

Stockport ALMO

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566

© Audit Commission 2006

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

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

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Text phone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections	5
Summary	6
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	9
Report	11
Context	11
The locality	11
The organisation	11
The service	12
How good is the service?	14
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	15
Access and customer care	15
Diversity	19
Stock investment and asset management	22
Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works	22
Responsive repairs	25
Empty (void) property repairs	28
Gas servicing	30
Aids and adaptations	32
Housing income management	33
Resident involvement	37
Tenancy and estate management	39
Tenancy Management	39
Estate Management	43
Allocations and lettings	45
Homelessness and Housing Advice	48
Supported Housing	52
Leasehold management and Right to Buy	56
Is the service delivering value for money?	57
How do costs compare?	58
How is value for money managed?	59

4 Stockport ALMO | Contents

Summary	61
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	64
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	64
How well does the service manage performance?	67
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	69
Summary	74
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	76
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed and reality checks completed	77
Appendix 3 – Positive practice	78

Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) inspections

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections.

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

Summary

- 1 Stockport is a metropolitan borough to the south of Manchester bordering on Cheshire. Much of Stockport is urban, but 45 per cent of the area is green belt. The local economy is vibrant with the highest levels of activity in Greater Manchester. The population of the borough is 282,200 and there are marked contrasts between areas of affluence and pockets of deprivation.
- 2 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council was formed in 1974 and has 63 councillors. Since 1999, the Liberal Democrats have held the majority of seats (currently 35). The Council employs 11,000 full and part-time staff, making it the largest employer in the borough.
- 3 The Council established an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Stockport Homes Limited (SHL) in October 2005. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to 11,806 tenanted properties and 284 leasehold properties (as at April 2006).

Scoring the service

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

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

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

Source: Audit Commission

- 5 The service is excellent because Stockport Homes has good access arrangements, has a clear and positive approach to diversity issues and is developing arrangements to ensure value for money is obtained in service delivery. The ALMO's lettings, rents, supported housing, homelessness, asset management and estate and tenancy services are areas of strength and it has significantly improved the way it delivers repairs.
- 6 A number of improvements have been implemented in the leasehold management service, although these are newly implemented and not yet fully embedded. There is a clear and strong focus on customer involvement across all service areas with clear outcomes being delivered as a result.
- 7 However, SHL has not yet introduced systems that systematically identify and address themes from complaints and user feedback.

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.

8 Stockport ALMO | Summary

- 8 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because Stockport Homes is improving the things which matter most to customers, has addressed the recommendations of the previous inspection and is delivering its decent homes improvement programme. It can demonstrate that strong leadership, robust planning and effective performance management systems have allowed it to focus on improving services while forming the ALMO, without reducing services to customers.
- 9 There are appropriate arm's length relationships with the council and a culture of continuous improvement is in place.
- 10 Weaknesses remain around ICT development. The slow implementation of a strategic, organisational ICT provision, currently limits the further improvement to services in some areas.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Further improve performance management by:

- *ensuring that data collected is systematically evaluated and impact assessed;*
- *developing process to monitor satisfaction and timescales for delivery of adaptations;*
- *develop a comprehensive HR and Training and Development strategy;*
- *deliver improvements to ICT to include, improving training on ICT systems to address issues of under utilisation;*
- *developing a dedicated SHL intranet site; and*
- *developing an Asset Management action plan.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- bringing together existing strands to deliver further improvements in workforce planning, ICT services and training to further support capacity to move the business forward;
- a consistent approach to service delivery through use of ICT which supports staff; and
- ensuring that data collection systematically informs continuous improvement.

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

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 Further improve its approach to customer care by:

- exploring opportunities to expand categories for customer complaints monitoring to allow themes to be systematically highlighted;*
- review the approach to collecting and using feedback from complaints for service improvement;*
- review contact centre performance and delivery, to address variable performance;*
- improve the adaptation service leaflet to include measurable targets; and*
- explore opportunity to promote adaptation requests direct to SHL.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- further improvement and understanding of customer needs through effective feedback.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2006.

- 12 We would like to thank the staff of Stockport Homes Limited and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 12-23 June 2006

Regional contact details

Audit Commission

Kernel House

Killingbeck Drive

Killingbeck

Leeds, LS14 6UF

Telephone: 0113 251 7130

Fax: 0113 251 7131

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Stockport is a metropolitan borough to the south of Manchester bordering on Cheshire. The 2001 census showed it to be the closest district to the national average across a wide range of indicators. This description masks the contrasts found in the borough - it is part of Greater Manchester but not typical of the conurbation. Much of Stockport is urban, but 45 per cent of the area is green belt. The south of the borough is highly affluent and contains some of the most expensive housing in the north-west but just a few miles away there are areas of deprivation. In particular, the Brinnington ward is amongst the 2 per cent most deprived areas in England³. Others, such as Adswold and Bridgehall, also have high levels of need. The gap between affluent and deprived communities is considerable. The index ranks Stockport as 187th⁴ most deprived borough of 354 in England.
- 14 The borough is close to Manchester Airport, the M60 motorway network and the West Coast main rail line, which makes it attractive for businesses. The local economy is vibrant with the highest levels of activity in Greater Manchester. No single sector dominates but there is a particular focus on IT and finance. The developing tourist industry is based on heritage and green space.
- 15 The population of the borough is 282,200 and whilst there is some affluence and low overall levels of deprivation, inequalities are stark. The borough is the seventh most socially polarised nationally. Unemployment at 1.4 per cent is low. Most housing - 89 per cent - is privately owned. The black and minority ethnic (BME) community makes up 4.3 per cent of the population (national average 13 per cent). Nearly half of BME residents of working age are in professional occupations.

The organisation

- 16 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council was formed in 1974 and has 63 councillors. Since 1999, the Liberal Democrats have held the majority of seats (currently 35). Other councillors represent Labour (15), Conservative (10) and Independent Ratepayers (3). Since 2001, the Council has been run by an executive with a leader and nine other councillors with portfolio responsibilities. The scrutiny function has four committees, two of which are led by opposition councillors. The area committee structure is based on eight localities and has been established for more than 30 years. Decision-making is devolved with 43 per cent of executive decisions made locally.

³ Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004

⁴ Rank of average rank

- 17 The Council employs 11,000 full and part-time staff, making it the largest employer in the borough. In the financial year 2004/05, its revenue budget was £269 million and its capital programme was £54.6 million.
- 18 The Audit Commission has assessed Stockport as a council that is improving well and demonstrating a four-star overall performance⁵.

The service

- 19 The Council established an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Stockport Homes Limited (SHL) with effect from the 1 October 2005. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to 11,806 tenanted properties (sheltered and general needs) and 284 leasehold properties (as at April 2006) and Homelessness and Housing Advice, receiving a management fee for this service.
- 20 The stock is predominantly of traditional construction, with a large proportion of flats and maisonettes (45 per cent) including 22 high rise blocks. SHL also maintains all Housing Revenue Account land and other buildings, including 1,370 garages, 71 shops and three temporary accommodation schemes for people who are homeless. SHL manages the council's budget for repairs and £54.6 million capital programme budget. It employs 235 staff to deliver the service.
- 21 The ALMO board consists of four Councillors, four Independents and five tenants.
- 22 The functions delegated to are set out in their Section 27 application and can be summarised as:
 - stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
 - rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
 - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
 - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions, estate management and caretaking;
 - similar functions for leaseholders;
 - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation;
 - housing related support services under the Supporting People programme, community alarms, wardens;
 - homelessness; and
 - administration of the Housing Register.

⁵ Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2005

- 23** The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents; and
 - managing the Supporting People programme.
- 24** We have not inspected any housing services since late 2001 when we inspected Housing Repairs and judged it to be a fair, one-star service with promising prospects for improvement. At the same time we re-inspected Housing Allocations and assessed it as a fair, one-star service with excellent prospects for improvement. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of what we reported in February 2002.
- 25** If the standards of Stockport Homes Limited meet Government criteria, the Council will receive Supported Borrowing of £40.4 million initially and be allowed to seek up to a total of £104 million if the ALMO progresses well.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26 The Council's overall vision is for a 'cleaner, greener, safer, stronger' future for Stockport and the Council has seven priorities, which are:
- Children and Young People;
 - Sustainable Environment;
 - Physical and Economic Environment;
 - Safer, Stronger Communities;
 - Older people;
 - Excellent Services; and
 - A Well Run Council.
- 27 Stockport aims to deliver its community vision through the following five challenges:
- challenge 1 – putting people first;
 - challenge 2 – promoting a strong and responsible economy;
 - challenge 3 – creating safe and healthy communities;
 - challenge 4 – protecting and promoting our environment and heritage; and
 - challenge 5 – developing learning communities.
- 28 Stockport Homes Limited mission is:
- 'To deliver a customer-driven service, providing quality homes where people want to live'.*
- 29 It has six aims to achieve this.
- Providing an inclusive service, which values its diverse communities, empowers its staff and makes effective use of its resources.
 - Ensuring all homes meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 and are then maintained at that standard, as a minimum.
 - Delivering a high quality housing service that continues to improve and meet customers' needs and aspirations.
 - Delivering consistent, clear and well-publicised services to tenants and leaseholders and proactively seeking to improve estates in partnership with customers.

- Providing appropriate accommodation (temporary and permanent) and support for the most vulnerable and socially excluded.
- Making a real contribution to the Council's wider strategic and housing objectives through helping to build social inclusion and safer sustainable neighbourhoods.

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

Access and customer care

- 30** In our previous inspection, we found that the five area offices were easily accessible and that staff were courteous and helpful. Customer satisfaction was not systematically measured and there was no corporate customer charter. There was no corporate identity and style for information leaflets.
- 31** In this inspection, we found that the ALMO has made very good progress in developing access arrangements and there are significantly more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Strong leadership and customer focussed staff are delivering improved services. SHL is providing easy to access, responsive services which have a strong customer care focus. Satisfaction levels are systematically measured and SHL has developed a clear branding for itself.
- 32** A strong customer focused culture is evident from board members to frontline staff, across all service areas. Our 'mystery shopping' visits to three offices found that all staff were knowledgeable, friendly and welcoming. Customer service standards have been developed for all service areas.
- 33** SH has taken positive steps to ensure services are accessible to customers. Office accommodation needs were reviewed in 2004 in conjunction with customers. Offices are open in line with customer preferences determined jointly through consultation and analysis of the volume of office visits and phone contact. Where offices have been relocated surgeries have been introduced. Offices are located across the three districts (East, West and Central) and residents can access services by telephone, website, e-mail, by visiting the offices, surgeries or through home visits. Office opening hours have been agreed with customers and the contact centre operates between 8am and 6pm Monday to Friday, there is a 24-hour emergency repair facility available to all customers and the contractors out-of-hours service is open on Saturday mornings for people who are unable to get repairs done during normal office hours.'

- 34 A full survey of all area offices has been undertaken to ascertain compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and one office is not fully accessible to wheelchair users. However, appropriate steps have been taken to meet the needs of customers who cannot access the building with information on contact details and home visits offered and clearly detailed outside the building. This should be viewed in the context of proposals underway to deliver services to customers through more focused community based, one stop shop services developed jointly with the Council. Currently there is a one stop shop located in Reddish and further ones will be delivered in 2007 to both the East and West areas. The delivery of these new facilities is seen as addressing some service shortcomings such as lack of customer toilets and will refurbish dated facilities. The new facilities enable a number of additional services such as Sure Start and the Education service to be co-located in areas and as a result provide wider accessible services to customers.
- 35 Visits to three area offices found that offices were welcoming and that staff were helpful and friendly. Opening times for the offices were clearly visible, informative posters and information was displayed and there was a good range of leaflets available. All offices have reception areas and private interview rooms, reception areas in Central District and the Housing Information Centre (HIC) include a low section of counter for wheelchair users. Reception facilities for customers waiting with young children include play facilities and water fountains are provided in all reception areas where there is sufficient space.
- 36 The website is very comprehensive, well presented and easy to use. Online services include making rent payments, reporting repairs, making housing applications and logging complaints. Core documents such as a summary of the Customer Handbook are available online including in other languages, to enable customers and staff to print copies on request. The website also directs customers to other information services such as debt advice and community groups. Positively the website has been 'Bobby'⁶ rated for accessibility and can be converted into text only and large print formats according to customer needs. As a result the website is an accessible and supportive tool for customers.
- 37 A good customer handbook has been developed. The handbook consists of a series of service booklets each detailing clearly the service standards. Information is in plain English and the handbook was developed through consultation with customers both in respect of format and content. The booklets in the handbook can also be used as stand alone leaflets and are displayed in offices and can be updated responsively. Customers are therefore able to have a clear reference document about the services that they receive from SHL.
- 38 There is a comprehensive diagnostic booklet in place to assist tenants to report repairs. The booklet supports the customer handbook. Options to access the service, including out-of-hours, are clearly described and contact numbers are included. The booklet includes a range of diagrams of fixtures and fittings which tenants can use as a reference aid when reporting repairs. This will ensure that responsive repairs are reported accurately, are ordered effectively and delivered right first time.

⁶ Bobby is a free national service which allows users to test web pages for compliance with internet accessibility guidelines.

- 39 SHL has a clear understanding of overall percentages of customer preferred contact routes. A Customer Access Strategy has been developed and customer barriers to, and preferences for, contacting SHL are identified, with the main route being by telephone. As a result SHL can develop its services appropriately to meet customer needs. For example by identifying that non English speaking customers prefer personal contact bi-monthly telephone calls are now being made, by an interpreter, to those identified customers in order that they can raise or discuss any issues.
- 40 A wide range of customer information leaflets are readily available. The quality of information in leaflets is good, in plain English, is customer focused and includes:
- a clear complaints, comments and compliments leaflets;
 - a range of clear information for customers and stakeholders regarding Housing Options;
 - a comprehensive Housing Application Pack which is available in a range of formats including Braille, large print and audio tape as well as community languages. The use of flow charts and 'frequently asked questions' ensures that the information provided is straightforward and easy to understand; and
 - useful leaflets to all tenants on the importance of gas servicing.
- 41 Positively SHL has issued its suite of leaflets to contractors so they can issue them to tenants when carrying out works should they have queries about other services. This supports a customer focused approach to the delivery of services.
- 42 Customer focus is evident in service delivery. Customer care kits containing magnifying strips, large pens for less dextrous customers and other small aids are located in all housing reception areas and portable induction loops are available for customers who use hearing aids. Vulnerable applicants are supported by tenancy support officers, in the Homechoice process to ensure that the lettings service is widely accessible.
- 43 Text messaging is used across many service areas both to support customer access and as a service delivery tool. For example text messaging can be used by customers to report repairs and to bid for properties through Homechoice, while SHL use text messaging to provide appointment reminders and rent arrears messages to customers. The repairs Contact Centre and Housing Information Centre both have the facility to receive text messages via mobile phone from customers, which are automatically transferred onto a computer. The text messaging service is advertised in Homechoice literature and on the outside of all SHL offices and has a clear service standard in place. All messages receive an initial response the same working day, with a follow up response if needed to confirm details of any appointment made, whether this is with an interpreter, home visit or other arrangement within three working days.

- 44 Clear information is routinely provided to customers. A good quarterly newsletter called 'Stockport Homes News and Views' is produced with tenants as part of the editorial panel. The newsletter is used to deliver clear information on services, is jargon free and includes a section for leaseholders. Examples of information for customers include publicity for gas servicing, promoting no access as a breach of tenancy conditions to emphasise its importance. A Homechoice newsletter is also produced which provides regular information about demand for properties through summary statistics to applicants on the Homechoice register. However, the Homechoice newsletter does not effectively promote the range of ways to bid for a property. While the texting service has been promoted, newsletters do not refer to the other ways that applicants can bid, for example, online or by telephone, and doesn't contain details of where the properties will be advertised. This is a missed opportunity to remind and encourage applicants to bid.
- 45 SHL have developed a sound customer feedback framework. There is a customer feedback policy in place which sets out customer expectation and is widely publicised. Service user satisfaction is measured by questionnaires across all service steams, through monthly estate inspections and through a resettlement team exit survey. A dedicated officer handles all feedback and as a result there is a consistent approach and clear accountability in the process. However there are weaknesses within the complaints process with breakdown of themes from complaints not systematically used or highlighted to further inform actions and service improvements.
- 46 A wide range of consultative bodies and forum are in place. These include the Housing 100 group, which is a database of 199 customers who have specified the level and type of involvement they would like, and specialist customer access groups. These mechanisms provide a clear means of ensuring that users contribute to service developments.
- 47 Out-of-hours calls are dealt with promptly and appropriately. Mystery calls were dealt with quickly and sympathetically. There are, however, some limitations in the service with no formal out-of-hours provision for interviewing complainants who have reported an incident of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and not all publicity to tenants regarding the out-of-hours responsive repairs service gives timescales for when this is in operation, although the website does list the contact centre opening hours. Tenants may therefore access this service to report non emergency repairs putting additional pressure on this reduced service.
- 48 There is a focused approach to customer care. All SHL staff have received customer care training which was audited to assess its impact and identify areas for further improvement. This approach is aimed at delivering a consistent message to all managers and staff, reinforcing the SHL ethos of delivering a customer driven service.

