

Housing Association Inspection Report

January 2007



Housing Association Inspection

Chevin Housing Association

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 2007

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 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Housing Association Inspections	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	9
Report	13
Context	13
The locality	13
The Association	13
The service	14
Scope of the inspection	15
How good is the service?	16
What has the service aimed to achieve?	16
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	16
Access and customer care	16
Diversity	20
Stock investment and asset management	23
Income management	31
Dealing with anti-social behaviour	34
Is the service delivering value for money?	37
How do costs compare?	38
How is value for money managed?	38
Summary	41
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	42
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	42
How well does the service manage performance?	43
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	46
Summary	49
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	50
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed	52
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken	53
Appendix 4 – Positive practice	54

Housing Association Inspections

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

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

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Chevin Housing Group provides a good housing service which has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Chevin is a customer focused organisation, with services developed in line with customer feedback. Information provided to tenants and residents is of a high standard and profiling information is known on the majority of tenants and their households, including vulnerability and preferred communication. There is a strong approach to housing investment and regeneration with a clear commitment to improving the quality of homes and sustainability of schemes. Voids performance is improving, with homes relet at a high standard. Rent collection is improving, and the organisation is proactive in helping to prevent debt and reduce the level of arrears. Specialist tenancy support services are available to support vulnerable tenants in sustaining tenancies. There is proactive approach to tackling anti-social behaviour with strong action and enforcement, support for victims and prevention work. Partnership working is used to improve efficiency, quality of services and value for money.
- 3 However, there are a number of areas which require further improvement. Access to services outside working hours is limited. The complaints process is not working effectively and does not allow for systematic learning. There are weaknesses in the performance and cost effectiveness of repairs, but these have begun to be addressed through the Lean Fundamental review of the service. The approach to adaptations is weak, with long average waiting times for major adaptations. There is lack of focus on former tenants' arrears, resulting in a loss of income to the organisation. There is limited clear information on the cost and quality of individual services, impacting on the ability to demonstrate and identify further value for money improvements.
- 4 The organisation is committed to improving services and there is a sustainable rate of improvement which reflects priority areas. The organisation is self-aware and responds positively to feedback from customers, staff and other organisations. There is a positive track record of change resulting in improved services for customers. The Lean Fundamentals approach is delivering a step change in the quality and cost effectiveness of the repairs services, and there is a commitment to apply this approach to other service areas. There is strong leadership provided by the Board and Group Management Team, and effective human resource management in place. Financial Management is robust and financial resources are healthy.
- 5 However there are a number of barriers to improvement. There are some weaknesses in performance management and performance reporting. Improvement planning is inconsistent across the organisation with some plans not SMART or fully resourced. ICT systems are not fully integrated and capacity of systems is not maximised.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Chevin Housing Association as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- a commitment to customer care which is understood throughout the organisation;
 - service standards developed with service user involvement covering most areas;
 - high standard and user friendly information provided to tenants and residents;
 - a strong corporate commitment and effective leadership for diversity and equal opportunities;
 - tenant and household profiles known for majority of tenants including vulnerability and preferred communication;
 - a strong approach to racial harassment which is dealt with to the satisfaction of victims;

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

- a strong approach to housing investment and regeneration;
- a robust asset management framework and investment matrix used as the framework for stock investment decisions;
- good progress made in meeting the decent homes target;
- improving voids performance with relet times reducing and a high standard of voids;
- efficient arrangements for gas servicing backed by robust access arrangements;
- recent improvements of the repairs service achieved through the Lean Fundamentals review of the service;
- a range of flexible payments options and clear regular rent statements;
- officers who are proactive in helping prevent debt and reduce the level of arrears;
- strong and improving rent collection;
- specialist money and debt advice available to vulnerable tenants through the tenancy support service;
- a proactive approach to tackling anti-social behaviour with evidence of strong action and enforcement, support for victims and prevention work;
- an open and transparent procurement framework and robust procurement decisions; and
- partnership working to improve efficiency, quality of services and value for money.

8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- a complaints process which is not robust and does not allow systematic learning;
- monitoring of compliance with service standards is not embedded;
- an under-developed website with limited online services;
- access to services is limited outside office hours;
- limited focus until recently on the wider diversity agenda;
- a weak approach to dealing with domestic violence;
- limited opportunities for the involvement of specific and minority groups in service development;
- limited tenant involvement in the development of the investment programme and the standards to which properties are improved;
- weaknesses in relation to the performance and cost effectiveness of responsive repairs;
- high cost repairs to empty properties, with the organisation unable to demonstrate cost effectiveness;

8 Housing Association Inspection | Scoring the service

- weak adaptation procedures, with long average waiting times for major adaptations;
- a lack of focus on former tenant arrears and high levels of write off;
- limited understanding of the outcomes of the anti-social behaviour service;
- anti-social behaviour complainants not consistently involved in developing plans of action, or agreeing case closure; and
- a lack of clear and accurate information on the cost and quality of services.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a strong track record of improving services with customer benefits;
- service reviews with customer involvement are used to improve services;
- there is a commitment by the organisation to use the Lean Fundamentals approach to improve efficiency and service quality;
- customer and staff feedback, and learning from other organisations is used to develop services;
- value for money is improving;
- a clear ten-year Corporate Plan reinforced with department plans is in place;
- effective leadership is provided by Board and Group Management Team;
- financial management is robust and financial resources are healthy;
- additional resources are attracted to support delivery of aims and objectives;
- effective human resource management is in place; and
- resources are aligned to meet service delivery priorities.

10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- best use is not made of available information to monitor and manage performance, and develop services;
- a gap in gathering evidence to measure success and the impact of recent improvements, particularly in relation to outcomes for service users;
- a lack of formal systems to evaluate, manage action and feedback following benchmarking and external learning;
- improvement planning is inconsistent with some plans in place which are not SMART or fully resourced; and
- ICT systems are not fully integrated and capacity not maximised.

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 Association shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members, and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Develop a strategic approach to managing the aids and adaptations service by:

- *reviewing and prioritising the backlog of adaptations;*
- *taking action to reduce the backlog;*
- *introducing performance targets and monitoring service standards and customer satisfaction;*
- *recording all adaptations completed against adaptations expenditure; and*
- *increasing the use of Occupational Therapist assessments to prioritise the need for larger adaptations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved support to enable tenants to live independently;
- reduction in the time taken for high priority adaptations; and
- improved value for money for the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

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 cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

- R2 Strengthen performance management and improvement planning by:*
- *developing an improvement planning framework to be applied across the organisation incorporating SMART resourced action plans;*
 - *reviewing existing performance reports and reporting frameworks to address weaknesses highlighted in the report;*
 - *developing outcome measures for all key areas of business; and*
 - *formally monitoring areas of performance where gaps currently exist, for example, anti-social behaviour.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved use of performance data for service improvement; and
- more effective planning and performance management outcomes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2007.

Recommendation

- R3 Improve the complaints procedure and learning from complaints by:*
- *reviewing the complaints policy and systems for managing complaints;*
 - *removing the barriers which exist in reporting complaints;*
 - *monitoring satisfaction with how complaints are handled and the outcomes; and*
 - *ensuring the systematic learning of all complaints made to the organisation.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved access to complaints;
- improved handling of complaints and customer satisfaction;
- earlier identification of service failure; and
- improvements to service delivery as a result of complaints.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

Recommendation

R4 Improve the collection of former tenants arrears by:

- *reviewing the current process and aligning with the arrangements for the new debt collection agency;*
- *identifying and training appropriate officers for the collection of former tenant arrears;*
- *developing a procedure for pre tenancy terminations; and*
- *introducing regular monitoring of collection rates.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduction in the level of former tenants arrears at tenancy termination;
- increased collection rates; and
- improved cost effectiveness of the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

Recommendation

R5 Improve information available on costs of services and value for money assessments by:

- *identifying and continually monitoring individual service costs;*
- *establishing systematic methods for comparing costs and quality to other service providers; and*
- *extending the use of benchmarking to enable more meaningful comparison with peers.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a stronger basis for planning to improve efficiency and value for money; and
- decision making which is based on greater appreciation of the cost and quality of services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2007.

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

Dates of inspection: 30 October to 3 November 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 The Chevin Housing Group operates across 19 local authorities in Yorkshire, Humberside and the North Midlands. The organisation is responsible for just over 6,000 general rented properties with concentrations in Wakefield (992 properties), Leeds (668 properties), Kirklees (582 properties) and Sheffield (498 properties). There are a number of outlying areas where the organisation has small levels of stock. For example, York (12 properties), Bassetlaw (34 properties), Hull (34 properties) and Craven (43 properties).
- 14 Within the region there are a number of housing markets with very different problems and issues. These range from under-supply and high demand in North Yorkshire to over-supply and low demand in parts of South and West Yorkshire and the Humber. Changes in demographics and household projections provide new challenges for the region. Over 21 per cent of the region's population are over 60 and over 4 per cent are over 80.
- 15 The region faces significant challenges to improve the quality of its existing stock. Non-decency rates across all tenure are the second highest of the regions in England. The 2001 English House Condition Survey estimated that 14.9 per cent of households in the region are fuel poor, which is the second worst of the regions in England.

The Association

- 16 Chevin has been formed through series of mergers and acquisitions over the last 14 years. The most recent events shaping the current structure are Chantry Housing Association joining with Harewood Housing Association in 2001. The structure created resulted in Chantry and Harewood retaining stock and management and maintenance responsibilities with Chevin remaining as the parent. In 2003, Chantry transferred its engagements to Chevin. Harewood also transferred its rented accommodation to Chevin, but retained the small number of leasehold properties to add to the portfolio of private sector leasehold properties. Chevin is the charitable parent of Harewood Housing Society which is a non charitable housing association registered with the Housing Corporation.

- 17 In 2004 Hallam Housing Society transferred engagements into Chevin Housing Association. The majority of Hallam's homes were in South Yorkshire which consolidated Chevin's existing ownership in that area and enabled benefits to be derived from more efficient management. The resulting Group now owns and manages over 6,000 rented homes, around 500 leasehold and RTB homes and manages a further 750 private sector leasehold homes. The majority of the Group's stock has been built since the 1970s, and is a mixture of new build and refurbished properties. The 700 ex British Coal homes inherited from UKHT are older with some built in the early 1900s.
- 18 A wholly owned company, Synergy Housing Solutions, delivers the development programme on behalf of Chevin and other members of the Synergy partnership. In 2004 the Group established the Synergy partnership to act as a development partner with the Housing Corporation. The partnership now consists of eight member housing associations (Wakefield District Housing, Arches HA, Broadacres HA, Connect HA, Pennine 2k, Sadeh Lok and Yorkshire Coast Homes), managing a total of 65,000 homes. Chevin, as the lead partner, is responsible for the delivery of the £90 million development programme in 2006/08 producing 1,000 homes. Synergy members are working to improve efficiency and reduce costs across development and maintenance, through joint procurement and benchmarking, and are beginning to look at improving efficiency and performance across other areas of work.
- 19 The Chevin Board consists of 13 members including 2 tenant members. The Board provides strategic direction for the organisation including business planning, planning of investment programmes, financial control, and performance monitoring of the group and partners. This is supported by an Operations Committee focusing on service delivery, performance monitoring and service engagement. The Harewood Board is responsible for the service to the group's leaseholders and private sector companies for the management of their leasehold properties.

