-agency task group to tackle cases of ASB and a specialist case worker. Meetings are held regularly to discuss the most appropriate action to tackle cases of ASB to which serious cases on council estates are referred for an agreement on the action to be taken. This work has resulted in an anti social behaviour order (ASBO) in respect of one family living in council accommodation. At Hawkinge, a housing officer is a member of the Hawkinge Partnership Neighbourhood Management Project the purpose of which is to work with tenants and others to improve pride in the area and reduce ASB.
- 98** Housing services uses other methods to tackle ASB. It has revised its tenancy agreement using good practice examples from other social landlords and this has enabled it to take proceedings in four cases in the last year. It works well with the police and carries out joint visits to perpetrators as a deterrent. It has an agreement with the Shepway and Dover mediation service to act on all cases that arise in the year on council estates in return for a grant of £10,000 per annum. This year it has dealt with 81 cases of which 51 reached some resolution between both parties. It has provided additional housing play areas at Reachfields and Burmarsh to divert young people away from creating a nuisance and has designed out ASB by increasing security. Examples include relocating footpaths, improved door entry schemes and installing robust railings around blocks of flats. The Council is therefore using a variety of measures to reduce nuisance to tenants.
- 99** The Council uses publicity well to inform tenants of action to tackle ASB. There are regular articles in Coast and Countryside magazine that set out the Council's policy and the action it will take. It tells tenants of action that has been taken, projects to design out crime and diversionary schemes. The Council also publishes a good quality information leaflet that sets out clearly and in plain English its policy, procedures and service standards. Tenants are therefore well-informed and know how to obtain assistance if they are suffering nuisance.
- 100** Caretaking is flexible and effective and the condition of the flats concerned has been improved. The Council has seven blocks of flats that receive a caretaking service. In some of these blocks access has been improved with exposed staircases and landing being altered to provide a brighter and more attractive environment. The caretaking service is flexible and where blocks might suffer ASB, the caretakers vary the hours of duty to improve security.

- 101 Arrangements for cleaning of communal areas are effective. The Council has a partnering contract for cleaning of communal areas in blocks of flats. Communal areas we inspected were kept to a high standard. Standards and the frequency of cleans are posted up in hallways although some were missing at the time of the inspection. There are also a number of asset tenants who help monitor standards. Tenants in blocks of flats are provided with clean and well-cared for communal areas.
- 102 The housing service has access to floating support places but there are gaps and sometimes delays in obtaining that support. A total of 50 tenants receive support from a service that has a capacity for 156 service users for all residents in the district. Gaps in service have been identified for people who misuse drugs and alcohol and ex-offenders, although some individuals with these needs are being catered for with help from other support groups, such as Re-Think. Future plans are to address this from a shift in resources from West to East Kent within the Supporting People regime. Assessments are made of all new and existing tenants where there is a health or support need that cannot be met by any provision in the accommodation they have been allocated. This is not wholly effective as some new tenants are housed without suitable support packages being arranged. The housing service seeks to make sensitive lettings where they can to avoid life style clashes in the future. But the service to vulnerable people is therefore not comprehensive and this affects the sustainability of council estates.
- 103 It does not monitor the effectiveness or impact of its ASB arrangements. The Council does not carry out a survey of people who have used the ASB arrangements with which to judge its effectiveness. Neither is there evidence that it properly closes down cases, fully monitors if issues have been resolved or keeps tenants informed of progress. There is no systematic evaluation of the impact of ASB measures, which are most effective, and whether they have achieved the desired outcomes. Without this information the Council is not able to adjust its measures and work with tenants and other stakeholders to improve its processes. The work with community wardens employed by the county council has not been wholly co-ordinated or effective because there is no joint protocol or clear understanding of each others role although this being improved. The service to tenants in respect of ASB is not therefore comprehensive and more could be done to improve the service.
- 104 There are no service standards against which to judge the quality of grounds and play area maintenance. This service was transferred from the Council to the County Council 18 months ago on a lump sum partnering basis. There are no service standards that set out the frequency and quality of grounds maintenance or the maintenance of play areas. The Council and tenants are not in a position to judge if standards are being achieved.