- 49 SHL have taken a pragmatic approach to the delivery of customer care training to contractors, given the number of contractors and the cost and logistics of delivering such training. Although no specific training is delivered, contractors receive a presentation on SHL code of conduct and customer care packs have been created for all contractors, which provide information on equality and diversity. Two contractor conferences have been held to reiterate the service that both customers and Stockport Homes expect from front line operatives and toolbox talks regularly take place with Repairs and Maintenance Contractors and the Partnering Contractors for Investment works to support this approach.
- 50 Performance in telephone answering for responsive repairs is variable. For the two months of 2006/07 this is 63 per cent, well below the target of answering 80 per cent of calls within 20 seconds. This compares with 71 per cent for October to March for when SHL was in operation during 2005/06. The average queue time for October 2005 to May 2006 was 40 seconds which is within target. Measures have been put in place to address these issues, these include additional staff to improve capacity, technical training for staff and dedicated on site technical support, although it is too early for their impact to be measured.
- 51 SHL has a well publicised and effective complaints procedure. Clear leaflets are available in all offices to actively promote complaints, compliments and comments. As a result of this increased profile the level of complaints has increased indicating that this transparent approach has been effective. Complaints are responded to appropriately and according to the standards and there are clear outcomes, which include:
- recharge policy amended to make it easier for customers to understand;
 - lettable standard agreed;
 - DVD in production explaining disruption to customers during kitchen installation works; and
 - RTB information changed and circulated to clarify situation over completion of repairs during and after applications.
- 52 However, themes developing from complaints are not systematically identified and as a result the opportunity for more strategic action may be missed.

Diversity

- 53 In our previous inspection, we found that the Council had demonstrated commitment to improving services for disadvantaged groups.
- 54 In this inspection, we found that the ALMO is effectively addressing diversity issues and there are significantly more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Stockport Homes has put in place appropriate policies, recruited a specialist officer to drive forward this area of work and is profiling its customer base. Partnership working is strong and staff and Board members understand the issues related to diversity. Performance on diversity is monitored and reported. There is a customer driven service improvement plan in place and ethnicity data collected across services forms part of monthly performance monitoring reports.

There is a very real commitment to ensuring services are equitable and accessible to all customers.

- 55 Stockport Homes have clear policies in place to support its focus on diversity. There is a diversity policy and statement in place which was developed in conjunction with customers. As a cross cutting area diversity is seen as fundamental to the SHL access agenda and is part of everybody's job.
- 56 SHL has a focused approach to diversity. Diversity is seen as intertwined with customer care and access and an intrinsic part of the service delivery. Overarching customer care standards incorporate diversity standards and work alongside service specific standards to ensure a consistent approach.
- 57 SHL have a clear focus on diversity. All staff and Board members at SHL have received generic diversity training. Further diversity training is included in the Board members future training plan, managers use a diversity checklist with staff to establish knowledge and training gaps and diversity is an area included at staff conferences. More specialist diversity training has also been delivered to staff, for example racist incident training, training on mental health issues by MIND and specific diversity training for operatives to support them in their roles. This approach ensures that staff and board members are aware of arrangements in place and commitments made by SHL to provide an accessible service to tenants, and how they can contribute to the delivery of this.
- 58 Access to services for those who do not have English as a first language is good. Repair operatives carry a translation card to enable tenants to specify their language requirements. The translation facility through the interpreter service is also publicised on Property Maintenance Service (PMS) vehicles. Rent statements are sent out in large print or audio tape format, on request and publicity for Homechoice was accessible for those with disabilities or that did not have English as a first language.
- 59 However PMS operatives had not been trained in Language Line or the interpreter service and were unaware how to access the translation service should this be requested by tenants. This means they will be unable to facilitate translation once this is requested through the translation card they have available, which may cause barriers to access to services for some tenants. SHL responded positively to this feedback on site and has issued information to all contractors, on how to access the Stockport Interpreting Unit.
- 60 The ALMO is taking the issue of embedding diversity priorities seriously. It has a diversity champion on the Board; a diversity improvement officer and has recruited a group of diversity representatives from all tiers and divisions of staff. These volunteers are currently being trained alongside managers to carry out diversity impact assessments. As a result diversity issues are championed and these staff act as conduits for information both up and down the organisation.
- 61 Although diversity issues are not standing items at senior managers meetings, they have received significant coverage over the past six months. Progress against the Customer Access Strategy is monitored and managed within the Service Improvement Team area of the performance management framework, and there is regular exception reporting on any failure to meet key milestones.

- 62 SHL is committed to addressing its diversity aims. SHL has adopted the councils Racial Equality Standard (RES) and works in conjunction with the council on the Local Government Equality Standard (LGEs). SHL currently meets level 2 of the LGE's and aims to meet level 3 by March 2007. Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) are routinely carried out on all new policies for example the homelessness assessment policy. The organisation meets the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) code of practice in rented housing and has carried out self assessment against the revised code.
- 63 SHL has a three-year programme of prioritised diversity impact assessments in place. This is a duty under the Race Relations Amendments Act and has been put in place by SHL from January 2006. As a result SHL are able to address problems and systematically embed policies across services.
- 64 SHL has worked pro-actively to establish customer database information. SH has surveyed all tenants and has a profile for 74 per cent of its customers, through use of questionnaires; telephone calls; partner working; new tenant data and use of a prize draw incentive, to establish their communication and access requirements and to profile them by diverse categories with an achievable target of 85 per cent completion by the year-end. The data collected is input onto the IT system and used to target the approach to customer contact. For example the interpreter service makes regular contact with non English speaking customers bi-monthly, to discuss any issues, deaf customers are targeted to make them aware of contact routes such as text type, sight impaired customers receive audio tapes and 149 customers automatically receive communications in large print. Those customers with English not as first language are passed to the interpreter service, who then contacts them by phone or personal visit as these are their identified routes for contact.
- 65 SHL is responding proactively to address the diverse needs of its customers. Home visits are arranged for applicants who require assistance in completing forms and who can't visit the Housing Information Centre or district office and this is promoted in the application pack. SHL also aims to identify applicant's future communication needs by including a communications preference form with the application pack. The text messaging service can also assist deaf customers who cannot communicate by telephone. PMS operatives were mindful of providing services appropriately for vulnerable tenants and were aware of information noted on works orders specifying such requirements, and responded accordingly.
- 66 SHL has been proactive in involving customers with diverse needs in developing service improvements. For example a deaf person has assisted in installing loop systems to all offices. Additional support for non English Speaking customers and other BME groups is systematic and widely available. SH is using mystery shopping by customers, to aid service improvement on diversity issues and customers are to be involved in a real time mystery shopping project around customer care standards.

- 67 SHL have a clear knowledge of its staff profile and are using this to address areas of inequality. For example there is currently an under representation BME staff in the estate management section and in response two PATH trainee posts have been developed where appointees will be able to develop competencies to enable career progression.
- 68 SHL is failing to fully meet DDA compliance in all customer access points. In terms of offices only Adswood is not compliant. However, the organisation has responded reasonably, providing appropriate alternatives including publicised home visits which are offered as a short term alternative. A pragmatic decision was taken not to spend on this office as it is due to be replaced by a one stop shop within the next six months. A sheltered housing DDA audit has been undertaken and costed but not fully delivered, although reasonable access works such as ramps have been provided and the DDA assessments will feed into the current strategic review of provision in the Borough which will determine long term scheme viability and then investment. An audit of multi-storey properties has been carried out although the outcomes are not yet known.
- 69 SHL is working with partners to meet the needs of hard to reach groups. A research project was undertaken in 2004 through a Community Training and Enabling grant of £25,000, through the Housing Corporation. Results were published in January 2005 and used to inform the council's BME housing strategy. An outcome of the research was that a BME housing association became a member of Stockport Housing Partnership to improve access to both RSL and council stock. For SHL the research ensured that more face to face consultation take place with BME customers given this was their preferred contact route.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 70 In our previous inspection, we found a firm understanding of business planning requirements and the need to revise the first year business plan with stock condition information, stock appraisal analysis and customer requirements. The cyclical maintenance programme was satisfactorily managed.
- 71 In this inspection, we found that the company is on target to deliver decent homes by 2010, based on sound stock condition data and effective planning. Effective partnership working is in place, alongside robust performance systems. Customer satisfaction with improvement work is very good.

- 72 SHL is delivering an effective improvement programme to customers. 37.4 per cent properties do not meet the DHS and works to these properties are included within the current four-year plan to achieve full compliance by 2010. Stock condition information is robust, and there is input from customers in deciding service improvements and priorities although a DHS plus standard has not been agreed with customers. There are high levels of satisfaction with major works.
- 73 Stockport Homes has good information on the condition of its properties. A stock condition database has just been introduced in house and is effective in managing property information and using this to inform property improvement programmes and their related costs.
- 74 The stock database is comprehensive and includes homes, communal areas and garages. Two staff carry out stock condition surveys to update the database, with a target of surveying 5 per cent of the stock annually. So far 1,346 properties have been surveyed which equates to 11 per cent of the total stock. Arrangements are in place to update the database with property improvements using spreadsheets, although in the near future programmes will be integrated within the database so that this can be achieved automatically. The database can identify when components will require replacement and whether properties comply with DHS now and in the future due to ageing components. A schedule of rates is included on the system and this enables replacements identified to be costed to inform financial projections, including on a long term basis. SHL is not using the visits to properties by technical staff to update the stock condition database, which is a missed opportunity.
- 75 SHL effectively manages its property improvement information to ensure that it delivers repairs appropriately. For example the contact centre has a list of property improvements still under the defects period, which is updated monthly. As a result responsive repairs reported by tenants relating to these items can be referred back directly to the installer to remedy at no charge to SHL.
- 76 SHL meets the requirements of the Control of Asbestos at Work act. An asbestos register is in place and SHL has prioritised its management of asbestos by recruiting a member of staff qualified in asbestos assessments to lead on this area. A database has been set up which will record asbestos in domestic properties, when this is identified, in addition to offices and communal areas as included in the register.
- 77 Appropriate asbestos information is provided to contractors. The asbestos register is issued to the contractor who can refer to it when issuing orders. SHL has commissioned a range of surveys for communal areas and offices to update its existing information held on the register and this will be completed shortly. If asbestos is identified decisions will be made on how this will be managed as per health and safety regulations. Limitations with the IT system at present mean it does not have the capacity to include asbestos information within property files for automatic inclusion on work tickets to operatives.

- 78 SHL is able to respond promptly and effectively to reports of asbestos identified by the contractor and external contractors were aware of managing asbestos arrangements at SHL. The in-house specialist inspects the area and requests testing if required, and tenants are given health and safety advice. For property improvements contractors commission their own surveys for the presence of asbestos and SHL is charged accordingly. Positively, SHL has carried out awareness training to staff at the contact centre, to assist them dealing with tenant responsive repair enquiries, at Customer Action Group (CAG) meetings and asbestos training has also been provided to contractors. There has also been an article in the tenants' newsletter on asbestos and its likely use in properties, with advice to tenants on how to get assistance if they have concerns.
- 79 Customers are effectively involved in determining priorities for improvement works. The Stockport Homes Investment Programme was discussed with customers at the housing stock investment and repairs CAG meetings. As a result customers have for example influenced choices available on the kitchen and bathroom replacement programme.
- 80 SHL is delivering a series of effective improvements to properties. A rewiring programme is taking place and tenants were satisfied with the work which was completed quickly, within one day, and post inspected within a week. A window replacement programme is in place and tenants were very satisfied both the quality of work and the promptness with which it was completed, usually within one day. Appointments were kept, work areas were left clean and tidy, blinds and fittings were replaced, and operatives were polite and showed identification. The old windows were disposed of the same day and post inspections were prompt, usually within an hour of the work being completed. Overall a customer focused service being delivered.
- 81 SHL has just started a pilot kitchen and bathroom replacement programme using GM Procure⁷ arrangements to procure contractors and component suppliers and this is highly effective. Tenants are offered a comprehensive range of choices for kitchen units, wall tiles, and flooring in terms of styles and colours, all of which reflect modern specifications. Tenants were able to view sample displays at public meetings held near their home, received a visit to agree designs which were drafted on an IT package and there was adequate notice of three weeks before the work started. Works are completed on time, within the 20 working day target. Tenants were very satisfied with the standard of work, including plastering and ceiling replacements, and were particularly positive about the role of the customer liaison officers who kept them informed of arrangements before and during work programmes.
- 82 Tenants considered contractors to be very helpful, letting them know what the work would involve, and how this could be managed to keep disruption to a minimum. This included providing storage boxes and temporary cooking and heating facilities if required. In addition, property improvement supplies were delivered daily, with removed kitchens and bathrooms also collected the same day, reducing the impact of improvement works on the appearance of the estate.

⁷ GM procure is the largest collaborative consortium in the country, has been given trailblazer status and grant funding by DCLG.

As a result of this approach tenants were very satisfied and considered that this work programme could not be improved.

- 83** SHL has a clear and detailed investment plan in place. Effective contract management is delivering schemes on time and in budget. The proposed programme is to be delivered in two tiers, one utilising Council funds of £11.137 million to be completed within 2006/07 and procured through traditional tendering, and the other tier by £20.32 million of Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) funds, directed through the 'GM Procure' consortium pilots put in place for replacement of kitchens and bathrooms.
- 84** SHL has a sound asset management plan in place. Development of the initiated through a multi disciplinary seminar facilitated by a consultant and evaluates properties as amber or red if they require attention to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS). It is comprehensive and includes all of the company's assets, such as the 1,366 garages and its retail outlets. However the strategy lacks an action plan and as a result does not set SMART⁸ objectives for its delivery. The action plan is scheduled to be agreed by October 2006.
- 85** SHL systematically inspects and maintains communal areas. SHL operates a five-year rolling prior to painting programme, with the exception of sheltered accommodation which has been put on hold pending the conclusion of the strategic review. Tenants in multi-storey accommodation are provided with choices about colour schemes, with sample boards displayed in communal areas.

Responsive repairs

- 86** In our previous inspection, we found that the Council had recognised many weaknesses with the repair service and had improved working relationships with both tenant representatives and building works to improve performance and services. Significant weaknesses remained with performance management and cost effectiveness that adversely affect the service received by tenants.
- 87** In this inspection, we found that the ALMO has worked hard to deliver improvements in the responsive repairs service and, overall, the performance has improved with repairs being completed more quickly and to higher standards.
- 88** Stockport Homes delivers its responsive repairs through two contractors. Two thirds are delivered through an external contractor and the remaining third by Stockport Homes through Property Maintenance Solutions (PMS) which is the in house repairs service transferred to Stockport Homes from the Council in February 2006. The external contract has two and a half years remaining with an extension option linked to performance.

⁸ SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time bound.

- 89 Access to the repairs service for tenants is good. Repairs reporting can be undertaken through the Contact Centre open from 8am to 6pm. Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings, and a low cost Repairs Hotline out-of-hours service operates outside of these times. Repairs can also be reported in person, by freephone from area offices, by text, website, and minicom. A hotline telephone number for sheltered schemes has also been introduced for Scheme Managers and residents to access the repairs team directly. Detailed component guides are now in a recently introduced repairs handbook, which are the same as the guides used by the Repairs Contact centre staff and this enables tenants to report their repairs more accurately.
- 90 The day to day repairs service is governed by a series of service standards which were agreed with residents. The residents' handbook outlines the responsive repairs service and service standards are in the repairs handbook which are available in other formats and carry language straplines. Service standards are monitored systematically through feedback from tenants. Customers are updated on the performance of the service through customer newsletters. These indicate that service standards are kept to and that standards are generally improving.
- 91 However there is no responsive repairs procedure in place. Although procedures are detailed in other procedure information there is no specific document for responsive repairs. As a result arrangements to deliver this service have not been formalised to give clear direction to staff and ensure a consistent service to tenants based on clear quality standards.
- 92 Maintenance is broadly completed in an economic manner. SHL exceeds the Audit Commissions recommended split between capital and responsive repairs of 60/40 per cent total spend and the responsive repairs budget for the last three years has increased less than inflation.
- 93 The responsive repairs service is piloting a Quickcall repairs system which offers two hour appointment slots for high volume and low cost repairs. Performance on the percentage of repairs jobs for which an appointment was made and kept for 2005/06 was 72.5 per cent which is a significant improvement over the previous year.

Performance in times taken to complete repairs is improving, although not meeting targets, as shown in the table below.