The service

- 20 The service is delivered from four office bases located in Wakefield, Guiseley, Selby and Sheffield, and from a depot in Pontefract. Central functions are managed from the Wakefield office including policy and service development, human resources, and finance. A centrally based customer services team handles telephone calls into the organisation. Four area based teams deliver housing management services including caretaking, cleaning and warden services.
- 21 The organisation employs 170 full time equivalent staff, and is managed by a seven member group management team. Chevin has been awarded Investors in People since 1996, with the most recent award in 2006.
- 22 The group is operating to a budget of £22.957 million in 2006/07 for managing homes, maintaining homes and redevelopment, including £6.936 million for capital works. Chevin is the lead partner within the Synergy Group, responsible for delivery of the £90 million development programme in 2006/08 producing 1,000 homes.

- 23 The group manages over 6,000 rented homes comprising 5,667 general needs rented properties, and 463 supported housing properties. The group is responsible for 500 leasehold Right to Buy Homes and 750 private sector leasehold properties. For the general needs properties the main property types are 1 bedroom flats (1,654 properties), 2 bedroom houses (1,272 properties) and 2 bedroom flats (1,117 properties).

Scope of the inspection

- 24 The inspection covered general needs housing. We did not inspect leasehold housing, supported housing or sheltered housing. When assessing how good the existing service is we looked at:
- access and customer care;
 - diversity;
 - stock investment and asset management;
 - housing income management;
 - dealing with anti-social behaviour; and
 - value for money.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 The Corporate Plan 2006-2016 sets out the strategy for Chevin Housing Group over the next ten years, and states how the organisation will work towards its vision and deliver against the key objectives.
- 26 The vision of the Chevin Housing Group is:
- 'Building a better future for people and communities.'*
- 27 This is supported by five key objectives:
- to provide and develop good quality homes in sustainable communities;
 - to develop greater customer focus, enabling choice and involvement across all services;
 - to work efficiently with a focus on creating improved front line services;
 - to operate in a fair, open and accountable manner; and
 - to be a well governed, well managed organisation and an employer of choice.
- 28 The Corporate Plan makes relevant links to national and regional priorities and strategies. The Group has adopted the NHF's; iN Business for Neighbourhoods manifesto with a focus on creating and sustaining safe and secure neighbourhoods where people want to live. Links are made to the delivery of the Regional Housing Strategy for the Yorkshire and Humberside area. The commitments made in the Corporate Plan are reflected in organisational strategies and in targets for teams and individuals.

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

Access and customer care

- 29 This is an area where there are more strengths than weaknesses. The organisation has a strong corporate approach to customer care and is customer focused. Customers are consulted on and increasingly involved in the development and monitoring of services. Services provided are tailored to meet the needs of tenants and residents. Chevin is committed to involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing services. Service standards are in place for most services. However the regular monitoring and testing of service standards is very recent. Access to services is limited to office hours and the website is under-developed. The complaints procedure is not effective, with no systematic monitoring or learning.

- 30 Chevin has a strong corporate approach to customer care that is very well understood throughout the organisation. This is reflected in the corporate objectives and values for the organisation where there is a commitment to high quality services for customers, and to understanding communities. Chevin staff are customer focused. Regular team meetings, briefings, and annual staff conferences ensure a consistent message, supplemented by training. This ensures services are provided and developed to suit customer requirements.
- 31 Standards have been set in most service areas; are generally clear and measurable, and have been developed with the involvement of customers. Details of service standards are communicated to customers in a comprehensive leaflet covering all key service areas and are promoted in newsletters, in offices and are given to new tenants in sign-up packs. Standards provide clear commitments to tenants, are relevant to customers and address the main aspects of each service area. Customers know what standards to expect when using a service.
- 32 Regular monitoring and testing of service standards is not embedded. New service standards have only recently been implemented and performance data has only started to be collected. The methods of monitoring and testing standards are identified. Mystery shoppers and satisfaction surveys test 'unquantifiable' measures such as helpfulness of staff. There is a Consumer Panel in place for South Yorkshire enabling tenants to monitor the performance of estate services through estate walkabouts, meeting with contractors and checking the quality of work delivered. Until performance is measured, reported and analysed across all areas, Chevin will not know if it is meeting standards and be able to identify key areas for improvement.
- 33 The quality of information for tenants and residents is high. Consistent branding is applied to the majority of publications and leaflets. There is a wide range of leaflets in place covering all the main areas of service. Most leaflets are in plain English, some with the Crystal Mark award. The quarterly tenant newsletter, Chevin Views, is informative and user friendly. This focuses on areas which matter to tenants, with articles covering a wide range of services and initiatives, and with contributions from tenants. Leaflets are edited by the tenants' panels prior to publication. Tenants state a high level of satisfaction with information, and 87 per cent stated they were kept well informed in the 2005 STATUS survey.
- 34 Services are accessible during standard office hours and Chevin has responded positively to the challenges presented by the geography of the stock and limited accessibility to local offices. Provision is shifting from the local offices to telephone hotlines in line with customer feedback. Services are delivered through a freephone repairs hotline and a low cost number for a centrally based customer services team. A reduction of office use enables housing officers to spend more time on schemes, and visiting tenants in their home. Contact numbers are clearly publicised on all leaflets and communication to customers. This improves access to customers in line with their requirements.

- 35 However, accessibility to services is limited. Some tenants do not know who their local officer is and are not aware of their increased presence on schemes. Telephone services are only provided from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, with emergency repairs as the only out of office hours service. Telephone information indicates there is a demand for increased hours. For example, in October 2006 713 calls were received between 8am to 9am and 5pm to 6pm, with the majority of these calls passed to voicemail. The quality of service tenants receive when contacting the organisation by phone is inconsistent. Generally the initial enquiry is responded to promptly. Calls are generally not concluded at the first point of contact and customers receive a variable service when calls are passed on to other teams and offices. Whilst the use of voicemail has been restricted following customer feedback, a number of calls are still passed to voicemail. There is no published measurable standard for dealing with telephone calls. This means the organisation is unable to report its performance against the service standard for call answering.
- 36 The monitoring of the quality of customer care is under developed for the telephone service. The organisation has piloted the use of telephone call back surveys to check satisfaction but this was not embedded at the time of the inspection as the information gathered has not been used to inform services. There is limited call monitoring or analysis of performance. Reports do not provide key information such as the average response time, or abandoned calls for the repair line and there are delays in obtaining reports from the telephone company. Targets and benchmarks are not in place. This information is not routinely reported in the key performance reports. This means the organisation is unable to monitor the telephone service it is providing to customers.
- 37 Chevin is committed to involving tenants and residents in the review and improvement of services. There are two tenant members and an area panel observer on the board. Chevin provides a wide range of opportunities for customers to put forward their views and these have been developed with some input from customers. Responses to the STATUS survey were used to develop a menu of involvement. The 'Your Voice, make yourself heard' leaflet lists types of involvement with time required, and a rating of the level of influence, to enable tenants to identify how they want to be involved. Every edition of the newsletter includes articles inviting tenants to future events or groups, and provides feedback on those which have taken place. This helps ensure tenant views are considered in the development and improvement of services and made aware of the difference this has made.
- 38 There has been a shift from consultation to involvement over the last twelve months. This commitment is reflected in the draft resident involvement strategy. For example, small groups of tenants have been involved in the development of the voids standard, service standards, housing management policies, and the new website. Tenants have been involved in the equalities and diversity steering group, interviews and selection for gardening and cleaning contractors, and through the consumer panels. The organisation is unable to demonstrate the current level of satisfaction with opportunities for involvement. The latest information available is the 2005 STATUS survey where 58 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the opportunities for involvement.

- 39 Chevin has considered the geography of stock and accessibility issues when developing opportunities for involvement. In 2005, seven tenants' conferences were held with a further nine in 2006, in different locations. Four area-based tenants' panels are in place to discuss local and corporate issues. An armchair panel was established in 2005 through which over 100 tenants can put forward views on new policies from their home. Fifteen mystery shoppers are trained to test customer and estate services. This opens up the opportunities for involvement to tenants in all areas covered by the organisation.
- 40 Whilst service users are consulted, they are not always actively involved in major decisions affecting the organisation. For example, the development of the customer services team for telephone contact, and changes to opening arrangements for the area offices is based on tenant feedback on accessibility. However, tenants have not been actively involved in developing the resulting services, for example, considering how the appointments system will work, or how calls and queries will be handled.
- 41 Customer satisfaction overall is high, at 83 per cent for tenants, 88 per cent for shared owners and 68 per cent for leaseholders. Services for leaseholders are not as well developed as those for tenants. However, improvements are planned to address this based on learning from other parts of the organisation.
- 42 The Chevin website is not comprehensive. The website has limited online services, few forms can be downloaded, and there is no opportunity to complain or provide feedback. Chevin recognises this as a weakness. Recent improvements have included the introduction of online payments and the opportunity to report a repair online. Tenants are actively involved in the development, design and content of the website through the Website Advisory Group. An action plan is in place and with a new website to be launched April 2007. The current website limits access to information, particularly for those not living close to an office.
- 43 The complaints procedure is not robust and is not consistently applied across the organisation. Tenants are not always made aware of the opportunity to complain when reporting an ongoing issue or dissatisfaction with the service. The first point of contact in many cases is a housing officer or customer services officer, and is not recorded as a complaint at this stage. The current system relies on front line officers escalating a complaint to the formal complaints system, rather than customers determining when a complaint should be escalated or classified as a formal complaint. This results in tenants not having control of a complaint, and losing ownership to decide when a complaint should be escalated. The complaints procedure and associated standards are not applied consistently, and the management of complaint case file information is weak. We found instances where customers complained and did not receive a response.

- 44 There is no systematic approach to learning from complaints and no monitoring of tenant satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, or the way the complaint was handled. There is a loss of learning, with information not shared on those complaints dealt with at a local level. Performance is not systematically measured, monitored, publicised and used to drive improvements in services. Whilst diversity information is collected on the complaints form, this information does not appear to be used in the monitoring of complaints. This makes it difficult to ensure complaints are driving service improvements.