- 105** Estate inspections are not wholly effective. They are not undertaken regularly, tenants do not take part and the date and time of the inspections that do go ahead are not publicised. This is an opportunity missed for the Council to engage with tenants and understand local concerns. One example of a problem that could be resolved is that bulky items of rubbish are sometimes left in communal areas for several days awaiting collection. Regular inspections with tenants and a range of council staff, say from highways and street cleaning, may also help address other problems.
- 106** There are limited opportunities for tenants to influence environmental improvements and the Council cannot be sure the budget for this work is adequate. There is an annual budget of £19,000 of which £15,000 is committed to specific projects which are officer-led improvements. The balance of £4,000 is available for officers to carry out minor improvements in response to individual requests from tenants. The overall budget is small in comparison to the overall spend of the Council in respect of the management and maintenance of its homes and there is no meaningful opportunity for tenants to directly influence the level of resources allocated or how this is spent. The impact is a reduced ability to improve the appearance and attractiveness of council estates.

## **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 107** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in terms of value for money. The Council is only beginning to compare its costs to other organisations and lacks a strategic approach to achieving value for money. It has, however, embarked on significant partnering and can point to some savings.

### **How do costs compare?**

- 108** The housing service is only beginning to understand many of the areas where it has most to gain financially from value for money decisions. It has recently joined a national benchmarking club and at the time of the inspection was beginning to receive data about the cost of individual services. It has identified rent collection costs as a priority because some of its costs are very high, for example as much as £8 per rent transaction although this only applies to one collection point. It has not until very recently used benchmarking as a way of comparing costs and is only just beginning to understand the cost of services. It has however, achieved improved value for money with partnering repairs and maintenance and costs are now falling with responsive repairs as a result. It has not therefore been able to focus on areas other than repairs and maintenance that will have an effect in financial terms.

- 109 The housing service does not have a full understanding of the balance of cost and quality of services. It has information from its recent benchmarking exercise with other providers in the South, but not necessarily the best performers regionally or nationally. The benchmarking has shown its overall costs compare well with its benchmarking club, in many cases at or close to top quartile performance, but has not explored the relationship between costs and quality. Therefore, it cannot tell if other service providers in the benchmarking club are providing better or different service levels. At the moment, it does not have the information to be used in discussions with tenants and other stakeholders about improving value for money.
- 110 It is not in a good position to align resources and policy. Because it has limited information the housing service cannot be sure it makes best use of resources. For example, it is considering the appointment of a specialist officer to tackle cases of ASB and improve tenancy sustainability. However, the CDRP and other partners have resources devoted to some of this work and housing officers and specialist rent arrears officers also work in this area. There has not been any assessment of whether the current arrangement is adequate, whether resources might be freed or whether savings could be made elsewhere to increase the Council's ability to improve action to tackle ASB. The Council may be in danger of wasting resources.
- 111 The knowledge of the cost and value for money of the repairs and maintenance service is good. It employed specialist consultants two years ago to help it prepare for partnering and retained their services for a further year. It has consulted extensively with tenants through the STLG about the quality of the service and the cost of different elements. It has detailed knowledge of the cost of responsive repairs, void costs and planned maintenance. It can evidence savings this year that are both cashable and non-cashable. It knows that its costs have been higher in the short-term for voids and responsive repairs and this reflects its priority established through its tenants' survey to improve this service. However, costs are now reducing as set up costs fall out. Shepway has improved the value for money of its repairs and maintenance service in response to tenants' wishes.