Table 2 Repairs performance

	2004/05	2005/06	Target
Urgent on time	86%	92.9%	94%
Non urgent	22 days	20 days	16 days
Appointments kept	27%	69%	75%

- 95 SHL has effective arrangements in place to issue and manage responsive repairs orders through PMS. Operatives collect a weeks worth of orders on Monday and they contact the depot each day to confirm which have been completed. This means that the repair status of the order is up to date, which helps the contact centre assess other enquiries from tenants since they have an accurate repairs history for the property.
- 96 Effective arrangements are in place for monitoring whether repairs have been completed in one visit. The IT system for ordering repairs references additional orders to the original repair reported by adding on a number to indicate how many extra orders have been raised. Performance in carrying repairs right first time is good at 90 per cent.
- 97 SHL has improved the efficiency of responsive repairs service by carrying out an audit of the materials held by operatives, based on frequency of use, to ensure they reflect components most in demand. Positively, operatives have been involved in this process and confirmed current stocks to be more appropriate than pre-transfer. Operatives have also been issued with more modern power tools, enabling repairs to be carried out more quickly and to a higher standard. This approach improves the ability of operatives to complete repairs in one visit, providing a more convenient service to tenants.
- 98 Effective processes are in place to support the effective delivery of responsive repairs. The contact centre has effective arrangements to issue work orders to operatives. The IT system is integrated with those of the two contractors so that orders can be placed electronically through hourly runs. Emergency repairs are issued immediately by email to the contractor. This approach ensures that the contractors have the maximum target time available to complete repairs for customers.
- 99 SHL is pro-active in collecting resident satisfaction information about the responsive repairs service, and customer satisfaction with the responsive repairs service is good with 94 per cent of residents rating the overall service as fairly satisfied or very satisfied (there is a difference between the two contractors with PMS at 97 per cent and Mears at 94 per cent). Tenants we interviewed considered that the responsive repairs service was satisfactory and was of the same standard as it was before SHL was set up. Tenants receive a letter to confirm repairs have been ordered together with a satisfaction survey to obtain feedback on repairs completed. A prize draw is in place to encourage the completion of satisfaction survey. Feedback from the surveys is analysed to identify any themes for further action. Although agreed with the CAG, it is a weakness however that SHL posts the confirmation of repair letter and the satisfaction survey separately to residents, incurring additional postage costs.
- 100 Community benefits have resulted from the involvement of the external contractor. The contractor has delivered a number of projects which add value to customers alongside the delivery of the responsive repairs service, these include:
- complete refurbishment of a scout hut in Bramhall;
 - complete refurbishment and creation of garden area at Russell Gardens;

- issuing of intumescent tabards to school children in the Brinnington area;
- monthly 'Reading Buddies sessions' where operatives from contractor attend local schools to help children with their reading tasks;
- farm visit for children from schools within Hazel Grove organised by Mears;
- joint use of facilities at Mears depot for meetings; and
- Health and Safety character 'Menda' raising awareness in all schools for repairs to properties.

- 101** SHL is developing its approach to completing repair works through a number of routes. Some operatives are multi-skilled and are able to complete a mixture of repairs in one visit. Positively DIY training for tenants, provided by a DIY chain, which is free to both SHL and the tenant, is being accessed. The scheme has been advertised for tenants in the Customer newsletter. However SHL has not formally developed the role of caretakers to undertake minor repairs, which may be a missed opportunity.
- 102** The level of emergency repairs is high at 21 per cent. Although the level is high this is a significant improvement on the 30 per cent level for 2005/06 and SHL is taking action to further reduce the level. For example a technical officer has been placed within the contact centre taking responsive repairs enquiries from tenants and training has been provided to staff at the contact centre, on the correct prioritisation of repairs. This approach enables requests for repair priorities to be professionally assessed and approved and emergency requests identified appropriately.
- 103** There are no formal guidelines or criteria for carrying out post-inspections of responsive repairs. SHL is consistently not meeting post inspection target of 10 per cent with performance at 6.9 per cent. It is therefore difficult to monitor whether repairs are being assessed for quality assurance by cost or frequency. However technical officers have been designated with specific responsibility to carry out post inspections. This aims to improve performance against the 10 per cent target and enables SHL to assess the quality of repairs carried out, the customer experience and value for money.
- 104** The level of pre inspections is reducing. Pre inspections during the last six months have been at less than 6 per cent against a target of 10 per cent, reducing significantly from levels of 40 per cent in 2004/05.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 105** In our previous inspection, we found that vacant properties were repaired according to specification but there was considerable variation in local procedures. We recognised the need to respond to local conditions but local variations needed to be approved and recorded to ensure accountability and consistency of service.
- 106** In this inspection, we found that the void procedure is consistent, properties are repaired according to the lettable standard and there are clear targets in place to drive improvement. Overall this is an area with more strengths than weaknesses.

- 107** The lettable standard and is comprehensive covering all components, facilities and external areas. It has been agreed with tenants and is publicised in a leaflet which is issued to all prospective tenants with offer letters. This clearly sets standards regarding the condition of properties and enables tenants to assess whether these had been met.
- 108** All prospective tenants receive an accompanied viewing. This is best practice since it enables the applicant to raise any queries and assess whether the lettable standard has been met, and is an opportunity for SHL to actively promote the property.
- 109** SHL has reviewed the relet process involving staff at all levels. The review was informed by learning from best practice and attending a good practice seminar. As a result an action plan identified service improvements including incentives for tenants to leave properties in good condition and/or to allow access to view, improved IT for monitoring purposes, and clearer and consistent timescales for various stages of the process. Improvements already delivered include direct lettings, of which there were 30 in 2005/06, a reduction in inspections and suited locks to enable housing staff and contractors to gain access without having to spend time collecting keys and involvement of tenant representatives in post inspecting voids. However, the review of the voids procedure did not involve any tenants who had recently had experience of the service which would have provided valuable feedback to inform improvements.
- 110** Clear targets are in place to measure and manage performance on voids. A range of target timescales for reletting voids, to reflect the demand and location of properties are in place. Targets differ for the estates teams and individual staff. The overall target for SHL is 35 days which is realistic and challenging since performance for 2005/06 was 40 days. Performance is discussed both at team meetings and at director level. There is a report on refusal reasons to the housing needs group and managers go through all voids outstanding weekly.
- 111** Void turnaround times are based on the value of works rather than the volume of works and this is a weakness. Targets are five days for works less than £500, ten days for works between £500-£1,500 or 15 days for works more than £1,500. This approach may allow more time for the work than is needed, for example a small amount of work which is high cost but will not take much time to complete.
- 112** SHL uses security for void properties sensibly. There is limited shuttering, with curtains used in the main. This reduces costs to SHL and does not have a negative impact on the appearance of estates.
- 113** SHL has effective arrangements to provide decoration vouchers to new tenants. Tenants are offered vouchers to use at a list of local DIY stores or they can have a visit by one supplier who offers choices and measures volumes required. This latter service is particularly helpful for tenants who are not able to visit stores and also makes savings to SHL, who receive a discount of around 50 per cent on shop prices. Budgets are held and managed by local offices. This approach offers choice and is easily accessible for tenants.

- 114 SHL is addressing the issue of value for money and choice within the decorating voucher scheme. An initial decorating service trial which enabled customers to spend their decorating vouchers to take advantage of discounted prices and home delivery has now been rolled out to all customers. Two suppliers are now offering reduced prices and home delivery to all customers, not just those with vouchers, and to all staff.
- 115 SHL effectively monitors quality and expenditure on void properties. Relet work schedules proposed by void contracts are authorised by SHL to monitor expenditure. More expensive works will be pre-inspected to verify requirements. Positively joint post inspections of voids are carried out with contractors to assess compliance with the lettable standard, both parties sign the handover sheet to confirm their acceptance and staff post inspecting void works have received briefings on the lettable standard to enable them to assess contractor compliance.
- 116 There has been some benchmarking for maintenance services on voids. SHL is part of a benchmarking club which has assessed repairs on voids as £570 per property, placing SHL in the top quartile using the Audit Commission family group.
- 117 A welcome pack is provided by the contractor to new tenants. However, although agreed by residents, the pack is basic and includes a few sachets of coffee, sugar and milk, plus toilet rolls and light bulbs. It is not clear on the pack who this is provided by, since there is no welcome note and at the time of occupation tenants may not be aware of the role of the contractor providing maintenance services on behalf of SHL. As a result we are unsure of the value and purpose of the pack to SHL and new tenants.

Gas servicing

- 118 In our previous inspection, we found that positive servicing procedures were let down by poor management arrangements for ensuring access.
- 119 In this inspection, we found that there are effective procedures and clear management arrangements in place and performance in this area is good. There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area.
- 120 SHL complies with gas safety regulations. There are annual services and safety checks of gas appliances, and performance has improved from 95.6 per cent in 2004/05 to 99 per cent in 2005/06. This left 89 services outstanding due to access issues, which has since reduced to 37. Gas certificates are completed and filed appropriately, being held centrally by the Council which retains the legal obligation for servicing, with a copy issued to the tenant. Servicing includes testing hard-wired smoke detectors, extractor fans and storage heaters. The Council carries out a 10 per cent check of appliances serviced by the contractor to ensure they are of an appropriate standard as an audit check of the contract.
- 121 Servicing is carried out by an external contractor following an open tender process. The Council manages the contract on behalf of SHL, and there are weekly meetings to discuss performance and issues.

- 122** The value of the gas servicing contract is £1.3 million of which £430,000 is available to replace failing components of heating systems and effective arrangements are in place to update the stock condition database when appliances are renewed. This enables repairs and replacements to be carried out promptly. Replacements are achieving value for money through the GM Procure arrangements, which for example has reduced the cost of boilers by 33 per cent.
- 123** SHL is introducing innovative ways to ensure access to properties to carry out gas servicing. It is installing gas shut off systems in all properties, which reminds tenants when servicing is due and to arrange access. This can be reset by the tenant several times to avoid them being left without a gas supply. Positively customer liaison officers attend with the contractor during installation so that the facility and the importance of arranging access to avoid its use can be clearly explained to tenants. Where tenants are considered vulnerable a shut off device will not be fitted, to ensure they have a gas supply at all times.
- 124** SHL publicises tenant and landlord responsibilities to ensure gas servicing takes place annually. Details are provided in tenants' newsletters and the tenants' handbook and tenants we interviewed were aware of when their home was due to be serviced, since this took place the same time each year.
- 125** There is a pro active approach to contacting no access customers. Customer liaison officers contact tenants outside of office hours if access has not been arranged after three visits and generally the service is accessible to tenants through appointments from 8.30am-9pm weekdays, and Saturday between 8.30am-1pm. SHL has also recently updated property files on the IT system where servicing is outstanding and this is flagged up to arrange access should the tenant contact SHL regarding another matter.
- 126** Satisfaction with gas servicing is good. Tenants receive a satisfaction survey following gas servicing and results from the survey indicate a 93 per cent satisfaction rate. Results are discussed at monthly liaison meetings with the contractor to address any issues arising.
- 127** Performance management arrangements to assess whether services have been carried out on time are weak. SHL receives monthly reports regarding properties where it has been unable to gain access, but reporting does not identify how many properties have been serviced on time. Another weakness is the target set by SHL to carry out gas servicing on properties, which is 99 per cent. Considering the high risk associated with the service, namely the health and safety of tenants, a target of 100 per cent is best practice.
- 128** Legal action for no access cases has been slow. SHL is in the process of taking legal action against tenants for persistent failure to allow access but this is insufficient. It is only just beginning to issue Notice of Seeking Possession's (NOSP) even though the longest outstanding service is April 2004. SHL's arrangements to take legal action is not fully explained within the gas servicing procedure and this is a weakness, since it fails to prioritise this as an option for staff in dealing with persistent access issues.

Aids and adaptations

- 129** In this inspection, we found that the process was well managed, budgets were appropriate and the service was delivering tangible outcomes to customers. However information to customers was not comprehensive and the service is not actively promoted. Overall there are more strengths than weaknesses.
- 130** The adaptation service is delivered through a centralised service with a specialist team established to manage requests effectively. A database has been established to make use of existing aids and adaptations, particularly through lettings matches and revising the assessment criteria in partnership with social services. This approach has been informed by benchmarking with other social housing providers to learn from best practice and provides a responsive service for tenants.
- 131** There have been significant improvements to the financial provision of the adaptation service. In 2004/05 requests amounting to £494,000 were already outstanding at the beginning of the financial year and 30 additional requests were being received each month. This level of demand would immediately exhaust the budget of £450,000 so positively additional capital funds of £350,000 were invested to address this backlog. In addition a review of the service was carried out and this made improvements resulting in savings of £78,000 during 2005/06. As a result of these actions there have been tangible outcomes for tenants.
- 132** SHL ensures a customer focused response to adaptation needs. It has allocated sufficient resources to meet tenant requests for aids and adaptations and there is currently no waiting list. The budget is increasing from £600,000 in 2005/06, to £618,000 in 2006/07, of which £10,000 is held by each of the three local offices to order aids and adaptations up to £500 directly. This approach supports and enables service users with disabilities to continue to live in their homes.
- 133** Arrangements to promote adaptations for service users with disabilities are weak. The tenant's handbook signposts customers to social services and does not encourage applications directly to SHL. The adaptation leaflet explains the procedure, but there are no timescales for visits or details of how applications are prioritised.
- 134** Information to tenants about adaptation application requests is not fully effective. Tenants receive confirmation letters which confirm aids and adaptations have been ordered. However the letter does not include a target date by which they should be completed. As a result tenants are unable to monitor the delivery of the service.
- 135** SHL is not effectively monitoring satisfaction with the adaptation service. Satisfaction surveys are undertaken through the responsive repairs service and SHL is not breaking down these results specifically for aids and adaptations. As a result it is unable to fully assess the effectiveness of the service.

- 136** There are established and effective arrangements in place to assess the need for high value works involving partners. Works between £5,000 and £25,000 are assessed through panel meetings attended by representatives from Stockport Homes, Adult and Community Services and Children and Young People's Services. Arrangements to carry out OT assessments are highly effective, being initially assessed over the phone, and if necessary through follow up visits which are usually within a week. Aids and adaptation are carried out by the in house maintenance service, with major adaptations specifications being assessed and post inspected in house. As a result customers receive a responsive adaptation service.

Housing income management

- 137** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength with effective management of the arrears process with a wide variety of methods for customers to pay, performance on recovery is improving and performance targets are in place to support further improvement.
- 138** There is a sound approach to income collection and arrears recovery based on comprehensive procedures reflecting both preventative and enforcement measures. The emphasis on prevention is evident throughout the recovery process and there is additional support for vulnerable tenants. Performance in collecting rent and reducing arrears has improved. Rent is charged over a 50-week year with two non-collection weeks to support arrears recovery.
- 139** There are a range of flexible payment methods available for customers to pay their rent. These include office payments by cash, cheque, post office pay points, credit or debit card over the phone, standing orders, direct debits and through the SHL website. SHL has developed a specific payment leaflet which details payment options for customers and has also provided information about payment options in the Customer Newsletter. This means that customers are offered a wide choice of payment options whilst the SHL optimises its opportunities for early payment.
- 140** SHL provides clear and accessible information about rent, service charges and arrears. Information is available in leaflets which are located at all offices, on the web-site, where leaflets can be accessed and downloaded, and is in the customer handbook.
- 141** There are a number of ways for service users to contact the customer finance team. Income management is dealt with by specialist officers located in the customer finance team and users can contact the team by dedicated area team telephone numbers, e-mail, letters, in person or by minicom and responses are dealt with within service standard targets. Contact details are well publicised for customers on rent statements, standard letters and in the customer newsletter.

- 142** SHL actively promotes the signposting of service users to other organisations when appropriate. Information about other organisations is printed on the reverse of all arrears letters and includes contact numbers. This approach ensures that service users are being directed to the most appropriate support organisation to meet their needs.
- 143** SHL delivers timely and appropriate information about rent and service charge accounts to service users. Quarterly rent statements ensure that tenants are kept up to date with their payment position. Statements provide clear information on current rent charges breaking down costs for heating; entry phones; grounds maintenance and communal lighting. The reverse side of rent statement contains information about payments; contact details and debt advice. Letters about the annual rent increase and service charge setting is presented in a clear format and gives a breakdown of charges for services received. As a result customers can understand how the amount that they pay is calculated.
- 144** SHL adopts good practice in managing its rent account systems. Court costs and other sundry debts are identified separately to ensure transparency for service users. A proactive approach to dealing with issue of housing benefit claw back payments has been developed. SHL applies to DWP for attachment to benefit, who then deduct overpayments at source reducing impact of overpayments on SHL arrears.
- 145** Performance in recovering rent arrears is improving. Arrears have reduced significantly from £1,040,834 in 2004/05 to £906,545 in 2005/06, with a challenging target of £766,033 for this financial year. Appropriate monitoring and tracking of arrears figures is taking place in order to ensure that service is on track to deliver target figure.
- 146** Clear service standards are in place for the income management service. These were agreed with customers and there is an Income Management customer action group established to monitor standards and act as a consultative group for this service area.
- 147** SHL has a customer focused approach to arrears collection. An escalation procedure is in place and early action is seen as key to preventing arrears, linked with effective signposting of benefit and debt advice. Letters are generated through the system on a semi-automatic basis but authorised by individual officers to prevent letters being sent out inappropriately.
- 148** SHL has introduced an incentive scheme to support service users in maintaining clear rent accounts. All tenants with clear accounts on a specified date each quarter are entered into a prize draw with prizes of £250, £100 and £50. Winners are publicised in customer newsletters. Anecdotal evidence to date indicates that this is having a positive impact on arrears, with arrears in these weeks reducing significantly.