Diversity

- 45 This is an area of strength. Chevin is effectively addressing diversity with strong corporate commitment and effective leadership in relation to diversity and equal opportunities. The organisation has comprehensive information on its tenants and residents, and staff are made aware of the vulnerabilities and needs of customers. Information produced contains comprehensive straplines, and access to translation and interpretation services is effective. Good support services are provided to vulnerable tenants, and the organisation takes a proactive role to support sustainable communities. Racial harassment is dealt with effectively. However, until recently the focus has been on race with limited focus on wider diversity issues. There are some issues surrounding accessibility, and the arrangements for dealing with domestic violence are weak.
- 46 There is a strong focus on diversity, with a corporate commitment and effective leadership supporting the promotion of diversity and equal opportunities. Equality and diversity is reflected in the corporate aims, objectives and values of the organisation and leadership is provided by diversity champions. The Equalities Steering Group is responsible for driving forward the diversity agenda and includes board members and tenant representatives. Training has been delivered to staff, which supports better understanding of the diversity of colleagues and customers. A number of human resources policies are in place to support this area of work. This ensures staff and board members demonstrate a consistent message and ethos in relation to diversity.
- 47 The organisation is committed to delivering against identified good practice in this area. A comprehensive assessment against the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice for Rented Housing has been completed which indicates the organisation complies with the code. Areas for further improvement or development are identified. An assessment has been carried out against Housing Corporation Good Practice Notes four and eight in relation to diversity, with areas for improvement identified to ensure compliance. This ensures the organisation is working towards meeting the needs of all customers in line with national guidance.
- 48 Historically the focus has been on the development and delivery of the BME and Race Strategy. Recent focus is on the wider diversity agenda, supported by the Equality Steering Group. A comprehensive up to date diversity policy and action plan is not in place. However, a new policy has been drafted and is currently under consultation. This will ensure the focus of the organisation remains on the wider aspects of diversity.

- 49 Chevin has a clear understanding of its customer base following a recent customer profiling exercise of tenants and occupants. This was collected through a three phase tenant census in 2006, supported by publicity in the newsletter. Information on new tenants will be collected at the sign up interview. Information on age, gender, ethnicity, disability or worsening health conditions, communication needs, and preferred language or format for future contacts is collected. Religion has recently been introduced. Information is known for 90 per cent of Chevin tenancies. Due to the newness of the information, limited use has been made to monitor service take-up, plan and target services. However, resources and systems to use the information are in place.
- 50 The organisation monitors the performance of key services and service delivery in relation to diversity. Performance reports to the Board and Operations Committee include diversity performance indicators. For example, monitoring the ethnic origin of lettings, satisfaction measures, tenants who have had legal action and tenancy terminations and monitoring the diversity of staff and board membership. Delivery of the BME and Race Strategy is reported to the Equality Steering Group and the Board. This ensures the organisation is aware of its current position and performance.
- 51 There are a number of strengths in relation to the accessibility of services. The use of Language Line is clearly promoted in area offices. A DDA compliance audit has been carried out at the area offices, and three of the four offices are certified as compliant. An action plan is in place to further improve access. All leaflets and literature produced from 2006 onwards has translated introductory sentences to explain what the leaflet is about and how to access the document in an alternative format. This covers the majority of leaflets. This supports customers in accessing services and information.
- 52 However, accessibility is limited for some service users. One area office is not DDA compliant and potential adaptation is limited. Chevin is tied into a long lease and is investigating the cost of early lease termination or sub letting opportunities. Officers respond by increasing the level of home visits, or making use of alternative venues. Leaflets do not carry the large print icon indicating to customers that they can request this document in large print. Information produced by contractors does not include translation straplines. There is no Braille signage or access to Minicom systems in offices.
- 53 Arrangements are in place to provide additional support to those who require it to sustain their tenancy. Staff are aware of tenants who are vulnerable, potentially dangerous or have particular needs. A 'flag' is on the system to alert where there is further information on a tenant's need or vulnerability. However, this information is not transferred to repairs orders. There is a basic strategy for vulnerable tenants in place. Vulnerable tenants receive additional support through four locally based Tenancy Support Officers, or through partnership with relevant agencies in outlying areas. The officers provide a range of services for young people, those with mental or physical health problems, or those struggling to maintain their tenancy. This has provided some success in improving the longevity of tenancy for vulnerable tenants, with turnover for those receiving the service considerably lower than the standard turnover rate.

- 54 Chevin plays an active role in community sustainability and development. In areas such as South Kirkby, the organisation is playing an active role in supporting tenants and local residents through the provision of a community house. A community contacts database is maintained identifying contacts across the geographical areas covered. There is evidence of partnership working with community contacts to improve community cohesion, mainly targeted at engaging with young people.
- 55 Chevin is committed to tackling race and other hate crimes and a zero tolerance approach is adopted. Specialist officers deal with cases, and monitoring reports are sent to the board every six months on racial harassment cases. Cases are handled appropriately, and there is high customer satisfaction with the information given and the way the cases are handled. Chevin encourages tenants to report harassment, and there are a number of leaflets available and an article written by a victim of racial abuse in the tenant newsletter. Chevin also attend a number of groups on hate crime to identify best practice, improve partnership working and benchmark. This encourages tenants to report incidents and helps them to receive appropriate support.
- 56 The involvement of specific and minority groups in service user involvement is under developed. Tenants and Resident Groups have been provided with equality training and all registered groups must sign up to the Code of Conduct which includes equality and diversity. Chevin consider the needs of specific and minority groups when planning events to encourage attendance from minority groups. However, existing groups are not always representative and there are no minority or specialist user groups in place. There has been limited encouragement for minority groups to become involved.
- 57 Contractors are aware of Chevin's priorities on diversity but adherence is not monitored. Contractor codes of conduct are present, and Chevin supports this by inviting contractors to Language Line and equalities training. However, contractor compliance with diversity requirements is not robustly monitored and managed. Without this Chevin can not measure the success of objectives, monitor and target improvement.
- 58 There are inadequate arrangements for dealing with domestic violence. There is no procedure or policy in place for dealing with domestic violence. Cases are referred to National Women's Aid or other agencies through a list of local available contacts and resources. There is no monitoring of individual cases. There is a risk that a consistent and appropriate response is not made in all cases.

Stock investment and asset management

- 59** This is an area where there are more strengths than weaknesses. There is a strong approach to capital improvement work. The asset management framework and investment matrix provide the framework for stock investment decisions, and good progress has been made in meeting the decent homes target. However there has been limited tenant involvement in the development of the investment programme. The responsive repairs service is customer focused with high levels of satisfaction. There are a number of issues with the performance and cost effectiveness of the responsive repairs service, but some recent improvements have been made through the 'Lean Fundamentals' review of the service. Voids are turned around quickly and the standard of voids is high. Gas servicing is carried out efficiently and access arrangements are robust. High priority has been given to aids adaptations through increased budgets. However, there are a number of weaknesses with adaptation procedures.

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major work repairs

- 60** There is a strong approach to capital improvement work. Chevin uses a comprehensive and robust matrix as a basis for its asset management strategy focussing on housing, investment and regeneration. The all encompassing matrix records summary details for all schemes and areas of stock condition and repair costs, as well as local information about lettings, satisfaction and neighbourhood data. It is supplemented by annual scheme appraisal for all areas and sustainability tool kit assessments to determine future options for high risk, low demand schemes. This ensures co-ordinated investment and housing management strategies are developed that improve the sustainability of areas and schemes. It also means investment is well spent and minimises the risk of wasted expenditure.
- 61** However, the asset management strategy does not assess existing issues and prioritise how agreed objectives will be delivered. It lacks supporting strategies to deal with, for example, diversity.
- 62** A five year investment programme is currently being agreed. This has been developed using information from the matrix, tenant feedback and other sources. Principles have been agreed with tenants at tenant conferences and individual tenant panels. It will be published March 2007. However, tenants have not been actively involved in the development or agreement of the improvement programme. There is low tenant awareness of the programme with few understanding what work they can expect and where this lies in the overall programme. Knowledge is improved where a tenant panel or resident group has requested further information but this is generally not known by the wider body of tenants. Involvement helps ensure that tenants own the programme and understand reasons for priorities.

- 63 Stock condition data is robust. Chevin collects accurate information on stock condition to confirm the condition of its properties, including DHS and Health and Housing Safety Rating System (HHSRS) requirements, and uses it to inform investment priorities and to strategically manage resources. It has completed a recent 9 per cent survey and has extrapolated data (where reliable) to cover 75 per cent of stock. The database can be interrogated by area, scheme and component to inform investment options. Mapping tools help plan work by local area. The stock condition database is not fully integrated with the repairs system. However procedures are in place to ensure the regular updating of records with repair and investment work. Plans are developing, along with the piloting hand-helds, to add to the database with ongoing surveys by Technical Officers during their normal repair inspections. This ensures that accurate data is available to support investment decisions.
- 64 Investment programmes have made significant improvements to tenants' homes. Good progress is being made to achieve the decent homes target. At 31 March 2006, 82 per cent of homes were decent, and Chevin is on target to achieve 100 per cent by 2011. Homes are improved to a standard in excess of the minimum decent homes standard. However, Chevin has not developed and published an overall decent homes/investment standard with tenants. Investment plans are based on local factors, using the matrix, and individual scheme standards are agreed locally with tenants. This ensures that homes are improved to meet tenant, corporate and neighbourhood needs, improving the sustainability of areas.
- 65 The association is committed to improving the energy efficiency of homes, supported by a number of initiatives. All newer schemes and reinvestment programmed works use condensing boilers with SEDBUK A rating, low energy light fittings used in some rooms, dual flush WC's, flow restrictors on appliances, and showers fitted to new build and reinvestment properties. Low energy light bulbs are distributed at tenant conferences and other events. Newer schemes reach Eco-Homes standards and some older schemes met the previous Environmental Standard. There are a number of individual 'green' projects. These include a ground source heat pump in one scheme, solar power on one reinvestment scheme, and the application of external thermal insulation on some estates. This helps to contribute to long term sustainability and reduces utility costs for tenants. However, there are no formal environmental or energy efficiency/affordable warmth strategies in place at the present time. Chevin have commenced work to develop a strategy. Without this strategy Chevin cannot target improvement and measure the success of existing work.
- 66 A wide range of choice is provided to residents in the improvement process. Tenants are involved in agreeing a standard range of components through the new 'component clinic'. Comprehensive individual choices are offered to each tenant through close liaison with project managers including design layout, colours and finishes. There is good use of show flats and samples to help residents make choices. This allows residents to tailor improvements.

- 67 There is no consistency in the opportunity to influence minor changes in work done. Some customers were asked if there was anything they would like changed to their home from the general specification provided. Other customers were not given this opportunity. There may be an inequity of opportunity to influence the design of improvements to individuals' homes across schemes.
- 68 There is a strong customer focus in capital improvements. In addition to individual choice, tenants have close liaison with project managers, respite facilities are available on site during improvement works, and individual needs such as adaptation work are catered for. Work was completed to a high standard and quality. Satisfaction surveys completed for each scheme show high overall satisfaction (in excess of 97 per cent) with improvements.
- 69 Tenants are provided with comprehensive information when planned maintenance work is completed on their property. A resident handbook and manual is provided prior to work commencing which covers the process, the role of the liaison officer, what is expected of tenants, how tenants can prepare for the work and what access to the property will be required. A weekly programme of work is provided and tenants are kept up to date with progress. On completion tenants are provided with a Handover Pack which includes the operating instructions for new fixtures and fittings and emergency contact numbers. This ensures tenants are well informed and they are aware of health and safety issues when work is completed on site.
- 70 Detailed customer feedback is obtained and used on all completed improvement schemes and helps inform future improvements. Satisfaction ratings are sought for a wide range of issues covering standards and design. Returns are interrogated using software that enables contractor, component and scheme comparison. Areas of lower satisfaction are investigated and are used to amend future specifications. This helps ensure future improvement work is designed to meet customer requirements.
- 71 Chevin is not fully compliant with statutory requirements regarding asbestos. Sample surveys have not been completed for domestic properties. However, the importance of asbestos management is acknowledged and suitable plans are in place to manage risks, deal with gaps and comply with regulations. An asbestos register is continually updated with completed surveys. Training has been provided for staff and is to commence for contractors' employees. Repair orders 'flag' the existence of asbestos and signpost contractors to the asbestos register for more detail. This helps ensure the health and safety of both staff and residents during building work. Chevin achieves a recommended 60:40 ratio of planned: response expenditure when including £3.6 million revenue contribution to major repairs (total of £5.7million). However, some revenue expenditure clearly provides 'capital' improvement, such as kitchen and bathroom replacements. If this expenditure was excluded Chevin would not achieve the recommended ratio. There is no detailed commentary within the asset management strategy about how responsive repairs can be minimised and expenditure re-directed to more planned, strategic investment. This could include batching repairs and draw-down contracts for component replacements. This makes better use of resources.