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

- 112 There is no overall strategic approach to achieving value for money. The Council accepts this is the situation. It has created a new post to work on the production of a corporate strategy to define what it wishes to achieve in respect of value for money taking its priorities into account. The strategy for housing has been driven by the Council's decision to retain the housing stock. This relates to the priority agreed with tenants to achieve the Shepway decent homes plus standard. At this stage the approach is not sophisticated and savings and improved services have been achieved in an opportunistic manner. Without an overall strategy, it is more difficult for the Council to drive forward value for money, to demonstrate that value for money is embedded within the organisation and that it is tackling the most important issues for tenants and other stakeholders.

- 113** A lack of suitable performance management arrangements is a barrier to improving value for money across all of the services provided. Currently, the housing department management team reviews performance but this is not carried out in a structured or consistent manner. Where performance information is reviewed there is no evidence that the reasons for under-performance are fully understood or investigated. Staff do not have good information on service costs from the management accounts with which to judge the costs and value for money of services provided. Therefore, the Council does not have the information with which to judge value for money of services provided.
- 114** The Council can point to a number of savings and the most significant relate to repairs and maintenance. Examples include:
- falling costs in maintenance from £16.85 per week per property to £13.28 per week per property together with improved satisfaction from tenants;
  - savings in the capital programme in 2004/05 of £293,000 with more homes achieving the DHS than originally planned;
  - a projected saving of £433,072 in the capital programme for 2005/06 from partnering with the original programme achieved;
  - a saving of £15,000 on annual maintenance of PVCu windows through partnering arrangements; and
  - a specialist rent arrears team has increased income from rents over the last two years.
- 115** The housing service is not achieving significant savings from joint procurement. Its membership of the South East housing consortium has yet to have any effect on procurement of housing services. It is not therefore achieving further efficiencies and savings in housing services by working with others outside of its partnering arrangements.
- 116** The housing service cannot be sure of its contribution to sector wide targets for efficiencies. It is showing efficiency savings in the annual efficiency statement for social housing of £3.3 million for last year of which £2.8 million is cashable. However, a review has highlighted some overstating of claimed efficiencies and future claims will have to be re-adjusted.

## Summary

- 117** Our conclusion is that the service is a fair, one-star service. There is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses with the service though the more cross-cutting issues of diversity and value for money are particularly underdeveloped.

- 118 Services are not fully accessible due to weaknesses with telephone access and offices are not DDA compliant. As the Council does not have a good understanding of the diverse needs of its tenants it has not made significant progress in tailoring the delivery of services to meet needs. While tenants do have some opportunities to be involved in the way their services are provided, the Council has more to do in this respect. The Council has good information for tenants and keeps them well-informed for repairs and maintenance. However, longer-term investment plans are not prepared and communicated to tenants so they do not know when they will get improvements to the DHS.
- 119 Positively, repairs are completed well and within target and this is also the case for planned improvements. Empty homes are let reasonably quickly, though the quality of work is inconsistent. Performance with gas servicing is not strong yet and it is unable to adequately manage asbestos. Vulnerable tenants are waiting too long for major aids and adaptations and the Council is not fulfilling this part of its agreement with tenants as contained in the Shepway housing plus standard.
- 120 A high level of rent is collected and arrears are managed reasonably well. This is same for estates, these are clean and tidy and the Council deals effectively with more serious anti social behaviour. Weaknesses exist though in terms of debt advice for those people in arrears and arrangements are less effective for dealing with low level nuisance.
- 121 The Council is developing its approach to securing value for money. It is not able at the moment to demonstrate that housing services provide VFM.

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

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

- 122 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Over the past three years, the housing service has improved key services for tenants including repairs and maintenance, ASB and sheltered housing. However, resident involvement has not improved and the Council is only just beginning to address value for money. There is a positive picture with performance indicators with rent arrears performance improving together with repairs and maintenance and gas servicing but tenant satisfaction and void performance are static.
- 123 The housing service responded well to the CPA inspection in 2004. This found weaknesses with plans and progress to achieve the DHS. Since that time the Council has agreed with tenants how the stock is to be managed in the future and a plan to achieve the DHS. The housing service is improving tenants' homes above the DHS.