- 149** SHL uses a variety of ways to contact customers in arrears. A number of different methods are used by the customer finance team before legal action is considered. These include telephone calls; customer friendly letters; text messaging and home visits which are used to provide debt advice to customers who may be facing financial difficulties. The customer finance team also works outside normal office hours, until 6pm on Wednesday nights and 9am until 12 noon on Saturdays, to be more accessible to customers and to improve the opportunity to contact customers. Agreements to pay arrears by instalments are agreed at affordable levels and staff are clear about the need to make agreements that are sustainable. This approach helps to ensure that hardship is not caused to customers and SHL recovers its debt effectively.
- 150** SHL are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable or disabled customers when dealing with arrears issues. Information relating to vulnerability or special needs is flagged on the IT system. As a result they can respond positively to tenants needs when sending out information, rent statements etc. For example by issuing information in large print. This approach widens the access that service users have to this service.
- 151** SHL has developed a joint corporate debt recovery policy with the council. The corporate debt policy covers all debts owed to the council and brings a consistent approach to the way multiple debt is dealt with, taking into account customer circumstances. Customers identified as having multiple debts can be directed for support to the Councils Corporate Debt Officer. This approach ensures that different sections of the council are not competing against each other for payments from customers who may have financial hardship and provides consistency and support to customers in need.
- 152** SHL has adopted a pragmatic approach to dealing with former tenants arrears. Former tenant arrears (FTA) are dealt with by a dedicated FTA officer and after issuing an initial letter, if there is no response then the arrear is passed to one of two debt recovery firms. The two firms have differing charges, operate on a no win, no fee basis and are monitored on performance. SHL has invested in Experion tracing software, which is used for no known address cases and by undertaking this in house reduces some tracing costs. There is a challenging target in place for FTA. The target for 2006/07 is £150,000 compared to £104,000 last year. Outcomes from this recovery process to date are positive with a 48 per cent increase in collection for the period 2005/06.
- 153** SHL is able to monitor trends in arrears and adopt their approach to target specific areas. For example an arrears prevention and benefit take up pilot has been developed at the Brinnington office, which links HB verification and HB entitlement to tenancy sign up. Documents are verified and applications scanned to the HB section who will then confirm benefit. The pilot success rate, problems and quality are being monitored and there are plans in place to extend this approach to the East area. Early indications from the pilot suggest that HB take up is increasing and that the percentage of new tenants in the area on HB has increased from 38 per cent to 47 per cent during the period of the pilot.

- 154 SHL has a clear understanding of the cost of rent collection methods and has evaluated these. As a result it actively promotes the most cost effective method, direct debit to all new tenants at sign up and offers an annual discount of £5 awarded in February each year to customers who choose this method of payment. There are now 12 per cent of customers paying by this method.
- 155 Service users are effectively signposted and then supported in terms of debt advice. New tenants are offered a benefits check. Signposting to support agencies is promoted through information on all arrears letters and rent statements and by front line staff. SHL has a good liaison partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Stockport Law Centre and Stockport's Welfare Rights Service. However there are currently no protocols in place to set the approach to debt advice and to allow the effectiveness of these services to be monitored.
- 156 SHL have developed a number of actions within the customer finance service to maximise the impact from its resources, these include:
- use of debt recovery agencies for FTA rather than to increase staffing levels to deliver the service;
 - use of HB contract to provide training for SHL staff which includes update training around new legislation and refresher training for example on verification. Training is provided by three dedicated training officers within HB council service and ensures that staff are appropriately equipped to deliver efficient service to customers; and
 - issues relating to the representation of cases by SHL as an ALMO have been agreed through a court issues working group and as a result SHL can present its cases direct to the County Court.
- 157 House contents insurance is managed by the income team. The service has been reviewed and cover for tenants extended to include accidental damage cover. Although costs have increased the cover remains the lowest in the GM area. SH now collects the commission for this service which equates to 19.25 per cent or £25,000 which more than covers the cost of administration of the service and adds value to the service and choice for customers.
- 158 Relationships between the ALMO and the Council's housing benefits section are good at both a strategic and operational level. New benefit claims are processed in an average of 24 days and changes in circumstances are dealt with through the fast track 24-hour service. This effectively minimises disruption and uncertainty for customers and reduces the potential impact on rent arrears figures. All relevant SHL staff have received verification training, have access to HB systems and have a direct contact number to HB staff to support them with queries. Quarterly liaison meetings are in place between the council and SHL to effectively monitor the service contract and verification monitoring is undertaken by council to ensure that consistency of approach is maintained for customers.

- 159** Appropriate referrals are made when possession action for arrears is taken. The relevant housing officer is advised, undertakes a home visit to the customer and advises the Homelessness and Housing Advice service. Notification direct to the homelessness service is currently being considered to ensure that customers receive homelessness advice and support at an earlier stage in the process.
- 160** There has been only limited engagement by SHL with Credit Unions. Although letters have been sent to the credit unions indicating SHL willingness to engage and to promote them, there has been no response to date. However, SHL has not followed up these initial approaches and may be missing an opportunity to further support customers who may be suffering financial hardship.
- 161** There are clear targets for arrears recovery. These are set with staff at the annual appraisal meeting and monitored through monthly meetings with the service manager. Weekly performance figures are provided for staff and teams, introducing an element of competition between teams. Arrears staff have a good understanding of their targets and of the performance information available to them.

Resident involvement

- 162** In our previous inspection, we found significant improvement of tenant involvement, there were areas in need of further development, for example being involved in selecting component types to be used in replacement programmes and not just a choice of paint colour/door types.
- 163** In this inspection, we found that there is a clear focus and commitment by the ALMO to resident involvement and this is an area of strength. A consultation structure is in place with a wide range of opportunities for engagement and an effective compact means that priorities for resident involvement and a plan to deliver them are clear.
- 164** SHL sees customer involvement as fundamental to the delivery of its aim to improve estates in partnership with its customers. Tenant and leaseholder participation is delivered by the Customer Involvement team which has been strengthened by the appointment of four additional staff to support customer involvement across specific areas, for example housing needs and support and in the area of stock investment.
- 165** SHL clearly supports customer involvement at all levels. There are five customer board members in place, being the majority group on the Board and Board meetings are widely publicised and open for customers to attend.

- 166 SHL has a clear understanding of both the cost and outcomes from customer involvement activities. Customer involvement impact assessments are undertaken across all customer involvement activities such as CAGs, District Forums, customer conferences, mystery shopping and customer surveys. These assessments enable staff to be clear about what they are aiming to achieve and the reasons for involving customers. As a result staff have information coupled with a greater awareness of costs linked to the effectiveness of customer involvement activities, which is being used to inform decision-making on future activities.
- 167 Resident satisfaction with opportunities is only fair. Information for 2004/05 indicates that 59 per cent of residents are satisfied with opportunities while satisfaction levels of BME residents are good at 71 per cent. However informal feedback from customers through Customer Action Groups (CAG) and District Forums indicates that customers are being listening to and involved more in developing the business.
- 168 There is a robust and structured approach to customer participation in place. SHL has developed Customer Action Groups (CAG) as its primary vehicle for engagement. There are CAGs for most service areas including customer involvement, income management, diversity, stock investment and allocations. We attended a number of these groups and found them to be active, focused and well attended. There are clear outcomes and good service improvements resulting from these groups which include:
- the development of the repairs diagnostic booklet;
 - the production of the Customer Handbook;
 - service standards;
 - producing the lettable standard; and
 - Quarterly rent statements.
- 169 SHL offers tenants and leaseholders a variety of routes for getting involved. These range from simple involvement in telephone-based surveys, estate walkabouts and mystery shopping to involvement in formally constituted tenants and residents groups. Information about involvement is clearly set out in the Partnership Agreement (Compact) which was developed with tenants in the Tenants Federation and Customer Involvement Customer Action Group. A summary of the partnership agreement has been sent out to all tenants and leaseholders in order to raise their awareness of participation routes.
- 170 SHL recognises that participation needs of specific user groups need to be addressed individually and a specific compact for tenants of sheltered schemes has been developed. The sheltered housing compact has been developed with the CAG, in line with the borough wide Partnership agreement and is being consulted upon at all sheltered schemes.

- 171** There is appropriate funding available to support customer involvement activities. The ALMO has set aside a specific budget for tenant participation of £144,000 which funds the participation team activities. Start up grants and discretionary grants, detailed in the Partnership Agreement, are also made available for the establishment of tenants and residents groups (TRAs).
- 172** SHL reduces barriers to participation by paying all reasonable expenses, such as travel and childcare in order for tenants to attend meetings, training sessions or focus groups. A Customer Expense Reimbursement Procedure is in place and Board and Tenant Federation members have been provided with computers and internet access to support them in their roles.
- 173** SHL are pro-active in identifying training needs for customer involvement. Training is identified through annual visits to resident groups, where 'health checks' are carried out to identify support and training needs. These training needs are then fed into the annual training programme. As a result customers are actively supported by training to undertake a participation role.
- 174** Clear information for customers is provided. A quarterly newsletter, which is easy to read and well presented is produced for tenants and leaseholders. Customers are involved in producing and editing the newsletter.
- 175** Service standards for customer involvement have been developed. A customer involvement strategy has also been developed to identify outcomes and targets for customer involvement. A wide number of involvement routes have been developed and include:
- customer conference;
 - customer telephone satisfaction survey;
 - customer newsletter editorial team; and
 - dream scheme for young people.
- 176** A formal tenant and resident structure is in place to support involvement represent tenant and resident views. There are 12 active constituted TRAs in the borough with a further nine informal groups established. They are all members of the overarching Stockport Tenants federation to which they send nominated people to attend regular meetings. SHL provides support to the TRAs through its Customer Involvement Officers.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 177** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength for the ALMO, with clear and well developed policies and procedures for setting up and managing tenancies, robust partnership working on ASB and alternative solutions to legal action in use. Strong case management ensures a good quality and consistent service is delivered.

- 178 Customers can access the tenancy management service in a range of ways. In addition to visiting the offices, local housing surgeries take place at varying locations which are provided in tandem with appointments for specialist advice regarding anti-social behaviour from the Tenancy Enforcement Officers (TEO). Interviews by housing officers with alleged perpetrators are held in the District Offices, with support from TEOs for complex or serious cases of ASB. This approach ensures that staff are safe and supported.
- 179 However SHL's approach to recording incidents of actual and potential aggression on tenancy files is inconsistent. This is limited by lack of available flags on the housing management ICT system and examination of case files showed that not all cases are consistently noted or visible. This poses a risk to staff that are new or covering a patch where they have no local knowledge.
- 180 SHL has a clear structure for addressing tenancy enforcement issues. District housing management staff deal with initial ASB cases. The three Tenancy Enforcement Officers provide support to housing management staff, deal with cases referred by the District Teams, and draft legal notices. Casework management and training is provided to all staff and means that the organisation has increased its capacity to resolve more cases at District level and so allow the TEOs to focus on more serious or complex cases of ASB. In addition to providing advice and support for complex cases, TEOs also attend interviews with alleged perpetrators where there is a potential risk to staff, and will also attend sign ups to reinforce the tenancy conditions where the new tenant has a history of breach of tenancy conditions.
- 181 SHL uses of a wide range of actions to tackle ASB and to enforce tenancy conditions. Introductory tenancies are used for new tenants, and it has made use of Introductory Tenancy Notices, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, injunctions, ASBOs and dispersal orders through partnership working. Legal action to repossess homes is taken as a last resort and information is notified to SMBC's social services team and its own housing options and resettlement teams in order that appropriate support can be provided.
- 182 ASB and nuisance actions are actively promoted by SHL. The Customer newsletter features articles about the work of the ASB team, and has included examples of cases and remedies. The customer handbook contains comprehensive information for tenants on theirs and their landlord's responsibilities, and the support that is available for complainants which includes co-attendance at court and the installation of panic buttons.
- 183 There is a comprehensive ASB policy and procedure in place. This is currently being updated with customers and stakeholders through the newly set up ASB Forum. The Forum's role includes scrutiny of performance and customer feedback from the recently introduced customer satisfaction surveys and performance indicators. The indicators are a means of measuring performance against the published service standards which reflect the key aims of the policy although they are too new to provide any meaningful trend data.

- 184** SHL is working to ensure that ASB cases are dealt with consistently. Incidents are recorded on spreadsheets in each district, which are monitored locally and centrally to ensure that the actions agreed with customers are completed within target time and that cases are being updated and closed in accordance with the policy and procedure. This ensures that customers receive a consistent service across the three Districts. However, SHL does not analyse incident data to identify, understand and tackle trends, or evaluate the impact of remedies on the level of complaints. For example, whilst there was awareness of small clusters of incidents of racial harassment in 2004/05 around particular locations, the organisation cannot demonstrate through reporting the incidents to the Safer Stockport Partnership that action has been taken to prevent this from happening in the future.
- 185** SHL works proactively to deliver diversionary activities. Working through the Safer Stockport Partnership a number of activities have been delivered, by key workers funded through the partnership to young people, these include:
- cultural projects such as information on lifestyles, relationships and safer sex;
 - skills based projects on radio station training, bricklaying and painting skills;
 - urban extreme projects which include outdoor pursuits for confidence building; and
 - local based projects such as the Brinnington boxing club attended by 15-20 children.
- 186** The tenancy and estate management service is responsive to customer feedback. This is indicated through the following examples.
- Through the best value review customers indicated that they would prefer one number to report incidents of ASB which has recently been implemented through SMBC's Contact Centre. Staff are available to record reports of incidents between 8am and 10pm, which are then passed on to the appropriate District office to deal with. However, the service is too new at this stage to evaluate its effectiveness.
 - Customer feedback indicated inconsistency and that communication on progress of cases could be improved. This has been addressed by a focus on case management to ensure that action plans agreed with customers are implemented in accordance with timescales. Cases are now monitored centrally and locally, and recorded through the 1to1 system with individual officers, which also identifies any individual coaching or training needs.
- 187** SHL is acting to ensure that its joint working arrangements are effective. For example, it has recently reviewed and updated its joint working protocol with SMBC Environmental Health to ensure that Environmental Health respond and deal with noise nuisance complaints reported by SHL customers. In addition, the mediation service is currently being reviewed as it was recognised that a small number of cases were being referred in relation to the total number of new complaints received. The review is focusing on value for money and staff training has been delivered to increase the focus on mediation as a means of resolving complaints.

- 188 SHL works effectively with a range of partners to share information and contribute to a borough-wide approach to tackling ASB. SHL is a member of the Safer Stockport Partnership, and attends regular meetings with a range of partners through the following groups, Tactical Business Group; ASBAT; ASBO Panel; and the Prolific Priority Offenders Group. Information regarding ASB is shared with other social housing providers and agencies, for example, through the Targeted Response Meetings and this will be further developed now that Housing Associations have joined the Safer Stockport Partnership. SHL contributes funding of £25,000 per year via the Safer Stockport Partnership to the Stockport Rangers Service. The Partnership has used a range of information and data to direct the work of the Rangers and SHL officers regularly communicate the need for a visible presence outside office hours in response to local issues.
- 189 However, there are some gaps in terms of how effective this information sharing will be as trends are not being fully explored. For example, where legal action has been initiated, many perpetrators have terminated their tenancies but this has not yet been explored to assess how this impacts on other services or landlords. And similarly, although SHL can demonstrate a positive relationship with the Ranger service through its membership of the Partnership, the direct impact of this work has not been formally assessed in terms of trends and outcomes for SHL tenants.
- 190 Specialist training has been delivered to support staff and contractors in their roles. The SMBC Community Safety Unit participated in delivering training to Stockport Homes staff and contractors to enable them to recognise and deal with hate crime. Wider training on ASB and nuisance has also been delivered through an ASB conference which was attended by members of the Safer Stockport Partnership to deliver scenario based training and workshops to SHL and SMBC staff.
- 191 SHL is not undertaking a formal programme of tenancy audits. Although tenants are encouraged to provide photographic ID at sign up, which is photocopied and retained on the tenancy file, this is not used through periodic visits, beyond the settling in visit, to ensure that the occupier is the legal tenant. Although this issue has been considered it is a missed opportunity to utilise information collected at sign up.
- 192 Understanding of service costs for ASB is mixed. Benchmarking was conducted as part of the best value review in 2005 which showed that the cost of the service was average compared to others and there are no plans to regularly review this. There has been no internal comparison of costs of providing the service between Districts. This means that the organisation cannot be sure that costs are in line with the service delivered and that it is providing value for money.
- 193 The organisation can demonstrate cost savings by using the Tenancy Enforcement Officers rather than the Council legal team to draft legal notices. Between November 2005 and the end of March 2006, the team drafted 13 legal notices which based on an hourly rate on for completion, saved £2,340 which has been used to deliver training to staff on housing law.