Responsive repairs

- 72 There are some weaknesses in the performance and value for money of the responsive repairs service. This is recognised by Chevin, and a Lean Fundamental review of day to day maintenance is underway. The review is delivering a step change in the quality and cost effectiveness of the repairs service, addressing many of the weaknesses identified. The improvements are operational within the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) and are in the process of being rolled out across contractors. However, the changes are not embedded and it is too early to have measured improvement.
- 73 The repairs service is accessible, and the reporting of repairs is easy for tenants. There is a dedicated repairs freephone number which the majority of tenants will use to report a repair. This is publicised in the newsletter, on key rings, and fridge magnets. Calls are answered promptly and dealt with appropriately. Frontline staff know how to access the necessary information to help service users. Information regarding the vulnerability of tenants or any special needs is not included on the repair order form. However, officers do attempt to contact the relevant operative or contractor in advance to ensure they are aware of the needs of the tenant.
- 74 Satisfaction with responsive repairs is high but response rates are low and feedback is not systematically analysed, reported and reviewed to improve services. In the 2005 STATUS survey 86 per cent of tenants with repairs completed in the last 12 months rated all aspects of the actual work as 'good' or 'very good'. Post repair satisfaction in 2005/06 was recorded as 98.6 per cent. Chevin is currently reviewing how it obtains feedback of tenants' satisfaction with repairs. Following poor response rates to postal surveys it is trialling telephone surveys for work undertaken by the DLO. New plans aim to ensure feedback is used to improve services in line with tenant requirements.
- 75 There is an increasing customer focus within the repairs service. Tenants and their homes are treated with respect, operatives identify themselves and all mess is cleared up. Chevin actively seeks the views of tenants in reviewing and developing the repair service. Tenants are mainly involved through the Tenant Panels and are consulted and involved in major decisions that affect the service. For example feedback helped focus the Lean Fundamentals review on having mutually agreed repair appointments. This helps ensure the service develops according to users' requirements.
- 76 Chevin does not make appointments or tell tenants when their repair should be completed at the time they report it. This results in an inefficient service as access cannot be guaranteed and can delay the length of time to complete a repair. This is being addressed through the service review. The new service arrangements enable operatives to arrange appointment dates with tenants and are empowered to carry out additional repair work at the time of the appointment.

- 77 Repair performance is mixed and Chevin does not effectively monitor and manage performance. Performance is not monitored for appointments, percentage of repairs completed at first visit, number of repairs outstanding over priority period or the time taken to carry out inspections. Performance in completing repairs on time has improved in the first six months of 2006/07 to around 98 per cent, above the 97 per cent target set for all categories. However, Chevin is not accurately measuring its performance for completing repairs on time. For example, the time to complete repairs is not measured from the time a repair is reported, but from the date ordered. This over states performance and performance indicators cannot be used accurately to compare performance. Improved performance monitoring is part of the Lean Fundamental review.
- 78 Some elements of the service are efficient. Chevin has a low level of emergency repairs, with only 8 per cent of repairs undertaken which is within the 10 per cent guidelines. However, 31 per cent of repairs were classed as urgent compared to 20 per cent guidelines. The low level of emergency repairs means Chevin is making the best use of resources and improving value for money.
- 79 Some elements of existing repair procedures are inefficient. Current procedures are not customer focused and may give poor value for money. At 13 per cent, pre-inspections are high, but are being designed out through the Lean Fundamentals review. New systems are being trialled by the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO). For example, increased multi-skilling and repairs completed right first time, patch based operatives increasing knowledge of stock and reducing time spent travelling, direct orders to operatives and accounts with local suppliers for materials. This improves the value for money and quality of the repair service.
- 80 The cost effectiveness of the response repair service has not been demonstrated. Internal cost comparisons (including with existing contractors) have been made and the service review will lead to greater efficiencies. However, there has been no robust comparison with good practice, other providers and the market has not been tested to see if the service could be provided to an even higher standard and lower cost. Without this Chevin cannot be sure its repair service is providing value for money.
- 81 Trends between contractors and geographical areas are not routinely reported and analysed in comparison with top performers to improve performance. This would enable Chevin to target resources and improvement where most needed.

Void repairs

- 82 Performance within this area is generally positive. Chevin has a good understanding of sustainability and has reduced turnaround times and levels of void properties. A challenging void standard has been developed with customers, and voids completed to a high standard of repair and decoration. Relet times, when excluding previous 'unavailable to let voids' are quick. However, the cost of voids is high and increasing.

- 83 Chevin has a good understanding of area based sustainability and the key reasons behind low demand and long relet times. It has developed comprehensive local strategies (Scheme Appraisals) and has successfully tackled issues of low demand through locally developed marketing plans. A specialist officer works with individual Housing Officers to develop the most appropriate strategies to deal with local issues. There has been a reduction in the number of long term voids, although reletting long term voids has had an adverse effect on average relet times. Overall turnover rates have reduced from 25 per cent two years ago to 12 per cent in the first six months of 2006/07. This approach is positive in bringing homes back into use.
- 84 The reletting of void properties averages 41 days, below the target of 25 days. This is within the third quartile group for 2005/06. Properties are generally repaired on time (average 14 days compared to target 15 days). Overall performance is however skewed by reletting long term voids, previously classified as 'unavailable to let'. Excluding these reduces average relet times to 22 days. Void processes are due to be reviewed as the next part of the Lean Fundamentals review. This will help relet properties more quickly and efficiently.
- 85 Ready to let properties are completed to a high standard. A challenging letting standard has been drawn up with residents. There is also a new void property service standard. Reality checks show that in the main the void standard is met. Work is generally completed to a high standard with additional repairs carried out where required, for example, new kitchens. Properties were left appropriately decorated, clean and tidy. Information is left in the property to inform tenants of the procedure they need to follow to get services reconnected. This provides new tenants with a good quality home.
- 86 In a small number of cases the void standard was not fully met. In two instances reality checks demonstrated that some upstairs windows did not have safety fittings despite being classed as ready to let. This presents a health and safety risk to future tenants.
- 87 The organisation has effective arrangements for the management of empty homes. Positive information is available to staff and prospective tenants about the type and availability of housing in each area. Details of types of properties, likely availability, waiting list and other relevant features are publicised in each office reception area and in more detail on the web site. This helps prospective tenants get access to suitable housing. The letting standard is given to new tenants as part of the sign-up pack. However, it is not given to prospective tenants during accompanied viewing to advise them about the standards they should expect. Other strengths include pre-allocation; initial offers by telephone to see if prospective tenants are interested; and new tenant visits between four and six weeks. A new tenant survey is about to be introduced. These practices help ensure properties are let quickly, efficiently with a high customer focus.

- 88 The average cost of void repairs is high and increasing. The average cost increased from £1,487 in 2005/06 to £1,872 by September 2006. The cost of decoration has increased from £364 to £610 over the same period. Costs have increased following the introduction of the new void standard. There is no comparison of costs to top performers. The costs are not systematically offset against improved outcomes, for example, sustainability. This means the organisation cannot demonstrate improved value for money or cost effectiveness.

Gas servicing

- 89 Gas servicing programmes are carried out efficiently and conscientiously. At the time of inspection 97.89 per cent of properties held a valid gas safety certificate. Performance is monitored robustly and regular meetings held with the contractor ensuring local issues are promptly addressed. All safety certificates are checked and internal and external arrangements are in place to ensure the quality of servicing.
- 90 Gas servicing access procedures are robust. Until recently the process began at 30 days, but this is now extended to 60 days before the anniversary date. Performance is high, and at October 2006, only 59 properties did not have a current safety certificate. Of these the worst case was only five months overdue. The cyclical gas servicing team works closely with the Special Initiatives team to secure access until legal action is requested by seeking re-possession. Access is invariably secured before possession orders are enforced. Strong performance gaining access helps ensure the health and safety of tenants and protects the properties.
- 91 The customer focus of gas servicing is mixed. The contractor offers an initial date for servicing and then an appointment if the suggested date is unsuitable. However, the option for evening, Saturday morning appointments is not widely known or publicised. Customer satisfaction, measured through 10 per cent audit inspections is high and improving. For example 96.9 per cent were satisfied overall with the process in 2005 compared to 88 per cent in 2006. The satisfaction form covers handling, quality and time of the appointment. However, this information is not reported and used to develop services.
- 92 There are few reported local PIs that monitor gas servicing. Reports focus on the percentage of properties with valid safety certificates but do not summarise the level of risk by length of time since last service. Furthermore good information is available from 10 per cent external audit inspections, but data is not routinely collated, analysed and reported. This means that current high levels of performance may not be recognised and weaknesses identified to develop services even further.

- 93 Best use is not made of IT to maximise efficiency. For example, contractors do not use hand held technology to directly update records. This is currently being explored and introduced with one of the gas contractors. Furthermore, gas servicing records are not integrated with Chevin's main IT systems. Records are held on stand alone excel spreadsheets. Outstanding gas servicing cannot be 'flagged' on the housing management system to ensure access is arranged when a tenant contacts the call centre. This is being addressed through the implementation of a new integrated contact system.

Aids and adaptations

- 94 Chevin have a commitment to addressing adaptations waiting times through increased funding. However, there are several weaknesses with adaptation procedures. For example, minor adaptations undertaken as repair work are not identified and recorded as part of total adaptations expenditure; the waiting list is not prioritised (other than for emergencies) and is managed on an open-ended time on list basis. Occupational Therapist assessments are not used unless they make a referral.
- 95 Chevin gives a high priority to adaptations and has steadily increased budgets to help cope with increasing demand. It has responded to tenant feedback to ensure internal funding remains a high priority. Helping people remain in their homes has been a key objective to improve the sustainability of schemes. Chevin uses a balance of adaptation budgets, budget for minor adaptations as well as general repair work, in addition to external funding from disabled facilities grant (DFG) to provide adaptations.
- 96 Good links with development staff ensure tenants' needs for adaptations are identified and provided during modernisation work. Adaptations are recorded on the stock database and relevant vacant property details are available to staff letting properties. This helps to match existing resources with waiting list demand.
- 97 However, the best use is not made of limited financial resources to ensure value for money. Adaptations are not prioritised (other than emergencies) but are done in date order. Adaptations are tenant led as Occupational Therapist assessments are not sought to identify or prioritise work required. Seventy per cent of work involves replacing baths with showers which costs on average £4,500, with no assessment of whether these replacements are necessary or will meet the needs of tenants. Arrangements exist with Leeds City Council to use Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) to maximise resources for adaptations, but are not systematically explored elsewhere. The service has not been reviewed to ensure it both helps those most in most need to live independently, and also makes best use of resources and stock.
- 98 The performance of the adaptations service is not effectively monitored, reported or managed to improve services. The average length of time to get a major adaptation is between 12-18 months. A new adaptations policy performance framework identifies a set of positive principles, but lacks clear, measurable service standards that are published for tenants. Satisfaction surveys started in August 2006, with the first report due in November 2006. Chevin is unable to demonstrate how the performance and the quality of the service have improved.

