

Housing Association Inspection Report

Wyre Housing Association Limited

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Housing Association 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.

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003) 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 association;
- 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.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its Lead Regulation staff work with Housing Inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the housing association's future business prospects.

Scoring the service

- 1 We have assessed Wyre Housing Association Limited as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

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

Source: Audit Commission

- 2 The service is fair because it has some positive features.
- Customers can access advice seven days a week through the contact centre and arrange appointments for early evening and week-ends for most services.
 - The tenants' handbook is informative and provides clear instructions on how to report a repair which is supported by simple diagrams.
 - Properties are maintained and improved using sound investment data.
 - 99.2 per cent of all gas appliances are serviced on an annual basis through a flexible appointment system.
 - Officers actively assist customers to reduce their rent arrears, resulting in low levels of debt and high collection rates.

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

- Housing staff work effectively with partners to target specific areas and address examples of anti-social behaviour (ASB).
- The association has taken positive action to test the cost effectiveness and quality of the responsive repairs service.
- Satisfaction levels are high for most service areas.

3 However, there are a number of weaknesses with the service.

- The waiting time for major adaptations is twelve months, minor adaptations are not fast tracked and improvements schemes are not used consistently to address the needs of tenants with disabilities.
- The board and senior managers are not systematically monitoring the take up of services and have yet to utilise the data collected so far to tailor services appropriately.
- The performance of some aspects of the repairs service has deteriorated and has yet to demonstrate a positive trend.
- There is a lack of publicity regarding the association's improvement programmes and the information provided in leaflets is not user friendly.
- Although the association consults customers on service delivery and improvements, it has not developed links to ensure views are received from groups which represent the diversity of the tenants in the area.
- The association has not articulated its approach to procurement due to the lack of a procurement strategy.
- Targets for efficiency gains have not been developed at a service level.
- IT systems are not an effective tool for staff in most areas of the service.
- The quality and content of leaflets publicising service standards is inconsistent with some providing only basic guidance on how the service will be delivered.
- There is a lack of clear written guidance for customers and staff regarding the frequency of visits and subsequent action for debt recovery officers.
- The web site does not provide information on all services and is not interactive.

4 The association is considered to have excellent prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.

- Several improvements have been implemented since the last inspection which have benefited customers.
- The association has responded to feedback from customers and revised its approach to service delivery including a new ASB policy and more face to face contact to support vulnerable customers.
- Almost all the recommendations in the last report have been implemented demonstrating a commitment to delivering improved services and effective performance management.

8 Housing Association Inspection Report | Summary

- The organisation has clear objectives and challenging, realistic targets which are linked to corporate objectives.
- Continuous improvement is seen as a high priority within the organisation.
- Staff are supported by regular training courses, sickness levels are low.
- There is evidence of effective leadership and a willingness to develop strategic partnerships.

5 However, we identified the following weaknesses.

- The repairs service has yet to demonstrate a positive trend in most performance indicators.
- The organisation has not developed a robust procurement strategy.
- There is a lack of specific targets to assess the performance of the board and for efficiency gains at an operational level.
- New IT systems are planned but have still to be installed for almost all services.

Recommendations

- 6 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the association shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members, and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Strengthen the focus on users and tenants by:

- *reviewing the service standards highlighted in the report as being weak and developing comprehensive guidance as to how the related services will be delivered;*
- *developing a comprehensive profile of the customer base;*
- *agreeing targets to ensure the staff and board are representative of the customer profile;*
- *with stakeholders, review the delivery arrangements for the adaptations service to reduce waiting times to reflect those delivered by the top performing organisations; and*
- *improving the content of the web site and develop interactive services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clear standards to enable customers to judge the quality of the service delivered;
- delivery of suitably tailored services for all including vulnerable groups;
- an organisation and board which is representative of the community it serves;
- improved access to suitably adapted properties; and
- easier access to information on services.

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

This should be implemented within 12 months.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen performance management arrangements by:

- *agreeing appropriate action to develop a positive trend in performance indicators for the responsive repairs service;*
- *developing clear, brief written guidance for staff and customers which outlines the frequency and nature of visits to tenants in who are in rent arrears; and*
- *ensuring all cases of anti-social behaviour are closed using a standard letter to the complainant.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an increase in the quality of the responsive repairs service;
- more consistency and transparency for customers and staff on debt management arrangements; and
- a formal approach to the closure of ASB cases.

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

This should be implemented within three months.

Recommendation

R3 Address capacity issues by:

- *completing the proposed implementation of the new IT systems; and*
- *developing specific targets to assess the performance of the Board.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- IT systems which support operational activities and readily provide accurate strategic information; and
- a robust framework to formally assess individual board member performance.

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

This should be implemented within nine months.

Recommendation

R4 Integrate value for money into working practices by:

- *developing a robust procurement strategy; and*
- *agree appropriate targets for efficiency gains for all services at an operational level.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the development of clear targets for efficiency gains and securing improved value for money.

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

This should be implemented within 12 months.

- 7 We would like to thank the staff of Wyre Housing Association Limited who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Date of inspection: 27 February to the 3 March 2006

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Report

Context

- 8 Wyre housing association (WHA) is based in Poulton Le Fylde in Lancashire.
- 9 WHA operates in nine local authority areas including Wyre, Preston and Blackburn and has over 3,000 properties. Most of the stock is based in the Wyre local authority area. It was established in March 1996 to take the transfer of all housing stock from Wyre Borough Council.
- 10 Wyre is a district within Lancashire in the north-west of England. Wyre incorporates the towns of Fleetwood, Thornton Cleveleys, Garstang and Poulton-le-Fylde. The population of around 105,000 is largely concentrated along a coastal strip with only one in four people living in the rural areas of the borough. It shares borders with Blackpool, Fylde, Lancaster and Preston. 11 22 per cent of the population are over the age of 65 which is well above the national average. Disability levels in the working age population are high at almost 13 per cent and the ethnic minority population currently stands at 1.2 per cent.
- 11 The improvement programme promised to tenants at transfer should be completed in 2006. Wyre has a £70 million loan facility in place to achieve this and moved into a surplus generating position at the end of 2003/04 with peak debt forecast of £51.5 million during 2010. The association has an active unregistered subsidiary (Wyre Developments Ltd) which was set up to deliver VAT savings on professional fees associated with development.
- 12 Wyre Housing Association Limited employs 100 staff.
- 13 The Board of Management currently has eleven members, four of which are resident representatives, who are voted onto the Board via the residents' forum.
- 14 The association joined the Regenda group in April 2005 bringing a mixture of general needs and supported housing properties.
- 15 At the time of the inspection, the organisation was in the process of further integration within the Regenda group structure. The Board had approved the move to a new corporate centre and all staff had been offered new contracts based on Regenda's terms and conditions.
- 16 The previous inspection report was published in August 2004 when the service was judged to be 'fair' with poor prospects for improvement.

The service

- 17 The services inspected were asset management, income management and anti-social behaviour.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

18 The association's vision is:

- 'making the neighbourhoods of Wyre Housing, better places to live'.

19 The association has listed seven key objectives:

- **regenda** fully embrace the Regenda culture by influencing, thereafter accepting and adopting the group strategic approach;
- **homes** offer high quality affordable housing;
- **service** offer exceptional customer service in all areas of the operation;
- **finance** manage the business in an efficient way, ensuring we are financially viable;
- **people** attract the best people to work in a creative organisation;
- **partners** working with key partners; and
- **neighbourhoods** improve the quality of life in neighbourhoods.

20 In terms of achieving the objectives, the association lists a number of ways in which the success of the above objectives will be measured such as:

- board member training and development;
- ensuring that repairs and maintenance expenditure is carried out effectively and efficiently, ensuring value for money;
- ensuring all properties meet Decent Homes Standard by 2010;
- ensuring customer satisfaction with the repair service achieves 80 per cent, per annum;
- the customer service plan will be delivered and 'impact' surveys used to test new approaches;
- raise overall satisfaction with the service from 80 per cent to 90 per cent by 2007;
- achieving the efficiency savings identified within the business case for merger and annual efficiency statement (AES);
- targets will be established to improve the diversity of the workforce;
- by becoming a 'preferred partner of choice'; and
- by monitoring the success of local lettings policies and hot spot areas.

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

Access and customer care

- 21 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area. There is a strong commitment to customer care and reality checks are carried out on a regular basis to test service delivery. Offices are conveniently located and open at times agreed with users. The call centre enables customers to make contact seven days a week and information is provided in a user friendly format. However, call centre performance falls below the published timescales; the web site is limited in content and is not interactive.
- 22 In our previous inspection we found that service standards were not widely publicised and although there was a good range of leaflets, they were not consistently straplined to highlight the availability of other formats. Complaints were not closed effectively and a new Tenants' handbook had been issued. Offices were conveniently located.
- 23 The association has made positive attempts to encourage staff to deliver a consistent service to customers. The customer care code provides detailed guidance on how telephones should be answered, response times to correspondence and general standards on dealing with the public. It specifically offers guidance on dealing with vulnerable customers which reflects the increasing awareness within the organisation of the need to respond to customers' needs.
- 24 Procedures are in place to ensure staff are trained in customer care and to review the approach to this aspect of the business. All new staff receive training on the subject during the induction process and each service area has a customer care champion. They, as well as an external agency, carry out random sampling of other services and meet monthly to discuss issues raised from surveys and reality checks. This has highlighted issues such as the inappropriate use of answer phones or services where standards were inconsistently delivered.
- 25 Tenants and managers receive detailed information on compliance with service standards. Results of satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping exercises are reported on a quarterly basis to the tenant forum and management team. The reports are used to highlight areas for improvement from the customer perspective and where staff have not followed the customer care code. Usefully, they are summarised in a league table to show comparisons with other group subsidiaries and participating associations. The last report showed Wyre's performance was second out of the ten associations.
- 26 A broad range of attractive leaflets has been developed which details the services on offer and how they can be accessed. They list contact details and generally how the services will be delivered. All are straplined to confirm they are available in different formats.