Estate management

- 194** In this inspection, we found that standards are high and estates are clean and tidy. Appropriate arrangements are in place to deliver, develop and monitor the standard of estate management services, which involve customers.
- 195** SHL has a clear focus on keeping estates well maintained. An 'Eyes Wide Open' policy has been introduced which encourages all staff to report any estate management issues such as litter or abandoned cars, as soon as they see it, in order to maintain the appearance of estates and to reduce complaints and enquiries. Regular meetings and site visits are also held with SMBC's Streetscene team to ensure that any issues for which the council is responsible are identified and resolved. This demonstrates that SHL is taking a proactive approach to maintaining and managing its estates.
- 196** SHL ensure that they manage estates to consistent standards through formal estate inspections. There are staff targets in place which relate to how many of the estates on their patch reach a good or excellent standard and officers are expected to inspect their entire patch over a three month period. Photo boards are available to support officers in recognising how a particular grade should look to ensure consistency within the gradings. Between January and March 2006, 86 per cent of estates inspected across the stock met the 'good' or 'excellent' standard, against a target of 80 per cent.
- 197** Customers are encouraged to be actively involved in how their estates are managed. Estate walkabouts take place on a monthly basis and meeting times and venues are publicised to customers through the newsletter and by leafleting the estate to be inspected. Customers are encouraged take part in estate inspections and are able to use the walkabout to raise any specific local issues. Between January and April 2006, 31 customers attended estate inspections. This approach enables SHL to identify and act upon estate improvements from a customer's perspective and customers who attend are provided with a summary of the actions taken so that they can see the value of their involvement.
- 198** However, SHL is not maximising opportunities to publicise the impact on estates resulting from customer involvement in estate inspections. Currently, only those individuals who are members of the District Forums or who have been directly involved in inspections and walkabouts receive information about the action taken in response to specific issues raised at the time. This is a missed opportunity to promote involvement from customers who are not already actively involved.
- 199** SHL aims to improve the visual appearance of estates through environmental improvements. The budget of £400,000 is split evenly across the three districts, and projects are initiated by customers through a range of mechanisms such as estate walkabouts, customer feedback and District Forums. Criteria for projects have been widely publicised, and the budget is allocated through the District Forums with progress reported on a regular basis. Photographs of completed works have been publicised in the newsletter to encourage more customers to contribute their ideas for how the budget should be spent. Projects have made many visible improvements to estates and include gating and railings in response to security concerns and improvement of communal areas.

- 200** SHL is working to maximise the impact of the Estate Improvement Budget by working in partnership with other organisations. For example, match funding and partnership working with the Groundwork Trust has enabled completion of projects which required more extensive work, such as the redesign of an alley way which residents were previously reluctant to use.
- 201** SHL has taken a pro active approach to dealing with issues of unkempt gardens. A number of initiatives have been developed and include:
- a gardening competition to encourage customers to maintain and improve their gardens. The scheme has been well publicised, and customers have volunteered to act as judges;
 - at one sheltered scheme, the residents have involved the local school to help improve their communal garden and have benefited from community development work by a contractor to help landscape and pave the garden;
 - a scheme has recently been launched in response to customer feedback which will loan garden tools to the community. This will enable customers who otherwise would not have had access to tools to maintain their gardens; and
 - the recently launched Assisted Gardening Scheme is delivered through Stockport Direct Services and provides customers with two hours of gardening to help in a way directed by the customer which could be a general tidy up, pruning or planting to assist elderly and vulnerable customers to maintain their gardens.
- 202** Abandoned properties are identified promptly. District teams identify abandonments through new tenant settling in visits, by notification from the customer finance team regarding arrears, and notifications of no access for gas servicing. Possible abandonment is also identified through estate inspection and walkabouts. This provides both staff and customers with means of identifying and responding quickly to abandoned properties.
- 203** Effective partnership working is being used to improve and maintain estates. An example is through membership of the SRB funded Adswold and Bridgehall Community Partnership where initial research indicated that residents put safety and security at top of their priority list. SMBC used this to inform its overarching stock investment programme for windows and doors to Secure by Design standards, supported by joint working with the Greater Manchester Police Architectural Liaison Officer. Other projects include installing intruder alarms in properties and improvements to fencing and gating.
- 204** The lettings process is customer focussed and all viewings are now accompanied. This is supported by use of a checklist to ensure that relevant property and area details are discussed at the property which can include any outstanding repairs or how to reconnect the gas supply, as well as any planned works. Sign ups are conducted following the viewing at the appropriate District Office where the checklist is completed and new tenants provided with the Customer Handbook, installation testing certificates and decoration vouchers if awarded.

Some evaluation of accompanied viewings has been undertaken in one District office which provides an indication of the positive impact of accompanied viewings on the level of sign ups.

- 205** SHL has a clear focus on sustainability. A sustainability manager has recently been appointed and a key role of the job will be to ensure that the asset management strategy is informed to estate improvement plans, which will be informed by estate inspections and grading and walkabouts. A draft report has been produced which sets out SHL's approach to managing garage and parking sites in relation to sustainability. This work is likely to have a positive impact on tenants through improved quality of estates, but it is too soon for any outcomes.

Allocations and lettings

- 206** In our previous inspection, we found that the service was customer-focused, with a meaningful input from tenants. Officers had clarity about their roles and an understanding of what the Council's policies were and there was compliance with basic legislative requirements and good practice.
- 207** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength. The service offers customers choice, is well publicised and there are clear policies and procedures in place to support staff and ensure consistency across the process.
- 208** The Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system, Homechoice, has been operating since 2001. SMBC's allocation policy was revised in 2003 to support CBL and the Allocations and Accommodation Code of Guidance. Policies are comprehensive and supported by procedures, guidance and training for staff including update training for staff at temporary accommodation schemes to ensure that they understand how the scheme works and are able to support their customers in bidding for properties.
- 209** Homechoice properties are widely advertised to applicants. Property adverts are published in the local newspaper at the start of a bidding week, in libraries, District Offices and the HIC, temporary accommodation schemes, on the website, and are also posted direct to applicants where this has been requested. Applicants receive a newsletter every six months which includes a breakdown of bids by points, area and property type to illustrate demand and performance against targets for the service, for example, and performance against the ten day target for processing applications.
- 210** There is a wide range of ways to bid for properties. Applicants can bid by telephone, in person at any of the offices, by text message or via the website. Support to vulnerable customers is provided by the Home Choice Support Officer who will complete bids on an applicants behalf or make a home visit if the service is not otherwise easily accessible. This approach encourages customers to consider and bid for properties.

- 211 Web access for Homechoice is proving to be a popular way for applicants to access the service. Use of web access is being monitored and since its launch in May 2006, a significant level of bids have been made through this route with one third of all bids received this way in week 67. Submission of bids online captures information which will enable further analysis of why applicants remove certain properties from their choices. The application form and medical assessment form can be completed but not submitted online as they require a signature which would then involve returning the forms for signature to the customer before inputting and is seen as counterproductive.
- 212 Access to the service by applicants is monitored and further support provided where appropriate. The service undertakes a 12-month rolling review of applicants to check their status and details and, where they have not made any bids during that period determines if they need support to bid for properties by giving advice by telephone or home visit to explain the bidding process and to explain realistic options regarding demand and their level of points.
- 213 SHL markets the Homechoice scheme to ensure wide and equal access. The scheme has been marketed through a number of agencies including CAB, Age Concern, Stockport Women's Aid, the probation service and SMBCs Adult and Communities Department. BME organisations have been approached to invite interest in receiving a presentation about the Homechoice scheme and the organisation is planning to promote all services, including Homechoice at the 2006 Manchester Mardi Gras.
- 214 SHL has a focus on equal access to accommodation. A question has been introduced on the application form to monitor sexuality. Response is low but the organisation has chosen to retain the question for a further period of 12 months and then revisit the level of returns as it is felt that this is a clear demonstration of their commitment to inclusivity. However, although ethnicity of registered applications and lettings is monitored and compared at an organisational level to the broad census data for the Borough which shows an increasing number of applications, and lettings above the census data, BME registrations and lettings are not analysed at District level and no BME lettings targets are in place.
- 215 Refusals data is not systematically used to inform service development. Broad category data by patch for refusals is collected at District level and reported on a six monthly basis to the Housing Needs Policy Group. However while there is understanding that the choice based lettings system results in two refusals for every successful bid where applicants maximise their bids for each advert, it is not clear from reports or minutes how other category information is being followed up or used at a more local level to inform service provision and reduce the level of refusals.
- 216 SHL has a clear nominations process in place. There is an agreement for 50 per cent nominations for homes within the Stockport Housing Partnership (which consists of SHL and five HAs) with one housing association, Northern Counties Housing Association providing 100 per cent of their empty properties for marketing and allocation through the Home choice scheme. This approach ensures greater choice for applicants.

- 217** A clear procedure is in place to allow for allocations outside the Homechoice system. District teams are able to withhold up to 10 per cent of their voids for people who are homeless or who have suffered a relationship breakdown and have not accessed the Homechoice system. The Special Housing Panel can also request a property to be withheld having determined the priority of cases where Homechoice cannot be accessed. For example, young people leaving care or in need, and people with mental health or learning difficulties. However SHL does not currently audit the reasons for bypassing applicants who qualify for an offer. Whilst this information is recorded on the housing management system, and is checked as part of the offer process, the monitoring reports collated centrally are not independently audited. The organisation responded whilst we were on-site to ensure that this is included in the current audit plan.
- 218** Risk assessments are conducted on lettings. The allocations policy contains clear guidelines on ineligibility with regard to rent arrears and ASB within the context of current legislation. There is a procedure for referral to SHLs Serious Offenders Panel which involves the probation service, to determine suitability for housing in complex cases.
- 219** Feedback from customers indicates mixed satisfaction with the allocations service. Feedback is collected through a number of routes including a Homechoice specific feedback form on the website, a survey is sent out with the annual applicant review letter and a monthly prize draw postal surveys sent to applicants. Results are publicised in the six monthly applicants newsletter which also includes a 'You Say...We Did' section which shows how the service has responded to customer feedback, for example by the introduction of the 'housing pyramid' sheets which are now sent out with the application pack and enable customers to better understand demand for property.
- 220** Outcomes of Local Lettings Policies are not being evaluated. There are three in place, by request of residents, which require applicants to provide additional reference checks. There are no additional sanctions in place, and the policies do not address sustainability or density issues which are covered instead in the allocations policy for particular areas for example multi-storeys child density. As a result SHL cannot demonstrate the impact of local lettings policies.
- 221** Only limited use of incentives is in place to encourage customers in under-occupied properties to move into properties which reflect their needs. Additional bidding points are available for each under-occupied bedroom but this is having little impact with no lettings recorded for this category from June to December 2005. As a result of opportunities to address high demand issues may be being missed.
- 222** A formal procedure is in place for reviews and appeals. This is co-ordinated by one service manager for all service areas, with a rota list of review officers. Decision letters and a homelessness specific leaflet refer to the appeal and review process. This robust approach to decision-making is having an impact on reviews upheld with ten appeals against homelessness decisions upheld, from 13 received in the previous year to February 2006.

- 223** SHL is exploring the opportunity for developing CBL on a regional basis. It is working with nine providers in Greater Manchester to develop and implement a regional CBL system, which has received funding from DCLG and for which a project manager has recently been appointed. Although the scheme is at an early stage, SHL has already begun to advertise properties for Greater Manchester providers in the HIC interview rooms to ensure that customers are aware of wider housing options.
- 224** SHL is aware of its service costs for the allocations service. The costs of providing the service are monitored and have been benchmarked. For example, costs per property per advert are monitored and published to customers and a recent benchmarking exercise showed that the cost of registering applicants compared favourably to other providers in Greater Manchester. In addition, the benchmarking exercise was used to explore levels of service provision and has resulted in the introduction of medical assessment home visits.

Homelessness and housing advice

- 225** In this inspection we found that this was an area of significant strength. The service is accessible to customers, supported by good quality information and advice. There is a strong preventative agenda in place and partnership working to support customers is well developed.
- 226** The Homelessness and Housing Advice service is widely accessible through HIC and outreach surgeries which are held at youth centres, the Wellspring Clinic (jointly with Homechoice) and Stockport Women's Aid. The Special Needs Housing Officer also conducts outreach work at the hospital's psychiatric ward and the A&E department shares information regarding patients who refer to themselves as homeless or potentially homeless. Joint working with the Community Drugs Team, funded by the Drug Action Team, means that any reported rough sleepers are visited jointly within 24 hours to try to bring them into the service.
- 227** Comprehensive and accessible information and advice publications have been developed which focus on prevention of homelessness. In addition to wider housing options information, such as the Rent Bond scheme and mediation service, a young person's guide to homelessness has been developed jointly with the Nightstop service using funding accessed from Connexions. Whilst the guide focuses on prevention, it covers all housing options and ensures that young people are aware of the choices that they can make and the support they will receive.
- 228** There is a clear focus on preventing homelessness. The service doesn't wait until homelessness is imminent to assess cases but invites people in straight away to discuss their options, which starts the clock ticking in terms of decisions on cases. A protocol is in place with SMBCs Children and Young Peoples Directorate (CYPD) which enables joint assessment of 16 and 17 year olds who present as homeless with the aim of a return to home.

- 229** SHL has clear policies and procedures in place to ensure that people accepted as homeless or whose cases are being investigated have access to temporary accommodation, support and resettlement services. SMBC has not used bed and breakfast accommodation for 15 years. Allocated project workers conduct initial needs assessments. Assessments include dependents needs, for example, for education, and also include a skills package. In addition, all residents of temporary accommodation schemes complete an interview with a substance misuse worker, whose post is part funded by the Drug Intervention Programme, who provides wider advice, crisis support and complementary therapy such as acupuncture. This approach ensures that residents have a tailored support package during and after their stay to enable them to sustain a tenancy when they move in to permanent accommodation.
- 230** SHL has developed effective working arrangements with a range of partners. These include regular health checks and awareness sessions which are available through scheme based surgeries, there are protocols in place to ensure that where residents move in from outside the area that health visitors and midwives are informed and can access previous patient records, joint working with SMBC via the transient learners group is positive with the planned implementation of a lifelong learning programme in September 2006, a children's art club and library service is provided through Stockport Gallery and SMBC libraries service and all schemes have IT equipment for residents. This partnership approach is geared towards achieving value for money services and ensures that residents of temporary accommodation schemes have access to a wide range of services.
- 231** SHL has focused on ensuring that temporary accommodation for homeless households meets diverse needs. Reasonable disabled access has been provided at all schemes, and there are currently five adapted properties within the temporary accommodation stock. In addition, the service accesses minor aids and adaptations provided jointly by SMBC and the PCT which can be made available as required and recycled back through the provider. The Stockport Interpreting Service and Language line is promoted in schemes and staff are confident in accessing those services. Funding is available for staff to train in using British Sign Language, and two staff members in post at the families' scheme have completed their training. This approach ensures that the schemes and the services provided at them are accessible to all customers.
- 232** The temporary accommodation schemes visited are well maintained and of a high standard with communal areas and grounds well maintained. Investment in the schemes has resulted in improved reception areas and security doors. Further investment is planned, for example, in the single male hostel, to extend the kitchen area to provide each resident with their own workspace to encourage independence in terms of skills such as cookery and budgeting.
- 233** SHL have in place a well publicised out-of-hours emergency accommodation number which links to housing officer standby. Emergency accommodation is at the families' scheme and is used only until a place at a suitable scheme is found following next working day housing options interviews at the Housing Information Centre.