- 99 Service standards for adaptations have not been developed or published for tenants. The lack of an advisory leaflet means that tenants are not fully informed about how they can access adaptations, priorities and likely waiting times before work will be done. These are expected to be developed and published by December 2006.

Income management

- 100 This is an area where there are more strengths than weaknesses. Improvements in rent collection have taken place in recent years, and officers are proactive in helping prevent debt and reduce the level of arrears. There is a range of flexible payment options, and tenants are provided with clear regular rent statements. Action is taken to minimise arrears on new tenancies. Specialist money and debt advice is available to vulnerable tenants through the tenancy support service. However, there is a lack of focus on former tenant arrears and high levels of write off. There is no process in place for the collection of rechargeable repairs.
- 101 Chevin achieves high rent collection rates. Collection rates have improved from 92 per cent in 2003/04 to 102.7 per cent at the end of 2005/06. Rent arrears reduced from 8.6 per cent in 2004/05 to 6.4 per cent in 2006/07. A target of less than 5.5 per cent is set for 2006/07. This increases income to the organisation.
- 102 Officers pursue current tenant arrears promptly, ensuring early contact is made. An arrears progression system is in place beginning when a tenant is two weeks in arrears. Communication with tenants is by mainly by letter, supported by telephone calls and visits where appropriate. Notices of Seeking Possession are served in person with a final opportunity for the tenant to make a payment and to gather additional information from the tenant to support the setting of a realistic payment agreement. This ensures a firm but fair approach to arrears recovery, and will minimise unnecessary legal costs being added to tenants' accounts. Appropriate arrangements are in place for the monitoring of current tenant arrears. This is managed through management meetings, team meetings and meetings with individual officers. Arrears are analysed in a number of ways. Particular focus is paid to ensuring action is being taken on cases between £500 and £1,000 (7.8 per cent of cases) and over £1,000 (3.7 per cent of cases).
- 103 There is a wide range of payment methods and these have increased over the last twelve months. A review of payment methods was completed in 2004 resulting in the cessation of the door to door collection and the introduction of more flexible, cost effective methods of payment. Current payment methods include direct debit, standing order, and AllPay cards for payment at post offices, local shops, by telephone and online. Payment methods are publicised on rent statements and in the tenant newsletter. There has been an increase in the use of more cost effective methods of payment with tenants paying by direct debit increasing from 381 in April 2005 to 701 by October 2006. This makes it easier for tenants to make payments, increases tenant choice and improves value for money.

- 104 Officers are proactive in working to help prevent debt. The association is notified when a tenant's benefit changes, and letters are sent to tenants to remind them to pay the change in rent. Rent increase letters remind tenants to inform housing benefit of their change in rent. This helps to reduce the number of cases which fall into arrears.
- 105 Action is taken to minimise arrears on new tenancies. New rent accounts are set up promptly, following the sign up interview. In the majority of cases accounts are set up on the system in time for the new tenancy commencing. Payment information is provided to new tenants in the tenant's handbook. Direct debit forms and an AllPay card are included in the sign up pack. The sign up interview is used as an opportunity to reinforce responsibilities around the payment of rent, and the importance of prompt completion of housing benefit forms.
- 106 Opportunities to provide tenants with benefit and money advice are not maximised. Arrears letters do not mention the additional help and support available or other agencies that could help. The sign up process is not used to provide tenants with benefits advice. Whilst housing benefit forms are included in the sign up pack it is not standard practice to complete the form or check supporting evidence at the time of the sign up interview. Housing officers only give basic benefit and money advice. However, tenants requiring further support are referred to the tenancy support officer, or local agencies. This will reduce the level and speed of housing benefit which is paid to new accounts, and can increase the level of low level arrears on the accounts for new tenancies.
- 107 Support is available to enable vulnerable tenants to maintain their tenancy. There are four area based Tenancy Support Workers who provide money and welfare benefit advice and support. Links are made with other agencies to deliver the service in outlying areas. There are good communication links between housing officers and tenancy support workers to assist the management of arrears cases. This helps provide customers with the best advice possible, maximise income and sustain tenancies. Between February 2003 and September 2006, 207 tenants were referred to the tenancy support team, 68 specifically for rent arrears, resulting in a reduction in the level of rent arrears.
- 108 Positive working relationships are in place with most of the local authorities administering housing benefit. Chevin take a proactive role in challenging under-performance and attends Housing Benefit Forums. Housing officers and tenancy support workers help tenants by ensuring that they have submitted all the relevant information for a claim, and will monitor new rent accounts to ensure the housing benefit payments are processed. This helps to ensure that income to the organisation is maximised and received promptly.
- 109 Chevin has established partnerships to improve access to money advice for tenants. Officers are working with local credit unions, and links are made in Leeds with the Financial Inclusion Group and with the Wakefield Credit Union, details of which are included in the sign up pack for new tenants. Early discussions are underway with the Sheffield Credit Union. This will help improve access to financial support for tenants.

- 110** There is a lack of focus on the collection of former tenant arrears. There is limited monitoring information, and no targets for collection. There is no efficient method of calculating the amount of former tenant arrears collected, as this cannot be extracted from the housing management system. The focus is on sending letters rather than proactively chasing the debt. At the end of September 2006 there were 738 arrears cases with a debt of £86,432 but only £4,824 recovered in this period. No legal action was taken in relation to former tenant arrears in this period. The level of write offs is high, at £262k in 2005/06, £743k in 2004/05 and £202k in 2003/04. There is limited action taken to pursue the debt before it is forwarded for write off. This results in lost income to the organisation and communicates the wrong messages to customers.
- 111** Limited action is taken to reduce the number of tenancies ending with arrears. Arrangements are in place for pre-termination visits to be carried out with the purpose of providing tenants with advice on clearing remaining arrears and collecting a forwarding address. This is supported by a termination letter. However, pre-termination visits are not always carried out, and there is no guidance for staff to follow. This means Chevin are not maximising the opportunities to collect information on where tenants are moving to, or to collect outstanding arrears. The percentage of visits completed is not known and Chevin has limited information to judge any direct impact on former tenant arrears collection.
- 112** There is no process in place to charge or collect rechargeable repairs. Rechargeable repairs are recorded but not invoiced to individual tenants. Over the last two years rechargeable repairs amounted to £14k per year and it was not deemed as cost efficient to collect this amount. There are no existing plans to address this gap, however it is due to be reviewed by the organisation in 2007/08 to assess the cost effectiveness of collection. This has resulted in loss of income to the organisation.
- 113** Chevin is on target to meet rent re-structuring targets. The number of homes already on target rents increased from 38 per cent to 60 per cent between April 2005 and April 2006. Plans have been discussed with tenant representatives and published. This helps ensure tenants understand the basis for future rent increases.
- 114** Comprehensive and clear information is provided to service users on the rent setting policy. The tenants' handbook sets out information on the setting of rents and this is supported by an article in the tenant newsletter, and clear rent increase letters. This helps tenants understand the rent they are charged.
- 115** Clear rent statements are in place which are produced quarterly, or on request. The statements provide the details of date and type of transaction with additional costs, for example court costs, identified in separate sections. An explanatory guide has been published in the tenant newsletter, and is supported by additional guidance on the back of the statement. Service charges are not disaggregated on the rent statements as a result of customer feedback and to help simplify the statement. However, tenants are informed through the annual rent setting letter the element of their rent which is due to service charge. This ensures tenants are aware of and can understand their rent account status.

- 116 Tenants are provided with limited information on the service charge setting policy. The annual service charge statements which break down how service charges are calculated are not user friendly. Whilst they provide a break down of the service charges and definitions, they do not make it clear to customers how the weekly charge is calculated. Accessibility issues have not been considered. For example, statements use small font, have no language straplines, and make assumptions on numeracy skills. This could make it difficult for customers to understand how service charges are calculated.
- 117 There are a number of gaps in the service. There are no incentives or sanctions to encourage tenants to stay out of debt or reduce their arrears. This is being investigated as part of the development of the Chevin reward scheme. Whilst there is a corporate debt policy in place, this does not cover how customers' debt will be managed by the organisation. There is no use of alternative remedies to recover service user debt, with a reliance on traditional money judgements, possession action and eviction. These would further support the collection of rents and recovery of arrears.
- 118 There is limited diversity monitoring of tenants in relation to income management. Legal action is monitored by ethnicity and considered at director level and Operations Committee. However, no further analysis of the service is undertaken. There is also no analysis of the reasons for non payment, nor links to other debts which tenants may have. This makes it difficult for the organisation to identify discriminatory practice and to target services.

Dealing with anti-social behaviour

- 119 This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The organisation's approach to anti-social behaviour is set out through a strategy, policy and procedure. Clear information is given to customers on their responsibilities as tenants. There is a proactive approach with evidence of action and enforcement, support for victims and prevention work. There is a focus on sustaining tenancies through the use of Tenancy Support Workers and mediation. However, the organisation does not routinely monitor performance in this area, or understand customer satisfaction with the process and outcomes.
- 120 There are several strengths in relation to general tenancy management and estate service. Schemes and estates were generally well maintained. Housing officers spend more time on estates as a result of the changes to access arrangements. Regular estate walkabouts were introduced in May 2006. Walkabouts are completed every four to six weeks, and 65 per cent are completed with a tenant representative. This is used as an opportunity to tackle issues on estates including environmental, maintenance and tenancy management issues.