- 27 There is a clear timescale to review the delivery of services through local offices. At the moment two offices are used to deliver the service, the main office in Poulton-le-Fylde and an area office in Fleetwood. The Wyre Board has approved the proposal to move to a corporate service centre to serve all the subsidiaries. An option appraisal on the delivery of local services is due to be completed by August 2006, with the Board committed to retaining a local office.
- 28 The offices provide easy access to visitors. The main office is open, spacious and well appointed. All relevant leaflets are displayed although there is limited information on resident involvement. The majority of the association's tenants live in Fleetwood which has an area office. Although it is conveniently located and well signposted, it is not as user friendly, primarily due to the internal design, where the low level counter is in an adjacent room, accessed through a lockable door.
- 29 Surgeries are providing additional options for tenants and supporting community development. Housing officers are available daily in the community centre located on the largest estate. They assist in the completion of housing benefit application forms as well as the reporting of repairs. Working closely with other community workers has also developed a supportive relationship.
- 30 Consultation has informed the times at which services are delivered. The main office is open between 8.45 am and 5 pm and the area office, between 10 am and 3 pm. The call centre is open seven days a week providing ample options for customers to contact staff. We also noted a willingness from staff to offer appointments outside normal office opening hours, which reflects a focus on delivering a service to suit customers' needs.
- 31 The quarterly tenants' newsletter is informative, easy to read and provides topical information. Recent publications have featured articles on anti-social behaviour and the need to use rent free weeks to pay off rent arrears. General news about the organisation ensures customers are aware of new developments and in particular the impact of the merger within the Regenda group.
- 32 Comprehensive information is available in the Tenants' handbook. The terminology used is easy to understand, it is well laid out and colourful. The repairs troubleshooting guide is particularly useful, being supplemented by diagrams which make it easy to describe a repair.
- 33 Feedback from surveys has been used constructively to re-design policies and procedures. The last general survey of tenants highlighted concerns regarding the association's approach to anti-social behaviour. A new policy and procedure was implemented in February 2005 with a variety of tools for staff. Impact assessments carried out in September 2005 show a marked improvement in satisfaction levels since the new policy was introduced.
- 34 The association uses a range of options to continually gather feedback on services. Satisfaction surveys are carried out following the completion of repairs and impact assessments are administered every six months for all services. As well as monitoring trends in satisfaction levels they are also used successfully to confirm for example that customers are being signposted to other agencies or receiving debt advice.

- 35 Tenants are offered formal and informal mechanisms to comment on services. Service improvement teams which work across the Regenda group include tenant representatives and are used well to identify improvements and areas of under-performance. Customers who wish to participate informally can join the e-mail group which has been a source of further comments. The Tenants' newsletter ensures the outcomes of suggestions are confirmed in a 'you said we did section'.
- 36 Customers have been involved in developing service standards, but some are more comprehensive than others. Details of how the improvement programme and the debt recovery service are delivered are very general. Other areas such as gas servicing and responsive repairs provide more detail which allows service users to make informed assessments on the level of service received.
- 37 There is a lack of strategic information available on the take-up of services. Systems and procedures have still to be implemented which enable the organisation to establish whether there are issues in terms of access to services for some of their customers. As a consequence the Board does not receive any information to confirm the take-up of services by different sections of the community.
- 38 The web site provides some useful information for customers, but has significant room for improvement. We found it difficult to use the section covering choice based lettings, some services are not mentioned, it is not interactive and when we used the e-mail function our messages were rejected. We accept that monitoring data shows very few customers use the web site, but the fact that it is not interactive will act as a disincentive to many.
- 39 The complaints system is clear and well publicised but targets are being missed in a minority of cases. A leaflet is available in the offices and on the web site which clearly explains the various stages in the complaints process for customers. Performance is reported to the Board on a quarterly basis, identifying specific issues. The IT system is unable to produce standard letters and at the times of the inspection only 86 per cent of complaints had been handled within the published timescales.
- 40 The call centre has developed challenging targets with customers, but is failing to meet them. One is to answer 85 per cent of calls within three rings, where the group target is within six. Within the first three quarters of the year the performance started at 85 per cent and dropped to 75 per cent. Within the same period the number of inbound calls rose by seven per cent. Whilst the number of abandoned calls is decreasing, the actual performance of 6.5 per cent is above the target of five per cent.

Diversity

- 41 There is a balance between weaknesses and strengths in this area. From a strategic perspective, the organisation has collated information on over 40 per cent of its customers, but this is not used so far to tailor services. In addition, there is no information to confirm satisfaction levels amongst diverse groups and consultation with hard to reach groups is under-developed. However, there is a strong commitment to improve this aspect of the business; offices are Disability Discrimination Act compliant (DDA), all staff and Board members have received regular training on diversity and detailed action plans to address weakness in this area have been developed. Customers have benefited from the close working relationships staff have in place with support agencies.
- 42 In our previous inspection, we found association's approach to diversity was weak. Its equality and diversity strategy was limited, there was an absence of effective monitoring arrangements and there was no mention of issues relating to diversity in some key documents. Contractors were not required to supply their diversity policies. The association did not focus on meeting the needs of its customers.
- 43 Positive attempts are being made to profile the customer base, but this information is not being used to date. An equality and diversity survey was carried out last September which produced a reasonable response from over 1,300 of the 3,000 tenants surveyed. Since then, call centre staff and housing officers have collected further information through day to day contact with customers increasing that number to 1,400. However, until the new IT system is introduced later this year, the existing database cannot be effectively integrated and used as a strategic tool.
- 44 Weaknesses in this area have been recognised and articulated in a strategy and detailed action plan. The equality and diversity champion has worked closely with consultants to scrutinise the organisation's approach to diversity and produce an equality and diversity (E&D) strategy. This highlights that the monitoring of services by diverse groups is still an area for development and the need to update the document to ensure the association is in a position to comply with the requirements of GPN4 and GPN8.³
- 45 Staff are working with the limitations of the existing system to highlight vulnerable customers. Basic information gathered following visits is shared on an individual property basis, using flags to warn other staff of the presence of a tenant with specific needs or where joint visits should be undertaken. In addition, the same information is shared with contractors which improves communication and the way the service is delivered on behalf of the association.
- 46 There is a commitment to ensure contractors deliver services sensitively, but this is not yet being tested rigorously. There has been significant progress in this area to scrutinise and support contractors. Free training has been offered which is positive and where policies are not in place or contractors show a lack of commitment to diversity issues, they have been removed from the approved list.

³ GPN refers to general practice notes issues by the Housing Corporation

However, there is no system in place to follow the desk top analysis of their policies to confirm they are performing as promised.

- 47 Targets to improve the representation of diverse groups within the organisation have not been achieved and are lacking in some areas. There are only targets which relate to the numbers of BME employees or board membership. The Board does meet the BME target and at a staffing level, only 1.3 per cent of staff consider themselves to have a limiting long term illness, but this cannot be benchmarked in the absence of appropriate targets. The latest report to the Board confirms that until all targets are achieved the profiles will not reflect community representation at all levels.
- 48 The procurement policy does not encourage disadvantaged groups to gain employment. Despite the fact that improvement programmes have provided a steady stream of activity over the last few years, there have been no requirements made of contractors to develop apprentices or employ local labour. The new contract for the responsive repairs service offers the opportunity to address this issue as there are targets to employ apprentices during the five-year term.
- 49 Attempts to engage with hard to reach groups have been made, but this is still a relatively new initiative. Although resident involvement has improved over the last two years, engagement with a broader range of tenants has not been achieved. A sounding board has been established which aims to improve the range of tenants the association consults with, but this has met only once to date. Staff have established links with other strategic partners and sensibly propose to use existing groups as a basis for consultation.
- 50 Offices comply with the DDA, but access isn't easy in all instances. The main office in particular provides a good example of a modern office with level access, automatic doors and a public toilet which can be accessed by all customers. Although the Fleetwood office complies with the act, additional safety measures mean the arrangements for disabled customers are not as user friendly. This is because the low level counter has to be accessed through an additional door which is controlled by a staff member.
- 51 Advice from consultants on DDA compliance is not customer focused. An audit was carried out which suggested that the installation of automatic doors should be re-considered if the numbers of disabled visitors using the Fleetwood office rises substantially. Whilst the installation of automatic doors is not a requirement of the act, the suggestion that they should be considered based on usage is insensitive to the needs of existing users of the office.
- 52 A comprehensive range of training has been delivered over the last two years to all staff on equality and diversity. Training by external consultants, the E&D champion and through lunch and learn sessions have been compulsory for all staff and Board members. It was apparent that this has increased awareness of issues relating to diversity within the organisation and encouraged the Board to be more demanding for example of external contractors and the monitoring of progress in this area.