**124** Areas where services have been improved over the last three years include:

- a reduction in the number of homes that fail the DHS with 77 per cent complying, resources identified to achieve 100 per cent compliance by 2010 and a local standard that is better than the DHS;
- an improved repairs and maintenance service with performance within top quartile for satisfaction and work completed within target times;
- an improvement in gas servicing to 98.72 per cent this year;
- tackling ASB with its partners and using the resources of its partners well to benefit tenants;
- improved performance with the collection of rent collecting 97.6 per cent of the amount due last year;
- achieving level B on the quality assessment framework, close to best performance as measured by the County Council who administer supporting people grant, following a best value study conducted with its residents; and
- an improved caretaking and cleaning service linked to improved security in some blocks of flats.

**125** Areas where service has not improved include:

- a lack of information to tenants on planned works. Tenants do not have a medium-term plan to 2010 (the DHS deadline) to show when work to achieve the DHS is due to their homes;
- monitoring of ASB. The housing services does not adequately check the quality of its service in respect of ASB and learn from feedback from residents;
- quality of empty properties. The quality of void properties is variable, new tenants do not know the standard to expect and the housing services has not provided a consistent service to new residents or used feedback to improve the service;
- estate management service standards. There are no service standards for estate management that tenants can use to check the standard of the service they receive;
- involvement of residents in planning and monitoring services. Housing services agreed to develop ways to involve tenants more as part of the tenants compact of 2000 and as part of the stock options appraisal but this has not happened; and
- housing services has no strategic approach to value for money. It does not have information to compare the quality and costs of services and cannot involve residents in making informed choices about value for money.

- 126 A number of performance indicators show improving performance. Seven of nine BVPIs have improved from 2001/02 to 2004/05. Examples of improvements include a reduction to 27 per cent of the number of homes that fail the DHS, improving performance with the collection of rent arrears, significant improvements in the repairs and maintenance service with performance within top quartile, a measure as part of contract management of the proportion of repairs that are successfully completed at the first visit with performance at 100 per cent against the target and re-let times are improving and are currently at 3.3 weeks, close to top quartile performance.
- 127 Some performance indicators are not improving. There has been a fall in the proportion of tenants satisfied with the service and the housing service does not know why the proportion of tenants from BME communities satisfied with the service at 55 per cent is even lower. The Council cannot measure whether electrical installations in its tenants' homes are safe and the measure of energy efficiency, SAP, is in doubt as the housing service are still collecting the data to measure this accurately.
- 128 The housing service has a reasonable track record of delivering on its plans. The service plan within the HRA business plan sets a number of key tasks for this year. It is delivering an improved maintenance service, has improved services to tenants with debt problems and tackles ASB effectively. Examples of those that have not been achieved include maximising the benefits from the ICT system and developing more estate agreements.

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

- 129 This is an area of balance between strengths and weaknesses. Plans are comprehensive and challenging and gaps within them have been addressed. The housing service has a structured way to address improvement planning with the service improvement plan. Performance management is a strength at high-level in housing services but staff are not aware of how they relate to targets and leadership within housing services needs to develop. Corporately, the Council is gaining in strength and this is having an impact upon landlord services.
- 130 The Council's key housing objectives are not comprehensive or specific in respect of landlord services. The management of council housing and achieving the DHS is the Council's overall second priority after regeneration and urban renaissance. The housing strategy sets this priority in terms of achieving the DHS and improving performance with repairs and maintenance. It is not specific about other service areas. But the HRA business plan is better. During the inspection the Council added missing tasks, outcomes and targets in respect of estate management and ASB together with the improvement of performance management