- 121** However, there are some weaknesses in the general tenancy management and estate service. There are no procedures or guidance in place for staff for pre termination visits, post sign up visits or estate walkabouts. This means there could be inconsistency in the visits carried out and tenants may not always receive the information required. There is also limited monitoring of those which take place to monitor the timescales in which they occur and to ensure the quality of visits is appropriate.
- 122** Some tenancy management issues are being used strategically to influence the development of services and asset management. Each scheme is ranked on the basis of the ease of management which considers the level of anti-social behaviour. The level of abandonment and eviction as a percentage of units is considered. Tenancy management and anti-social behaviour information feeds into the annual scheme appraisal process and is used to identify where further action or resources, such as CCTV, are required.
- 123** A reasonably comprehensive anti-social behaviour (ASB) strategy, policy statement and procedure is in place. This was updated in 2006 and annual reviews are planned. A summary of the strategy for customers is produced in leaflet form, supported by a number of leaflets reinforcing how anti-social behaviour, adult abuse and racial abuse will be dealt with. In two areas Chevin has introduced local neighbourhood agreements to further reinforce tenants' and residents' responsibilities in the wider scheme. This ensures customers are aware of the approach taken by the organisation, and staff are clear of action they are required to take.
- 124** The tenancy agreement and tenants' handbook set out clear responsibilities of tenants to the community. This states clear expectations around nuisance and anti-social behaviour, animals, parking, gardens and shared areas, harassment and illegal activities. Conditions are enforced where necessary. The level of enforcement cases increased from 392 in 2005, to 417 in the first nine months of 2006. Legal action is taken to address issues where appropriate. Between January 2005 and September 2006 the following action has resulted: 49 Acceptable Behaviour Contracts; 6 demotion notices; 28 Anti-Social Behaviour Notices; 5 Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, 13 court cases for ASB; 9 evictions and 9 injunctions and undertakings and 3 suspended possession orders.
- 125** Systems for managing anti-social behaviour case information are not robust. There is no centrally based IT system other than a basic spreadsheet which makes monitoring of information very difficult. This makes it difficult to ensure advice can be given to tenants when the officer handling the case is not available and results in difficulty monitoring the impact of the service. Chevin is aware of this and is introducing a new IT system to support the management of ASB case file information.

- 126** Generally good support is available from officers to tenants who report anti-social behaviour. Tenants are supported as victims, are constantly reassured and are reminded of the importance of completion of diary sheets for evidence gathering. Tenants are contacted regularly by officers to check the latest situation and to provide information on progress with the case. Tenants feel Chevin is committed to tackling anti-social behaviour and take all the action they can do to address cases.
- 127** However, there are a number of weaknesses in anti-social behaviour which impacts on the support provided. The lack of an out of hours reporting facility for anti-social behaviour impacts on access to the service, particularly as anti-social behaviour often occurs outside office hours. Plans of action are not always agreed with tenants, and there are some examples where tenants felt the action taken made the situation worse. Complainants are not always contacted every 20 days to obtain an update on progress with the case. Cases are generally closed where there have been no further complaints over a three month period and not always closed in agreement with the complainant. In some cases letters are not sent to the complainant to inform them their case has been closed. This limits the control which complainants have over the management of their case.
- 128** There is some support for perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. There is evidence of cases referring young or vulnerable tenants to the tenancy support team for further support to assist in sustaining their tenancy. There is also evidence of involving other agencies as appropriate. This helps to change the behaviour of perpetrators to avoid the need to take serious legal enforcement action.
- 129** The organisation does not systematically monitor customer satisfaction with the way the complaint was handled or the outcome. Two exercises have been completed to measure satisfaction with witness support and dealing with racial harassment cases. However, there is no ongoing satisfaction monitoring when cases are closed. This means the organisation does not always understand the outcomes of its work.
- 130** Chevin uses a wide range of methods to gather evidence. This includes the use of two mobile CCTV units which are owned by Chevin. Audio tapes are used where these are not supplied by the local authority, and hand-held video cameras and covert cameras are also used. This evidence is used to support court action and to gather evidence where no local tenants are willing to come forward. Provision is made for external security agencies to act as tenants to gather evidence but this has not been used yet. Officers within the team have also visited properties to collect evidence when required. This ensures legal action can be taken where appropriate and increases success rates of court and legal action.

- 131** Chevin is committed to a range of remedies to address ASB. This includes mediation. A service level agreement covers all local authority areas, and a budget set for eight cases a year. Regular case reviews are held to check progress, and mediation has led to some successful outcomes. The specialist officers receive training to identify cases suitable for referral. Community mediation is also used to tackle community wide problems following legal action for anti-social behaviour and has helped to bring stability back into the community through mediation, open meetings and a community event.
- 132** The agreement and current budget for the use of mediation is not adequate. The agreement allows for eight cases a year. However this resource is almost used. There are plans to reduce the level of court action and use more mediation. In these cases money budgeted for legal action will be used to fund further mediation.
- 133** Despite covering a wide geographical area, Chevin is building partnerships with the police, local authorities and other agencies to tackle ASB. Information sharing agreements are in place for many of the areas in which they work. Chevin contributes to local multi agency partnership groups, and ensuring they are made aware of any local issues. Chevin's officers also participate in beat sweeps and other initiatives at a local level. This assists a joined up approach to tackle the issues of ASB.
- 134** Residents are encouraged and supported to set up local resident associations to improve community relations. Some work in partnership with other agencies to provide diversionary activities, for example, the establishment of the Community House in South Kirkby and the establishment of an American Football Team for young people on a Chapelton Estate. Driving training programmes are set up in a number of areas. In Harrogate, Chevin participates in a Multi Agency Problem Solving Team which is attended by education and youth services to plan out local strategies and identify hot spots to tackle.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 135** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There is a corporate commitment to value for money but this is not embedded throughout the organisation. Procurement decisions are taken on an objective basis, using an open and transparent procurement framework. Chevin works jointly with partners to improve efficiency, quality of services and value for money (VFM). Internal reviews are targeted at high cost areas that are important to both the business and customers. The business plan sets a challenging target of 5 per cent efficiency savings for all management services. However, Chevin does not have clear and accurate information on the cost and quality of individual services, and is not aware how costs compare with others. The VFM strategy lacks detail about priorities and how improvement will be delivered. Efficiency savings and gains are not collated to demonstrate overall improvements over the last three years.

How do costs compare?

- 136 Chevin does not have clear and accurate information on individual service and unit costs and the quality of services. It is currently exploring ways to do this as part of the VFM strategy action plan. This is needed to understand differences between parts of the organisation and to compare with other organisations in order to help review cost effectiveness throughout all areas of its business.
- 137 The organisation does not know how its costs of each service compares with others. Little benchmarking has been carried out and this prevents the organisation from understanding how costs are driven, or in challenging any high cost services.
- 138 Costs of the organisation compare favourably when looking at the few areas where comparative cost information is known. The weekly operating cost per unit of £45.23 compares favourably to similar organisations³ with an average of £56.18 and is within the national top quartile. Some cost comparisons have been undertaken with Synergy Partners and appear positive. For example, in investment per general needs unit in March 2005, Chevin was the second best performer with £31.68 investment per week. However without reliable information on cost comparison the ability to challenge or understand the drivers for high cost services is absent.

How is value for money managed?

- 139 There is a corporate commitment to value for money. Chevin embraces VFM as a principle of achieving a corporate objective to work efficiently and improve services. This objective is underpinned by a new VFM strategy that provides the framework for improving VFM throughout the organisation's culture. The culture is not yet fully embedded but Chevin is working towards this through staff and board training and staff conferences. Team and individual targets being developed through annual appraisals.
- 140 Procurement decisions are taken on an objective basis, using an open and transparent framework. A draft Procurement Strategy is about to be approved which embraces partnering and other modern procurement frameworks across service areas. Partnering frameworks have already been used, for example with the gas servicing and repair contracts, which have led to increased efficiencies and improved quality of services. The Synergy Group partnership embraces robust partnering principles and will use collective purchasing power to deliver efficiency savings, as well as the improved quality of investment programmes.
- 141 Chevin works jointly with partners to improve efficiency, quality of services and VFM. For example, the Synergy Group has used feedback to develop common house types for development that will deliver savings. Following adverse feedback about gardening services, tenant representatives have been involved in setting up a new partnering contract, and significant savings are expected. The new service is currently being tendered.

³ Figures for 2005/06 when compared to similar organisations with stock size 5000-10000. Information taken from Housing Corporation PI website.

- 142** Some improvements in VFM have been achieved through best value reviews, procurement and partnering or other changes. For example, the Annual Efficiency Statement shows savings of £500k for 2005/06, and projected savings of £937k to 2006/07. Savings through bulk buying of mobile 'phones and translations of £30,000. Insurance has been re-tendered and estimated to save over £400k over three years. The AES sets out how the gains will be reinvested including greater investment in frontline services, investment in additional stock and improvements to existing stock, and wider tenant participation and improved tenant satisfaction.
- 143** The mergers have been used as an opportunity to improve value for money. For example, the merger of Chantry and Harewood resulted in savings of £185k per annum through reduction of staff at a directorate or management level. Savings of £20k were generated by converting to one IT system which is more effective and efficient. Performance in relation to voids and rents improved increasing income to the organisation.
- 144** Internal reviews are targeted at services considered to be least cost effective and that are important to both the business and customers. For example, the Lean Fundamentals review has started with the repair service and will move on to the voids process. Findings from the repairs review are being piloted through the DLO before being rolled out to all contractors. It has already led to improved services and efficiency gains, although these have not been quantified yet.
- 145** Tenants and stakeholders are involved at all stages of the procurement and service design/delivery process, and have influenced service standards. For example tenants were fully involved in procuring the gas repair and servicing partner and also in the Synergy Group procurement of development partners. This ensures customers are involved in making decision that affect them and the VFM of services they pay for.
- 146** The business plan sets a challenging target of 5 per cent efficiency savings for all management services. Individual targets are being developed and set for managers through 'efficiency plans'. For example, one manager has a target to reduce mileage claims by 10 per cent. This helps ensure all parts of the organisation play a part in improving efficiency. The annual efficiency statement sets out how savings will contribute significantly towards the achievement of the strategic aims and objectives and will be reinvested. However, other corporate documents including the business plan do not highlight the impact of savings made, and there is a lack of strategic approach to the evaluation of value for money.
- 147** The VFM strategy lacks detail about priorities and how improvement will be delivered. The action plan is not SMART. The 28 actions are not prioritised, risk assessed and potential impact is not measured. Without knowing the individual costs of services, weaknesses cannot be identified, and this impacts on the ability to prioritise the action plan. Without this information it is not known if the action plan is focusing on the right areas.

- 148 Arrangements are in place to ensure the VFM strategy is regularly reviewed. However, identified VFM KPIs and targets are not yet regularly reported to ensure the VFM strategy is reviewed, and action is targeted at high cost service areas that are most important to customers for improvement. This is recognised by the organisation and improved benchmarking is underway.
- 149 Open procurement methods are not always used. The new debt collection agency has been appointed without the use of a robust procurement method. The new agency was appointed on the basis of feedback from another organisation and cost. A tendering or market testing exercise was not completed to ensure that the appointed agency provides best value for money.
- 150 Efficiency targets are not fully developed and have not yet spread to individuals through appraisal plans. Challenging but realistic efficiency targets are not yet provided for all service areas, based on a group wide strategic view of priorities. This is necessary to ensure resources focus on the key areas for improvement. Incentives or rewards are not offered to staff for meeting budget or efficiency targets.
- 151 Overall efficiency savings and gains are not collated to demonstrate overall improvements over the last three years. Whilst overall efficiency savings are detailed in the Annual Efficiency Statement, these are not broken down, detailed or linked to quality outcomes. Improvement is ad hoc and uncoordinated. Without a more strategic and formal approach to measuring VFM gains it cannot demonstrate its success, re-direct gains to further improvement and ensure that it is focusing on the right things.
- 152 Some members of the Tenants' Panel felt they had been given insufficient training to enable them to understand financial information and to enable them to take part in VFM exercises. This impacts on their ability to make informed decisions on the procurement and development of services.
- 153 The organisation has a lack of understanding of costs and the relationship with quality of service. Chevin has not fully investigated stock rationalisation or management. It does not know the cost of providing services in different areas. For example, it may be expensive to provide a service to a few properties in an area that could be more effectively, and efficiently, provided by another organisation with more stock in that area. However, it is acknowledged that previous mergers followed this principle of allowing the more efficient provision of services by joining together.