- 234** Residents at temporary accommodation schemes are supported and encouraged to participate in the Homechoice allocation scheme. Priority points are allocated for a period of six weeks to enable residents to bid for properties. Project workers use a 'red-amber-green' system in the schemes to ensure that they provide appropriate support which may include assistance with submitting a bid or accompanying residents to viewings. This approach ensures that residents are able to maximise their priority points award to find permanent accommodation through the choice based scheme, and ensures that there is a focus on move on and maintaining capacity in the temporary accommodation schemes.
- 235** The service actively seeks and is responsive to customer feedback. Service standards and a re-let standard have been developed with customers, and performance against them is monitored through staff weekly work plans and reported to the Customer Action Group. Feedback about the service is sought through questionnaires and surveys. In 2005, 96 per cent respondents to the temporary accommodation service's annual satisfaction survey rated it as good or excellent. Improvements resulting from feedback include extending meal times at the male hostel and investment in modular buildings at the families scheme to provide a communal space for residents. As a result customers have had a positive and visible impact on the service.
- 236** The service seeks to actively learn both externally and from customers. For example following learning visits to two prisons and working with NACRO, Homechoice adverts are sent to prisons so that offenders can make bids for properties by registering from their release address. Annual fun days are held, for families in temporary accommodation, where customers are encouraged to produce a wish list for the scheme. These are discussed at annual planning days for the Housing Options service and have resulted in investment and improvements to the facilities, such as provision of communal space.
- 237** SHL delivers a wide range of resettlement support services. There is a dedicated Resettlement Team whose aim is to provide housing related support to vulnerable people. The service includes the resettlement, tenancy support and asylum teams and received a B Grade following a recent Supporting People review. Support is available to homeless people and families, care leavers, lone teenage parents, young people in their first tenancy, refugees, and people fleeing from domestic violence, ex-offenders and people with mental health problems. There are also dedicated posts within the team which are funded through Supporting People grant, Drug Intervention Programme and the European Refugee Fund and focus on support to BME communities, substance mis users and teenage parents. This broad level of support assists vulnerable people to sustain their tenancies.
- 238** SHL have taken a pragmatic approach to ensuring the continued delivery of asylum services. The Asylum team has signed a new dispersal contract as a member of the North West (East) Consortium for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. New lower contract terms have meant that a number of properties will have to be decommissioned from use and SMBC have supported this decision in order not to lose the service entirely.

- 239** Satisfaction with the resettlement service is high. In addition to tenancy support, services include a rent bond scheme, mediation for young people and a furnished tenancy scheme. Analysis of service exit questionnaires shows that almost all respondents received help with obtaining furniture and household goods, connecting utilities, accessing benefits and form filling, and maintaining their tenancy. The team also conducts an annual satisfaction survey which shows that 92 per cent of respondents accessed the service at the start of their tenancy and that 95 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the service.
- 240** The Resettlement Team consults effectively with service users and can demonstrate how it responds positively to their feedback. Consultation and involvement takes place using a range of mechanisms which, in addition to the CAG and Housing 100, includes exit questionnaires, an annual survey, focus groups and the service has recently held a BME focus group to ensure that involvement and consultation opportunities are accessible to all customers. Changes to the service based on customers' experience have been made and include simplifying support plans and providing welcome packs which include local area information and contact details.
- 241** The resettlement service is accessible to customers and demand is actively managed. Services attract high levels of demand, and steps taken to manage this include referrals to specialist providers, implementing and monitoring referral assessment targets and clear policies for disengaging with service users. Active caseload management and prioritisation policies developed with the SP team ensure that priority is awarded based on applicants support needs and current care packages ensuring that those most in need of the service are able to access it.
- 242** The mediation service has had a positive impact on preventing young people from becoming homeless. The service is provided in-house by a dedicated officer and aims to prevent young people from becoming homeless, working with them to resolve any dispute or relationship breakdown and enabling them to remain at home or to help them move to safe and secure accommodation. The service monitors repeat referrals to the service and service users are contacted after six months to assess the impact of the service had. Monitoring indicates that of the 225 referrals between June 2004 and September 2005, 85 per cent referred for mediation returned home or stayed with friends and for 74 per cent of these cases homelessness was prevented for six months or more and 76 per cent of the original referrals withdrew their homeless application.
- 243** The service is focused on delivering and monitoring outcomes for service users. Monitoring is in place for outcomes from the resettlement service as a funding requirement, for example, monitoring the success of the mediation scheme. Outcomes of cases are monitored at 6, 12 and 24 months after resettlement support has ended and show that since 2003, 84 per cent of people have sustained a tenancy 12 months after support has ended. Tracking outcomes alongside the focus on consulting and involving service users enables the team to continue to develop and improve services to customers.

Supported housing

- 244** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of significant strength. Policies and procedures are effective, customers are supported and services are sensitive to their needs. There is partnership working to deliver wider outcomes for the service and there is active customer involvement.
- 245** Stockport Homes provides a variety of supported housing services to customers. It manages 12 sheltered schemes, 1,000 age restricted properties supported by the Carecall and Mobile Warden Response service and provides support to a further 4,500 vulnerable people in the Borough.
- 246** The current supported housing service has been remodelled to reflect the needs of a modern service. Following a joint review of sheltered housing provision across the Borough in 2004 and a structural review in 2005, the role of Scheme Wardens has been successfully changed to that of Scheme Managers, with the addition of a Mobile Scheme Manager. Consistent hours are worked across schemes and contracted night time hours have been removed. As a result Scheme Managers are accessible to residents during the day with effective out-of-hours cover provided by the Carecall emergency alarm service.
- 247** The review and restructure of the Scheme Warden role was developed around the Supporting People framework. This has resulted in the development of clear policies and procedures supported by a focus on training. Scheme Managers have received comprehensive training and support to deliver their role, such as alerter training for identifying elder abuse and training on completing Support Plans. This has brought benefits for customers for example there has been an increased numbers of referrals for aids and adaptations through the needs assessment process and by completing support plans with residents, Scheme Managers are able to help residents access appropriate support and sustain their tenancies within the schemes.
- 248** Supported housing services have been assessed through the Supporting People review process and achieved positive grades. The Sheltered Housing service was reviewed by in February 2006 and achieved a 'C' grade and the Carecall service was also assessed against the SP QAF⁹ lite and achieved the highest grade possible under this assessment, which is Grade C.
- 249** Clear structures are in place to ensure continued learning within the service. The change in the Scheme Managers role has also delivered benefits to staff, with indirect benefits to customers. Following the standardisation of working hours, Scheme Managers are now able to attend regular monthly team meetings to discuss and share learning and working practices. As a result, for example, one member of the team has developed an effective referral process for services provided by Age Concern which has been shared with colleagues.

⁹ QAF - Quality Assessment Framework

- 250** SHL have a focus on ensuring schemes are both safe and accessible. Safety and accessibility in supported housing schemes has been assessed. All schemes have been assessed for DDA compliance and fire safety. Reasonable access has been provided in schemes for those with a disability for example access to communal lounges. A programme of replacement furnishing, to comply with fire safety standards, is underway with a completion date of July 2006 and residents are being consulted on styles and colours. In addition to weekly health and safety checks on alarm systems, an annual health and safety assessment for each scheme is jointly conducted by the Scheme Manager and Housing Officer to identify and action wider health and safety issues both inside and outside the schemes.
- 251** The supported housing service responds positively to service users. Customers are encouraged to become involved in the well-attended Customer Action Group, and outcomes include resident input into service standards for Carecall and Sheltered Housing and a dedicated repairs and maintenance advice line for sheltered tenants with access to reduced rates for minor repairs. In addition customer led Estate Improvement Budget projects have led to visible improvements for customers in supported housing schemes such as residents' - only parking scheme and landscaping which has included provision of patio areas.
- 252** Clear and appropriate service standards have been developed for the supported housing service. Customers were involved in developing them through consultation and the CAG. However service standards have only recently been finalised and so have not yet been monitored.
- 253** SHL have clear processes in place to ensure that appropriate support plans are in place for customers. Support plans are completed with all residents within 4 weeks of moving in and reviewed on at least an annual basis or sooner if there is a recognised change in circumstances. Scheme Managers and Mobile Wardens have received training to complete support plans effectively and completion of plans is monitored by the Scheme Manager Supervisor through monthly one to one meetings and visits. Quality checks conducted by the supervisor also include completion of health and safety checks, fire alarm testing, support referrals and case management.
- 254** SHL has recognised the need to tailor customer involvement at supported housing schemes, to meet their specific needs. A draft Compact for all sheltered schemes has been developed which sets out a clear agreement between customers and SHL with regard to consultation, information and involvement. As a result customers are clear about expectations and opportunities for involvement.

- 255** SHL responds positively to customer feedback in supported housing. Training has been provided to residents and the wider community in response to customers concerns and feedback. For example a training session for customers was held regarding bogus callers, this was supported by Age Concern, who provided a range of free security measures for customers such as spy holes, door chains and visibility mirrors. Positively this training was also attended by a representative from the nearby Asian Heritage Centre in order to arrange delivery of similar training to the wider diverse community.
- 256** The service promotes and responds positively to complaints. Customer feedback suggestion boxes, complaints forms and freepost envelopes are prominently displayed in communal lounges. Two complaints about the service following falls, prompted the design of a falls service user satisfaction survey, which identified that investment in moving and handling equipment and training was required. This has been implemented although the survey is still in place and the results are used to inform and support individual training needs.
- 257** Sustainability of supported housing stock has been considered by SHL. A sustainability manager has recently been appointed and there is a current review of sheltered housing provision across the borough. All schemes have been assessed in terms of DDA compliance and future sustainability using a traffic lights system this information will feed into the current review of sheltered housing provision across the Borough and subsequently into an asset management plan for each scheme. Whilst no schemes have received a red grading, there are some schemes which have been awarded an amber grade, which has meant that there is a stop on investment such as window replacement until the review is complete. However, this has not prevented SHL from investing in minor improvements to amber graded schemes, for example in communal areas, where it is felt that residents will benefit in the short term.
- 258** Sheltered accommodation lettings procedures are customer focused. Properties are allocated via the Homechoice scheme, with accompanied viewings which are now attended by Scheme Managers to provide an introduction to the scheme and its facilities. Scheme Managers also use this meeting as an opportunity to collect contact and emergency details from customers if they are positive about accepting the offer of a property. This ensures that there is no delay in receiving information from the application form when customers have moved in.
- 259** Allocations to sheltered schemes are sensitive and reflect individual customer needs. No properties above ground floor in schemes without lifts have been adapted as a result customers with mobility difficulties are only allocated ground floor properties. There is a pro-active approach to transfers for example were customers need to move to ground floor accommodation, priority points are awarded to enable a move to a more suitable property. Focusing on needs assessment and anticipating future needs ensures that many customers will be able to remain in their home for longer.

- 260** SHL is working with partners to deliver a variety of supported housing. These initiatives are aimed at enabling more customers to remain in their homes include:
- an intermediate care scheme has been established which uses a combination of tele care provision and the mobile warden service, with provision for 40 customers paid for by social services. SHL is currently working with SMBC to further expand the scheme;
 - work is also underway with SMBC to develop an extra care scheme at Birch Court and an extra care pilot at Russell Gardens, an existing sheltered scheme, which will include the use of tele care equipment;
 - SHL are about to launch a pilot project for provision of accommodation to customers with learning disabilities which has been developed with and approved by SMBCs Strategic Housing team. The agreement is yet to be finalised and the management fee will cover provision of a Housing Officer and Assistant post. Properties in the project will be available from housing associations, SHL and from the private sector; and
 - a rent bond scheme was piloted and then introduced when SP funding was secured for a co-ordinating officer and enables people with low incomes to access privately rented accommodation. SHL will be working this year to recruit more private landlords to the scheme as demand has outstripped supply.
- 261** SHL has a positive relationship with the local authority Supporting People team and liaise with them regularly for advice and guidance. The restructure of the supported housing service has meant that it is now closely aligned to SP priorities which can be seen through the involvement of SHL in pilots for intermediate and extra care.
- 262** SHL is working pro actively to address issues that link to wider government health targets. It is working with partners to reduce the number of falls in line with wider government policy. The service deals with on average 2,300 falls per year (which includes external customers), of which approximately 20 per cent require hospital treatment. Falls are recorded on the call system and this enables information sharing with the PCT which has resulted in the development of actions such as prevention advice through Age Concern, reassessment of support plans and need assessments for aids and adaptations to further support customers.
- 263** SHL has benchmarked costs for its Carecall service. As a member of the Telecare Services Association, SHL has benchmarked the cost of provision of the telecare control room against other similar service providers. This showed that the service had the lowest costs. As a result costs are now being incrementally increased in order to allow the delivery of more services.

- 264 Opportunities to develop and maximise the income for the service are being explored. The Carecall service currently has approximately 4,000 external customers of which 1,900 are housing association tenants and 2,000 are private customers. Business planning for 2006/07 is underway and will include the development of a marketing strategy, to include marketing to BME communities, to further expand the service and to maximise income to ensure and sustain future provision.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 265 Stockport Homes provides a leasehold management service for 284 leaseholders, with the council retaining the responsibility for the Right to Buy service. As a result of this service split we would expect that SMBC and SHL to work together to provide a seamless service to leaseholders.
- 266 In this inspection, we found that there is a clear protocol in place to support the relationship between the council and SHL in delivering the service, leaseholders can contact the service in a number of ways and information is being provided on leasehold issues.
- 267 The relationship between SHL and the Council is clearly detailed in a leaseholder protocol. Appropriate information is provided to the council in order that applications can be processed. Regular liaison meetings take place between the council and SHL to monitor the progress of RTB applications.
- 268 SHL has worked proactively to improve the service to leaseholders. A best value review has been undertaken and an improvement plan developed. SHL has used opportunities for learning to support this approach, for example through Leaseholder Services at the North West Best Practice Unit.
- 269 Customers can easily contact the leasehold service. Although there is no dedicated leasehold officer, details of contact names for local managers and account officers, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses are provided. Contact can be also be made through the website and the Customer Newsletter has a section covering leaseholder issues. SHL staff have had briefing sessions to improve their knowledge of leaseholder issues, including relevant legislation information and to raise the profile of leaseholders within the company.
- 270 SHL has effectively addressed the issue of rights and responsibilities, including repairs obligations, of leaseholders. A comprehensive leaseholder handbook has been produced. The handbook has been submitted for crystal mark approval and contains clear information about rights and responsibilities; a quick reference table and a breakdown of terms used in the book. Leaseholders were involved in developing the handbook and service standards relating to estate appearance and anti-social behaviour, which are contained within the handbook. Service standards are monitored and feedback provided through the CAG. However the handbook has only recently been distributed to leaseholders and as a result it is too early to measure outcomes.

- 271** SHL is consulting and involving leaseholders in the service. Leasehold residents are involved in the service through the Leaseholder Customer Action Group (CAG), which is well attended with between 12 and 16 leaseholders at each meeting. This approach means that leaseholder, although a small group are able to express their views and be involved in developing service delivery.
- 272** Clear information is available to leaseholders about the collection of leasehold charges. A leaseholder guide has been produced which includes information about service charges, payment details, contact names and telephone numbers and details of agencies which can provide independent advice on service charge issues. Service charge collection rates are currently low at 55.5 per cent. Payment options for leaseholders are the same as those for tenants and there are incentives for clear leasehold charge accounts.
- 273** SHL complies with requirements to consult with leaseholders for statutory capital works. A clear procedure for consulting leaseholders on investment works has been agreed with leaseholders together with a process for the reporting of communal area repairs. Positively leaseholders are offered the opportunity to purchase additional services, such as gas servicing and contents insurance, from SHL and loans for improvement works are available, through the council. Leaseholders are also offered the same property improvement choices as tenants, agreeing the works direct with the contractor. As a result leaseholders will benefit from competitive prices since they will be eligible for discounts SHL has negotiated through GM Procure.
- 274** Historically leaseholder satisfaction has been poor. Information from a survey carried out for the council in June 2005 indicated that leaseholders were dissatisfied with the service offered by the council. In particular leaseholders identified that they were provided with poor information and that there was a lack of their views being taken into account. SHL has, as indicated above, begun to address the issues of consultation and information raised by leaseholders in the council survey. In addition it has been agreed with leaseholders that an annual satisfaction survey will be undertaken with effect from July 2006, and results will be used to establish areas for further improvement.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 275** SHL has achieved improved Value for Money (VFM) across several key areas. There are more strengths than weaknesses and some positive initiatives identified. The organisation is committed to ensuring that both cost and quality of housing services is improved as an element of the delivery of key objectives.
- 276** SH have taken appropriate actions to ensure that it has a sustained and integrated focus on VFM issues. A VFM board sub group is in place and this group reports monthly to the board. SIP has an integrated VFM impact column and all reports have to indicate VFM implications. Targets in the procurement strategy are embedded in the VFM action plan targets, which are tracked through the VFM sub group. The SIP and budget process are closely allied and budget priorities are reflected within the SIP. As a result VFM is integrated into objectives.

How do costs compare?