- 53 Reports to the Board are comprehensive in terms of progress against the E&D action plan but not on satisfaction levels among tenants from diverse communities. The number of outstanding actions has reduced which reflects the progress made. Although this is positive, there are no reports which enable the Board to gain an understanding of the satisfaction levels amongst the diverse tenants it serves and consider the implications.
- 54 All literature has been revised with customer involvement. A new suite of leaflets has been published which are stapled to make readers aware of the various formats available. A reader's panel vets any new publication or guidance leaflet which encourages feedback on the content and suggested amendments.
- 55 Translation facilities are easily accessed and clearly publicised. Language line posters are displayed in both offices and all staff have been trained in its use. Contractors carry language line cards which is useful.
- 56 At an operational level, cases of harassment or hate crimes are dealt with efficiently and in conjunction with support from other agencies. There have only been three reported incidents of hate crime within the last twelve months, which related primarily to verbal abuse. All were resolved within the agreed timescales and where necessary other support agencies were used to carry out joint visits.
- 57 Clear guidance and procedures are in place to minimise the impact of domestic violence (DV). The new policy establishes how the association will respond to both staff and customers who are affected by DV and guidance on how to deal with reports. This includes suggestions as to which agencies should be contacted in order to make an appropriate referral. We noted that repair requests as a result of such incidents were dealt with promptly and staff were briefed on the procedure.
- 58 At an operational level, officers from Wyre work closely with a number of stakeholders to promote community cohesion. Partnership and Community together meetings, led by the police are held on a monthly basis in several areas to discuss the concerns of the community. Housing officers attend each meeting and have assisted in addressing issues such as fly tipping and neighbour disputes, irrespective of tenure.
- 59 Housing officers are well placed to offer additional support and guidance to vulnerable tenants. All have been trained to verify housing benefit (HB) claims and offer assistance to customers. They have access to a comprehensive list of support agencies in the area to encourage appropriate referrals. It was evident that most had established close working relationships with stakeholders and partners.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 60 There is a balance between strengths and weaknesses in this area of the service. From a strategic perspective, the association is on target to achieve the Decent Homes Standard (DHS), asset management arrangements are robust and the risk associated with asbestos is effectively managed. However, from a customer perspective, there is a lack of comprehensive service standards, the choice of materials on improvement schemes is limited and decoration vouchers are not administered in an open and transparent manner.
- 61 In our previous inspection we found that contracts were let purely based on cost, 30 per cent of homes failed the decent homes standard and although improvements were being delivered ahead of schedule, tenants were not always informed of the timing of the works. There was no long term planned maintenance programme, but customers had influenced the improvement programme.
- 62 The association has an effective asset management strategy which is reviewed periodically with stakeholders. The plan is developed using accurate details on property condition, levels of demand and sustainability of areas. Properties are rated according to a traffic light system which highlights those where sustainability is an issue. Investment proposals are regularly reviewed with all stakeholders and amendments made to ensure appropriate investment decisions are approved.
- 63 Where less popular properties are identified, positive action is taken to increase demand. The asset management review highlighted a block of flats and two sheltered schemes which have now been improved. Lettability is no longer a significant issue which demonstrates an effective use of resources.
- 64 Investment plans are adequately resourced to deliver national and local priorities. Around 16 per cent of properties currently fail the decent homes standard (DHS), due mainly to defective windows and roofs. Projections show the DHS is scheduled to be achieved for all properties by 2010, supplemented by a programme of environmental works, agreed with tenants to commence this year. The works reflect tenant's aspirations with improved security and lighting.
- 65 Systems are in place to continually update the stock condition data and predict investment requirements. Ninety-four per cent of homes have been surveyed, with all planned to be surveyed within a year. Void properties are cross checked with the database and the condition data is updated following improvement works and the installation of adaptations. The data base can predict spend over a 30-year period and reflects sustainability issues such as environmental conditions. This is an essential tool to inform strategic investment decisions.

- 66** Information is shared systematically within the organisation to identify works under warranty or imminent improvement schemes. Details of where improvements are planned or have been completed are recorded on the repairs system. This enables staff to identify work which is under warranty or items which are to be replaced reducing unnecessary expenditure on repairs.
- 67** Cyclical repair programmes are delivered in an effective manner. Properties are painted every five years and following improvements to materials in partnership with paint suppliers, the association proposes to extend this to six years. Tenants are offered a choice of colours and appropriate notice of when works are due to commence. Other cyclical works such as lift servicing and replacements are well organised, which assists in extending the life of the stock and reducing repair costs in the long term. Routine surveys confirm high levels of satisfaction with these programmes.
- 68** The association meets the requirements of the Control of Asbestos at Work Act. All communal areas have been surveyed for asbestos and details of this are held on an accessible data base. Contractors and staff confirm that details of asbestos are routinely shared with them prior to any works. Staff have received training on asbestos and an informative leaflet explaining the risks posed by asbestos has been supplied to tenants which is an effective way of increasing their knowledge and reducing anxiety.
- 69** There is an increased emphasis on addressing fuel poverty using targeted investment, but thermal efficiency levels are below average. Homes are insulated above the minimum standard with works supported by contributions from energy suppliers. Grants are also used to fund a fuel swap programme from electric storage heaters to gas systems and tenants are provided with energy saving light bulbs which will increase their disposable income. However, despite the fact that the average SAP rating is now 69⁴, it is still lower than more than half of comparable associations.
- 70** The benefits of joint procurement arrangements have not been fully assessed. Materials are procured by a variety of means as the association is a member of several procurement consortia including Procurement for Housing and Fusion 21. Costs have been evaluated to ensure they are competitive, but gains through procurement have not been quantified which would demonstrate the cost effectiveness of the procurement groups.
- 71** Capital programmes have not made use of partnering arrangements, but there is a focus on increasing value for money. The current programme has been delivered through traditional competitive tendering and plans are now in place to procure next years programme through the group structure. Monitoring reports show that programmes are delivered on time and within the last two years the budget has been almost spent. External consultants have been used to assess the rates being charged which confirmed they are competitive. However, this approach does not encourage contractors to identify potential efficiency gains.

⁴ SAP-Standard assessment procedure, used to rate the thermal efficiency of a building

- 72 Tenants are supported during the improvements process, but information could be more user friendly. On site quality control and tenant liaison is provided by contractors which assists verbal communication and the speedy resolution of problems. Fact sheets explain what to expect during works and timetables for completions are supplied which is helpful. However, the terminology used is technical at times and the size of the text is smaller than in most communications and will cause problems for some customers.
- 73 There is a lack of transparency regarding the policy on decoration allowances. Decoration vouchers are not offered to customers who owe rent, but this is not confirmed until after the works have been completed. This is not an effective way to communicate the policy or encourage debt levels to be reduced.
- 74 There are a number of other weaknesses associated with the delivery of planned schemes which impact on customers.
- We noted that requests for adaptations are not acted upon and in some instances this can result in the installation of equipment which does not meet the needs of the tenant.
 - Tenants have not been involved in agreeing the range of materials to be used on improvement schemes and the range of fixtures and fittings on offer is not particularly impressive.
 - Service standards are not as comprehensive for this aspect of the service as other areas such as repairs.
 - Publicity on programmes is limited to an annual programme which does not allow tenants to plan improvements such as internal decoration.

Responsive repairs

- 75 We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in the responsive repairs service. The service has been market tested and a five-year contract agreed which focuses on quality as well as cost. Operatives are multi-skilled, it is easy to report a repair and arrange an appointment to have the work carried out. The number of repairs completed as emergencies has been halved and feedback is used routinely to inform improvements. However, performance on repair completions has deteriorated and targets for appointments are not being met.
- 76 In our previous inspection, we found it was easy to report a repair which was detailed comprehensively in the Tenants' handbook. Appointments were only offered for 22 per cent of repairs and there was a lack of confidence in some of the statistics produced by the IT system. Tenants made a number of negative comments about the service.
- 77 The responsive repairs contract has been market tested with an emphasis on cost and quality. All responsive repairs (excepting electrical works), are completed by the in house contractor following a competitive tendering exercise. Contractors were assessed with tenant involvement and using external consultants. The new contract outlines the intention to develop a partnering arrangement within the first year offering the opportunity to develop a closer working relationship with the contractor.

- 78 The association has addressed some of the barriers to service improvement including:
- the restructuring of the in-house contractor and the placing of association staff in the same office has improved communication channels. For example, it is easier to identify rechargeable works and prioritise works to voids;
 - operatives are multi skilled and operate with an imprest stock in their vans which improves their ability to complete jobs on the first visit and reduce disruption for tenants;
 - diagnostic repairs tools at the contact centre and in the tenant's handbook, improves the accuracy of repairs reporting; and
 - an appointment system to carry out repairs at a time to suit customers.
- 79 The number of jobs done as an emergency repair are close to Audit Commission good practice guidelines. Since the last inspection there has been a significant reduction in the number of jobs completed as an emergency. At the time of inspection this was around 10 per cent, an improvement against the 16.5 per cent for 2004/05 and a significant reduction from approximately 28 per cent in 2003/04. Although the association do not pay a premium rate for emergencies, dealing with them is an unnecessary disruption for the contractor and reduces efficiency.
- 80 Similarly the levels of pre and post inspections are appropriate. There is a target to complete a maximum of ten per cent pre and minimum of 10 per cent post inspections of all repairs which is being achieved. Usefully, inspections are carried out by appointment and used to gather information which is summarised and reported to the service improvement team in order to identify improvements in the service.
- 81 We found access arrangements for the repairs service to be satisfactory. Tenants we met during the inspection were satisfied with the repairs service and found it easy to access. Reporting a repair is straightforward, with telephone numbers, addresses and opening times of area offices displayed in leaflets and other publications. All tenants receive a leaflet 'how to get repairs done', which describes the various options available. When reporting repairs, tenants are asked if they have any specific needs, which are recorded and passed onto contractors which is customer focused.
- 82 A weakness with the reporting arrangements relates to the web site. The internet repair reporting service is not interactive and the repairs finder software is unavailable. Therefore, there is a reliance on customers e-mailing details of the repair, including a time when they are available. This is inefficient and can cause additional work such as re-arranging appointments or querying the description of a particular repair.

