

Re-inspection of Landlord Services

Rutland County Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

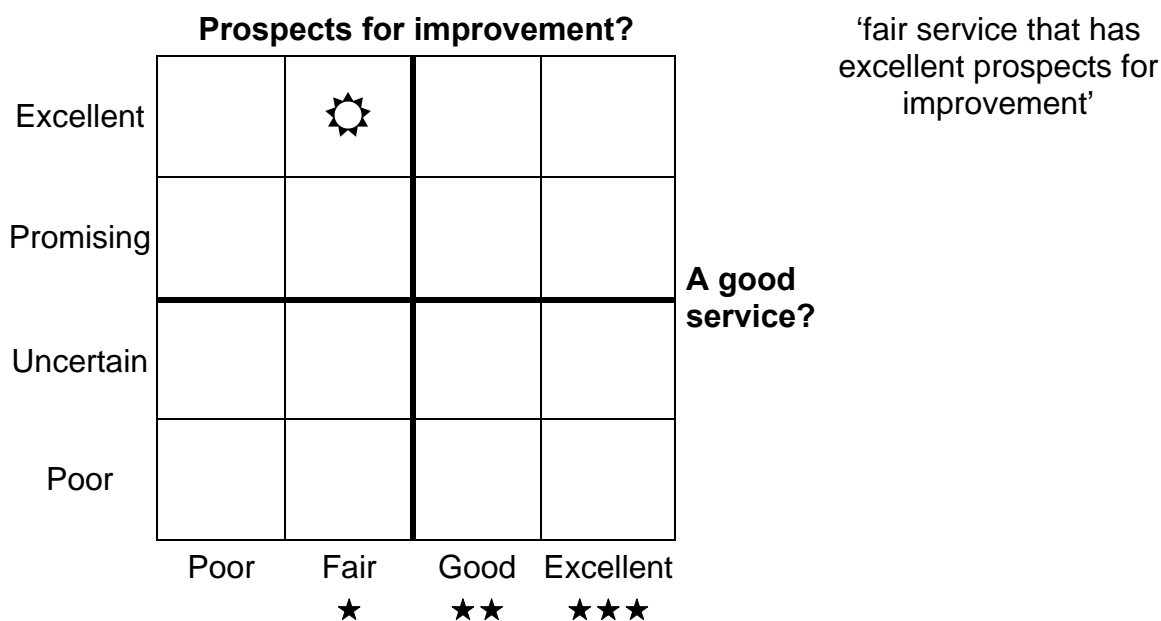
Summary

- 1** Rutland County Council's landlord services are assessed as being fair, one-star services with excellent prospects for improvement. This represents an improvement from the last inspection in 2006, when the service was assessed as being poor with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2** There are some key strengths resulting from systematic improvements being made to core housing management services. Services are accessible for tenants and there are clear service standards in place. Tenant involvement has informed service delivery in many areas, and is now embedded across many services. Improvements have been made to the responsive repairs service resulting in changes that tenants would notice, including appointments being offered and repairs being completed on time. Gas servicing is now an area of strength. A capital programme is in place that has delivered improvements to homes and tenants were involved in the procurement of new contracts. Tenancy management and the approach to anti social behaviour have been strengthened by introducing new procedures and estate inspections. Value for money is a high priority and it is a clear ambition to deliver improved services at no extra cost.
- 3** The Council recognises that some services remain in need of development. Void turn around time is too long and the reasons for this seem unclear to the Council, aids and adaptations are not promoted effectively and the balance of expenditure between planned and responsive repairs does not comply with good practice recommendations. The approach to income management is under-developed and needs reviewing and along with the Anti Social Behaviour and tenancy management service needs increased involvement of tenants in shaping the service.
- 4** The Council has excellent prospects for improvement. The capacity to deliver the improvements has been enhanced by robust plans that are appropriate and are managed effectively. Performance management is embedded in many areas and used systematically to deliver services effectively. Information is shared widely with tenants and used by partners to challenge performance. The Council is considering a stock transfer to a Registered Social Landlord as a way of securing further investment in the stock and meeting the Decent Homes Standard.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Rutland County Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 6 We found the service to be fair because of the following strengths.
- The vast majority of repairs are completed within target times and appointments are offered.
 - Customer information is clear and there are comprehensive service standards in place.
 - There are a range of ways for tenants to be involved in shaping the service and involvement has increased.
 - Performance is reported to customers.
 - Tenant satisfaction is high.
 - There is an asset management strategy in place that has informed a capital programme that is delivering improvements to homes.

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.

- Gas servicing is effectively undertaken with 100 per cent of properties having a current gas safety certificate.
 - All tenants have been provided with a revised Tenants Handbook.
 - An extensive customer profiling exercise has taken place, resulting in some services being tailored to meet individual needs.
 - Value for money is optimised.
 - ASB resolution is supported by partnerships.
 - There are effective debt advice arrangements in place.
- 7 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- services outside Oakham are limited;
 - income collection is not pro-active and this is reflected by rates of collection;
 - some services, in particular income management, have not yet benefited from systematic tenant involvement;
 - void turn around times are too long and difficult to let properties are not marketed;
 - aids and adaptations are not promoted; and
 - involved tenants have not received training in all areas.
- 8 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:
- there is strong and visible leadership that sends clear messages about the vision of the Council and Spire Homes;
 - staff are well trained and supported to do their jobs through an effective human resource strategy;
 - there are effective, well researched and robust plans in place to deliver improvement;
 - there is a track record of delivering improvements against plans that have led to improved outcomes for tenants;
 - modern methods of procurement are being used;
 - performance management is embedded across services;
 - there are ambitious targets for improvement;
 - savings are being reinvested into improvements; and
 - there is an appetite for a large scale stock transfer to be facilitated that will result in further improvements being made to homes.
- 9 However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include:
- some areas of performance monitoring and reporting are under developed.

Recommendations

- 10 In order 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 Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve arrangements for customers to access services by:

- *considering implementing web enabled services including repairs reporting;*
- *introducing systems to monitor whether enquiries are effectively dealt with at the first point of contact;*
- *completing the review of services offered outside Oakham including establishing demand for satellite / remote services;*
- *fully implementing the results of the profiling exercise;*
- *identifying whether there are any barriers to accessing services and take steps to improve access as a result; and*
- *implementing a comprehensive training plan for involved residents including training on procurement and recruitment.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- customers will be able to access the service more easily in a way that suits them.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2008.

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 Further develop the approach to diversity by:

- *ensuring a consistent approach to the collection of diversity data;*
- *ensuring all services are using data collection consistently to demonstrate targeted approaches to service improvement;*
- *undertaking systematic equality impact assessments across all services; and*
- *continuing to target hard to reach groups to increase representation in involvement structures.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a consistent approach to fully understanding the needs of the community

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Improvement the repairs and maintenance service by:

- *reducing the time taken to repair and re-let homes, by taking a coordinated approach across the service including staff responsible for letting properties;*
- *taking steps to fully understand likely future demand on the aids and adaptations service, marketing the service and ensuring that delays are minimised;*
- *developing more mechanisms for obtaining feedback on improvement programmes;*
- *surveying communal areas and developing a programme of capital works as necessary; and*
- *establishing why some properties have had no repairs reported for some time and using this information to inform access to repairs arrangements as necessary.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- use of empty homes will be maximised, resulting in increased opportunities for housing;
- customers will gain a better understanding about how to access the aids and adaptations service;
- future improvement programmes can be adjusted to meet the needs of tenants and performance of contractors addressed;

- communal areas will be brought up to standard; and
- a better understanding of stock condition and barriers to access will be achieved.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

R4 Improve the tenancy and estate management (including allocations and lettings) service by:

- *tracking and analysing reasons for refusals;*
- *implementing a marketing strategy for difficult to let properties;*
- *reviewing the incentive scheme offered to tenants to move to smaller accommodation to establish why take up has been low;*
- *setting in place opportunities for tenants to be systematically involved in shaping the ASB and tenancy management service;*
- *implementing a programme of tenancy audits;*
- *systematically establishing the most frequent causes of ASB and the most effective methods of dealing with ASB; and*
- *reviewing existing partnerships for impact, value for money and determine whether the introduction of individual SLAs would benefit outcomes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- use of properties will be maximised; and
- the ASB and tenancy management service will operate more effectively producing better outcomes for tenants.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

R5 Develop the income management service to be responsive to customers and reflect the needs of a modern service, by:

- *systematically testing and monitoring customer satisfaction with all aspects of the service;*
- *ensuring that there is a mechanism in place to provide systematic and consistent contact with customers at all stages of the recovery process;*
- *exploring opportunities to offer incentives to customers who retain a clear rent account, and publicise appropriately;*
- *ensuring that data on income management service is used to identify trends in order that targeted campaigns can be used; and*
- *ensuring that there is effective and consistent management of cases.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- the service will have greater customer focus and will be pro-active, rather than reliant on sanctions.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2008.

We would like to thank the staff of Rutland County Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 25 February to 29 February 2008.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 11 Rutland County Council is a small, rural local authority in the East Midlands that covers 2 market towns and 52 other settlements. The population is 38,300³ of which 1.86 per cent is from black and minority ethnic communities.⁴
- 12 In terms of deprivation, Rutland ranks 343 out of 354 areas of England, where one is the most deprived. Even though Rutland scores very low on the indices of deprivation there is a problem of rural poverty. The relatively high average income (£37,000) is influenced by a sizeable minority of very high earners.
- 13 Unemployment is 4.5 per cent which is lower than the regional and national average at five per cent of the working population.⁵ Most employment is within public administration, education and health.⁶
- 14 The main local housing issue is the lack of affordable homes to rent or buy. House prices have been driven up by wealthy incomers attracted by Rutland's attractive rural environment, while wages have stayed in line with the East Midlands as a whole. The average house price for June 2007 was £244,390 compared to the East Midlands average which was £143,742⁷.