Summary

- 154** Chevin Housing Group provides a good housing service. Chevin is a customer focused organisation, with services developed in line with customer feedback. Information provided to customers is of a high standard and profiling information is known for the majority of tenants and their households, including vulnerability and preferred communication. There is a strong approach to housing investment and regeneration with a clear commitment to improving the quality of homes and sustainability of schemes. Voids performance is improving, with homes relet to a high standard. Rent collection is improving, and the organisation is proactive in helping to prevent debt and reduce the level of arrears. Specialist tenancy support services are available to support vulnerable tenants in sustaining tenancies. There is proactive approach to tackling anti-social behaviour with strong action and enforcement, support for victims and prevention work. Partnership working is used to improve efficiency, quality of services and value for money.
- 155** However, there are a number of areas which require further improvement. Access to services outside working hours is limited. The complaints process is not working effectively and does not allow for systematic learning. There are weaknesses in the performance and cost effectiveness of repairs, but these have begun to be addressed through the Lean Fundamental review of the service. The approach to adaptations is weak, with long waiting times for major adaptations. There is lack of focus on former tenants' arrears, resulting in a loss of income to the organisation. There is a lack of clear information on the cost and quality of services, impacting on the ability to demonstrate and identify further value for money improvements.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 156 This is an area where drivers outweigh barriers. The organisation is committed to the improvement of services and there is a sustainable rate of improvement which reflects priority areas. There is a strong track record of change and improvement as a result of service reviews, customer and staff feedback.
- 157 The organisation has delivered effective change through service reviews carried out with customer involvement. For example, a review of rent collection increased the range and cost effectiveness of payment methods. This resulted in the removal of door to door collection, introduction of the AllPay card system and increase in direct debit payments. A review of involvement opportunities was carried out in 2005 which introduced an increased menu of opportunities for involvement and consultation which focus the areas identified by customers. The reviews have resulted in clear benefits for tenants and residents.
- 158 A wide-ranging review of the responsive repairs service is underway using the Lean Fundamentals approach. This review is re-engineering the service to deliver efficient outcomes based on the requirements of customers, and seeks to reduce waste by the management of work flow. This has begun to introduce improvements in service delivery, value for money and performance monitoring within the areas piloted, however, at the time of the inspection, changes were recent and the review, although progressing well, was not yet complete.
- 159 Past mergers have delivered tangible benefits and improved services to tenants. The organisation used the mergers to identify best practice and improvements in cost effectiveness, particularly through the merger with Hallam. Customers are able to identify service improvements following the merger. For example, the increased opportunities for involvement and improvements to the repairs service.
- 160 There are demonstrable improvements in the way which ASB cases are handled. The current strengths of the anti-social behaviour services are the result of reviewing approaches following the merger and building on strengths in existing practices. More action is taken to investigate reports of ASB, and there is increased activity to support the tenant and deal with the complaint. There are improvements in the information available to tenants on anti-social behaviour. The introduction of the four tenancy support officers has improved services to vulnerable tenants. The officers have improved action taken in relation to welfare benefit and debt advice, and anti-social behaviour. This has resulted in improved sustainability of tenancies. The turnover rate of those receiving support is considerably lower than that for the organisation.

- 161** Some areas show improved performance. Tenancy turnover has reduced from 25 per cent to 12 per cent a year over the last five years resulting in an estimated £1.2 million of savings on 2001 levels. Arrears performance has improved from 6.4 per cent in 2004/05 to 6.2 per cent in 2005/06. Void turnaround times have reduced from 41 days in 2004/05 to 37 days in 2005/06. However void losses have increased from 2 per cent in 2004/05 to 2.5 per cent in 2005/06.
- 162** The organisation has delivered improvements in services which have resulted in clear benefits for customers. These include:
- increased knowledge of customers following the tenant census to inform the future planning of services;
 - changes to the gas servicing contract and tenant involvement in the process to give improved services;
 - changes to the out of hours maintenance service through a tenant supported review to deliver a more effective and efficient service;
 - introduction of the customer services team in line with customer feedback to improve telephone access to services;
 - improving the energy efficiency of homes with an estimated saving of £250 per annum on tenant fuel bills; and
 - improved community engagement opportunities particularly with young people, for example through the establishment of driving schools.
- 163** There is some evidence of improving value for money over the last couple of years. Links have been made with Procurement for Housing, creating a number of cost saving lines of procurement. A value for money and partnering process has been undertaken, delivering savings in the reinvestment programme. Work is in place with the Synergy Partners to achieve significant savings in the maintenance programme through common specifications and supply chain management. Initial outcomes demonstrate around 10 per cent savings on some component costs. However, these improvements are recent and they cannot demonstrate a clear track record on value for money.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 164** Chevin is an organisation committed to continuous improvement which learns from the feedback of staff, customers and other organisations. There is clear and effective leadership from the Group Board and Management Team. The organisation has strong self awareness and action plans are in place to address many of the areas for improvement identified. Performance is managed in the organisation, however, this is not systematic or formally evidenced through reporting frameworks. Improvement plans are inconsistent, with some not fully resourced or SMART.

44 Housing Association Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 165** The organisation has a clear corporate plan for the next ten years. The vision is translated into tangible ambitions, aims, and objectives. Staff, tenants and board members are involved in developing corporate objectives and priorities for the organisation. This recognises the role of partnership working in supporting the delivery of the plan. There are clear links to the National Housing Federation 'iN Business for Neighbourhoods' objectives and other regional and national targets. The targets reinforce that the focus of the organisation is to go beyond bricks and mortar. For example, targets are set for employment initiatives. The plan demonstrates the commitment to achieve best value and continuous improvement through the engagement of tenants. Key priorities indicate the organisation is aiming to improve the things that matter most to users and communities. These include working with regeneration partnerships, community development work, supporting people, anti-social behaviour and stock refurbishment. This is supported by a corporate action plan which is SMART, with actions identified under each of the corporate objectives. This includes challenging outcomes and targets across all areas of the organisation.
- 166** The corporate plan is supported by a series of department plans and strategies which are linked to the organisational objectives. However, there is no consistency in improvement plans within the organisation. A standard format is not applied and the departmental strategies and improvement plans are of varying quality. Some are not SMART, for example the Housing Services plan has no links to resources or timescales. This presents difficulties in ensuring plans are deliverable and in monitoring the impact of their delivery over time.
- 167** Strong arrangements are in place to manage performance within the organisation through the performance management framework. Performance is managed through 1:1s and annual appraisals. Staff are aware of their targets. Performance is then discussed at an area level, within the departmental management team, group management team and then passed to operations committee and the Board. Some performance information is shared with customers. Tenant panels receive the performance reports on housing and repairs. A presentation on performance is included in the tenant conference, and an annual summary included in the newsletter. An analysis of performance is provided to all the tenant shareholders as part of the AGM.
- 168** However, Chevin does not systematically or formally evidence performance management through its reporting frameworks. There is a lack of a streamlined performance framework, with a number of different performance reports in place for different audiences. The reports contain very limited analysis of performance and action taken. The performance reports do not link directly evidence of delivering the key objectives for the organisation. There are differences in the figures included in different reports due to lack of clarity over the definition of some indicators. There is a gap in gathering evidence to measure success and the impact of recent improvements, particularly in relation to outcomes for service users.

- 169** In some service areas performance information is not used to effectively manage and develop services. The performance reports are not comprehensive and do not reflect all service areas, for example, the anti-social behaviour service, former tenant arrears, customer services information, and aids and adaptations are not included. Performance data by management area is not yet systematically monitored to compare performance over time, between areas, top performers, contractors etc. Local indicators have not been developed that are tailored to risk and customer, officer or board member requirements. Without this Chevin cannot ensure it is monitoring and managing the right things and is unable to act on variations in performance between areas.
- 170** There is effective leadership within the organisation from the Board and Group Management Team. There is an open but challenging relationship in place, with a focus on delivery of the corporate objectives. The Board can make difficult decisions, including those around mergers and stock investment and de-investment. The Board and Management team ensure staff are supported to deliver to the best of their abilities.
- 171** Board members are provided with the relevant information to lead the organisation and make decisions. The quality of information provided to Board Members is high. Reports include a summary sheet identifying where decisions needs to be made, or implications for the budget, risk, equal opportunities, or tenant consultation. All reports are linked to the relevant corporate objectives. Regular updates are provided on the Corporate Plan, financial plan, and performance information against a set of key performance indicators selected by the Board. An annual review is undertaken of policy documents to ensure that they are relevant and in line with best practice within the housing sector.
- 172** There are arrangements in place to ensure Chevin learns from staff. This includes a staff sounding board which is held with the Chief Executive to enable staff to have their say about services. The second tier management group meet regularly to identify ways in which services can be improved. There are annual staff conferences which provide the opportunity for staff to comment on service developments. Group Management Team has spent a day in the roles of other officers within the organisation. The staff satisfaction survey is used as a tool to identify areas for improvement. The Group Management Team attends team meetings regularly to listen to what staff have to say. This all contributes to the learning which takes place within the organisation.
- 173** The organisation has learned from and responded to feedback from customers. For example, action plans are in place to address a number of areas covered by the 2005 STATUS survey. Learning is also identified from other feedback forms, for example, the service accessibility review, monitoring of satisfaction with the approach to racial harassment and from mystery shopping. Tenants are being brought into the Lean Fundamentals process with workshop presentations.

46 Housing Association Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 174** The organisation is committed to learning from other organisations through benchmarking and through the sharing of good practice. The Peer Group was set up ten years ago, however not all organisations make good comparators. Some benchmarking has been undertaken with the Synergy partners, and further work is planned. The Synergy Group has been used to compare results from the Lean Fundamental work. There are a number of examples where Chevin has learnt from the experiences of others. For example, when reviewing the management of supporting housing, and investigating the use of single contractors for repairs.
- 175** However, Chevin lacks a formal system to collate, and action, feedback from benchmarking and staff attending conferences and best practice events. While there is evidence of learning from benchmarking and visits, it is often ad hoc. Unless learning is formalised Chevin is unable to measure the value and impact of internal and external reviews. This helps ensure improvement is focused on key priorities.
- 176** ICT systems are not fully integrated and best use is not made of extensive information databases to provide meaningful reports. Information is not always effectively interrogated through local performance indicators that demonstrate the true picture of existing service performance, or measure the success/impact of initiatives. Some key indicators are not routinely measured and reported. For example, void PIs focus on traditional average relet times, that fail to show true performance, and VFM.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 177** This is an area where drivers considerably outweigh weaknesses. The organisation has access to the appropriate skills, tools and finances to deliver improvement. The Board and Group Management Team have strong leadership and staff are motivated, skilled and equipped to carry out their roles. Resources have been allocated to reflect priorities. There is evidence of effective human resource planning. Financial management arrangements are robust and financial resources healthy.
- 178** Chevin's staff are professional, motivated, understand and demonstrate the organisation's culture and have the capacity and capability to improve deliver and services. Board members and senior officers are clear about their responsibilities. A very positive professional relationship of mutual respect exists between Board and management team. This provides positive leadership and helps ensure that business is managed effectively and efficiently.