- 83 The repairs reporting process is supported by well trained staff and a comprehensive handbook for tenants. A composite schedule of rates and repair identification software is used by call centre staff who are able to quickly identify multi - task works, reducing the risk of contractors claiming additional works. The tenant handbook contains clear diagrams for tenants to help them describe the work required. This has led to a significant reduction in the number of repairs attracting variation orders from 56 per cent, two years ago to 8 per cent at the time of the inspection.
- 84 There have been improvements, but monitoring information reveals this is not comprehensive. Performance on repair completions within timescales has deteriorated over the last three years although this improved in the last quarter. In other areas, there is a lack of sufficient data to demonstrate a trend such as jobs being completed first time as this has only recently been monitored.
- 85 Options for appointments are reasonably flexible, but targets are not being met. Although customers are offered Saturday morning and evening appointments which is positive, the system has not been developed to specify a time period within the day as opposed to a morning or afternoon appointment. In 2004/05 86.9 per cent of all appointments were delivered against a target of 95 per cent, a fall from the previous year's performance 98 per cent. Usefully operatives call before they visit to confirm it is still convenient to carry out the repair and reduce the number of wasted journeys.
- 86 Tenants' responsibilities around rechargeable repairs and repair responsibilities are clearly articulated in a leaflet. Repairs caused by criminal damage are completed when the crime has been reported to the police. This will help police and other agencies target their resources and increase the likelihood of identifying repairs which the tenant should be charged for.
- 87 Feedback from customers is analysed in detail to identify specific issues and confirms high levels of satisfaction. Positively, incentives are offered to encourage the use of satisfaction slips, which request views on the different trades and contractors, around 22 per cent are returned. This is supplemented by random telephone sampling exercises which are shared with contractors and staff. This has provided managers with an accurate picture of how the repairs service is delivered and identified training needs for individual staff. The latest reports show that 95 per cent of customers are satisfied or very satisfied with the service.
- 88 An effective estate based caretaking service is available on one estate and there are proposals to extend this to three. The caretaker is based on the largest estate in the area and deals with minor repairs and the general maintenance of common areas. Tenants we spoke to valued the service and our tour of the estate showed it to be well maintained with common areas clean and tidy.

Empty (void) properties

- 89 There are more strengths than weaknesses. Performance is top quartile and a dedicated voids team works closely with housing officers and tenants to deliver properties which meet the lettable standard. However, the policy on decoration vouchers has not been updated to confirm the revised approach.
- 90 In our last inspection we found a very comprehensive and detailed lettable standard but customers had not been involved in its development. Variation orders were very high, representing 74 per cent of all orders and there was a lack of guidance on the use of decoration vouchers.
- 91 Performance on voids reflects that of a top performing organisation and targets are challenging. Voids are processed quickly, on average within 15 days and inside the association's target of 2.5 weeks. This reduces the impact of income lost when the property is empty and means that tenants are not waiting long periods once they have accepted an offer for a home.
- 92 The association works effectively with the contractor to repair empty properties. There is a dedicated void repairs team who work closely with housing staff. Key safes attached to the exterior of properties provide an effective way to manage access to the properties. Where necessary, works are prioritised to reflect local circumstances such as the need to move a tenant in as a matter of urgency.
- 93 A minimum void standard has been agreed with tenants and is monitored by residents with 'spot checks' on voids. New tenants are supplied with a copy of the voids standard so they can judge the condition of their new property before moving in. Those we visited during the inspection were presented to a high standard.
- 94 The policy to modernise voids once the property is occupied is not comprehensively articulated. Tenants agreed in principle to major improvements being carried out once the property is let. This is primarily to minimise the loss of income from empty properties and to involve the new tenant in the refurbishment of their new home. We noted however, that this was not explained in detail at the sign up stage which would prepare the customer for the inevitable disruption and an option to have the work carried out beforehand.
- 95 The guidance on decoration allowances has not been updated to confirm the revised approach. Housing officers are given the discretion to vary decoration allowances where properties are less popular. However, this is not covered in the current policy and is therefore open to interpretation and an inconsistent approach. Properties we visited during the inspection were in good decorative condition but were awarded large decoration allowances.

Gas servicing

- 96 This is a well organised aspect of the service. 99.83 per cent of properties have been serviced within the last twelve months, systems are in place to organise access and take legal action if required. However, the Board does not effectively monitor performance in this area.

- 97 In our last inspection, we found a robust approach to gas servicing and only three properties with an outstanding service for more than 12 months. Record keeping was accurate and easily accessed, but satisfaction levels were not monitored.
- 98 The gas servicing contract is based on cost and quality considerations. All gas servicing and replacement of minor items are completed by the in-house contractor as a 'three-star' style contract. A new contract is due to start in April, based on a fixed cost per property for annual service together with breakdown and replacement of parts and an emergency service. This is an effective way to deliver a servicing contract.
- 99 There are adequate options available to arrange a gas service. All customers are offered an appointment letter which explains why their gas appliances need servicing. Should the appointment not be kept tenants are given a further appointment at a specific time. Out-of-hours appointments are also offered for early evening and Saturday mornings.
- 100 Reviews have been used to deliver efficiency gains. The association and the contractor have identified duplications in process and moved to a shared office and a common IT system, which has reduced overhead costs and enabled the more efficient updating of information.
- 101 Systems and procedures are used efficiently to manage the contract and arrange access with customers. A robust gas servicing database is easy to interrogate and is routinely updated. It is linked to the repairs reporting system so that should a tenant report a repair on a house with an outstanding service, this is completed at the same time as the repair. Consequently, at the time of the inspection only five properties had not been serviced within the last twelve months, representing a 99.83 service rate.
- 102 The importance of the annual gas servicing programme is clearly and regularly explained to tenants. Leaflets explain the importance of regular servicing and articles appear in tenant's newsletters. Other methods to gain access are used, for instance a large parking ticket type sticker is fixed to tenants doors stating: 'Potentially Dangerous Gas Appliances' when the tenant has not given access. Those who continue to refuse access have been served with injunctions. Both demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the association's legal responsibilities are discharged.
- 103 Routine monitoring is carried out to solicit views on the service delivered. The latest analysis shows that 83 per cent of customers are satisfied with the way their last service was carried out.
- 104 Board members are not comprehensively appraised on the progress of the gas servicing programme. They do not receive information on the numbers of no access cases and action being taken to resolve them. They are therefore failing to gain any understanding of performance in this aspect of the service.

Aids and adaptations

- 105** There are more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Some customers are waiting up to a year for an adaptation and minor adaptations are not fast tracked. Leaflets are lacking in detail and misleading and improvement programmes are not used consistently to fit equipment which meets the needs of tenants. However, action has been taken to improve the service by developing a closer working relationship with stakeholders and the association has significantly increased its budget for adaptations for the next five years.
- 106** Information on the adaptations service is inaccurate and lacks important details. The new corporate leaflet outlining the service is not particularly helpful, referring tenants to social services or local council offices without providing addresses or phone numbers. It is also inconsistent with the association's policy on minor adaptations, stating the association will fit minor adaptations without referral to an occupational therapist, when this is not the case.
- 107** Some aspects of the service lack a customer focus. Although waiting times for referrals have fallen there is still around an eight week waiting list before an Occupational Therapist (OT) will visit. The fact that this includes an assessment for minor adaptations such as grab rails illustrates that the fast tracking of minor adaptations or the use of OT assistants has not been considered by the Social Services who are responsible for that aspect of the service.
- 108** The association shows a disregard for tenants' needs in some instances. During the recent refurbishment of a sheltered scheme requests for baths to be replaced by walk in showers were not acted upon for financial reasons. Given the high percentage of elderly residents and the opportunities offered by the improvement scheme, this was a short sighted approach and will ultimately lead to more expenditure. We did note that other adaptations, for example an adapted kitchens, had been installed during refurbishment works.
- 109** However, it is evident that the association is committed to improving this service through its partnership arrangements with the local council. Both parties are working on a common protocol and all stakeholders meet regularly. This has resulted in the more appropriate letting of adapted properties and the recycling of adaptations where possible, which helps to maximise the use of scarce resources.
- 110** The association has increased funding to demonstrate its commitment and reflect the level of demand. The budget for adaptations which is match funded by the council, has been increased from £100,000 in 2004/05 to £220,000 in 2005/06, and is approved to increase for the next five years. A variety of sources are used to fund adaptations including recycled capital grant fund.
- 111** There is lack of information to confirm satisfaction with the service. Satisfaction levels have only recently been gathered and the results have not been passed on to occupational therapists or tenants. Without this information the association will not be able to identify trends in satisfaction and identify areas for concern.

Income management

- 112** There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Performance on rent collection and arrears compares with the top performing organisations. There is an emphasis on face to face contact to support customers and reduce the levels of arrears. Linkages with the relevant support agencies are well established. However, there is a lack of written guidance for staff and customers to confirm the associations approach to arrears management, affordability is not considered before a property is offered to new tenants and the IT system is not an effective tool.
- 113** In our last inspection, the association had a reasonable range of payment options, but did very little to assist customers who were in arrears. Rent statements were basic and missed information such as the amount of housing benefit being paid. Performance management was weak in this area and there was a high number of evictions.
- 114** Customers have access to a broad range of options in order to pay their rent, although some could be more flexible. Payments can be made by standing order, debit card/credit card, swipe cards, in person or through the internet. Direct debit has recently been introduced but with only two dates offered, it does mean that it is unlikely to suit all customers.
- 115** Performance on rent collection has continued to improve over the last three years to reflect one of the top performing associations. In 2002/03, the percentage of the rent debit collected was 98.8 per cent for general needs accommodation, which rose to 100.6 per cent in 2004/05. At the same time the level of current tenant arrears has reduced to 2.9 per cent, again reflecting high level performance.
- 116** Stakeholders have influenced changes to the association's approach to debt collection. Staff from local agencies have participated in meetings to review procedures, standard letters and leaflets with a view to increasing the level of support to customers.
- 117** As a consequence, the income management team is focused on preventing debt and sustaining tenancies. The emphasis is on face to face contact with customers in order to offer support in managing arrears down. This has led to a reduction in the number of scheduled evictions in the last three years from 204 in 2003 to 32 in 2005 and in court costs from £32,000 in 2003 to £2,467 in 2005.
- 118** A flexible approach has been introduced to appointments which benefits both the tenant and the association. Officers also have a target to visit all new tenants in order to introduce themselves and emphasise the importance of managing their rent accounts. Leaflets publicise the fact that debt recovery officers are available for home visits from 8am - 9pm. This accommodates the needs of the tenant and it also enables staff to carry out visits outside normal office hours and discuss the reasons for arrears with customers.