- 131** The HRA business plan has a service plan that is challenging. While on-site, the plan was improved and consolidated. The Council has identified the key landlord services that it is improving through a unified service plan as part of the Shepway Plan and HRA business plan. The plan is SMART<sup>9</sup> for example it sets out clear tasks that are measurable and identifies those accountable. Targets are ambitious and reflect how the Council seeks to improve performance. The targets for repairs and maintenance are ambitious as they seek to improve upon current performance which is within top quartile and promote a culture of continuous improvement. The plan is improved with key tasks identified and the service objective 'providing best value housing management and maintenance services' is defined. The plan improves on the previous four plans with specific tasks aimed at key priorities for tenants including estate management and ASB. The plan encompasses actions to improve future improvement planning and performance management with the objective of embedding this within landlord services. One flaw with the plans is a lack of milestones with some tasks.
- 132** The draft service plan for 2006/07 has addressed the shortcomings of previous plans. For example the previous plan did not include adequate actions to improve performance management. Furthermore next years' plan is clear and addresses the majority of weaknesses identified in this report. For example, the Council plans to improve the service to its disabled tenants, increase the representation of tenants and roll-out estate inspections more widely. Targets are more ambitious than in earlier plans. The target for SAP is to achieve 69.5 in 2008/09 and targets for repairs and maintenance are very ambitious improving on already top quartile performance. Revised plans will assist the Council in improving services to tenants.
- 133** There has been no comprehensive consultation with tenants in respect of service planning but it plans to do so this year. The housing service knows the key priorities of its tenants from surveys it has carried out and within its service plan it plans to consult a wider group of tenants to establish if these are correct and to align its plans with the aspirations of its tenants.
- 134** A formal service review process has been used to improve services in some cases. For example, the Council employed specialist consultants to help with its review of repairs and maintenance. Performance with other social landlords was compared, tenants were consulted and involved in the review, consideration was given to the best contractual arrangements and there was effective challenge to the existing basis of delivery that resulted in significant change. Similarly, the review of sheltered housing followed best value principles and the outcome has been an improvement in services for tenants.

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<sup>9</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, resources identified and time-bound.

- 135 There is little evidence of other improvement planning in a structured way. There has been no formal improvement planning in respect of housing management and the Council's agreed best value process has not been used. This means that in other service areas performance has not been compared with others, tenants have not been involved in a meaningful way in examining how services might be improved and no consideration as to whether existing ways of delivery are the best. However, the Council has within its service plan a move to a more formal and programmed approach to address these weaknesses. While there have been some service improvements more would have been achieved with formal planning setting clearly agreed goals and targets with stakeholders.
- 136 Performance management systems are effective at higher level but require further development with landlord services. The framework is adequate and plans are in place to improve this to a balanced score card approach. The range of indicators has been simplified at scrutiny level and are now focused on key elements of performance, priorities and objectives. This will help council members and senior management focus on key issues of performance. Within the department performance management is more mixed. There is regular scrutiny of performance and the outcome has been, for example, good performance with the collection of rent arrears and top quartile performance with responsive repairs. But the service has more to do to develop additional indicators to help it monitor and improve some other services such as ASB and voids where a better understanding of trends would help it shape services better for tenants.
- 137 Performance is not consistently managed by managers. The housing services departmental management team (DMT) is not reviewing performance as regularly as it should. The minutes of DMT show that performance was not adequately reviewed during the last six months of 2005. A discussion took place at the meeting in January 2006 but it is not clear from the minutes where performance was considered to be on target, where action was required and what that action is to be. Performance at team level is better with evidence of key data being reviewed within teams on a weekly basis and individual managers take responsibility for carrying out quarterly reviews of performance with reports to the corporate management team and elected members.
- 138 The evidence of learning in the way services are developing is limited. It has learnt where it employed specialist consultants in the review of repairs and maintenance services, the review of sheltered housing and with the new tenancy agreement. But there is no evidence of other learning and housing services have not used benchmarking in this respect. Learning from its own processes is also limited. The Council has only recently begun to learn from the complaints it receives and because it does not record informal complaints is missing further opportunities. The Council is aware of this shortcoming and its revised plans acknowledge the necessity for improvement to enable it to take services forward. It is therefore missing opportunities to learn from others and improve services.