The Council

- 15 The Council has 26 elected members: 19 Conservative, 5 Independent, and 2 Liberal Democrat. The Council is governed by a Leader and Cabinet.
- 16 The Audit Commission assessed Rutland County Council as improving well in its Direction of Travel assessment which took place in 2007.

The service

- 17 The Council owns 1,243 properties; 19 per cent of these are designated for older people (aged 55+) with a further 218 in sheltered housing schemes. The homes are managed by Spire Homes, under a five year contract from February 2006. Spire Homes was selected to manage the housing service following a stock options appraisal and a competitive selection process. It is a registered social landlord⁸ and part of the Longhurst Group.

³ Source: ONS mid-year population estimates 2006

⁴ National Statistics - Census 2001.

⁵ Annual population survey (January 2006 to December 2006).

⁶ Annual population survey (January 2006 to December 2006) and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2006 – ONS.

⁷ HM Land Registry - Property Price Report June 2007.

⁸ Registered Social Landlord - registered with the Housing Corporation as a not for profit company.

- 18 Spire Homes provide housing management and homelessness services for the Council and manage the housing maintenance contracts. Maintenance work is carried out by one main contractor and a range of smaller, specialist contractors.
- 19 The operation of the Rutland housing contract is overseen by a Partnership Board, consisting of three tenants, three Council nominees and three independent members. Performance is also monitored by the Council's Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Spire Homes Board.
- 20 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) capital programme for 2007/08 amounts to £1,213,000.⁹

⁹ Housing Business Plan 2007/08

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 21 Rutland County Council (RCC) has six key themes. There are specific housing outcomes in its strategic aims, including:
- to increase and sustain the local availability of affordable social housing; and
 - to increase the availability of affordable housing by 30 new homes a year for the period of the plan.
- There is a strategic objective to be a two-star Council. This has a particular implication for the Housing service as it is performance reported in this service that is preventing RCC from being a two-star authority.
- 22 Spire Homes mission statement complements these aims.
- 'Inspired by the communities we serve...to be the first choice for quality homes and services; to make a positive difference to people's lives.'

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

Access and customer care

- 23 In our last inspection we found that there were a mix of strengths and weaknesses in this area, but in this inspection we found that customer access and customer care is now an area of strength. There is continued commitment from both RCC and Spire Homes to develop this area resulting in initiatives now maturing and delivering improved services for tenants. Satisfaction with the service remains high, information about services keeps tenants well informed, a customer charter and customer services strategy are now in place and work has taken place to complete a tenant profiling exercise. The main office used by tenants is now DDA compliant and there is evidence that tenants have been involved in service improvements with feedback being systematically used. However, there is limited use of electronic and web-enabled services that would allow tenants to take advantage of online facilities. Monitoring of how many enquiries are successfully dealt with at the point that tenants first contact Spire Homes does not take place.

- 24** Spire Homes has taken appropriate account of its tenants' views in developing its approach to customer access and customer care. For example, it has used information from the 2006 STATUS¹⁰ survey, subsequent customer surveys and focus groups to inform its Service Improvement Plan (SIP). Tenants' views were also sought on the customer service strategy through discussions with the Rutland Tenant and Leaseholder Partnership (RTLTP), meetings at sheltered housing schemes and questionnaires sent to all tenants on the involvement database. Voicemail has been introduced and staff are permanently on the reception desk as a result of tenants' views. Tenants' views also influenced the layout and facilities in Spire's reception area at the Pinewood Office, including the provision of private interview facilities, at the start of its management contract in 2006.
- 25** The standard of services that tenants can expect is clear. There is a robust Customer Charter in place that was approved by the Partnership Board (PB) in November 2007. The Charter was developed with the RTLTP, staff and other involved tenants and is provided to all new tenants in leaflet form. It is also available on the website and explains the 13 service promises made by Spire Homes. A copy of the Charter has been sent to all tenants and is included in the sign up pack. The Charter is easy to read and understand and is available in other formats on request. By clearly setting out the service standards, Spire Homes has enabled all tenants to monitor the services that they receive.
- 26** Written information for tenants is easy to read and information leaflets have been developed in conjunction with the RLTP. The leaflets are attractive and are clearly 'Spire' branded. There are a variety of leaflets covering information including repairs, tenant involvement, how to make a complaint and equality and diversity. All leaflets contain logos showing that the information is available in other mediums such as on audiotape. Some information is routinely made available in large font, such as the Streets Ahead newsletter and the Tenants Handbook. Posters and flyers are also regularly used to update or reinforce messages; for example, a flyer explaining Spire Homes ASB policy was recently distributed to all tenants. The tenants' handbook has been updated in partnership with the RTLTP and has been sent out to all tenants. The new handbook is attractive and easy to read and emphasises the service that tenants can expect to receive, as well as outlining their responsibilities.

¹⁰ STATUS survey - the standardised tenant satisfaction survey developed by the National Housing Federation and endorsed by the Housing Corporation and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

- 27 Tenants are able to access some information via the RCC website, which clearly shows that Spires Homes manages the service on their behalf. A full range of leaflets are available online, including the tenants' handbook. It is a weakness that although some leaflets are available to download, forms cannot be submitted on line. There is currently no facility to use the website to report a repair or make a complaint. The website does not include contact numbers for staff (other than a general telephone number for Spire) and does not inform users about significant events - for example meetings of the PB. This is mitigated by the relatively low levels of use of the website at present in comparison with other methods of accessing services provided by RCC. Research by undertaken by Spire Homes shows that 2.1 per cent of tenants prefer to access services using the RCC website and this has been taken into account by RCC and Spire Homes when directing resources.
- 28 Tenants are able to access the service easily at offices located in the Town Centre or at an outreach surgery at Uppingham. Home visits are made available as necessary. There is a dedicated Customer Services Team that delivers services direct to customers at the point of enquiry including logging repairs and processing application forms. Tenant surveys indicate broad tenant satisfaction with current office opening hours and the opening hours are regularly reviewed in line with tenant feedback. An out-of-hours service is provided to tenants by Harborough Homes, offering emergency repairs reporting and response to the emergency alarm system. The out-of-hours service is monitored to ensure a good standard of customer service is provided. Courtesy calls are made to residents who have used the service to check that the response was polite and helpful and, where repairs are concerned, that the work was carried out. These surveys show very high levels of satisfaction with the call handling service.
- 29 It is a weakness that there is limited provision for access to services outside Oakham. Spire Homes offers a periodic surgery at Uppingham, the use of which is currently under review. It has not yet fully explored options for the use of mobile office facilities which could be used to take services to customers in rural areas. There have been some discussions regarding the use of RCC's mobile library facility and the customer service strategy also refers to further exploration of mobile office facilities, but consideration of the options is at a very early stage, which may result in some tenants being unable to access services.
- 30 Front line staff are supported to provide effective customer service. New members of customer service staff are given a 'buddy' who is more experienced in the role as well as being provided with customer care training along with service specific training, including, for example, how to deal with initial repair queries, homelessness queries, applications for housing and tenancy management issues. Some staff are currently undertaking National Vocational Qualification (NVQs) in customer service, and equality and diversity training and people handling courses such as 'managing conflict' are mandatory. Customer care objectives are regularly discussed at one to one meetings and at team meetings, ensuring that customer care remains a high priority across the organisation.

- 31 Spire Homes is involving tenants in developing its approach to customer access and customer care. It established a customer care working group approximately six months ago, including residents from its involvement database. The group has been involved in a number of issues such as devising the tenant profile survey and reviewing the complaints policy.
- 32 Spire Homes is responsive to tenant enquiries. Tenants note that Spire Homes seeks their views on a range of issues and believe that these are taken into account - whether on individual issues or general topics. Examples include responding to suggestions to carry out gutter clearing in a planned way and response to concerns about the cleaning service in a sheltered scheme. This ensures that the service offered is responsive to suggested changes and tenants can feel confident that their views are acted upon.
- 33 Spire Homes is able to demonstrate that tenants are a vital factor in assessing the quality of the service. Tenants have been trained to carry out mystery shopping, which will include checks on Spire Homes' performance against its service standards. Training, which also involved Spire Homes' tenants from Rushden, has been provided by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS). A programme of mystery shopping has been set in consultation with residents and TPAS and a set of scenarios developed to assist in this work. Spire Homes has experience of using mystery shopping successfully in its Rushden based services, where it has developed links with tenant auditors from another organisation.
- 34 Service standards are monitored by Spire Homes, with the new telephone system being able to support this more effectively. RCC is able to closely monitor performance of its own Customer Service Centre using the Govmetric system which reports that RCC is exceeding its own targets for resolution of queries at the front desk or by the call centre. Although reports show that housing enquiries are rarely made at the main RCC office, there is a freephone link in reception enabling visitors to make contact with Spire Homes at no cost.
- 35 There are comprehensive reports submitted to the PB that supply detailed information on customer satisfaction with services. Reports include those about satisfaction with contact arrangements, helpfulness of staff and outcome of contact. Reported satisfaction rates in respect of these areas during the year to date are higher than last year and range from 92.9 per cent to 96.6 per cent, exceeding the targets set for 2008/09. Customer satisfaction with overall services is high and has improved since our last inspection. A mini-STATUS survey currently being used by Spire Homes shows that overall satisfaction with the landlord service is now 86 per cent compared with 80 per cent in the 2006 STATUS survey. This demonstrates that the services delivered by Spire Homes have improved in ways that tenants have noticed.