- 119** Communication regarding rent increases is in a user-friendly format. Customers receive a letter, which plainly explains the rent increase and usefully, stressing the fact that those in receipt of housing benefit do not need to contact the benefit section, reducing unnecessary telephone calls. A more formal letter is attached which explains the calculations resulting in the increase in order to comply with the legal requirements.
- 120** Publicity has been used well to reduce arrears levels. Tenants have four rent free weeks during the year. Posters have been used at various times in the year to explain that rent free weeks are an opportunity to pay off arrears and the consequences of being in debt. Reports show that the numbers of payments and rent collected over the last two years during rent free weeks has increased.
- 121** Systems are in place to actively monitor payment agreements. When staff have visited tenants in arrears and agreed a payment plan, a weekly report is produced and scrutinised by call centre staff to highlight where payments have not been made. Debt recovery officers are then in a position to call or visit the customer the following day to discuss the reasons for non payments.
- 122** The success in reducing debt is due to some extent to targets which are stretching but reflect local context. Individual targets have been agreed with staff for specific areas after taking into account the level of arrears for a particular location and other factors such as court orders which stipulate the level of payments from customers following legal action.
- 123** The relationship with the courts has been strengthened by the effective sharing of information through regular contact. A court user group meets every quarter and new policies and procedures have been discussed when necessary. This has reduced delays and queries should court action be taken and increased the percentage of applications for eviction supported by the courts.
- 124** Customers are actively encouraged to seek independent advice on their financial circumstances. Recovery Officers provide information and contact details for specialist agencies where applicable, to assist customers to maximise income or receive debt advice. In our discussions with external agencies we were advised that Wyre's officers follow up referrals to confirm customers have attended which is helpful.
- 125** Where evictions are pending, staff efficiently share information with relevant agencies. A standard e-mail group has been established so that the homelessness team, the housing service team and contacts at the council are informed of the proposed action.
- 126** Some initiatives have been used effectively to reduce debt levels. Debt recovery officers have used attachment to benefits arrangements when tenants are in arrears. This has successfully reduced the debt on specific accounts whilst maintaining existing payments from HB.

- 127 The association has taken positive action to support customers submitting housing benefit applications. Over 60 per cent of tenants qualify for housing benefit payments. All debt recovery staff and housing officers have been trained to verify completed forms. The community centre on the largest estate is also used on a daily basis to provide additional access to housing staff.
- 128 The additional support from staff has assisted in reducing the processing times for HB. The local council is currently processing new applications within 26 days and responding to changes in circumstances within 10, which has reduced from 40 days and 15 days over the last six months. Staff within the council were complimentary regarding the approach taken by Wyre's staff and their approach to working in partnership.
- 129 Staff have developed an effective working relationship with the housing benefit section at the local council, formalised by an SLA. Managers meet on a monthly basis to discuss operational issues and to identify common problems in the completion of applications for benefit. Details of where any clawback arrangements are to be implemented are also shared with debt recovery officers enabling early contact with their tenants to minimise the impact on the rent account.
- 130 Specific initiatives have been developed to reduce debt levels and improve access to advice. The association has part funded the local Council's benefit bus which tours the borough and has the necessary technology to submit forms on line as soon as they are completed. The Regenda group has also approved funding of £150,000 over three years for a CAB debt counsellor who will be available to residents of the borough.
- 131 There has been an increasing focus on former tenants' arrears and new procedures have been implemented. Decisions regarding write offs are now made on a monthly basis which is efficient. In 2002, an average of over £10,000 was written off per month which rose to £15,500 in 2004 following a purge on very old debts. External debt agencies are now used to collect harder to recover arrears on a commission basis, which has resulted in approximately £400 per month being recovered on average.
- 132 Service standards are not comprehensive. A leaflet outlines the ways in which to pay rent and how to prioritise the various outgoings, but it fails to mention some of the services customers can expect, such as signposting to debt advice agencies, quarterly rent statements and importantly brief details of the debt collection process. This will make it difficult for customers to comment precisely on satisfaction when impact assessments are carried out.
- 133 There is a lack of written guidance for debt recovery officers. We acknowledge that staff have been very successful in reducing the levels of arrears over the last three years, but there is a reliance on process charts and intensive performance management to ensure regular visits are made to tenants in arrears. The frequency of visits is not articulated and in some instances not confirmed in writing. This can reduce the consistency of approach from officers and a lack of transparency for customers.

- 134** Opportunities to identify potential affordability problems are being overlooked. Customers sign for a property without any discussion with housing staff as to whether they can afford to pay the rent. This is a weakness which has been identified within the association and included in the service improvement team action plan.
- 135** Tenants are encouraged to pay their rent according to their preference, but this does not take into account the impact on costs. Staff are not advised to promote the cheaper ways to collect rent such as direct debit and standing order. This will make it more difficult to achieve the target within the procurement plan to reduce the cost of transactions by £27,000.
- 136** Delays in identifying arrears are as a result of weaknesses within the existing IT system. At the moment monthly reports can be produced which detail all tenants in arrears. However, this means that in some instances a customer can be three weeks in arrears before staff are aware of the situation.
- 137** There has been little use made of targeted benefit take-up campaigns in the area. The benefits bus run by the council focuses solely on HB and not on access to other benefits. The association and partners have not considered the use of campaigns to encourage residents to apply for other benefits they could be entitled to, which could reduce debt levels further and increase disposable income for vulnerable households.
- 138** An impact survey confirms there are areas for improvement with the rent collection service. Just over 56 per cent of tenants stated they were offered debt counselling and 64 per cent were signposted to the CAB. Positively 51 per cent were very satisfied with the way staff had dealt with their arrears and 39.3 per cent slightly satisfied.

Tenancy management and anti-social behaviour

- 139** There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The association clearly outlines the behaviour expected of its tenants as regards respecting their neighbours and environment. From a customer perspective complaints are responded to quickly and housing officers work well with other agencies to resolve incidents. However, cases are not formally closed, there is a reliance on manual systems to manage cases and the strategic relationship with other agencies is under-developed.
- 140** In our last inspection, the association was closely involved with the local authority through the crime and disorder partnership, but had not developed its own strategic response to anti-social behaviour. A satisfaction survey, undertaken in 2002, identified a significant number of the association's tenants perceived that there were ASB related problems in their neighbourhoods.
- 141** Feedback from surveys has been used constructively to re-design policies and procedures. The last general survey of tenants highlighted concerns regarding the association's approach to ASB. Consequently, a new group policy has been developed with stakeholders and residents involved in the production, one of the outcomes being a more succinct document with clear guidance on dealing with this aspect of the business.

- 142 The ASB policy is very detailed, specifies timescales by which staff must respond to complaints, but has one significant weakness. It lists a range of options which can be used to address ASB such as introductory tenancies and mediation. Although it is explicit regarding the process to be followed it does not specify cases are to be closed formally, in writing to the complainant which is a major oversight.
- 143 Customers are clearly made aware of their responsibilities before accepting a property. At the sign up stage, housing officers follow a checklist of issues to be covered, including what happens if tenancy conditions are breached. The messages are repeated again during the follow up visit after four weeks.
- 144 The tenancy agreement stipulates the options available to the association if tenants are found guilty of anti-social behaviour. New tenants sign an introductory tenancy and all tenancy agreements offer comprehensive details of the type of behaviour which is considered to be unacceptable and the options available should tenants breach the conditions laid down.
- 145 Staff have established close and effective working relationships with other agencies to address and reduce instances of ASB. Although the number of reported incidents is low, with only eight live cases at the time of the inspection, there is an emphasis on prevention of ASB through early intervention. Housing Officers attend the Police and Community Together (PACT) meetings, developing a multi-agency approach to estate management which has assisted in identifying potential problems at an early stage.
- 146 Practical support is offered to customers in order to accurately record instances of ASB. The association has recently developed an ASB tool library which consists of disposable cameras, dictaphones and a video camera, which provide user-friendly and simple options in which to record anti-social behaviour. Photographic evidence has been provided to some council departments to enable action to be taken.
- 147 Enforcement action has been used successfully to resolve complaints. In the majority of cases, noise and neighbour disputes are the main reasons for complaints. Only five anti-social behaviour contracts have been used but in those cases, they have reduced the requirement to involve other agencies such as Environmental Health in noise complaints. There have not been any ASB related evictions since the implementation of the new ASB policy, but there are currently two households that are scheduled for possession proceedings in May 2006.
- 148 Estate walkabouts are used regularly to identify areas for action in partnership with other agencies. Representatives from the local council, the police and tenant representatives meet on a six weekly basis to identify and address specific issues and to identify solutions. Staff have intervened on behalf of the council to ensure new systems such as wheelie bins are used and dumping in rear passages is addressed.