- 179** The Board has the strategic knowledge and skills to successfully lead the organisation. This includes a number of members who have worked in the housing sector or have community development, legal, or financial skills. Gaps in board membership have been identified and as a result the representation and skills coverage of the board has been improved following the recent mergers. The Board is supported by an ongoing training programme and attendance at national conferences and events. Areas for development are identified through self assessments against 31 skills, and a training plan is being developed to meet the needs identified. This has already resulted in additional training sessions on Equality and Diversity. Future Board Members are being identified and developed through participation in the National Housing Federation's Get On Board Programme.
- 180** The Board has provided a strategic steer to the organisation and there is evidence of difficult decisions being made, for examples, decisions around potential mergers and acquisitions. Board Members are able to influence decisions and take control of key projects, for example, the development of the tenant incentive scheme. There is evidence of decisions being made which consider the capacity of the organisation. For example, participation in PFI schemes, opportunities for mergers. This ensures that decisions are made in line with and towards the achievement of the corporate objectives of the organisation.
- 181** ICT is used effectively to deliver service objectives and improvements. Software and hardware are strong, provide management information and support staff to deliver effective services. A disaster recovery plan is comprehensively tested each year. ICT facilities are continually being developed to improve services and efficiencies. For example, through improved intranet and internet information and services. A new management reporting facility, Hummingbird, is currently being trialled and rolled out. This will improve reporting capacity.
- 182** There is evidence of effective human resource strategies. This is supported by the continuous award of liP since 1994 through four assessments. Human resource planning has been handled effectively throughout the mergers which have taken place and staff have been well supported. Structures have been developed which meet the needs of the organisation rather than the staff within the organisation. Where appropriate, an assessment process was completed for any new jobs to ensure the best person for each role was appointed. Three month trial periods were in place for those officers having to work in a new geographical area. Workforce planning and profiling is in place to monitor future impacts on the organisation. To support succession planning future managers are developed through the 'next level' management development programme which combines training with experience.

48 Housing Association Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 183** Resources have been allocated to reflect priorities. For example, staff have been released to work on the Lean Fundamental review of the repairs service. A dedicated post is now in place to look at the analysis of the customer profile information. There is an officer located within the organisation with responsibility for the IBS system. This improves the support and training available to staff within the organisation and ensures system issues are resolved as promptly as possible. Chevin is committed to developing roles to ensure that they meet the positions required. For example, administration staff have had a change of role to customer services assistants with new personal specifications and job descriptions supported by training.
- 184** Staff are supported to carry out the duties of their job. There is an ongoing training programme for staff. This includes the follow up training to the 'Free to be' programme. The 'Knowing your customers' training programme is due to commence late 2006, and will help staff understand how the tenant census information can be used to improve access to services and service provision. Training impact assessments are carried out to identify the impact the training has made and to ensure the outcomes of training match the initial objectives set.
- 185** There are appropriate arrangements for capacity building. There is a mentoring and coaching scheme in place, the 'power of you' for managers. This involves managers working with an independent person on a 1:1 basis to meet their individual needs. There is a self-help book in place for managers which serves as a guide to all management areas and sets out their responsibilities.
- 186** There are appropriate arrangements in place for sickness absence management. Staff are provided with the incentive of a day off on their birthday following one year with no sickness absence. Staff sickness is closely monitored and ranked on the basis of frequency and length. Management reports on the level of sickness are reported on a monthly basis to Group Management Team and also in the Chevin staff newsletter. Sickness monitoring is used to identify where there is work related sickness. Managers are trained in managing sickness, and back to work interviews are required for all periods of sickness. Targets for sickness are based on below the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development average for the sector, and performance is monitored compared to others in the sector. Sickness performance has improved with 2.6 per cent of working days lost to sickness at August 2006. The Yorkshire and Humberside National Federation Group and Synergy group are used to benchmark sickness figures.
- 187** Financial accounting and monitoring is robust. Chevin has a robust medium term financial plan. Unintended high spending is identified at an early stage, and addressed. Budgets are set, and monitored, providing financial services support to managers responsible for budgets. This helps ensure budgets are kept, and/or resources re-directed to overcome problems. Financial performance information is well integrated, timely, relevant and easy to understand with appropriate reports available to individual budget holders and monitoring groups including GMT, committees and Board. This ensures it has the financial capacity to deliver its service aims, priorities and the work programme set out in service plans.

- 188** Financial resources are healthy. Chevin had an operating surplus of nearly £2 million in 2005/06 and current reserves are £42 million. Strong gearing ratio (24 per cent compared to average 32 per cent) means it has the capacity to increase development and raise additional future loans. This strong financial position means Chevin is able to support requests for internal investment/new initiatives that support corporate aims and objectives.
- 189** Chevin attracts additional resources to support aims and objectives. For example, through leading the Synergy Group is attracts HC allocation for new development, it is the only regional association to receive major repairs grant and some £76,000 from local councils is received to support regeneration initiatives.
- 190** Chevin is effectively engaged in strategic partnering. For example through leading the Synergy Group, and senior officers have a high profile representing the organisation externally with both councils and stakeholders.

Summary

- 191** Chevin has promising prospects for improvement. The organisation is committed to the improvement of services and there is a sustainable rate of improvement which reflects priority areas. The organisation is self-aware and responds positively to feedback from customers, staff and other organisations. There is a positive track record of change resulting in improved services for customers. The Lean Fundamentals approach is delivering a step change in the quality and cost effectiveness of the repairs services, and there is a commitment to apply this approach to other service areas. There is strong leadership provided by the Board and Group Management Team, and effective human resource management in place. Financial Management is robust and financial resources are healthy.
- 192** However there are a number of barriers to improvement. There are some weaknesses in performance management and performance reporting. Improvement planning is inconsistent across the organisation with some plans not SMART or fully resourced. There are limited outcomes measures to demonstrate the impact of service improvements. IT systems are not fully integrated and capacity is not maximised.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Housing Corporation performance indicators for the year to 31 March 2006

Performance Indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06 Comparison Group Mean ⁴	2005/06 Comparison National Average Mean	2005/06 National Quartile Position
General needs rent						
Average GN weekly gross rent	£58.29	£59.06	£61.85	£63.69	£66.23	2
Vacant dwellings and lettings						
GN re-let time	64 days	38 days	41 days	44 days	40 days	3
Vacant and available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	1.1%	0.9%	0.8%	0.8%	3
Vacant and not available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	1.6%	1%	1.5%	1.2%	3
GN lettings to BME tenants	-	14.4%	10.6%	13.9%	14.9%	-
Stock Condition						
Average SAP rating	55	60	78	68	69	1
Failing decent homes standard	20.7%	19.1%	15.0%	17%	15.5%	3
Repairs Performance						
Emergency repairs completed in target	96.1%	94.4%	94.6%	95.5%	95.4%	3
Urgent repairs completed in target	95.8%	94.2%	97.6%	92.1%	92.7%	1
Routine repairs completed in target	97.4%	96.1%	96.4%	91.4%	93.7%	2
Appointments made that were kept	-		-	95.6%	93.8%	-
Service to Tenants						
Tenant satisfaction overall	87%	87%	83%	79%	79%	2
Tenant satisfaction with participation	62%	62%	58%	62%	62%	3

⁴ Comparison based on similar organisations, with stock size 5000-10000. Extracted from the Housing Corporation Performance Indicator Website November 2006 .

Performance Indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06 Comparison Group Mean ⁵	2005/06 Comparison National Average Mean	2005/06 National Quartile Position
General Needs Financial Performance						
Weekly Operating Cost per GN Unit	£36.76	£40.68	£45.23	£56.18	-	-
GN Operating Cost as a percentage of Turnover	63.5%	70.8%	71.1%	89.0%	-	-
Weekly investment per GN unit	£26.00	£31.68	£32.28	£43.12	-	-
Rent Collected for GN	87.9%	99.9%	99.1%	99.5%	-	-
Rent lost due to GN Voids	2.0%	1.9%	2.4%	2.0%	-	-
Current tenant rent arrears at year end for GN	-	6.1%	6.1%	5.1%	-	-

⁵ Comparison based on similar organisations, with stock size 5,000-10,000. Extracted from the Housing Corporation Performance Indicator Website November 2006 .

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on site, and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - Chevin Corporate Plan and Annual Report;
 - Business plans;
 - service strategies and improvement plans;
 - service area policies and procedures;
 - Board reports;
 - performance reports;
 - tenants' newsletters;
 - tenants' handbook and other leaflets and literature;
 - stock condition survey reports;
 - planned and capital expenditure programme information;
 - complaints procedures and registers;
 - customer satisfaction results; and
 - best value reviews and audit reports.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - visits to offices and the depot;
 - visits to estates and schemes;
 - observation of the staff and offices;
 - observation of Tenants Conference;
 - observation of board meeting;
 - focus group with front line staff
 - staff and board member interviews;
 - interviews and focus groups with tenants and residents;
 - inspections of empty properties, repairs and investment schemes;
 - mystery shopping and reality checks; and
 - file checks for rent arrears, gas servicing, complaints and anti-social behaviour.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Menu of opportunities for involvement

- 1 The 2005 STATUS survey was used to ask tenants how they would like to become more involved. This information was used to increase and further improve the opportunities for involvement. The 'Your voice, make yourself heard' leaflet provides a summary of the eleven methods involvement. This includes a pictorial indication of time and commitment, and the level of influence of each method. An application form is included to enable tenants to express an interest in their preferred methods of involvement, and a database held with all respondents. This is used to invite customers to involvement events, and to plan future involvement opportunities.

Translated information on leaflets and literature

- 2 The branding for Chevin leaflets and literature has been developed to incorporate translations. A simple design is on place for the front cover of leaflets and literature based on the title of the leaflet, and eight translations of the title into alternative languages. This is supported on the back by translated information on how to access the leaflet in an alternative format.

Sustainability matrix

- 3 Chevin Housing Association maintains a Housing Strategy Matrix as an asset management tool. This brings together information on stock condition at scheme level, and combines it with quarterly data on 23 indicators relating to management performance and scheme sustainability issues such as arrears, void costs, terminations, waiting list to vacancy ratio, and tenant satisfaction. Schemes are ranked in terms of overall performance and sustainability to prioritise investment. The matrix is used to track the effect of scheme changes, for example, spending on major improvements or the introduction of a local letting scheme. Data from the matrix is transferred to scheme sustainability appraisals and used as a method of annually reviewing scheme performance against Chevin's targets over the previous 12 to 36 months. Schemes experiencing problems are identified early, and preventative action taken to reverse the trend.