- 36 Tenants are kept well informed about RCC and Spire Homes' activities, services and performance. There are regular newsletters to residents which are attractively presented and include a wide range of relevant information. Flyers and leaflets have been sent to residents about issues such as performance against the service standards and opportunities for involvement. Residents comment that service information has increased and improved over the past two years.
- 37 Spire Homes supports contractors to comply with its customer service standards and has effective monitoring arrangements to check their performance against the standards. Training has been provided for contractors' staff on 'working with respect', and this training addressed equality and diversity issues, communication with residents and conduct in residents' homes. Monitoring is carried out using the repairs satisfaction surveys, results of which are discussed at regular meetings with the contractors. Issues such as operatives not showing identification cards when they visit have been raised and addressed with the contractors, ensuring that they comply with the standard.
- 38 Spire Homes has been conducting a tenant profiling exercise and plans to reach 100 per cent of tenants in the next few months. Housing officers and surveyors have been given lists of addresses where profiles are outstanding, with the aim of completing the information as they make visits in the area. The IT system also shows an alert on the screen if an address is entered on the system, enabling staff to ask the tenant to complete the profile information. Current performance is at 84 per cent which has enabled Spire Homes to ensure services and information meet individual tenants' needs. Alerts on the IT system indicate communication needs and have been used to prompt use of translated letters and to advise contractors via job tickets about tenants they are visiting who may need extra time to reach the door. Other changes have been made in response to the tenant profile information such as changing the format of 'Streets Ahead' to a larger print A3 version, in recognition that a high proportion of tenants are elderly and may have impaired vision but may not have specifically indicated that they need large print documents.
- 39 It is a weakness that Spire Homes is not systematically identifying tenants who are not using its services and so is unable to identify why this might be and what, if any, barriers exist to accessing its services. It is also not clear whether there is an agreed point at which service enquiries should be referred on from customer services staff to more specialist staff. In addition monitoring does not take place in respect of how many enquiries are dealt with at the point tenants first contact the organisation and there is no target for this. This limits how Spire Homes can monitor the quality and effectiveness of its customer service and how this improves over time.

- 40 There are clear standards in place for dealing with complaints and there is a robust, well publicised complaints policy in place that was drawn up by using good practice examples from high performing organisations. A leaflet on how to make a complaint supports the policy. It is easy to read and is made available to new tenants at sign up, as well as on-line and in the offices and sheltered schemes. Details on the service standards that tenants can expect in relation to complaints are also included in the tenants' handbook. Complaints can be made in person, by e mail, by telephone, by letter or by using a complaints form that is available from offices and sheltered schemes.
- 41 There are arrangements in place to track complaints and to ensure that customers receive a prompt and appropriate reply, with clear responsibility for recording and chasing outstanding responses. The target time for responding to complaints has been reduced from 21 days to 10 days from November 2007 and complaints handling reports to the partnership board show that of the 27 complaints received during the year to date 24 were responded to within the target time. Staff and tenants are clear about procedures and standards in respect of complaints.
- 42 Spire Homes seeks feedback from complainants through a simple survey and currently receives responses from around 50 per cent of complainants. This is a high response rate. Satisfaction with the way that complaints are managed is monitored and 100 per cent satisfaction has been achieved during the year to date. Reports to the partnership board identify learning from complaints and include action taken in response to the individual complaints. There is evidence that complaints are analysed for trends, but the number of complaints is small and no trends in the nature of complaints is yet evident. Some processes have been changed in response to complaints made. For example, 100 per cent of void properties are now post inspected following a complaint about the condition of a garden. It is clear that Spire Homes is actively seeking to learn from complaints and is systematically using complaints to inform the way services are delivered.

Diversity

- 43 In our last inspection this was found to be an area where there were more weaknesses than strengths. During this inspection we found that this is now an area where strengths balance weaknesses. Equality and diversity is demonstrably a high priority at a corporate level both for RCC and Spire Homes and arrangements are now in place to enable both organisations to understand whether they are meeting the needs of the community. The largely complete tenant profile has enabled Spire Homes to respond effectively to diverse needs and to adapt services and there are examples of this happening in practice. Arrangements for responding to race hate crime and other forms of harassment have improved and there remains a focus on supporting staff through training. The service has recently been externally verified as being compliant with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Rented Housing. However, it is a significant weakness that sheltered schemes are not compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and there are limited outcomes from equality and diversity information collated during service delivery.

- 44 RCC and Spire Homes have made progress in the area of equality and diversity since our last inspection and new ways of working are now embedded in some services. This is as a result of the clear and consistent corporate leadership from both organisations and commitment to the promotion of equality and diversity. The Chief Executive of RCC is the Diversity Champion and the Chief Executive of Spire Homes is a member of the RCC Equalities Working Group. To complement this RCC has joined Spire Homes Equality and Diversity Working Group, which comprises of staff, PB members and tenants. The RCC representative is a tenant member from the PB. Adopting this partnership approach ensures that policies and procedures reflect the priorities of each organisation and in particular demonstrate the value that RCC attributes to its working relationship with Spire Homes.
- 45 RCC has achieved level 2 of the Local Government Equality Standard¹¹ (LGES). Although this is an improvement on Level 1, it demonstrates that various actions are still to take place and these are outlined in the action plan to meet Level 3 of the LGES. The overall aim of the plan is to meet Level 3 by 2009. Some actions have been completed including reviewing the terms of reference for the Equalities Group and hosting an open discussion session involving key partners and stakeholders. The session included representatives from the Leicestershire Ethnic Minority Partnership and the Leicester Lesbian, Gay and Bi-sexual and Transgender Centre. This demonstrates an increasing awareness of the need to involve other stakeholders and partners in establishing policies and procedures for RCC to enable it to deliver appropriate services.
- 46 RCC and Spire Homes now meet the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Guidance for Rented Housing and this has recently been independently audited and verified. Procedures have been put in place to enable services to be routinely monitored by ethnicity, including housing applications, satisfaction with the repairs service and rent arrears enforcement actions. More work needs to be done with the information collated, but by meeting this standard Spire Homes now has the information to demonstrate that it is not discriminating in the way that services are provided.
- 47 Corporate commitment to diversity is shown in a number of other ways. For example, one of Spire Homes' core values is to 'embrace diversity and value all people'. Staff are required to attend equality and diversity training and this is also emphasised during their induction to the company. Members of the PB have also undergone a briefing session on equality and diversity. Performance against the Service Standards and the Customer Charter are monitored through one to one meetings and Personal Development Interviews (PDIs). For example this process has identified that young people are under-represented in Spire Homes' involvement structures and it is therefore an individual target for the Resident Involvement Officer to involve more young people in developing services. Achieving this will ensure that this group is not excluded from the opportunity to be involved.

¹¹ Equality standard - a framework to help local authorities introduce a comprehensive and systematic approach to dealing with equality issues.

- 48 RCC promotes its commitment to equality and diversity to customers and stakeholders by reviewing policies and literature on a regular basis. To support this, the Spire Homes' Equality and Diversity Policy sets out a clear framework for direct service operation to ensure that equality and diversity issues are addressed. It is an easy to read document and addresses the ways that both contractors and staff are expected to behave to deliver fair and equal treatment to service users. The Spire Homes Service Improvement Plan (SIP) includes specific actions to deliver the aims set out in the Equality and Diversity Policy. Some of the actions have been completed, resulting in outcomes that would be noticed by tenants, including working towards completing the tenant profile and improving the accessibility of the Pinewood office.
- 49 RCC has detailed understanding of the current needs of existing groups in the community, informed by the Housing Needs Assessment. In addition to this RCC has undertaken a small survey with 50 migrant workers to start to understand the needs of emerging communities. This information has been shared with Spire Homes which has enabled work to commence to respond to this, most notably in respect of the provision of information, most of which has now been translated into Polish, thereby enabling potential service users to easily access the service.
- 50 The make up of RCC and Spire Homes broadly reflects the community it serves. Diversity monitoring takes place during the recruitment process and women are very well represented at senior management level.
- 51 Spire Homes is also taking steps to ensure that services are adapted for young tenants as well as for the older community. For example, work has been undertaken with tenants under 25 to determine the ways that they would like to be involved in shaping the service; this has resulted in specific articles in Streets Ahead aimed at young tenants and a project with local schools, which it is hoped will increase interest.
- 52 Spire Homes is taking the necessary steps to ensure that translation and interpretation facilities are available. The suite of Spire leaflets include a pictorial strap line confirming that the document is available in other formats, including audiotape, Braille and translation into other languages, and staff have access to Language Line, although have not needed to use it. The RCC website is also set up to enable easy access and is supported by the Browsealoud facility and translation services are clearly promoted. This demonstrates that RCC has invested resources in making the facility easily available for those users with diverse needs, despite the website not being a facility widely used by tenants.