- 149** Co-ordinated action is targeted at specific areas to improve the environment and address cases of ASB. When an area suffers from high levels of environmental problems such as litter and graffiti and above average reports of ASB, they are designated as hot spots. Housing officers adopt a cross tenure approach to resolving problems by involving relevant agencies, prioritising some repairs and marketing empty properties to specific groups which has been successful in improving the sustainability of areas.
- 150** Diversionary tactics have been developed by a community group which is actively supported by the association. The dream scheme run by the community group on the largest estate in Fleetwood has been very successful in forming links with the younger residents and developing specific projects on the estate. As well as providing a community caretaker, housing officers work closely with the community staff to support initiatives which have reduced vandalism and improved the environment through for example the development of a community garden.
- 151** Linkages to local agencies are delivering targeted support to vulnerable clients, including perpetrators. A tenancy support worker is employed on a full time basis and co-ordinates linkages within the area. Housing officers regularly refer clients to Shelter, New Leaf, a support agency and mediation services, to provide specialist support, particularly in sustaining tenancies.
- 152** Impact assessments confirm the customers are significantly more satisfied with the service. The Status survey in 2004 revealed only 32 per cent of customers thought they received good help and advice on dealing with a problem, this increased to 63 per cent when last tested in September 2005. At the same time, 23 per cent thought they were kept informed of progress which has risen to 68 per cent, which is a marked improvement in a relatively short time.
- 153** There is a reliance on manual systems to prompt repeat calls and monitor action. The present IT system cannot support staff dealing with ASB cases in terms of producing reminders when visits or letters are due. Staff have therefore had to develop a spreadsheet which lists all cases and is used to review progress on an individual case basis.
- 154** We noted however that although responses to complaints were generally within the published timescales, cases are not formally closed and the database contains errors. Staff visit residents to confirm complaints have been successfully resolved, but this is not followed up in writing. Our examination of the database revealed incorrect or missing dates in 27 of the 147 reducing confidence in the data and the accuracy of performance reports.
- 155** There has been no analysis to compare the cost of delivering the ASB service with other organisations. There has been limited analysis of the costs of the ASB service and how it compares with similar organisations. Consequently the Board and senior managers are unable to take a view on the quality of the service to customers and whether it is delivering value for money.

- 156 Successful outcomes of intervention are not routinely publicised. There are a number of examples where housing staff have resolved complaints of ASB using formal and informal action. However, the Tenants' newsletter is not used to celebrate those successes, missing opportunities to raise awareness of the options available to the association and encouraging victims of ASB to report incidents.
- 157 Responding to the needs of customers with individual needs and developing a co-ordinated approach to ASB is recognised as an area for improvement and listed within action plans. Senior managers have established relationships with the local council and the police but acknowledge that there is a reliance on operational relationships particularly in dealing with domestic violence and hate race crime. The absence of strategic information on the needs of customers also reduces the ability to provide tailored services in this area.
- 158 Exit interviews are not being carried out consistently and according to the prescribed targets. Customers are requested to take part in exit interviews when they have given notice of their intention to leave the house. Over the last nine months, the percentage visited averages 83 per cent, but did fall to 37 per cent in one month against a target of 90 per cent. Given the fact that only 53 per cent gave notice in the same period, opportunities to confirm the reasons for moving and discuss other issues such as the rent account are being overlooked.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 159 There is a balance between weaknesses and strengths in this area. The costs of the services are average and the overhead costs are low compared with others. Reports to the Board and senior managers consider both cost and quality. Joint procurement arrangements have been in place for a number of years and the association has made effective use of grant funding. It is evident that value for money (VFM) is being considered at a group level.
- 160 However, there has been a reliance on a traditional approach to procuring contracts and as a result partnering arrangements are under-developed. The responsive repairs service has recently been exposed to competition, but a partnering approach is not scheduled to be implemented until later this year. At a service level, specific targets for efficiency gains have still to be developed.
- 161 In our last inspection we found the approach to value for money was poor. The Board did not consider value for money when making decisions, there had been no comparison of the costs of services and management costs were high compared with peers. There were a number of concerns in respect of the performance of the repairs service and how this impacted on costs.

How do costs compare?

- 162** The cost and quality of services are average compared with others. A report to the Board in December 2005 compared the costs of all services and the range of PIs used. The results revealed a mixed picture with some being upper quartile for performance and median cost, and others upper quartile for both cost and performance. The report highlighted areas for concern which have been incorporated within service reviews.
- 163** Benchmarking is being used increasingly throughout the organisation to compare performance and costs. In some service areas such as income management and responsive repairs, managers do not simply report on the progress of performance indicators. The HouseMark database is used as an additional reality check to compare progress against other organisations. Calls are then made to the top performing organisations to identify better working practices and the costs of services.
- 164** The association has been successful in maintaining operating costs within the agreed budgets. Both targets for the operating cost per property and the operating cost as a percentage of turnover have been achieved within the first three quarters of the year as a result of effective budget management and to some extent the integration within the Regenda group. Benchmarking results show they compare favourably with other organisations, ranking eighth out of 26 associations which participated in the exercise.
- 165** The group has adopted appropriate principles in the budget setting process. Instructions have been circulated to all budget holders to explain the new policy which covers five-year plans, zero based budgeting and spend profiles based on predicted expenditure as opposed to simply dividing the allocation into twelfths and narratives on efficiency gains. This offers a useful framework in establishing budgets aligned to corporate objectives.

How is value for money managed?

- 166** The association does not have a robust procurement strategy. An interim procurement policy has been approved pending the development of a group wide policy. It is evident that the organisation and the Regenda group have challenged the procurement of some services which resulted in the market testing of the higher spending areas such as the repairs service. The policy identifies targets for savings on goods and services. However, it does not establish a clear procurement framework to be applied to all services, including the prioritisation of services to be reviewed. There is also no mention of the use of local suppliers or targets for modern apprentices.
- 167** Although the quality of centrally provided services is specified and monitored, they have not been formally assessed in terms of value for money. Inter-group agreements are in place which outline charging mechanisms for the services which are linked to service standards. Although the various subsidiaries challenge standards where there are concerns, there has been no exercise to compare the costs with other providers.

- 168 The financial benefits of the merger with the Regenda group have been clearly articulated. The procurement plan lists the targets and the anticipated efficiency gains. These are projected to be in the region of £460,000, a 30 per cent saving which is positive.
- 169 However, targets for efficiency gains at an operational level have still to be identified and articulated. Contracts for the improvement programme do not have any specific targets and fail to make use of partnering principles. At a service level, action plans have still to include targets for efficiency gains.
- 170 Several actions have been completed to test the cost effectiveness of the responsive repairs service. Given the fact that Wyre was in the process of joining the Regenda group last year, the previous contract with the in-house contractor was extended for another year after engaging consultants to validate the competitiveness of the schedule of rates. This revealed they were very low. A competitive tendering exercise then followed which resulted in a new five-year contract starting in April and based on cost and quality was awarded to the in-house contractor.
- 171 However, the association has not sought to maximise the benefits of partnering in the new contract. Although based on Egan principles, it does not embrace an open book approach although this is planned to be implemented later in the year. In the interim, a traditional approach to contract management is taken and the potential benefits from a partnering arrangement have still to be delivered.
- 172 The association did not fully explore the options available when procuring the repairs contract. Consultants conducted informal discussions with a number of contractors to stimulate interest and encourage the submission of tenders. This did not include discussions on how the contract could be packaged, for example with an improvement element or the use of smaller contracts.
- 173 Suppliers and contractors have not been encouraged to identify potential savings. Historically, improvement works have been delivered through competitive tenders with no partnering framework. Consequently, there have been no discussions as to how to improve quality whilst reducing overall costs.
- 174 Joint procurement arrangements are well embedded and linked to efficiency gains. For a number of years, the association has benefited from a number of agreements to jointly procure materials such as Procurement for Housing and Fusion 21. The latter has an annual target to deliver a minimum 15 per cent efficiency gain.
- 175 The approach to value for money is being developed across the group. Staff within the association participate in a VFM efficiency group which has been used to benchmark costs internally, share learning and prioritise actions. It has been used to benchmark internal costs and highlight best practice such as the approach taken to reducing debt whilst improving the quality of the service.

- 176** Additional funding has been used effectively to develop new initiatives and improve property condition. Both internal and external funding has been levered in to deliver specific projects. Grants from the energy companies have been used over the last five years in particular to install additional insulation. Over £1.5 million of internal funding for the next five years has been used to fund amongst others a CAB worker and the part funding of the benefits bus.
- 177** The management of capital budgets has improved to reduce under-spends. Two years ago the kitchen and bathroom budget of 1.9 million was underspent by almost 16 per cent, this reduced to less than two per cent the following year which ensures the effective use of resources and ensures programmes are delivered on time.

Summary

- 178** There are a number of weaknesses which impact on the quality of the service to customers.
- 179** Service standards are of an inconsistent quality with some providing limited information on the service to be delivered or in the case of the adaptations service, a lack of contact details and incorrect description of the process. The association does not monitor the take-up of services and does not have a comprehensive profile of its customer base which would identify potential barriers to accessing the service and allow services to be tailored accordingly.
- 180** The performance of the repairs service has deteriorated over the last three years although we acknowledge there have been a number of improvements including a new five-year contract which focuses on the quality of the service as well as the cost. However, partnering arrangements are under-developed and a procurement strategy has yet to be developed.
- 181** Tenants have a limited range of materials to choose from when their homes are improved and the improvement programme is not published well enough in advance, to enable customers to plan and prepare for the associated disruption. In addition, the fact that the improvement programme is not used consistently to install adaptations reflects a poor customer focus and the inappropriate use of resources.
- 182** Waiting times for adaptations are long and there is no fast tracking of minor adaptations.
- 183** At a strategic level, the organisation and the Regenda group have agreed specific targets for efficiency gains, but these have not been developed at a service level where there is a lack of knowledge regarding higher level targets.
- 184** However, access to the services is made easy by a call centre which is open seven days a week, conveniently located, DDA compliant offices and staff offering evening and week-end appointments. Staff have been trained to deliver a customer focused service and work well with customers to reality check services.