- 139 The current staff appraisal system is not robust. Tasks and targets in service plans are often high-level and there is no mechanism to translate these into more detailed tasks and targets for staff. There are for example, few team targets linked back to the service plans or HRA business plan. Appraisals reviewed were not specific about the development needs of the staff concerned. At the moment it is difficult to see how staff are able to relate to the Council's key objectives for housing. The Council knows this and a more robust process is already being implemented as part of its new HR strategy.
- 140 Leadership from cabinet and senior management is developing but this is slow to have impact within housing services. The cabinet and corporate management team are providing a strong lead to other council members and staff in moving forward from the 2004 CPA judgement. This is now impacting on housing services where weaknesses in respect of diversity, staff development, resident involvement and service improvement and planning are acknowledged and it is accepted that a focused departmental leadership will lead to improved services for tenants.

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

- 141 The capacity of housing services to deliver improved services to tenants is improving. There are weaknesses with management skills but the Council's corporate plans to increase management capacity are now beginning to impact in the housing service. The ICT housing management system is under development with the appointment of new staff and housing services can show that training is linked to priorities to improve services with the new performance development system.
- 142 The capacity of staff and management capacity in landlord services needs to increase to deliver high-quality services. Staff within housing are now beginning to benefit from the Council's development plans. The weaknesses identified above are indicators of the need to develop management and professional skills within the housing service and the Council has a management development scheme underway to increase the capacity of its managers over the next 12 months. Shepway understands the key competencies its staff require to deliver improving services to tenants. It has set its four core values of 'customer first', 'one team', 'performance counts' and 'thinking ahead' in terms of the behaviour it expects of its staff. The Council's plans in this respect will impact upon the housing service and help to lead to improvements in services to tenants.

- 143 ICT has not been used to best effect but is now being developed. The Council's housing management ICT system has a range of features that are not being utilised. For example, the rent arrears management module has not been implemented which enables automated escalation of procedures. This means that staff are having to use manual methods to overcome this. Similarly, the systems database of property attributes is not fully utilised and data on stock condition is contained on a range of databases owned by both the Council and its contractors. There is the potential for data to be lost as there is no link between the databases to ensure that data is fully up-to-date on the Council's main database. The Council has appointed additional specialist staff specifically to realise the full potential of the housing management ICT system and improve its efficiency.
- 144 The Council has difficulty demonstrating value for money with its landlord services. The proportion of revenue repairs and maintenance spend on responsive repairs was 61 per cent last year and Shepway predict this will improve to 55 per cent this year. Good practice is to reduce this to 40 per cent or less. The Council knows its transaction costs for rent collection are high and that direct debit would be the most cost effective method. It has brought forward implementation of direct debit to October 2006 from April 2007 but could have acted on this much earlier. The revised service plan places a much greater emphasis on value for money with plans to obtain the necessary information for a strategic approach that will enable it to involve its tenants in choices for future services. The Council has not been able to demonstrate comprehensively to tenants that it is working to achieve improved value for money but has plans to address this now.
- 145 The HRA business plan demonstrates that council housing is viable and the plan is used as the primary budgeting tool. The HRA business plan shows that resources are available to deliver and maintain the DHS and identifies the funding for management of the housing service. Annual budgets are set based on the plans for the coming year but the Council has not been able to analyse costs against the quality of services. The Council can show that resources are following the priorities it has agreed with some tenants.
- 146 Housing services has not been able to demonstrate that training plans are linked to its development needs but is addressing this. Resources for training in housing services are more limited than in other parts of the Council with the training budget representing 1.1 per cent of the payroll compared to the corporate average of 1.9 per cent. The housing service has addressed this shortfall by improving the cost effectiveness of training with joint training courses held with others and an increase in internal training leading to an average cost of £136.00 per training place. Deficiencies with staff appraisal have meant that development needs were not identified with reference to the key objectives for the service but the new staff development system addresses this. The Council is beginning to show that funding for training is being used to deliver its objectives.