- 53 It is a significant weakness that all sheltered schemes are not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). A compliance audit has been undertaken of all sheltered schemes and offices with the required works costed and budgeted. RCC and Spire Homes have taken a pragmatic view with regard to the works necessary to ensure all sheltered schemes are DDA compliant. The future of some of the sheltered schemes is being examined as part of the Sheltered Housing Review which is due to be completed shortly. The review is considering future demand for sheltered housing, the types of schemes currently available to meet demand and whether any of the schemes need to be re-configured, especially those schemes offering bed sit accommodation. Once the outcome of the review is known, an informed decision will be made with regard to the programme of capital works. In the meantime, sheltered schemes have undergone a DDA audit with stair lifts available in some schemes assisting customers. The housing office is now DDA compliant and there has been positive feedback from customers about the design and accessibility.
- 54 The RCC Equality Scheme requires Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) to be completed for all new policies as well as existing policies. Training is planned for Spire Homes staff to ensure that they are able to effectively undertake the assessments. Some EIAs have been completed, for example the Allocations Policy was assessed in 2005, but this has not been a high priority and it is not clear what the outcomes have been. It is a weakness that Equality Impact Assessments are not routinely undertaken across services and it is therefore difficult to be sure that appropriate action has been taken to deliver services appropriately.
- 55 Spire Homes seeks to actively involve tenants in influencing policies and procedures with regard to equality and diversity issues. The Spire Homes Equality and Diversity working group is attended by both staff and tenants. This has led to the review of every stage of customer access to the services provided by Spire, including the reception area, to ensure that no one is disadvantaged. Tenants attending the Group have received training to assist them in their role including recent attendance at the launch of the BME Communities and Housing in the East Midlands Research Report launched by the National Federation of Housing Associations.
- 56 Spire Homes Equality and Diversity Policy has also been reviewed by the Spire Homes Race Equality Group comprising tenants from Spire Homes in Rutland and in East Northamptonshire. In February 2008 the Policy was also reviewed by Northamptonshire Race Equality Council and is being redrafted to take account of their comments. The final version will go to RTLP for comments and approval and then to the PB for final approval, which will result in a user friendly document.
- 57 It is a weakness that, to date, the views of minority groups including BME tenants and disabled tenants have not been specifically sought. There are some limited examples of tenants from minority groups being involved in existing mechanisms, for example a BME tenant is involved in the Customer Care Working Group. Spire Homes is currently not able to demonstrate that services meet the needs of minority groups and may unwittingly be excluding them.

- 58 RCC and Spire Homes work with numerous other community organisations to ensure that services are tailored to local need. There are a number of partnerships in place to assist RCC to meet the needs of the local community, for example Rutland Access Group has undertaken mystery shopping at RCC's Catmose office and Spire Homes' Pinewood office, with other work being undertaken with Vista (impaired vision organisation) and Deaf Awareness that will assist with the review of the Equality and Diversity Plan and move towards Level 3 of the LGES. Outcomes from this work include re-modelling the Customer Service Centre at Catmose following advice from Rutland Access, enabling easier access for visitors in wheelchairs.
- 59 RCC has in place a victim-centred approach to racial harassment outlined in the Racial Harassment Policy and this approach is supported by the funding of a domestic violence outreach worker. RCC's clear stand against domestic violence has been reflected in its LAA1 targets. Corporate awareness raising sessions are currently taking place for all staff and Spire Homes staff are able to join these sessions, ensuring that a common approach and understanding is achieved and maintained.
- 60 Spire Homes has undertaken work to support RCC in this area and in other areas of harassment and hate crime. For example, the tenants' handbook includes sections on harassment and hate crime that clearly reinforces to tenants that this type of behaviour is unacceptable. The handbook also includes a section on domestic violence and refers to partner agencies that may be able to provide assistance. It is a weakness that the tenancy agreement does not include specific reference to domestic violence and therefore it is not explicit that incidents of domestic violence may be a breach of the tenancy conditions. Despite this there are examples of Spire Homes working in partnership with organisations to support victims.
- 61 Arrangements to support the reporting and resolution of harassment and hate crimes, including racial harassment and domestic violence have improved since our last inspection and are included in the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Statement of Procedure. Domestic violence is specifically categorised as a category one incident, as is offensive and racist graffiti, requiring a response within one working day. Responses to hate and race crime have been publicised by Spire Homes using the ASB information leaflet and during the recent Equality and Diversity week. This demonstrates a clear stand against this type of behaviour and ensuring that appropriate support is provided or action is taken.

Stock investment and asset management

- 62 In our last inspection we found that weaknesses significantly outweighed strengths in this area. But in this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. A stock condition survey has been undertaken and there is now an asset management strategy in place that has informed a capital programme. Planned improvement works have commenced in a number of areas and there is a four year programme in place. Gas servicing is now well managed and there are suitable arrangements in place for other cyclical works. Responsive repairs are now completed in time and appointments are offered. Tenants have been systematically involved in reshaping this service area. Performance in respect of voids remains a weakness; although costs have reduced, re-let times remain too long. Although detailed work is taking place to address historical underinvestment, at the time of our inspection only a small proportion of properties had undergone improvements. A large proportion of properties do not meet the Decent Home Standard¹² and RCC cannot meet the government target for all properties to meet the standard by 2010.

Asset management strategy and capital programme

- 63 Accurate information has been collected on stock condition following a new stock condition survey commissioned in 2006 by Spire Homes. Thirteen per cent of all properties were included in the survey. Additional resources have been provided by Spire Homes to supplement this by implementing a programme aimed at systematically surveying 100 per cent of properties by an in-house surveyor. To date 40 per cent have been completed and work is on target to complete the remainder by June 2008. The data from the individual surveys has been found to support the results of the stock condition survey and a new database has been procured which enables automatic transfer of information from the survey into the main property database. There is now detailed understanding and awareness of the condition of the stock and the work necessary to not only meet the DHS, but also to maintain the stock to the satisfaction of tenants.
- 64 Investment in stock is guided by a clear strategy. The data from the stock condition survey has been used to develop a draft Asset Management Strategy. The Strategy was drawn up using information from a variety of sources. Results of the stock condition survey, customer and staff feedback, advice from consultants and experience of similar plans within the LG have been used to assist in determining priorities. The draft Strategy clearly identifies the total cost requirement of ensuring that properties meet the DHS. Further assessment of options for some areas where sustainability is a concern, such as garage sites and low demand sheltered housing schemes, is being further investigated. This approach provides direction and clear principles for stock investment.

¹² Decent Homes Standard - a minimum standard for housing set by the Government, covering basic legal definitions of fitness, reasonable state of repair, modern facilities and services and thermal comfort.

- 65 RCC does not have the necessary resources available to meet the DHS by 2010. It has taken the decision not to direct resources that are available to meeting the DHS at any cost, but to use its resources to address a raft of issues that have accumulated following a lack of regular planned maintenance in the past. By taking this approach, current predictions show that 83 per cent of properties will meet the DHS by 2010 subject to completion of the improvements that will be delivered by the capital works programme.
- 66 Capital works have been packaged into improvement programmes totalling approximately £1 million each year, over a four year programme. Capital works have been systematically prioritised according to a number of factors including health and safety, DHS failures, energy efficiency and tenant priorities. Some of the planned works will address several of these issues at once, for example the heating system replacement programme will increase energy efficiency, improve value for money, satisfy tenants' priorities and meet DHS criteria. There is an improvement plan in place that will deliver new doors, windows, heating systems, roofs and external painting. The programme is delivering improvements that tenants will directly benefit from as well as improving the overall condition of the properties.
- 67 Tenants have been systematically involved in the capital works programme. Spire Homes has recognised the importance of involving tenants and has spent considerable resources on establishing an active tenant involvement structure. Developing this structure has delayed the start of some of the improvements. Tenants were involved in drafting the Asset Management Strategy and have been consulted about and involved in major decisions including prioritising works, designing specifications, choosing components and selecting contractors. Spire Homes has consistently sought the views of tenants by using a range of methods including taking road shows to different parts on the county. This approach is used to reduce barriers and supports customer satisfaction with the service, as well as ensuring that tenants' priorities were factored into the development of the capital programme.
- 68 Development of the capital programme has been fed back to the wider tenant community by way of the Streets Ahead newsletter explaining the priorities and issues and how decisions have been reached. It is a weakness that there is no information publicly available to enable tenants to find out when improvements to their property will be undertaken. There are no plans to do this, other than to upload the programme to the website.

- 69 Spire Homes is now delivering a series of effective improvements to properties. There are programmes in place to replace windows and doors, refurbish and renew central heating, as well as a re-roofing contract and an external decorations contract. Work to deliver these programmes started in November 2007 and 412 properties have been targeted during 2007/08, a third of total stock numbers. So far, 211 properties have been completed, representing 16 per cent of the stock. Works are on target to be completed by the end of the financial year. The quality of the work undertaken is checked in a number of ways including spot checks during the work, 100 per cent post inspections and satisfaction surveys. The capital programme is delivering results for some tenants.
- 70 Spire Homes is responding to the individual needs of tenants. For example, tenants are provided with assistance to move large items of furniture. Satisfaction with the capital programme is high, with responses from tenants ranging between 83 per cent to 100 per cent satisfaction. This includes both the quality of work and the promptness with which it was completed. Appointments were kept, work areas were left clean and tidy, and operatives are polite and show identification. Overall a customer focused service is being delivered.
- 71 It is a weakness that cyclical maintenance programmes for communal areas, particularly for painting, are not in place. As a result, some of the Tenant Incentive Scheme¹³ (TIS) budget has been used for decoration as residents have wanted to improve the appearance of communal areas. However, the criteria for the scheme states that TIS funding will not be used for work the Council would normally fund, and cyclical painting should fall into this category. Funds that are normally reserved for more general environmental works are being inappropriately used, therefore, and the opportunity is being lost for tenants to use the funds as designed.
- 72 There are basic arrangements to record the actual and presumed location of asbestos. There is an asbestos register and flagging system in place and communal areas are inspected annually. Spire Homes has recognised that the asbestos register needs development as it is based on a type one survey¹⁴. A type two survey¹⁵ is currently being undertaken with ten per cent of properties being surveyed; this information will update and supplement existing information held on the property database. There are flags on the system that link to responsive repairs and appear on the works order for the contractor as well. All contractors have a version of the register which is updated for accuracy every time there is a void. Overtime this will result in comprehensive data being held about the location of asbestos.