- 277** In our previous inspection, we found that the Council had not demonstrated that the existing repair service was cost effective, although comparison of costs with other authorities indicated that they were getting value for money for repair work. Proposals to tender parts of the service would market test competitiveness.
- 278** In this inspection, we found that SHL is comparing costs with other services, areas of work have been tendered and positive work on procurement has developed around a consortium approach.
- 279** Benchmarking is undertaken to compare organisation and management costs in a number of service areas to inform improvements. For example:
- SHL uses Housemark and GM group to update cost models and compare costs. Housing management costs were on average at £400 per property. Costs per function are also benchmarked;
 - benchmarking former tenancy arrears collection methods resulted in externalising collection;
 - costs of providing allocations service have been benchmarked and showed registration costs compared favourably to other Greater Manchester providers, also used benchmarking to explore service provision levels which resulted in introduction of medical assessment home visits; and
 - SHL has benchmarked costs for its Carecall service. As a member of the Telecare Services Association, SHL has benchmarked the cost of provision of the telecare control room against other similar service providers. This showed that the service had the lowest costs.
- 280** SHL has a programme to review all services provided by the council by September 2006. The review will ensure that service provision is assessed in terms of both cost and quality, with regard to customer satisfaction. Stockport Homes and the council are progressing the reviews positively, on a priority basis taking into account risk and customer focus with the grounds maintenance service currently being reviewed. The council has recognised the risk that the reviews could lead to outsourcing of some services. However, the council has not taken a protective approach and has agreed a three month notice period in most service areas, should this arise.
- 281** Stockport Homes can demonstrate savings across a number of service areas. These include:
- centralisation of recruitment requests in-house to co-ordinate pooling of adverts, media selection and advertising text;
 - savings on printing costs;
 - savings in management costs and overheads by bringing PMS in house;

- gas component replacements are achieving value for money through the GM Procure arrangements, which has reduced the cost of boilers by 33 per cent; and
- cost savings by using the Tenancy Enforcement Officers rather than the Council legal team to draft legal notices. Between November 2005 and the end of March 2006, the team drafted 13 legal notices which based on an hourly rate on for completion, saved £2,340 which has been used to deliver training to staff on housing law.

282 Improved methods of working have also been used to deliver savings and include:

- change to more cost efficient rent payment methods such as Direct Debit;
- reduced number of pre-inspections for responsive repairs; and
- SHL is accessing DIY training for tenants through a scheme by DIY chain which is free of charge to the tenant and SHL.

How is value for money managed?

283 In this inspection, we found that SHL is challenging costs and exploring opportunities to deliver and procure services in a number of ways.

284 The Board receives good quality information on VFM issues, allowing it to make informed decisions about priorities and resourcing, and it shows strong leadership in this area. All Board reports assess VFM implications of proposals. Board members display a developing understanding of VFM issues and have refused, on a number of occasions, to make decisions until they were satisfied that VFM considerations had been thoroughly explored. For example in requiring assurances about the financial impact before approving new staffing structures.

285 SHL is actively involved in GM Procure and can demonstrate significant savings from its involvement. Responsibilities include chairing the procurement sub-group and attending the skills and employment sub group. SHL also contributes in other ways including as the managing agent for the consultants commissioned and providing internal audit services to the company. A contribution of £25,000 was made to the start up costs of GM Procure and is projected to save £300,000 by not having to provide some services in-house. The main priority of the company is to procure property improvement services and it is estimated that this will save SHL 21 per cent compared to if the services were procured in house. SHL's involvement in GM Procure is a positive example of combining bargaining power with other social landlords to attract discounts and agree contract conditions which include customer service standards.

- 286** Stockport Homes has challenged the way services are procured. SHL is a key partner in a consortium of social landlords called GM procure. The GM Procure consortium has just completed the allocation of contracts for its property improvement programme and this tested value for money through tendering arrangements under EU regulations. This put in place installers of works and suppliers of components for the ten partners to access for estimated works of £500 million over four years. The market place was assessed using a consultant and is for an elemental programme, breaking down works by component replacements. Partners access the framework and decide the works they need at which point GM Procure goes out to installers and suppliers to facilitate the services. There are 40 providers and several suppliers. This has split the materials provision from installation. This approach enables the consortium partners to access materials and contractor services at competitive rates, as and when they need them to meet DHS compliance obligations by 2010.
- 287** SHL has a procurement strategy and this together with a value for money strategy places value for money within a framework aimed at continuous improvement on value for money considerations. The VFM strategy and linked action plan sets challenging targets for the next three years and is in place to manage and monitor VFM targets. The action plan sets targets for management and maintenance spend, proportion of capital work procured and the balance of spending between responsive and planned maintenance.
- 288** SHL effectively manages its contracts to ensure delivery of VFM. The performance of the external contractor providing void repairs is monitored and contract penalty clauses are evoked when targets are not met. This demonstrates that SHL is proactively assessing compliance with standards and targets to achieve VFM through compensation secured.
- 289** SHL has tested the market for contract delivery through the OJEU tendering arrangements which advertises contracts to potential contractors. Current contracts procured in this way include gas servicing, void works, two thirds of responsive repairs, and capital works through GM procure. This approach enables SHL to compare the costs of different contractors to determine which tender offers the greatest value for money in terms of quality and cost. SHL is also able to assess whether PMS provides VFM by comparing its costs with market prices identified through the OJEU procurement process. However SHL has not fully explored partnering as a procurement option for maintenance services. Although they are preparing a partnering charter with Mears this will be based on partnering principles but will not be a partnering contract.
- 290** Issues of cost against outcome are being identified in the area of customer consultation. SHL undertakes impact assessments for customer involvement activity. These identify costs against intended outcomes and are being used to inform decisions on cost versus outcome of future involvement activities.

- 291** SHL is failing to address value for money considerations in some areas of the responsive repairs service. There is some duplication in post inspections with SHL undertaking a small number of post inspections following contractor post inspections. Post inspections are not fully effective with some being conducted by telephone and so relying on the tenant perception of the standard of work rather than SHL's, as outlined in standards set for contractors. Post inspections samples selected include items identified by the IT system and there is no confirmed figure specifying repairs over a certain value must be post inspected to ensure VFM for high cost works.
- 292** The company has taken a pragmatic approach to market testing. Although SH can not demonstrate VFM for its responsive repairs service through PMS, it has facilitated a transfer of the Council's in-house maintenance service to meet what it considers to be a shortage of contractors/operatives in the area to deliver this £2.9 million contract. There has not been any formal tendering of the contract to test VFM or to confirm its perception of the market place. Mears was unable to extend its share of the market by gearing up its operations within such a short timescale.
- 293** However, SHL has carried out a health check of the SDS responsive repairs service to assess the viability of taking this underperforming service in house. This recognised inefficiencies and cost issues, and identified a range of improvements pre- and post- transfer to improve value for money and service benefits to tenants. The service was forecast to have a £400,000 overspent for 2005/06, but since transfer in February 2006 the established Property Maintenance Solutions (PMS) has made a surplus of £25,000. Previously it had £200,000 excessive overheads. Changes include a reduction in staff from 38 to 26 operatives. The bonus system has also been revised to give a pre-set sum based on the average of previous payments, this removes any incentive to carry out more work than is required. Overall, the revised arrangements have given SHL more control over the delivery of the responsive repairs service as they train operatives on expected standards and conduct and put in place procedures to deliver and monitor the service.
- 294** The responsive repairs service provided by PMS is still 7 per cent higher than VFM market prices identified by SHL through the tendering process which appointed its other contractor for this service. However, improvements to the budget position demonstrate value for money and efficiency gains. SHL has committed to market testing the service through tendering if costs did not represent VFM within 12 months.

Summary

- 295** The service delivered by SHL is very customer focused with satisfaction across most of the service areas monitored and showing high levels of satisfaction with the service. Customers are actively and effectively involved in decision-making at both strategic and operational levels with consultation routes improving to include tenants who are not involved in formal tenants and residents associations.

- 296 The performance of all services has improved significantly since our last inspection and the focus on establishing the ALMO has not detracted from delivery of tangible improvements to areas of the service which are a high priority for tenants.
- 297 Easy to access and responsive services are being delivered. SHL is effectively addressing diversity issues and there is a real commitment to ensuring services are equitable and accessible to all customers.
- 298 Effective partnership working and robust performance systems are delivering very good improvement work, with high levels of customer satisfaction.
- 299 Performance in the responsive repairs service is improving and the management of voids is consistent, with properties repaired to the lettable standard.
- 300 Gas servicing is area of strength. Procedures are effective and customer focussed, performance is good and there are effective access procedures in place. However, legal action on no access cases has been slow to date.
- 301 The aids and adaptations service is a strong area. The process is managed effectively, budgets are appropriate and the service is delivering tangible outcomes for customers.
- 302 There is a customer focussed approach to income management. There is an emphasis on the preventative approach with support for vulnerable customers and good use is made of debt advice. Significant improvements have been made in processes and partnership working is strong and effective.
- 303 Tenancy management is an area of strength. There are clear policies and procedures in place for managing tenancies, with robust partnership working on ASB and alternatives solutions to legal action being used.
- 304 Estates are well maintained, clean and regularly inspected.
- 305 SHL has undertaken a lot of work to improve the service to leaseholders. Customers have been actively involved in improving the service and there are service standards and a leaseholder handbook in place. Owners are offered the opportunity to access internal improvement work and benefits such as insurance and gas servicing are also offered.
- 306 SHL has a strong commitment to resident involvement. There is a robust structure for participation and a wide range of ways for customers to be involved. Involvement has delivered tangible outcomes in service delivery and impacted on the development of customer driven policies and plans.
- 307 Allocations and lettings is an area of strength for SHL. There is a good and effective choice-based letting scheme which is a customer focussed. Vulnerable customers are effectively supported through the system. However outcomes from local lettings policies are not being evaluated to demonstrate their impact.
- 308 Supported housing is an area of significant strength for SHL. Policies and procedures are effective, customers are supported and services are sensitive to their needs. There is active customer involvement in the service and good partnership working in place to deliver wider service outcomes.

- 309** Homelessness and Housing Advice is an area of significant strength for SHL. Services provided are customer focused and provide a wide range of sensitive support and information to vulnerable customers. Preventative work is evident and temporary accommodation is of a very high standard. Customers are also actively involved in developing the service.
- 310** SHL has made good progress on delivering value for money within a number of its services. Costs are being challenged and opportunities to deliver and procure services in a number of ways are being explored.
- 311** Overall, therefore, we judge that the housing service provided by Stockport Homes is an 'excellent' three-star service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 312** In our previous inspection, we found a recent track record of improvement in the repairs service including increasing tenant participation, redressing the issue of emergency repairs, developing a partnership approach with SDS, producing a repair service charter and regenerating unpopular estates.
- 313** The Housing Allocations re-inspection found that the quality of the service had improved almost beyond recognition over a period of 14 months. Of our 17 recommendations, 14 had been delivered by the Council, two were in hand and only one had not been delivered.
- 314** In this inspection, SHL have focused on achieving improvements linked to the weaknesses identified in our previous inspections and their own BVR and feedback processes. There have been notable improvements in performance and service improvements as a result even though the organisation has only been in existence for eight months. There are some improvements which have only been made recently and are not yet fully embedded but these had been introduced in line with SHL's own plans.
- 315** Stockport Homes has responded positively to previous inspection recommendations and other weaknesses identified in the reports to deliver and improve services. Of the five recommendations from the Allocations inspection only one has not been completed. This is the move to a common register which has now been superseded by a proposed move to a regionally based CBL scheme. All recommendations from the Housing Repairs inspection have been completed.

Table 3 Progress against housing repairs recommendations

Housing repairs

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Services are improved to respond to customers needs by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring the effective involvement of a broader group of tenants in all aspects of the service including contractor recruitment and appraisal; • involving tenants to produce a broad range of housing advice leaflets in a corporate style that also addresses equal opportunities; and • ensuring that the findings and recommendations of this report are formally reported to the Council and Tenants federation. 	<p>Delivered</p>

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Working practices are improved by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • urgently reviewing gas servicing access and control procedures; • improving performance management systems to ensure the production of timely, accurate and integrated reports; • ensuring the development of a corporate procurement policy incorporating recommendations of the Byatt and Egan reports; • testing the competitiveness of all aspects of the repairs service, including arrangements for managing and supervising cyclical and servicing contracts; • developing and reviewing recently drafted strategies to reduce the proportion of emergency repairs and the high number of pre-repair inspections; • reviewing repair procedures (allowing for a system for responding to local conditions), training staff and monitoring performance to ensure consistency; and • developing housing service plans, with clear service standards 	Delivered

Source: Audit Commission

Table 4 Progress against Housing allocations recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
Take further action, in conjunction with RSLs, to achieve a common housing register.	Not delivered ¹⁰
Develop local performance indicators in consultation with tenants.	Delivered
Ensure that cases referred to the Special Panel are considered and recorded on an anonymous basis to ensure confidentiality.	Delivered
Ensure that a monitoring mechanism in relation to special cases is put in place so that the need for allocations policy changes is kept under review.	Delivered

¹⁰ This was followed up with RSL partners at time but they did not want to proceed and this has now been superceded by proposed move to regional CBL system.

Recommendation	Progress
Review the Allocations Service on an ongoing basis in order to deliver continuous improvement.	Delivered

- 316** In addition to delivering these improvements SH has also delivered other improvements on time and in line with other plans. For example establishing a structured approach to customer involvement, improving void turnaround times, delivery of the capital programme and being a key partner in the development of GM procure.
- 317** SHL have established a track record in delivering improvements through effective project management. The ALMO 'go live' project has been delivered through an enhanced project management approach which improved the way projects were planned and resulted in the positive establishment of the ALMO, alongside the maintenance and improvement of existing service delivery.
- 318** Performance has systematically improved across a range of PI, both national BVPI and local Performance Indicators (PI), over the last three years. Performance against individual PI's is detailed in Appendix 1.
- 319** There is evidence of very positive, clear and discernible customer benefits being delivered particularly when measured against a significant programme of change. The Council and SH have effectively delivered the governance structure for the ALMO, which has resulted in the smooth transition to the ALMO. Strong and effective management has meant that there has been no reduction in service for customers, during the period of change. Clear customer benefits include:
- introduction of lettable standard;
 - improvements in repairs performance;
 - delivery of improvement works;
 - establishment of district forums;
 - incentives for clear rent accounts and more ways to pay rent;
 - estate improvement budgets;
 - customer profiles;
 - accompanied viewings; and
 - estate inspections.
- 320** Customers have also influenced a number of improvements, which include:
- for example a deaf person has assisted in installing loop systems into reception areas;
 - development of customer handbook;
 - developed service standards;

- development of repairs handbook; and
 - revised role of scheme managers has meant that hours worked are consistent across schemes and are accessible to residents during the day.
- 321** SHL have risk assessed plans and built in contingencies for those plans where either the risks are high or the impact great. For example a high impact risk such as not accessing additional ALMO funding has a clear contingency plan that has been developed jointly by SMBC with SH.
- 322** During this inspection Stockport Homes responded positively and quickly to concerns raised. For example the lack of fully effective gas monitoring reports has now been addressed.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 323** In our previous inspection, we found that that the Council had developed a strong best value corporate framework but the repairs best value review was limited in extent and incomplete in many areas. The repairs improvement plan was ambitious and, if achieved, would give significant change to the repair service. Despite recent improvements with communication and staff appraisal many procedures were still applied inconsistently. This needed to be addressed to ensure customers were dealt with fairly and consistently.
- 324** In this inspection, we found that Stockport Homes has used best value principles and project management tools to develop plans for improvement. Staff, tenants and board members effectively challenge plans. There are Customer Action Groups in place where customers are systematically consulted and these groups are used as a mechanism for service improvement and development.
- 325** Stockport Homes uses comparisons with other organisations through benchmarking and through best practice to develop service improvement requirements.
- 326** SHL applies the principle of competition to areas of improvement. All services are challenged and open to review. For example the review of service contracts includes the options to procure externally. This approach helps to develop services that are measured against both cost and quality.
- 327** The quality of plans is strong, being comprehensive and tackling the right things. The organisation has clear aims and objectives which are cascaded from the organisation-wide Service Improvement Plan (SIP) into team and individual plans, which are monitored through monthly team and individual meetings. Actions are linked to corporate aims and targets and risk to the organisation is assessed for non-completion. Progress against the SIP is assessed on a monthly basis and exception reports ensure that actions are monitored, redefined, added or updated regularly to ensure that the SIP is a working document and able to respond to legislative, sector or environmental changes. This approach supports a culture of continuous improvement.

- 328** Effective performance management arrangements are in place to drive and monitor progress and review impact. The service manages performance through its SIP and project management principles are applied to monitor the plan. Improvement planning is supported by use of a balanced scorecard to monitor progress against targets. A performance sub group of the board monitors performance with exceptions and performance failures reported on and in one example the performance sub group called in the manager of a service to challenge an issue of failure. SHL has recognised the importance of communicating this to staff and so has introduced quarterly performance reviews of the scorecard at housing management training meetings.
- 329** Plans and objectives are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. The budget and SIP are developed in tandem. There is a clear connection running from the business plan, through other plans and strategies, with the performance management system feeding a cycle of planning, review and implementation throughout the organisation.
- 330** SHL is not systematically monitoring and managing performance across all service areas. For example it is not measuring satisfaction and timescales for the delivery of adaptations and allocation refusal data is not systematically used at a local level to reduce refusals. As a result opportunities to further develop services may be being missed.
- 331** Budget information provided to managers is currently underdeveloped. Budget information and year end date is provided for managers but monthly information focused on variances is due to be systematically introduced with effect from this month. This information will allow a more focused and accountable approach to managing financial performance at all levels and corrective action can be more clearly detailed and tracked.
- 332** SHL has a programme, based on risk, to renew internally provided services. All service contracts with the Council are being reviewed with a completion date of September 2006 in place. Services will be reviewed on both quality and costs and services will be externalised where this is considered to be the best option for Stockport Homes and its customers.
- 333** Stockport Homes Limited has a clear medium-term vision, which sets out what it wants to achieve over the life of its five-year business plan. This is translated, in the annual delivery plan, into tangible and achievable objectives for service improvement. Objectives are based on a sound understanding of the challenges the ALMO faces.
- 334** SHL has effective, visible and active management. The leadership of the organisation sets the tone by its enthusiasm, commitment and a desire to provide excellent services. The organisation has a culture of openness and mutual respect which is supported and reinforced with staff by the acronyms SMILE (support, motivated, innovate, learn, enjoy) and PRIDE (performance orientated, risk taking, influential, developing, efficient). As a result staff are clear about and actively part of the culture of the organisation.