- 147** Corporately, the new human resources (HR) strategy is beginning to have an impact. The Council has tackled examples of long-term illness that were obstacles to service development as staff were also covering the duties of these colleagues. In the housing department this has enabled two posts that were effectively vacant to be filled. Similarly, the Council appreciates that corporately it has to tackle other issues of under-performance of a few staff and the new strategy will help it resolve these issues through staff development or in other ways. The Council is therefore beginning to make better use of its staff resources.
- 148** The capacity of councillors to improve services for tenants is increasing. Councillors are taking part in the IDeA leadership skills development programme. The impact is a greater focus from cabinet and the appropriate scrutiny committee on the performance of the housing service. Councillors are committed to achieving improvements in services to tenants and see this inspection as a key element in this process.
- 149** Housing services has access to resources to improve management capacity. The Council has established a capacity building fund of £185,400 to address key weaknesses including training and development. Managers in the housing service are undertaking management development training in this year. The Council has therefore identified gaps with management skills in housing services and is addressing this.
- 150** The housing service has committed staff, morale is high and there are no recruitment difficulties. In the staff survey 96 per cent of staff felt a shared responsibility to provide good services to tenants. The Council has confirmed that there are no recruitment or retention issues relating to housing staff.
- 151** Priority is being placed on improving value for money. The Council has created a new post to lead its proposals for a new value for money framework from March 2006. The framework is intended to focus the Council to incrementally improve value for money of all of its services including housing services. Its objective is to embed value for money as an issue that Council members and staff strive to improve on a day-to-day basis. There is therefore the potential that value for money of services for tenants will improve.
- 152** Shepway is attracting additional income from external sources. Examples include energy grants to a value of £40,000; £70,000 to fund the provision of new recreation facilities for young people; £100,000 from SRB to fund environmental improvements around council flats in Central Folkestone; match funding of £85,000 for an improved day centre, and future government grant for a proposed East Kent choice-based lettings scheme. It has increased its resources by attracting external funding to improve services for tenants.

## Summary

- 153** Our conclusion is the service has promising prospects for improvement. The delivery of housing services in its service plans and the track record of service improvements is improving. Repairs and maintenance has improved significantly with performance well within top quartile and performance with ASB has improved. Resident involvement and value for money has not improved although there are plans in place to address this. Performance indicators also show a generally positive picture with a balance of improvements in key areas for tenants but static performance, and in some cases poor performance, in a few areas.
- 154** The HRA business plan and the service plan for housing are much improved and becoming an effective tool for service improvement. The large majority of tasks have been achieved and new plans roll forward tasks not achieved in the current year. Objectives and tasks in the plan are measurable in most cases and the plan is effective for the Council in achieving its objectives for this service. Targets in the new plan are more ambitious and tenants are being involved in its development.
- 155** Improvement planning has been inconsistent. There are examples where a structured approach has achieved better services for tenants. But this approach has not been adopted in a comprehensive or consistent manner and the outcome has been a lack of improvement in services in some areas for tenants. The Council's improvement planning structure has not been used.
- 156** The housing service is improving its effectiveness in using information with which to manage performance and the existing staff appraisal system which has not been an effective tool to link individual objectives and targets to higher level plans is being replaced. Capacity building at a corporate level is impacting on the housing service where management skills need to improve.
- 157** In addition to improving the quality of some key services for tenants, the housing service has addressed the weaknesses identified in the CPA report and is on track to achieve the DHS target and has increased its capacity by attracting additional funding that has directly benefited tenants by enabling it to improve more homes.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Description	2003/04	2004/05	Target for 2005/06
<b>Satisfaction</b>			
Tenant satisfaction overall (BV074a)	77%	77%	77%
<b>Access</b>			
Percentage of abandoned calls	Not available	Not available	Establishing baseline
<b>Diversity</b>			
Satisfaction among BME groups with opportunities to participate (BV075b)	55%	55%	55%
Level of LG Equalities Standard (BV002a)	1	1	1
<b>Income collection</b>			
Local authority rent collection and arrears: proportion of rent collected (BV066a)	97.6%	97.6%	97.5%
Arrears as a percentage of the annual gross debit	2.9%	2.6%	2.4%
Collection rate for former tenant arrears (FTA as percentage of rent roll)	1.25%	1.46%	1.2%
Collection rate for rechargeable repairs	93.68	73.08	75
Collection rate for leaseholder service charges	99.97%	96.5%	97%
No of evictions for rent arrears	10	10	7
Percentage of rent loss due to voids	0.83%	1.23%	<1%