¹³ Tenant Incentive Scheme - a scheme enabling tenants to bid for a share of a budget set aside for environmental improvements.

¹⁴ Type 1 Survey - Type 1 surveys are those that identify the likely presence of asbestos.

¹⁵ Type 2 Survey - Type 2 surveys are those that explore the presence of asbestos without disturbing it.

- 73 Information for tenants about asbestos is under developed. Spire Homes has recognised this, and although general information about asbestos is provided to tenants using Streets Ahead, a new advice leaflet has been drafted and is being sent to all tenants soon. Tenants were involved in designing the leaflet, five residents were asked to respond to the draft and it has been approved by the Asset Management Group.
- 74 Value for money in the packaging of major works can be demonstrated. Quality and cost are key considerations within the tendering process, with an emphasis on quality ranging from 40 per cent to 60 per cent. There are examples of individual contracts offering savings, for example Dulux ICI post inspects painting works at no cost. Tenants have been involved throughout the tendering process and the increased satisfaction rates along with good quality work demonstrate that value for money is being achieved by using this approach.
- 75 It is a weakness that there is no clearly defined strategy to improve the energy efficiency of homes or systematic work towards addressing the fuel poverty issues experienced by some tenants. The average SAP¹⁶ rating is 57 which is quartile four performance, with the lowest SAP rating found to be 21. Properties with a low SAP rating have been included in the heating refurbishment and replacement programme, but some properties with a very low SAP rating have not been included early on the programme. There are some examples where Spire Homes has undertaken pieces of work to start to address fuel poverty experienced by tenants, including lobbying activities around the use of pre-payment meters and running articles on this subject in Streets Ahead, and attracting grant funding to help support an insulation project. Work has begun to develop a fuel poverty strategy, but the lack of a strategy at present means that work in this is un-coordinated and has limited outcomes that tenants would recognise.

Responsive repairs

- 76 It is easy for customers to access the responsive repairs service. Repairs can be reported online, by telephone or in person. Appointments are now offered for all non-emergency or urgent repairs and are confirmed in writing. An emergency out of hours call handling service is available that responds to emergencies. Information about the repairs service is widely accessible within a suite of leaflets available from all the offices and sheltered schemes as well as online as downloads. The website also includes information about a raft of issues including rechargeable repairs and the out-of-hours service, with the telephone number of the call handling service clearly displayed. Normal opening hours are 9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday, and until 4.30pm on Friday.

¹⁶ SAP: Standard Assessment Procedure – the Government’s recommended system for home energy rating. The higher the number is, the better the energy efficiency of the dwelling.

- 77 Availability of information about priorities for repairs and service standards available for tenants is mixed. Repairs are categorised into four priorities: emergency (24 hours), urgent (7 days) and routine (14 and 30 days). There is a repairs leaflet that details this information but the website does not include details of priorities and response times, with the website in particular only focusing on tenants' responsibilities. This makes it difficult for tenants to know what to expect and to know what priority the work may be given.
- 78 Spire cannot be certain that all residents are able to access the service as work has not been undertaken to establish why some properties have not had any repairs completed at all. This means that there may be tenants who urgently need repairs undertaking but are unsure how to report this.
- 79 There are effective arrangements in place to assist tenants and staff to identify the necessary work, at the time that the repair is reported. Tenants have a repairs handbook that includes diagrams to assist in identifying repairs. The number of repairs completed right first time is good, at 81 per cent, and so diagnosis is not especially weak at present. Staff are able to access a new diagnostic tool, which links directly to the schedule of rates. This has been in place since January 2008 and it is therefore too early to assess the implications, but it is anticipated that it will be an aid to commitment accounting as well as diagnosis.
- 80 The responsive repairs service is now more customer-focused. Appointments are offered for all responsive repairs other than emergency works. Residents were involved in designing the system and three 'slots' are offered; 8am to 11am, 11am to 2pm and 2pm to 5pm. The appointments are made when the repair is reported, for the convenience of the tenant. This has resulted in few abortive calls being made, thereby increasing efficiency.
- 81 There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that emergencies are dealt with outside office hours. The out-of-hours call handling service arranges for works to be undertaken with details faxed through to Spire Homes the next day when a courtesy telephone call is made to the resident. Performance in respect of appointments has improved over time and the percentage of repairs completed by agreed appointment for quarter three for the year to date is 93.4 per cent, exceeding the target of 90 per cent, compared to performance of 85.2 per cent for 2006/07. This is demonstrating an increased customer focus and is an improvement that customers would notice.
- 82 Contractors are given a reasonable amount of freedom to undertake works, even when a degree of variation from the original order is necessary. There are systems in place that allow work to continue following self-authorisation up to a level of £100, with Spire Homes authorisation being required at varying levels beyond this. The number of variations is decreasing following the improved use of Schedule of Rates codes that link directly from the diagnostic tool used by staff. This system ensures that the operative is able to continue with the work with minimum inconvenience to the tenant.

- 83** RCC and Spire have worked together to resolve the poor performance of the responsive repairs contractor. There is now a service level agreement in place with the contractor covering elements of service delivery that are not included in the contract, including offering appointments and undertaking pre and post inspections. Performance of the contractor is closely monitored by way of structured meetings using a detailed agenda, where performance is discussed and validated, information about outstanding work is exchanged and invoice status is clarified. Tenants regularly participate in these meetings. As a result of this, performance has improved and an efficient service is now being offered to tenants, reflected in satisfaction rates of 97 per cent.
- 84** Spire Homes has delivered an improved service across all areas of responsive repairs. For example, during quarter three of the year to date 100 per cent of urgent repairs were completed on time, compared with 89.1 per cent during 2006/07 and 96.9 per cent of 14 day routine repairs are completed on time, compared to 78.4 per cent in 2006/07. This demonstrates significant changes being made in areas that matter most to tenants.
- 85** Tenant involvement has also affected service delivery. For example as a direct result of comments from customers, appointments for repairs and contractors undertaking post inspections have been introduced.
- 86** IT systems are not being used to their full potential, although use of technology is improving. There are flags in place on the system to indicate vulnerabilities and these are shared with the contractor and the new diagnostic tool will assist in accurately reporting repairs. Hand held technology has not been fully embraced in this area of work, although the stock condition survey surveyor uses a PDA. There are no IT links with contractors which is a lost opportunity to maximise efficient exchange of information that could lead to improved performance. RCC and Spire Homes have recognised this, and as the main responsive repairs contract is due to end in December 2008, re-letting the contract will enable this to be re-visited.
- 87** There is currently an imbalance in the split between emergency, urgent and routine repairs. Current performance is 22:28:50, whereas good practice suggests that the split should be 10:20:70. Spire Homes is aware of this and although these proportions have changed positively since our last inspection, no specific steps have been taken to address this. This is largely because the current responsive repairs contract does not differentiate in payment to the contractor and so there have to date been no financial implications of this. This is currently a significant weakness with resources potentially being misdirected to emergency and urgent repairs and away from routine matters.

- 88 Budget monitoring mechanisms used to manage the responsive repairs expenditure are not entirely effective and this is a weakness. Budgets are monitored internally within the technical team, but also with Spire Homes Management Team and within RCC structures. The responsive repairs budget was not profiled to make contingencies for additional demand for repairs during the winter months. In addition to this, the budget has been overspent following late submission of invoices from the main contractor. RCC has been able to support an overspend on this occasion, but resources may not allow this in future which will impact on their ability to respond to tenants' demands and the needs of the properties.

Void repairs and management

- 89 Average repair and re-let times have improved since our last inspection but this remains an area of concern. At the end of 2006/07 average re-let time was 59 days. The target for 2007/08 is 52 days which remains in quartile four. Average performance in the year to date has ranged from 33 days in quarter one to 99 days in quarter two. Performance is affected by low demand properties. It is a weakness that Spire Homes do not yet have a clear strategy to address the continuing problem of difficult to let properties. These are primarily properties designated for older people but because of their size, location or facilities are difficult to let. A clear approach to this problem has not yet been agreed. Spire Homes will therefore continue to have problems letting these properties, impacting on the length of time they remain empty and the associated rental loss.
- 90 There is a lack of joined up working in respect of void management and this is a significant weakness. For example, Spire Homes does not have a clear understanding of why the turnaround time for vacant properties is at the current level, even excluding difficult to let older persons' properties. It is aware of some issues, such as refused offers, occasional contractor delays in carrying out the work and instances where, for example, electrical upgrade work is needed. However, it does not know how much impact each of these factors has on the average turnaround time, despite information showing that repairs to void properties are generally undertaken within the specified target times of either 7, 14 or 21 days. Delays in re-letting properties have a direct impact on the ability to meet housing need.
- 91 The average cost of repairs to void properties is now being monitored and has reduced slightly during the year to date. These costs compare favourably with organisations against which Spire Homes has benchmarked, and have been affected by the decision not to include component renewals during void works, but to advise new tenants when the works feature in a planned programme.
- 92 Spire Homes does not have a clear, customer-focused and published lettable standard in place, provided to applicants at the point a tenancy is offered. A new standard has recently been developed in consultation with members of the RTLP. Spire Homes is in the process of drafting a user friendly leaflet which will explain this to customers. It has very recently started to issue the standard in its current format to those being offered a tenancy. Having a lettable standard in place will help inform prospective tenants about the standard they can expect and will reduce the number of queries.