- 335** Staff are effectively supported to undertake their roles. SHL can demonstrate a commitment to training and developing its staff. Training and development needs are identified through the appraisal process, with core training for all housing management teams provided through a weekly training programme. This programme was recently evaluated by staff, and their feedback will inform the development of a wider training strategy. Feedback from staff indicated that they felt that SHL was positive about training and supported their development.
- 336** SHL has developed performance management systems which drive improved value for money. All reports contain VFM considerations, the SIP contains a column to identify VFM considerations and there is a VFM sub group in place to focus and challenge VFM across the performance of the organisation.
- 337** Stockport Homes is pro-active in seeking learning from its own experiences and from good practice established elsewhere. Staff share information at team meetings and weekly training sessions. They have learned from TPAS, for example, that introducing separate booklets to form a customer handbook is easy and more cost effective to update.
- 338** SHL has an effective sound customer feedback framework. There is a customer feedback policy in place which sets out customer expectation and is widely publicised. There are a number of examples of outcomes from feedback, these demonstrate that SHL listens to its customers, learns and responds to feedback. and include:
- ASB surgeries now held in District Teams to improve access for customers;
 - sign up checklist produced to ensure customers issued with correct keys;
 - housing options advice now written up and sent out following interviews to ensure no misunderstandings; and
 - following customers being unhappy/confused that homelessness points reduce from 40 to 30 after six weeks, this is being fed into the forthcoming Allocations Review with a recommendation that it is simplified to a single points award that doesn't change; and
 - residents of temporary accommodation schemes have an annual 'wish list' exercise which has resulted in provision of modular buildings and window replacements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 339** In our previous inspection, we found impressive dedication and enthusiasm by both staff and tenant representatives to improve the repair service. It was important however that delivery of these improvements did not rely on a few key individuals, whether staff or tenant representatives, as sustainable improvement depended on a broad ownership of the programme.
- 340** In this inspection, we found that there is continued enthusiasm and vitality among staff and customers, to improve services. Customer involvement has widened and there is a sense that all stakeholders have ownership of the programme to improve.

- 341 SHL has strong leadership and is effectively managed. The ALMO board, council and SHL have a clear joint vision of the role of the ALMO in delivering effective and responsive services to customers. The management and governance structures of the organisation have developed a service improvement plan that reflects the organisations ambitions and agenda for continuous improvement to adapt to a changing environment.
- 342 The aims of the ALMO are clear, explicit and provide a challenging context for the future development of the organisation and its services. SHL recognises that cross-cutting issues such as diversity, can be mainstreamed in the organisation and focuses on issues of social inclusion; sustainability and the needs of vulnerable people.
- 343 There are effective decision-making structures in place. The system of Board and sub groups structure works well for the ALMO. Three sub groups covering areas of VFM; performance and human resources have been established with clear terms of reference. They focus on specific areas in detail, essentially undertaking the role of scrutiny whilst allowing the board to address more strategic, overarching issues. The day to day business of the organisation is delegated to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and five directors. Officers and members indicated that the structure was appropriate and met both the interests of the organisation and residents.
- 344 There is a structured approach to the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources. Budgets are linked to corporate objectives and used to address areas of underperformance. For example the use of the budgets in a strategic manner will help the ALMO reach its objectives.
- 345 SHL has successfully developed a strong corporate identity, brand and image, in short period of time. This demonstrates the ALMO's commitment to delivering improvements to its local communities and supports the ALMO in its move from a Council delivered service.
- 346 SHL has successfully delivered an ambitious agenda for change. The ALMO structure has been developed, staff transferred and the organisation is delivering clear customer focused outcomes across services.
- 347 Capacity to deliver outcomes has been maximised through effective Human Resources (HR) and Performance Management (PM) systems. Board members, senior staff and frontline staff were clear about the key aims and objectives of the ALMO. The commitment and enthusiasm we found across all areas of the organisation was impressive and supported the ethos of a 'can do' culture in the organisation.
- 348 HR management is effective. Staff are effectively supported through a Personal Development Plan (PDP) appraisal system and delivery of appropriate training to address their identified needs. SHL has a clear knowledge of their staff profile and are using this to address areas of inequality. For example there is currently an under representation BME staff in the estate management section of the organisation, two PATH trainee posts have been developed within the service area. SHL has also worked with Employment Services to offer work shadowing opportunities for disadvantaged job applicants.

There are some weaknesses in this area as there are no formal HR and Training and development strategies in place to deliver a strategic approach to these areas. However, the HR strategy is currently in draft form and is to be submitted to the July board meeting.

- 349** SHL recognises the need for high quality and well trained staff. Staff turnover in the organisation is relatively low. There are clear policies and procedures in place, sickness levels are reducing (absence levels at 4 per cent for May target for year is nine and a half days based on previous performance of 11 days) with staff and resource planning, and responses to sickness issues are effectively supported by the human resources section. Front line staff indicated that SHL is a staff focused organisation which has an emphasis on work life balance. This is demonstrated by staff friendly policies which are in place to support staff needs and include compressed hours, reduced hours and flexitime. The need to retain and reward staff has been recognised and exceptional performance can be rewarded through PDP process by incremental increases and grade changes. Although staff appear well motivated and positive about the organisation, there is no formal evidence of staff attitude to the organisation as no staff surveys have been undertaken since SHL was established, although this is currently being considered.
- 350** Training is used to enhance the knowledge and skills in the organisation. Staff are well trained and generally equipped to do their jobs. Training is offered to staff in their roles. In addition to the annual appraisal of staff and the associated training plan, we have come across arrangements for specific briefing/training which has been delivered, for example at the Wednesday afternoon training sessions in housing management and operatives toolbox talks, to increase the effectiveness of staff.
- 351** There is good mix of skills at senior management team level and sufficient capacity to drive improvement. A number of senior and middle managers have been recruited from outside the organisation to address skills gaps and the ALMO has created appropriate specialist posts in the structure to meet new business challenges.
- 352** Performance monitoring and management is good. There is an effective appraisal system in place which develops targets and objectives for individuals which link to team, service and corporate targets. Performance reporting uses traffic light and balanced scorecard systems to focus of key issues, with exceptions effectively flagged and reported.
- 353** SHL is risk aware. A corporate risk register is in place which includes the risks associated with operating the management agreement and sets out the key risks which could impact on delivery of DHS, improvements in service quality or on the reputation or financial standing of the Company. This approach is cascaded through the business planning process and all reports to the Board must identify and detail any risks to the business.

- 354** SHL has an effective VFM strategy in place. In order to fully embed the principle across services, VFM is a consideration on all reports submitted and is an element of the service improvement planning process. This approach raises the profile of VFM to all staff and supports the organisation in its aim to fully embed a VFM culture.
- 355** Systematic benchmarking across services is developing. Benchmarking is undertaken to compare organisation, management costs and costs per function. SHL uses a number of routes for comparison which include Housemark and the Best Practice Group to update cost models and comparing costs. Additional comparisons, for example, with other consortiums in the country have identified that contracts recently awarded to contractors and suppliers are low cost, representing VFM.
- 356** Budget setting and monitoring is primarily the role of the Finance team. Although managers are involved in budget monitoring, they are not fully involved in budget setting and do not have budget responsibility clearly devolved to them. Greater involvement would further develop the accountability and ownership of service areas.
- 357** Governance arrangements between the council and SHL are strong. The council and ALMO have a positive and mutually supportive relationship. The council see SHL as having a significant part to play in delivering some key council objectives, for example around crime and disorder and community safety. Some services are delivered in partnership, for example the ASB helpline and link into wider corporate objectives such as the Safer Stockport partnership. Stockport council is already planning its response to the Respect agenda and sees SHL as having a major role to play in delivering against the agenda.
- 358** There is an appropriate arms length management relationship between organisation the council and SHL. The council has shown maturity in its support for the development of the ALMO. Both parties are very clear about their respective roles, with council having clear expectations that the ALMO will deliver outcomes through its operational role. Although supportive of the ALMO the council is clear that in reviewing, for example, the SLA/ contracts the ALMO can look at services delivered outside the council and if others offer better VFM then there is no pressure on SHL to remain with the council as evidenced by the externalising property services.
- 359** The council effectively manages the performance of the ALMO. There is a clear monitoring structure in place which consists of monthly meetings and quarterly performance reviews. A dedicated ALMO policy and monitoring officer is in post within the strategic housing function. The officer not only undertakes the monitoring role but also acts as the link with the ALMO in developing strategies and key policies such as homelessness; allocations; community development and crime and disorder. As a result mutual aims of the council and those of the ALMO can be organised and developed.

- 360** There is a clear commitment to diversity issues by officers and board members. Diversity is seen as intertwined with customer care and access and is an intrinsic part of the service delivery. SHL has worked pro-actively to embed diversity across the organisation. Equality and diversity implications are detailed on all reports and there is a Diversity improvement officer, a diversity champion on the Board; and diversity representatives in all service teams. Overarching customer care standards incorporate diversity standards and work alongside service specific standards to ensure a consistent approach.
- 361** SHL governance arrangements are working well. Board members demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm. Considering the board was only formally established in 2005, development has been successful.
- 362** There is evidence of a cohesive and challenging Board. Board reports are presented in a readable format which allows members to make appropriate and well informed decisions. They include key information on proposals being made, including financial implications, risk assessment, consultation with the tenants, arrangements for monitoring, evaluation and review. The board meetings we attended were well run with opportunity for discussion and debate. Board members challenged and questioned reports presented and the overall impression is one of an effective decision-making structure which provides leadership and direction for SHL.
- 363** The involvement of tenant board members in board meetings is highly effective. They are well informed about issues being discussed and ask challenging questions informed by their experiences as tenants. Examples include requesting a budget expenditure breakdown for responsive repairs to assess how this is committed, requesting DDA compliance to have a higher profile within the asset management strategy, and challenging how tenants not benefiting from property improvements due to the current DHS compliance of their properties will be informed to ensure they are not dissatisfied with this decision. Overall this adds value to the activities of SHL with business decisions being informed by tenant priorities for the service.
- 364** The board is able to monitor the performance of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The performance of the CEO is formally assessed through appraisals by the Chair of the Board and the Chair of the Human Resources committee. This makes the CEO accountable, evaluates performance and sets clear goals for the future.
- 365** Effective support is provided to Board members. A governance officer supports the board in terms of administration, development and training. A Governance Improvement Plan has been developed. As a new board SHL faces challenges and has recognised the need to develop continuous learning; learn from other good practice and be able to evidence that it reviews its own performance. The GIP identifies areas of focus for the Board and Stockport Homes in order to develop and sustain strong governance. This approach will ensure that the Board will have the capacity to develop and lead Stockport Homes forward.

- 366** The Board operates effectively, with appropriate terms of reference. Board Members sign up to a Code of Conduct have access to sufficient training and a skills audit has been carried out to help identify development needs. One to one meetings with Board members have resulted in individual personal development plans, which have been developed into a Training and Development Plan for the Board. Board meetings are open to the public, and are publicised.
- 367** SHL is supporting wider long term community issues. SHL contributes to developing the job skills of the local community. For example it provides out of school training, work experience and apprenticeships for young people in the area of maintenance. This also develops the job market in the locality for it to access in future years.
- 368** SHL has invested in the developing the delivery of effective IT systems to support staff. There is a new IT system in place; an IT manager has been appointed and investment in hardware for training is being developed. However there are some weaknesses in this area. SH does not have an approved IT strategy in place and ICT processes are not fully developed across all services. Although there are systems in place, staff are not all utilising their functionality and as a result information may not be effectively shared across services and this may limit the ability of the organisation to deliver some customer focused improvements.
- 369** SHL has recognised that IT training is underdeveloped and as a result has identified high risk users to target refresher training. A training suite is being established and it is planned that 200 staff will undertake two estates module training next month. IT systems are not fully rolled out to all staff. A plan is in place to extend IT services to concierge service, wardens and scheme managers. A practical approach has been taken to rolling out to these staff with for example a pilot being operated in a sheltered scheme to demonstrate the systems and reduce barriers from users. Skills sets in terms of IT needs have been established and the free e-services courses are being used to support skills.
- 370** SHL does not currently have its own intranet site. Staff currently utilise the councils site to access SHL policies, procedures and information. However the lack of its own site means that some policies and procedures are being kept by staff in a variety of places. SHL is missing the opportunity to have an independent site, with its own identity where wide organisational information can be provided for staff. As a result SHL is missing the opportunity to reinforce its identity with staff and to have a site that is easily accessible and meets the specific needs of its staff.

Summary

- 371** Our judgement is that SHL has 'excellent prospects' for improvement. There is strong and effective leadership for the ALMO. The ALMO board, council and SHL have a clear joint vision of the role of the ALMO in delivering effective and responsive services to customers. Staff morale is good and there is clear direction for the organisation. Innovative approaches have been taken, for example, in addressing the delivery of improvements through GM Procure.

- 372** Stockport Homes has addressed the recommendations of previous inspections and is improving the things which matter most to customers. This is particularly relevant given the age of the ALMO.
- 373** There is clear enthusiasm and vitality among staff and customers, to improve services. Customer involvement has widened and is a key component to service development and improvement, and there is a sense that all stakeholders have ownership of the programme to improve.
- 374** A culture of continuous improvement is embedded and there are appropriate arm's length relationships with the council. Robust planning and effective performance management systems have allowed SHL to focus on service delivery. The board is mature and is developing and strengthening its role.
- 375** The culture and ethos of the organisation supports the positive pace of change which is evident throughout the organisation and staff are fully supported to deliver their roles.
- 376** However the slow implementation of a fully effective ICT provision, currently limits the further improvement to services in some areas.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 5 Stockport performance indicators 2003/4 - 2004/05

Performance indicator	Stockport 2003/04	Stockport 2004/05	Mets top quartile 2004/05
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	65	71	64
BVPI 66a Percentage rent collected	94.7	95.6	97.69
BVPI 74 Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	-	76	81
BVPI 75 Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	59	68
BV184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	44*	44	43
BV184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	-18.5	4.5	11.3
BV185 Percentage repairs appointments made and kept	23.9	27.7	75
H15 The average length of stay in hostel accommodation of households which include dependent children or pregnant women and which are unintentionally homeless and in priority need	-	11	21.3
H14 The average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation	-	0	-

Source: ODPM

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed and reality checks completed

- 1 Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed documents as requested on our standard document request list and a number of additional documents which Stockport Homes and the council felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.
- 2 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. Reality checks included customer focus groups, file checks, observations at meetings and shadowing staff.
- 3 A range of people were interviewed including the chief executive, management team members, service managers, Board members, council leader and cabinet member and the council strategic housing director. We also met a range of other people including frontline staff and customers and held a number of focus groups with partner agencies and frontline staff. Observation of Board meetings and CAG was also undertaken.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

- Kennels at temporary accommodation.
- Effective IT arrangements for monitoring whether repairs have been completed in one visit.
- Staff culture and morale on the ground; approach to production of culture and values [SMILE and PRIDE].
- Website (Bobby approved) including:
 - interactive CBL website – at the forefront of CBL websites providing properties for viewing with photographs, on line bidding and registration, customer feedback facility and information in different languages.
- Proactive home visits and fortnightly phone calls to non English speaking customers.
- Customer Care Kits.
- By accessing Drug Action Team funds for a Homelessness Outreach Drug Worker the Homelessness Service benefits from an award winning service tackling one of the key underlying causes of homelessness.
- Mediation Scheme; an innovative approach to the prevention of youth homelessness - it seeks to prevent homelessness by mediating between the young person and their parents, identifying the causes of conflict and eliminating such so the young person can continue to live at home.
- The 'Falls Service' provided by Carecall represents excellent value for money for customers and the Borough of Stockport. Carecall attends an equal number of falls in Stockport as the Ambulance Service and is one of the few mobile warden services to operate a 'falls service' and results in savings for the Primary Care Trust.
- HB verification pilot.
- GM Procure delivers good VFM.
- Governance Improvement Plan – puts forward the adoption of Governance PIs, which are currently under consultation.
- VFM Action Plan with targets, including use of e-purchasing and balance of front line and central support costs, approved by Board and monitored by Board VFM Sub-group.