- 185** It is easy to report a repair as staff and customers have access to a detailed handbook with simple drawings and descriptions of the various parts of the property. Improvements are carried out to a high standard and empty properties are repaired efficiently and to a standard agreed with customers. Almost all gas appliances in the association's homes are serviced on an annual basis.
- 186** The debt recovery performance has improved significantly over the last two years and there is an emphasis on assisting customers to reduce through regular contact and advice. The association responds quickly to reports of ASB and has developed close working relationships with local agencies.
- 187** Overall, therefore, we believe that the housing service provided by Wyre Housing Association is a 'fair', one-star service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 188** There are several examples of service improvements within the last two years. Flexible appointments are available, the contact centre provides access seven days a week and a new anti-social behaviour policy has improved the response to reports of ASB. There is a willingness to deliver a customer focused responsive repairs service by carrying out additional minor repairs when operatives visit properties. The approach to debt recovery focuses on support through face to face contact with customers, which has resulted in debt levels being continuously reduced.
- 189** Improvements have been successfully implemented following feedback from customers. Payments by direct debit, the review of the ASB policy and a new lettable standard have been instrumental in delivering a service which reflects the priorities for tenants.
- 190** Additional financial resources have provided increased assistance and support to communities. The funding of a CAB worker to increase independent advice to those experiencing debt problems reflects a commitment to supporting the more vulnerable residents in the borough. Verification framework training to housing officers and debt recovery staff has improved support and processing times for customers applying for housing benefit.
- 191** All the recommendations listed in the last inspection report have been successfully implemented, although two have not been fully effective. Of the 30 listed, one relating to the development of comprehensive service standards has been completed, but as mentioned in judgement one, some are more specific than others. Another relating to developing links with groups to reflect the range of communities served has commenced, but has still to deliver the intended outcomes of the recommendation. Overall however, this does demonstrate the progress made since the last inspection particularly to address the weaknesses listed in the previous report.
- 192** An analysis of performance indicators over the last three years reveals mixed success. Improvements in re-let times and rent collection place the organisation amongst the top performers in its comparator group. However, most relating to the responsive repairs service have deteriorated, although unaudited PIs show this trend improved in the third quartile of the current year. Although we acknowledge that the budget for the adaptations has been increased significantly, this has not reduced waiting times below 12 months.

- 193 There is a limited track record in delivering quantifiable efficiency gains but this is gaining momentum. Since the merger within the Regenda group, the procurement plan has been used to identify the high level targets, but there is very little evidence of the outcomes prior to this, for example from joint procurement arrangements.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 194 The strategic direction of the organisation is clear, is informed by the agenda to integrate within the Regenda group structure and respond to local priorities. Since joining the group, interim plans have been developed in anticipation of developing corporate ones, whilst resident involvement in shaping policy decisions has increased.
- 195 The organisation has developed objectives which are closely linked to the Regenda corporate plan and which address national priorities. The Wyre operational plan identifies the key tasks facing the association and how they link to corporate priorities. Usefully it is linked to a more detailed document setting out operational targets for the next three years, which offers clarity and a monitoring mechanism for all stakeholders.
- 196 Operational targets are focused on achieving upper quartile performance and the majority are challenging. In some instances upper quartile performance has already been delivered for example in respect of void management and debt recovery. However, some targets increase by one per cent per year, for example some repairs indicators. These do not reflect expectations for a step change in performance following a service review.
- 197 Service improvement plans have been used systematically to drive improvements, but they do have weaknesses. Tasks are listed together with the intended outcomes which is a useful format. However, the operational plan for example, lists some outcomes as 'increased levels of resident satisfaction' and 'increased repair performance of contractors'. As these are not specific, it will be difficult to determine when they have been successfully completed.
- 198 The service planning process enables residents and staff across the group to influence the resulting action plans. Team plans have been superseded by service improvement plans which relate to each of the eight service streams. This has improved the sharing of best practice, consolidated policies and developed a more consistent approach to service delivery.
- 199 Customers are an integral part of the service planning process. The tenant's forum considers all board reports which enables a two way dialogue on the current state of performance and issues to be raised at board level.
- 200 However, there has been limited success in establishing contacts with groups or individuals from the diverse groups within the area. Plans show the need to involve a broader range of customers in the service planning process as an outstanding action. There is therefore a reliance on the views of existing tenant groups and representatives to shape policy which is not an inclusive approach.

- 201** Resources have been strategically aligned using feedback from residents and using a range of survey data. Neighbourhood mapping techniques provide managers with a comprehensive array of information on ASB, arrears levels, property density and stock condition. This information has been used to strategically allocate resources and develop neighbourhood initiatives such as hot spots. Ultimately, the intention is to rationalise the management arrangements for the stock owned by the group.
- 202** The performance of senior managers is to be linked to strategic and neighbourhood priorities. A new appraisal system has been developed and is planned to be launched in April, which assesses how individuals have contributed to delivering the strategic objective articulated in the local council's plans as well as the priorities for the association's customers. This is a positive move and one which should encourage a commitment to working in partnership, whilst delivering improved services to customers.
- 203** Staff actively seek to improve services and continuous improvement is given a high priority within the organisation. A continuous improvement strategy and framework was approved in December 2004 together with a dedicated continuous improvement manager. Service reviews have been carried out across the group resulting in a challenge to the way services were delivered and the production of the service improvement plans.
- 204** Performance reports are presented in a simple format making them easy to interpret. A traffic light system is used to direct the reader to areas of concern. Where targets are not being met, a brief explanation is offered together with the proposed remedial action. The board requests further detailed updates when performance indicators show no significant improvement.
- 205** Staff have individual performance targets which are challenging and are monitored monthly. One to ones and annual appraisals are used to agree and revise targets which are realistic. Each section has monthly 'issues' meetings to discuss performance against KPIs and highlight any operational issues. Feedback from customer care champions is also used to confirm outcomes from reality checks and highlight weaknesses in service delivery.
- 206** The reporting of performance is under-pinned by clear timescales for all staff. The performance management framework stipulates the frequency of reports, the information to be provided and ultimately to which committee the report is presented ensuring staff have clear timescales by which to prepare reports and to plan accordingly.
- 207** There is lack of specific targets in place to formally assess the performance of board members. The chair for example is aware of his role, but has no specific objectives which can be reviewed on a periodic basis. The integration plan proposes to address the development of targets for individuals and boards in order to have a more robust assessment framework.

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- 208 High level targets for efficiency gains have not been communicated effectively to all staff. The value for money group is in the process of developing a revised efficiency plan to address this weakness. Progress in delivering objectives, such as reducing the cost of transactions associated with rent payments is undermined by the fact that staff have little knowledge of the subject and in this instance do not actively encourage customers to pay using the more cost effective methods.
- 209 Risk is well managed at a strategic level and is being embedded within the organisation. A key task listed in the Regenda and Wyre integration plan is to embed risk management at an operational level, with the development of risk maps seen as the outcome. These have been completed and we noted that all one to one interviews are used to review the approach to health and safety and risk in general, reinforcing the corporate message.
- 210 Internal audit arrangements are used effectively to identify deficiencies in systems. Reviews carried out by internal auditors are prioritised according to risk and carried out on an annual basis. Reports have revealed minor operational issues and confirm whether previous recommendations have been implemented.
- 211 The rate of progress over the last two years is due to some extent to the proactive approach to learning. Within the Regenda group, service improvement teams are a useful vehicle to identify best practice and share experiences. The last inspection report of Maritime has been used to prepare staff for this one. Benchmarking has also been used successfully to identify organisations where costs or performance is better than Wyre's and where policies can be replicated.
- 212 There is clear and effective leadership within the organisation. Staff are well briefed on their roles and the change process which is underway following the merger with the Regenda group. Whilst this has caused concern and a degree of disruption, most services have continued to improve which is an indication of the level of commitment within the organisation.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 213 The merger with the Regenda group has increased opportunities to deliver efficiency gains, access improved systems and the sharing of expertise. It is apparent that other subsidiaries such as Maritime have benefited from the integration within the group and a similar effect is evident at Wyre, where improvements have been implemented, others are planned and linked to the integration plan.
- 214 A tangible benefit of the merger is additional resources to support community development projects. Over £1.5 million of gift aid from the Regenda group has been used for the dream schemes, the benefits bus and specific projects such as an estate caretaker which assist in developing community cohesion and improving services to the residents of the borough.

- 215** The association has been pro-active in developing effective partnerships in the area. Officers recognised the need to establish a closer working relationship in particular with the local council and have developed protocols and policies to address issues relating to affordable housing and community safety as well as establishing close working relationships with the police and the youth offending team.
- 216** In some areas however, relationships are not as well developed at a strategic level. We have outlined within the tenancy management section, that staff accept the need to have a more co-ordinated approach to the reporting of race hate crimes and domestic violence. Attempts to form links with established forums representing some of the more diverse groups are relatively recent reducing the organisation's understanding of those customers with specific needs.
- 217** New ICT systems are planned which offer the opportunity to tailor services more appropriately and address weaknesses in existing systems. The new Orchard software is being implemented across the group with Wyre due to be upgraded in August this year. This should enable the more effective sharing of information and less reliance on manual systems which is hindering progress in some areas.
- 218** The association takes a pro-active approach to the delivery of training. Some training is compulsory and was delivered through monthly lunch and learn sessions. This has been replaced by themes for the month, which focus on specific topics such as the organisation's approach to development, helping staff to gain an understanding of work carried out in all services.
- 219** However, a more strategic approach to training is planned to reflect the group arrangement and provide increased value for money. Managers have identified the need to identify the skills gaps within all the subsidiaries and target training rather than responding to development needs identified in annual appraisals. Where appropriate external training will be procured for the group, reducing the use and cost of external courses and tailoring courses for individuals.
- 220** Following the introduction of a number of new members, the board is in the process of developing its effectiveness. Five new members have joined within the last twelve months; which has brought in new skills but lost a degree of experience. It is apparent however, that they are able to call on the support of other subsidiaries and the Regenda board which helps their development and addresses any skills gaps.
- 221** Board members have established an appropriate and supportive working relationship with staff. Through attendance at lunch and learn sessions and routine meetings, members are gaining an understanding of the business enabling them to challenge but support officers.
- 222** The training needs of new board members have still to be established. Since new members joined, there has been a reliance on the induction process to improve their knowledge. External consultants have been engaged to develop a robust appraisals system which focuses on embracing principles outlined in the standard of good governance, developed by the Independent Commission on Good Governance in Public Services.