- 93 The current lettable standard is generally adhered to. We carried out reality checks as part of our inspection and found that the lettable standard had been met and all properties that we saw were clean, tidy and finished to a high standard. Electrical checks had been carried out to ensure that the property was safe to move in to. The surveyor carries out post inspections on all vacant properties once the work has been completed to ensure that all necessary work has been done. This demonstrates that the quality assurance arrangements that are in place to ensure that properties are fit to let are working.
- 94 The approach to the decoration of vacant properties is not clear. Initially the surveyor can decide whether or not decoration work is carried out; this decision is based partly on the condition of existing decorations and, where appropriate, the ability of the incoming tenant to decorate. Where decoration is damaged, the wall may be stripped to provide a clear surface which the tenant can decorate. Decoration vouchers may be given to incoming tenants at the discretion of housing officers, but it is not clear what guidance, if any, is used to ensure that this discretion is fairly exercised or to what extent the vouchers are used to encourage an offer to be accepted. This lack of a consistent approach could result in different levels of service being offered to tenants.

Gas servicing and other cyclical work

- 95 The approach to gas servicing has strengthened since our last inspection and at the time of this inspection 100 per cent of properties had a valid safety certificate. There are now robust and effective procedures in place to ensure that gas safety checks are undertaken to all properties. An in-house tracking system has been devised that automatically alerts the surveyor responsible for this area of work 60 days before the current certificate is due to expire. The system also automatically alerts the surveyor at 30 days and 7 days to enable progress to be monitored. This means that properties will not be overlooked.
- 96 Spire Homes has undertaken work with contractors to improve gas servicing. Following an external audit, the contract was terminated and work is being undertaken by another contractor who works with Spire Homes elsewhere. The contract is currently being re-let and is due to commence in June 2008. The quality of gas servicing is routinely monitored by an external agent. There are a number of other examples where value for money has been attained in gas servicing, as well as the delivery of an improved service at no additional cost. For example, sharing validation of servicing with Spire Homes in Rushden and the modernisation of the procedure, including new letters to tenants that are clearly effective.

- 97 There is a pro active approach to contacting no access cases. Following three contractor visits to gain access, the cases are passed to housing officers who contact the customer. Housing officer intervention improves contact and access, avoiding the need for legal action. There are also flags on the IT system where servicing is outstanding, to arrange access should the tenant contact Spire Homes regarding another matter, for example to report a repair or discuss rent arrears. Housing officers use innovative methods to contact tenants, including visiting tenants at work, to ensure that a servicing appointment can be made. This approach is effective and during the last year only eight cases were referred to the housing officer and no injunctions were necessary.
- 98 High priority is given to achieving contact and out of hours appointments are offered to ensure that servicing is undertaken. Staff adopt a flexible approach to meeting customers needs when undertaking gas safety work, for example if residents are sleeping in a room with a gas appliance, a carbon monoxide detector is fitted while the problem is resolved, and in one case this involved a stair lift being fitted. This approach has encouraged tenants to cooperate.
- 99 Customer information in respect of gas servicing is mixed. There is currently no specific leaflet in place outlining the service. Although one is being drafted the lack of information may have a direct impact on general levels of understanding among the wider tenant body. Tenants have, to date, received information in the tenants' newsletter. However, satisfaction surveys are routinely and systematically undertaken and satisfaction in this area is high at 92 per cent, exceeding the target for the current year.
- 100 There is a programme in place to undertake servicing of solid fuel appliances and this is an improvement since our last inspection. Performance is measured and currently 93.5 per cent of properties with solid fuel heating have received an annual service. Satisfaction rates are higher in this area with current reported rates of 100 per cent satisfaction.

Aids and adaptations

- 101 Improvements have been made to delivering the aids and adaptations service since our last inspection, but there is inadequate information available to customers. There is some information on the RCC website and the Tenants' Handbook contains some information in the chapter on Maintaining Your Home. Spire Homes acknowledges that more work needs to be undertaken in respect of marketing the service and a new leaflet has been designed with the assistance of tenants from the Asset Management Group. Failing to adequately promote the service may mean that there are tenants who are struggling to remain independent in their homes.

- 102** There is a new aids and adaptations policy in place, drawn up in consultation with tenants and approved by the PB. The new policy and procedure have only been in place since November 2007 thus it is too early to see any results. Work is also being undertaken to determine likely demand for the service in the future and this will be completed soon. In the meantime all minor works are fast tracked through the system and are completed within five days. Aids and adaptations major works are now packaged into minor works bulk contracts, for example level access showers are now completed by one contractor following a procurement exercise. The waiting list for all works is well managed and significant delays are not evident with the oldest case dating from July 2007. All aids and adaptations are post inspected for quality. This has resulted in an increase in value for money and increased satisfaction rates, now reported at 100 per cent.
- 103** There is a good relationship with the Occupational Therapy team and a mutual understanding of budgetary constraints. Meetings are held every month to look at emerging issues and priorities and to discuss on going works. The property database has flags to show where properties have been adapted and although incomplete, it is updated when properties become vacant. Failing to understand which properties have been adapted may lead to ineffective lettings.

Housing income management

- 104** Weaknesses outweighed strengths in this service area at the time of our last inspection and in this inspection we found this still to be the case, although there have been some improvements. Information provided to customers has improved, but the easiest and most cost effective methods of paying rent remain unavailable. Arrears work is still not prioritised or routinely managed effectively. There remain good liaison arrangements with partner agencies and referral systems are in place. Rent collection performance is average and has improved slightly compared to last year.
- 105** Options for making rent payments are limited. Tenants are able to pay by most traditional methods but at the time of our inspection were unable to make payments by direct debit. It is positive that the rent collection service, which was the most costly option, has been discontinued, following consultation with service users. There are plans in place to introduce direct debit payments from April 2008, failing to enable tenants to pay by these least expensive methods has been inefficient and not customer-focused.

- 106** Information about the rent service is clear and easy to access. It is offered in a variety of ways including the website, leaflets and flyers and the tenants' handbook. Information about payment methods is publicised well and enables tenants to make informed choices, and is easy to understand. Rent payment methods are discussed at the sign up and tenants are able to set up the most appropriate method for them at that time. There are a number of opportunities for customers to obtain advice and assistance about their rent accounts. A leaflet explaining what to do if served with a Notice accompanies every Notice Seeking Possession (NSP). Rent statements are sent to all tenants every six months and up to date rent statements are sent with every letter about rent arrears. This means that tenants are clear about what action may be taken and what they can do to prevent this.
- 107** Tenants are well supported in accessing effective welfare benefit advice. By using the website, service users are able to obtain advice about applying for housing benefit. There is a link in the RCC website to the Housing Benefit (HB) section, enabling users to apply for HB, and use an online calculator to assess the likelihood of HB payments. HB application forms are also sent out by Spire Homes with all new tenancy offer documents. This provides users with clear information about their options and enables them to maximise their income.
- 108** Work has not been undertaken to assess whether there are any barriers to accessing the rent service. Anecdotal feedback from the CAB suggests that the Spire Homes is effective at signposting users. However, Spire Homes is unable to demonstrate that the rent arrears service is equitable and accessible by all members of the community. As a result, the service to tenants may not be consistent or focused on identified areas of need.
- 109** Tenant involvement in the rent arrears service is under developed. There is limited testing of service user satisfaction. Some information is currently collected by a survey of new tenants, which includes questions about satisfaction with the sign up process and whether they were informed how to pay their rent and how to claim HB. A survey is currently being designed to measure satisfaction with the rent arrears service itself and involved tenants will be invited to make comments on the draft questionnaire. Spire Homes is unable to demonstrate that tenants are satisfied with the rent arrears service.
- 110** The rent arrears service is not fully pro-active. The current rent arrears service has not been reviewed for three years. Although there have been some adjustments to delivery including a new procedure for staff to use, directing additional resources to lower level arrears and responding to new legislation such as the introduction of Postponed Possession Orders, a complete review is not planned to take place until 2009. It is accepted by Spire that the current procedure has some limitations and improvements are now necessary. As a result of this rent income collection is not being maximised.

- 111** The procedural approach to collecting rent arrears is not customer-focused. There is a rent arrears procedure for staff which includes information on the legal aspects of rent arrears. The rent arrears procedure is automated and staff are not required to speak to customers in rent arrears until four weeks' debt has accrued. The rent arrears procedure emphasises action to be taken and offers little guidance to staff on assessing ability to pay and tenancy sustainability and makes no reference to referring customers for debt advice, despite an SLA with the CAB. However, there are some examples of customer focus within day to day delivery of the service. For example, housing officers are able to take cash from residents when undertaking visits, and although this is not encouraged, this approach assists in the recovery of arrears. Housing officers also use text messaging to contact tenants in arrears and this has proved to be an effective method of achieving contact. Having this mixed approach, however, could lead to inconsistencies in service delivery.
- 112** Spire Homes is over-reliant on traditional methods of recovery. There is no evidence that any pro-active work has been undertaken around targeting particular groups through profiling or that there is an awareness of tenants most likely to accrue arrears. There is no analysis of which tenants are in rent arrears other than by address or why they might have accrued arrears. Additional resources have been brought in to the team but there is no evidence to conclude that lower level arrears have reduced as a result or that this is an effective method of arrears recovery. The use of incentives as a way of encouraging rent payment is under-developed with only an annual prize draw for those with clear rent accounts and no work has taken place to determine whether the prize draw has had an impact on arrears. Rent payment campaigns or blitzes are not systematically undertaken. Spire Homes is not maximising resources to enable tenants to understand the necessity to pay their rent regularly and this is having a direct impact on collection rates.
- 113** There is limited systematic checking of quality in the rent arrears service. There are some processes in place to monitor cases and manage the performance of housing officers. The Team leader is responsible for signing off each case referred for NSP, Court or eviction which requires each case to be checked for appropriateness of action taken. Performance is discussed at one-to-ones and team meetings and organisational targets and statistics are discussed, along with income management issues in the current SIP. However, there are no spot checks made by the team leader and housing officers do not have individual targets set around arrears recovery. Housing officers and managers cannot therefore be sure that they are delivering the service in the best way to achieve results for tenants and for Spire Homes.