Description	2003/04	2004/05	Target for 2005/06
<b>Repairs and maintenance</b>			
Satisfaction with home	88%	88%	88%
Four hour repairs completed in target	95.1%	100%	99%
24 hour repairs completed in target	83%	98.9%	94%
Five day repairs completed in target	90%	98.5%	94%
Routine repairs completed in target	94%	98.3%	96%
Average SAP rating (BV063)	64.5	65.5	65.5
Percentage of homes failing decent homes standard	38%	26.6%	22%
Percentage of change failing decent homes standard	6%	11.4%	10%
Percentage of appointments made and kept (BV185)	98.4%	99.8%	99%
Average re-let time	20 days	33 days	21 days
Percentage of stock with up-to-date gas safety checks	97.8%	97.33%	100%
<b>Tenant involvement</b>			
Satisfaction with opportunities to participate (BV075a)	70%	70%	70%
<b>Estate management</b>			
Satisfaction with estate	82%	82%	82%
Percentage of offensive graffiti removed within 24 hours	Not available.	Not available.	100%
No of evictions for ASB or other breach of tenancy (except arrears)	0	1	1

<b>Description</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>Target for 2005/06</b>
<b>Value for money</b>			
Balance of planned to responsive maintenance (revenue)	36%	34%	45%
Percentage of paying rent by SO	27%	28%	
Percentage of post-inspections (physical inspections)	Not available.	5%	
<b>Other</b>			
Average time for processing new HB claims (BV 078a)	44 days	35 days	
Average time for processing notifications of changes of circumstance (BV 078b)	13 days	8 days	
Percentage of cases for which the calculation of the amount of benefit due was correct (BV 079a)	99.6%	99%	
The number of working days/shifts lost due to sickness absence (BV 012)	13.5 days	8 days	

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - a self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses compiled by the Council;
  - performance data including the Shepway Plan;
  - the draft Housing Strategy 2005/10;
  - the draft Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2005/10;
  - Shepway housing stock options appraisal;
  - stock condition survey and asset management strategy;
  - capital investment and revenue account estimates;
  - income management policies and procedures;
  - internal audit reports and action plans;
  - policy and procedures in respect of anti-social behaviour, domestic violence and racist behaviour;
  - tenancy and estate management policies and procedures;
  - plans, policies and procedures in respect of tenants involvement;
  - various leaflets and documents relating to access and customer care;
  - strategies, policies and procedures in respect of diversity;
  - benchmarking documentation;
  - key performance indicators; and
  - training records.

## Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - a tour of the housing stock;
  - visits to estates;
  - file checks;
  - meetings with tenants;
  - face-to-face and telephone interviews with tenants, staff, Board members and contractors; and
  - focus groups of staff, council members and tenants.

## 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)

### **Effective maintenance of PVCu doors and windows**

- 1 Shepway has entered into a partnering contract for maintenance and repair of PVCu windows and external entrance doors. The contractor is paid a price per property to carry out all necessary maintenance over a contract period of five years that can be extended to ten years. As part of the agreement the contractor has brought all windows and doors up to an agreed standard in the first year and an annual service will be carried out.