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- 223** The impact on service delivery as a result of further integration with the Regenda group has been assessed, but remains a risk. Detailed preparations have been made and contingencies approved to ensure the transition causes minimum disruption to services. However, the move to a new corporate centre, the implementation of new IT systems and the development of new working arrangements pose a threat to maintaining performance in the short term.
- 224** A modern approach to procurement is being developed, but has to be fully embedded within the organisation. An interim procurement policy sets out Wyre's approach until a procurement strategy for the group is approved. Recent contracts have been let using Egan principles, but partnering principles are under-developed and the intended benefits from such arrangements are still to be realised.
- 225** Short and long term funding arrangements are clearly articulated. The business plan outlines the projected spend over the next thirty years. In addition a five-year forecast is in place to confirm budgets over the short term particularly for major capital programmes. This enables project managers to plan accordingly with a degree of confidence and confirms the commitment to increased expenditure in specific areas such as adaptations.
- 226** Effective financial management arrangements are supported by systems which provide account managers with timely information. Monthly financial reports are produced and in some instances, projected spend is automatically profiled. Where it is done manually, profiles reflect the likely spend according to programmes. This has enabled programmes to be monitored more accurately and managed within budget.
- 227** Sickness levels are low and reducing. Reports are considered on a monthly basis together with all other PIs. Refresher training has been given to all managers recently and recent reports show the levels to be within the target of 2.75 per cent absenteeism, which is a positive outcome.

Summary

- 228** It is evident that a number of improvements have been implemented since the last inspection, it is easier to contact staff and customers can arrange to see staff at times which suit them.
- 229** The organisation has listened to their customers and acted upon the feedback, producing a new ASB policy, more face to face contact to support vulnerable customers and have completed almost all the recommendations in the last report.
- 230** From a strategic perspective, clear objectives have been articulated, most operational targets are challenging and realistic and staff understand how their targets link to corporate objectives.

- 231** Continuous improvement is seen as a high priority within the organisation, staff are supported by regular training courses and sickness levels are low. Managers are demonstrating effective leadership by seeking to influence community cohesion by developing effective partnerships and by managing change within the organisation.
- 232** However, IT systems are a barrier to improvement and are planned to be replaced. The repairs service has yet to demonstrate a positive trend in most performance indicators and partnership arrangements have not been developed for major capital schemes and the responsive repairs contract. This is linked to the lack of a robust procurement strategy to inform procurement decisions.
- 233** There is a lack of specific targets to assess the performance of the board, which after a number of new appointments is in the process of developing its effectiveness. In addition, targets for efficiency gains at an operational level have to be developed.
- 234** The integration within the Regenda group, including the relocation of some staff within a new corporate office, together with implementation of new IT systems does raise some uncertainty and barriers to overcome in delivering continued and additional improvements to the service.
- 235** We therefore, consider that the prospects for improvement are 'promising'.

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous recommendations

Table 2 Recommendations of previous inspection

Recommendation	Progress
Ensure that targets are set, reflecting the full range of diversity issues, performance is monitored and action taken to address shortfalls in performance, as required by the Housing Corporation’s regulatory code.	Complete
Ensure that diversity issues are addressed within service delivery by making sure that equality and diversity issues are incorporated within key corporate documents; developing the induction training programme to include equality and diversity issues and arrange appropriate training for Board members; developing links with groups to reflect the range of communities served.	Partial
Develop a partnership based approach with Wyre BC, to allow both organisations to work together and make the most of any available funding for aids and adaptations for the benefit of customers and ensure that the adaptations procedure reflects actual practice, making appropriate information available for customers.	Complete
Ensure all offices meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1998 and improve signage to the Lord Street office.	Complete
Introduce comprehensive service standards and effective monitoring arrangements, including better use of IT systems to achieve this.	Partial
Improve the complaints process by monitoring verbal complaints to make best use of customer feedback and ensuring that customers and staff are made aware of the role of the Independent Housing Ombudsman.	Complete
Develop a formal approach to procurement and ensure value for money considerations are rigorously investigated before entering into partnerships. Ensure that tenants are involved in this process.	Complete
Review the efficiency of the repairs service. Consider how the number of emergency repairs can be reduced and develop a robust approach to managing variations.	Complete

Recommendation	Progress
Ensure that there is a robust performance management system in place and measures set for outcomes and impacts of procurement decisions.	Complete
Develop a decent homes delivery plan to ensure that compliance will be achieved by 2010.	Complete
Improve the customer focus of the repairs service by extending the appointment system to include all repairs, and ensuring that both contractors and staff offer appointments to customers and provide tenants with confirmation of their reported repair.	Complete
Review the association's approach to pre and post inspections and introduce effective targets and monitoring arrangements. Ensure that appointments are made with customers for pre and post inspections and that all faults are recorded in the agreed manner.	Complete
Ensure that the time taken to complete a repair is measured from the date it is reported.	Complete
In conjunction with tenants, clarify the rechargeable repairs policy and that of charging tenants for breaking appointments that they have been given, rather than mutually agreed.	Complete
The association should adopt a strategic approach to current and former tenant arrears which takes account of regional priorities such as the prevention of homelessness and sustainability, the cost effectiveness of its collection techniques and introduces comprehensive preventative actions and protocols for working with other agencies to achieve these aims.	Complete
The association should review its existing rent arrears recovery procedures and balance the need for guidance on processes to be followed with a greater focus on customer care and introduction of user friendly service standards.	Complete
Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of income management service by introducing systems to ensure that tenants falling behind with rent payments are contacted promptly and given appropriate advice; reviewing current IT facilities and ensure that staff receive regular and up to date reports on tenants in arrears; ensure rent payments are speedily credited to tenants accounts and making better use of the call centre.	Complete
The association should introduce an effective and comprehensive performance monitoring system and ensure that all officers are aware of their individual targets and receive appropriate and timely performance information.	Complete

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Recommendation	Progress
Develop a strategic response to dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB), ensure that it is identified as a risk within the risk strategy and that customers are made aware of the association's approach.	Complete
Review the ASB procedure to ensure it provides comprehensive guidance for staff and review the approach to case management to ensure customers receive appropriate and timely information about the way in which the association is managing the issue.	Complete
Develop a robust range of performance targets based upon the nature and seriousness of the ASB cases, ensure that there are formal monitoring arrangements for cases of ASB and that the association's performance in this area is reported to the Board	Complete
The association should urgently review its racial harassment procedure to ensure that it takes account of published best practice.	Complete
Improve the effectiveness of the lettings service by ensuring that the association is operating the telephone application and reference system effectively, and that the approach to excluding applicants from the waiting list complies with good practice and HC guidelines.	Complete
Review the current practice of awarding priorities for re-housing to ensure compliance with the ODPM 'allocation of accommodation - code of guidance for local housing authorities' and introduce and publicise an appeals system.	Complete
Review the approach to refusals of accommodation to ensure best use is made of resources and that the council's duties to the homeless are effectively exercised.	Complete
Ensure that there are clear targets for the nature of the allocation to be made, that staff are fully aware of these, that there are systems in place to monitor progress and take action and that the re-housing of homeless households and council nominations are accurately recorded and reported to the council.	Complete
Ensure that homelessness approaches and enquiries are recorded separately and that, for all approaches, an appropriate decision is issued. Monitor the time taken between approach and interview.	Complete

Recommendation	Progress
Consult tenants about every aspect of the association’s work and develop the range of ways in which customers can play an active part in decision making. Ensure they receive full feedback about their involvement.	Complete
Consider ways of measuring the impact and value that community development work has brought to the association’s business and develop closer links between community development and tenant participation activity to support integrated forward planning.	Complete
Consider ways in which the tenants forum and other stakeholders might have input into the developing resident involvement strategy and agree targets and timescales.	Complete

Source: Audit Commission inspection August 2004

Appendix 2 – Performance indicators

Indicator	2003/04	2004/05 target	2004/05 actual	2005/06 target	2005/06 To date	National Quartile position 2004/05- (If applicable)	Current status of performance Improving/ deteriorating
Re-let time	4.32 weeks	2.5 weeks	2.6 weeks	2.3 weeks	3.64 weeks	Upper	Deteriorating
Average SAP rating	56	55	61	62	69	Upper	Improving
Failing decent homes standard	41.6	33.9	36	25	16	Upper	Improving
% emergency repairs completed within target	98.6	100	96.5	100	99.03	Upper	Improving, within last quarter
% urgent repairs completed within target	94	95	91.4	96	94.04	Upper	Improving, but only within the last quarter
% routine repairs completed within target	97.6	90	91	92.5	84.9		Deteriorating
% of repairs where an appointment was made and kept	98	95	87	95	86		Deteriorating
% of rent debit collected	99.88	100.00	100.74	100.00	99.51	Upper	Improving
% of rent debit in arrears	3.72	3.00	2.52	2.25	1.93		Improving
% of rent debit written off	1.27	1.28	2.01	1.85	1.15		Improving
% of rent debit lost through voids	2.40	1.50	1.35	1.50	1.32		Stable
Operating cost per unit				931	534		Improving
Tenant satisfaction overall	No target set		80	83			

Appendix 3 – Documents reviewed

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

Appendix 4 – Reality checks undertaken

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

Appendix 5 – Positive practice

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

The use of key safes in the void management process

Key safes, secured on the exterior of the empty property are used to store keys, which are accessed through a coded lock.

Publicity on rent free weeks

Regular publicity is used to explain that rent free weeks are an opportunity to pay off arrears and the consequences of being in debt. Monitoring reports demonstrate the campaigns are successful.