- 114 Spire Homes is not maximising rental income. The percentage of rent collected at the end of 2006/07 was 97.81 per cent; at the end of quarter three in the year to date this had deteriorated to 96.84 per cent. At the time of our inspection half the tenants were in rent arrears, resulting in loss of income to Spire Homes and RCC. Current rent arrears at the end of 2006/07 totalled £83,021 and totalled £125,988 at the end of quarter three during the year to date. Performance is difficult to assess because overall rent payments follow a trend year-on-year that is caused by unsatisfactory arrangements with standing order payments being made two weeks in advance and two weeks in arrears. Rent accounts do not balance until the end of the year. Taking this approach effectively offers tenants an interest free loan throughout the year.
- 115 Work has taken place to improve the former tenant arrears (FTA) service. A trial is currently taking place to establish the most effective debt collection agency and of £8,000 referred to the agencies, £1,000 has been recovered. The FTA service is supported by Spire resources in Rushden and is incurring no cost for RCC. However, overall FTAs are increasing thereby reducing the total income available to Spire Homes.
- 116 There are appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that tenants receive effective welfare advice to maximise income and manage their debts. Debt advice is offered via the CAB. The CAB not only provides advice, support and debt counselling, but acts as an advocate for residents during court action. The team leader from Spire Homes meets quarterly with the CAB to discuss casework. Statistics are also provided from the CAB giving information on the number of cases referred. Advice offered by the CAB has resulted in large payments and therefore increased tenancy sustainability.
- 117 There are effective liaison arrangements with partners that help to maximise tenants' income. For example, Spire Homes has an effective relationship with the HB team at RCC which enables them to assist residents with HB claims, thereby preventing debt. Spire staff can view HB accounts and are therefore able to establish whether there is any missing information that they can chase up with residents. Spire staff report that HB claims are generally assessed within two weeks of receipt of all information, sooner if required urgently. This relationship is not supported by an SLA, and although currently effective is based on personal contact and is at risk of deterioration should staff change.
- 118 RCC has in place a Corporate Debt Policy that also includes a fair recovery statement. A Corporate Debt Scheme supports this Policy. The Scheme enables customers to make one payment that is then apportioned across the debts that they have with RCC. Only two cases out of the three that have been referred to the Corporate Debt Scheme have kept to the repayment arrangement. Referrals to the scheme are made by the CAB but meetings with the CAB are not being used effectively to determine why only three cases have been referred for participation in this scheme. RCC cannot therefore be sure that the Corporate Debt Scheme is appropriate for tenants.

- 119** RCC and Spire have started to address issues around financial inclusion that should in the long term lead to direct benefits for tenants. This includes working with the CAB to develop an LAA2 indicator that will address rural deprivation. There have been articles in Streets Ahead and other media about the campaign to reduce the uplift on unit charges in respect of pre payment meters for utilities. There are also examples of Spire Homes and RCC addressing issues with poverty in a wider sense by participating in HB take up campaigns run in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions and by working with local schools and churches to distribute harvest festival and Christmas food. Taking this approach has a more immediate impact for some tenants.

Resident involvement

- 120** In our last inspection we found there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area and in this inspection we found Resident Involvement to be an area where strengths now outweigh weaknesses. A resident involvement strategy has been in place since February 2007 and there are a number of ways that tenants can be involved in shaping and monitoring the services that they receive and there have been clear outcomes from this. Resident involvement is largely embedded across both organisations, yet there remains some work to be done with regard to income management and Anti-Social Behaviour. Some residents have not yet received all the training necessary to enable them to participate at a higher level.
- 121** There is clear commitment to resident involvement. Resources, in terms of staff and an increased budget, have been committed to its development and RCC and Spire Homes have been prepared to see slightly slower progress on some issues to ensure that tenants are involved and that services and approaches are developed in line with resident priorities and concerns. Senior managers attend resident involvement events and are seen as taking an active interest in the issue. This approach sends a clear message to staff and residents that resident involvement is the key to effective service delivery.
- 122** There is a robust Tenant Involvement Strategy in place. The strategy is up-to-date and includes an action plan including clear objectives for services with demonstrable outcomes. The strategy was devised in partnership with tenants and staff of Spire Homes and sets out which methods will be used, how involvement will be supported and how it will be resourced. Local PIs and relevant BVPIs are included for reference. The strategy is monitored for outcomes by the Partnership Board and is supported by a comprehensive action plan. It is output rather than outcome based but is generally SMART, with many actions completed. It is an easy to read document and demonstrates that involvement begins at an early stage.

- 123** Spire Homes has developed its resident involvement strategy and framework around what tenants want. For example, it sought tenant views in a 'getting involved' survey in September 2006. The survey achieved a response from around 25 per cent of tenants. It identified tenants' preferred methods of involvement and enabled Spire Homes to develop a database of tenants who wished to be involved. This survey was followed up more recently with a flyer sent to all tenants encouraging involvement and setting out the various options available. The database is used to identify tenants to participate in various projects such as mystery shopping and recruitment and selection. Those on the database have also been surveyed on issues such as the customer service strategy and tenant involvement agreement.
- 124** Spire Homes communicates well with tenants about resident involvement and is clear about the way that they can be involved. The tenants' handbook has a section dedicated to encouraging tenants to be involved and explicitly states that Spire Homes wants tenants to be involved and to work with them to help improve the housing service. The handbook explains how and why tenants should be involved and the benefits of involvement. Other methods of encouraging involvement are used including various flyers, surveys and the Streets Ahead tenants' newsletter. For example, opportunities to participate are advertised by way of a leaflet - the 'Tenant Involvement Menu'. The leaflet very clearly explains how and why tenants may want to get involved in the services and describes involvement by way of 'lighter bites' or more detailed involvement through structures including different decision-making panels. As a result of this there are now over 400 tenants on the Spire Homes involvement database, indicating that they wish to be involved in a variety of ways.
- 125** Tenants are aware of participation opportunities and there are reasonable levels of satisfaction with opportunities for involvement. The mini STATUS survey carried out in January 2008 shows satisfaction at 69 per cent compared with 68 per cent in 2006. During the last year 36 per cent of tenants have been involved in some way and it is clear that Spire Homes' methods of encouraging involvement are effective and that tenants have a real opportunity to influence services.
- 126** RCC involves tenants at the highest level. There are three tenant members of the PB who accessed the PB by way of responding to adverts in the Tenants newsletter, Streets Ahead, or through the Rutland Tenant and Leaseholder Partnership (RTLTP). Applicants are selected for the PB after being interviewed by a selection panel consisting of the PB Chair, a member of RTLTP, and either the council's Head of Housing or the Director from Spire Homes. The PB monitors the performance of Spire Homes and very clearly provides an opportunity for tenants to have a direct impact on the priorities and resources, as well as challenging performance.

- 127** There are a variety of both formal and informal structures and opportunities in place that support tenant involvement, including the PB, RTLP, Sheltered Panel, Editorial Group and Scrutiny Panel. A regular newsletter is produced four times every year and residents are on the editorial panel. Spire Homes offers a wide range of opportunities for residents to become involved in service development and monitoring. Tenants can join the RTLP, which is open to all tenants and leaseholders, become mystery shoppers or join specific groups such as the sheltered housing forum or young peoples group. Tenants are actively involved in the selection of contractors. Tenants were involved in the panel which selected contractors for heating improvements and sheltered residents were involved in the selection of cleaning contractors.
- 128** RCC and Spire Homes also clearly involve leaseholders in their participation structures. Leaseholders now form part of the RTLP. All leaseholders were contacted last year and, as a result, two leaseholder members were recruited to the panel. Every tenant and leaseholder is eligible to join the panel and this ensures that leaseholder's views are taken into account.
- 129** Spire Homes has targeted some involvement activities to attract hard to reach groups including younger people, to ensure that they are represented and able to influence services, and is using events to engage with them. It participated in European neighbours day by inviting local tenants, including families, to a barbecue and its next community fun day is at an area in Uppingham where younger residents have shown interest in being involved. The residents there have been encouraged to make a bid under the Tenant Incentive Scheme (TIS) for future use of a former play area and it is hoped to use the fun day to attract more interest in, for example, mystery shopping. Publicity for the TIS and mystery shopping has been produced using images of young people to help promote the fact that involvement is not just for older residents. The tenant involvement officer also has targets in her Staff Development Interview to increase involvement of hard to reach and underrepresented groups which will ensure that this area of work remains a strategic priority.
- 130** Spire Homes has also taken steps to encourage resident involvement in outlying rural areas, for example, by ensuring RTLP open meetings and events are held at a range of venues across the county. Although attendance has been limited, this is a positive approach to encouraging involvement.
- 131** Reasonable support is provided to enable residents to participate. There is a dedicated tenant involvement officer for the service and a budget of £15,000. The budget has been increased significantly since our last inspection. In addition to training, Spire Homes arranges transport to venues and travel expenses and offers to meet child care costs. Residents are offered assistance in photocopying and have access to a laptop for use in connection with involvement activities. Taking this approach helps to encourage involvement from tenants with diverse needs.

- 132** Training for involved tenants is mixed. A training plan has been developed, in consultation with the RTLP for their training. Members are sent details of the training available; members of the customer care focus group are also invited to the planned training, although their needs have not been separately assessed. It is a weakness that Spire Homes has not adequately prepared tenants to be involved in the recruitment of contractors. Spire Homes has recognised this and has arranged for some training to take place in the spring. Work has not been undertaken to effectively assess the training needs of tenants and information about training is not readily accessible for all tenants. For example, while the training needs of the RTLP have been reviewed in consultation with members, the training needs of other actively involved tenants have not been assessed. This under developed approach could lead to some tenants being unable to contribute effectively and confidently.
- 133** Spire Homes does not widely publicise the availability of training to tenants at large, for example, using Streets Ahead or the information area at Pinewood. There have been three sessions run this year to date (equality and diversity, making a success of meetings and mystery shopping) and four tenants benefited from this. Involved tenants are aware that training and other support is available but few have yet taken up the opportunities available. Training events that have taken place have been in conjunction with other organisations, offering value for money. Despite this, take up of tenant training to date is limited.
- 134** Spire Homes is clear about the purpose of involving tenants and uses impact assessments to evaluate effort against objective. Impact assessments are undertaken for all activities, and this includes an assessment of the value for money of the activity. There is clear evidence that involving tenants has led to improved services.
- 135** Tenants have used their skills to make an impact on service delivery. For example, tenants are involved in the production of service information and Streets Ahead. A small editorial group discusses items to go in Streets Ahead, the mix and presentation. Tenants' views have influenced the length of articles, the balance between news, information and 'people' stories and the change in format to an A3 document. Tenant involvement in the production of the involvement agreement also led to a summary document being produced and helped to ensure it was free of jargon. Involving tenants in the production of literature has led to user friendly documents being created.
- 136** Resident involvement is not yet embedded across all service areas. For example, involvement has been limited in the area of tenancy management and income management. Spire Homes recognises this and has started to address it through encouraging involvement in estate walkabouts and some consultation in the development of ASB policy and literature.

Tenancy and estate management

- 137** In our last inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths in this part of the service and there is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Customer information in respect of ASB has been improved and the procedure has been re-drafted. Estate inspections now take place and there are strong partnerships in place. However, understanding of the main causes of ASB and which are the most successful tools to resolve ASB needs developing and work to sustain tenancies is limited.

Tenancy management including dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB)

- 138** RCC and Spire Homes communicate with tenants about tenancy management and ASB using a number of methods including the website, a suite of leaflets and Streets Ahead. Reports of ASB can be made by a variety of ways including in person, by telephone, by letter or by email. The ASB Statement of Procedure explains the service standards that residents can expect when reporting ASB. The standards are also included in a draft ASB leaflet. Tenants have been involved in drafting some of the literature available about ASB. The revised ASB policy was presented in draft form to the RTLP and the tenant information about the policy and service was presented to a reader's panel and to recent service users for comment. This consultation resulted in significant changes being made to the summary document, which has now been produced in an easy to read leaflet explaining the service. The ASB standards were agreed by RTLP and are explained in a clear and customer friendly way. There are other leaflets that explain in plain language what court action or NSPs for ASB mean. All this helps to ensure that tenants understand the action that is being taken against them and how they can respond to that action.
- 139** Spire Homes is not systematically and effectively gathering feedback on its ASB service. During the redrafting of the procedure statement, tenants' views were sought on draft versions of the policy and service leaflets. However, no satisfaction surveys are used during, or after, case closure and reliance is on tenants expressing dissatisfaction at this stage or making a complaint or unsolicited comment about the service for feedback. It is missing a valuable opportunity to learn from the experience of its service users to improve the service.
- 140** There is a clear framework in place to support staff to deliver the service. The ASB Procedure Statement adequately assists and advises staff on how to deal with ASB in a methodical and systematic way. There is reference to providing feedback to reporters of ASB and with expected timescales, as well as the importance of preparing an action plan with victims, and the statement confirms that anonymous reports will also be investigated. RCC's tenancy agreement clearly sets out examples of ASB which could constitute a breach of tenancy. The Procedure Statement ensures that staff are aware of all the tools available to them.

- 141 There is no 24-hour ASB reporting or response service in Rutland. Until recently a national pilot, the 101 service, provided a single reporting number for ASB reporting in Rutland. This service was withdrawn recently with little notice and no replacement has yet been developed. Although tenants can currently access Spire Homes 24-hour telephone service, this has been designed predominantly for tenants needing to report repairs and it is not clear whether the out of hours call handling service has received any guidance to enable it to respond to any calls regarding ASB. Spire cannot therefore be sure that customers making out of hours enquiries will be given appropriate advice, or whether the report is about serious or minor ASB.
- 142 RCC has developed strong strategic partnerships to address ASB and ensures that effective targets are set within the Local Area Agreement¹⁷ that reflect the concerns of the local community. Town and Parish Councils as well as local community and voluntary sector organisations are represented on the Community Safety Partnership enabling issues to be fed through to assist in the development of the Community Safety Strategy. Work is taking place to determine the priorities for the next set of Local Area Agreements and these will include targets around young people and drink which is an issue for the local community. The PB has direct links to the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), represented by the Leader of RCC, who is the Chair of the LSP. By taking this approach RCC has ensured that knowledge about the area and the priorities of residents influences strategy and policies.
- 143 RCC and Spire Homes have a positive working relationship with partners, particularly the Police, which has assisted in dealing effectively with ASB. There is regular liaison with Police through the Joint Action Group (JAG). This has included discussions about common issues and individual cases. The liaison arrangements were developed during the implementation and life of the 101 service and have continued after this service ended. An example of action arising out of the liaison is shared information about distraction burglaries in the area, which Spire Homes responded to by alerting staff to incidents so that they could keep a look out for perpetrators and supplying information to older tenants to raise their awareness of the potential problem enabling them to take appropriate precautions. A further example involved a neighbour dispute which, through work with the police, resulted in joint action being taken against one tenant and additional support being provided to assist the perpetrator to amend her behaviour. RCC has effectively tackled incidents of ASB by working with young people after identifying an ASB hotspot, and have removed play equipment that was being inappropriately used. Joint working in this way has produced outcomes that residents would notice.

¹⁷ Local Area Agreement - an agreement between central Government and local Government and their partners to deliver outcomes against local priorities.

- 144** Not all partnerships are under-pinned by an SLA or formal protocol. Given the context within which RCC and Spire Homes operate, and the relatively small numbers of ASB cases, this has to date not caused a problem. Spire Homes has no formal SLA with RCC's environmental health service for response to noise nuisance cases. Spire staff generally deal with such cases until and unless sound recording equipment is required. Staff report a good working relationship with RCC which enables them to obtain sound recording equipment quickly. This demonstrates effective partnership working, but a relationship that could be at risk of being undermined following staff turn over.
- 145** RCC and Spire Homes have made effective use of the media in publicising successes in respect of dealing with ASB. There have been articles in the local RCC newsletter, police newsletters, interviews on the local radio station, flyers, Streets Ahead and information on the RCC website. This ensures tenants and the wider community are aware of the stance that RCC and Spire Homes have taken.
- 146** Quality assurance arrangements for the ASB service are mixed. Although there are no random quality checks on ASB cases, the service manager discusses cases with staff on a one-to-one basis to establish whether or not appropriate action is or has been taken and will carry out a basic review when the case is due to be closed. Undertaking random spot checks would ensure that cases are being dealt with systematically and consistently in line with the procedure.
- 147** ASB recording is now done on an access database with key stages noted. However, Spire Homes does not have a detailed understanding of the most common causes of ASB and the most successful type of action. The database does not prompt actions, but reports can be generated from the system, for example, exception reports and common perpetrators can be identified. Undertaking an exercise to determine cause and effect would assist Spire Homes in managing resources more effectively.
- 148** RCC and Spire Homes have no clear action plan to achieve compliance with the Respect Standard. While some actions which will contribute to this have already been carried out and others are included in the SIP, there is no document which sets out all actions which Spire Homes will need to do to meet the standard. By failing to complete an action plan, there is a risk that some aspects of the standard may not be complied with, thereby putting residents at risk.
- 149** Spire Homes does not currently carry out periodic tenancy audits. This has not been a priority for the service and it does not currently have the resources to enable it to carry out this work. In addition there is no systematic risk assessment of new tenancies at the point a tenancy is granted. Spire Homes carries out some assessments at application stage, using references from previous landlords and information from other agencies to inform this. In some cases this leads to applications being excluded or to referrals for floating support being made. Failing to undertake tenancy audits and systematic pre-tenancy checks could result in inappropriate offers being made to tenants that are unable to sustain a tenancy, and there is little opportunity to pick up these types of issues until a crisis has been reached.

Estate Management

- 150** Estate management is now reasonably well organised. Estate inspections are undertaken with the involvement of local tenants and local partners including the police. They are publicised in advance and written feedback is provided to tenants that were involved as well as by occasional articles in Streets Ahead. Our own reality checks showed that there was effective liaison between the estates officer and the local police beat officer. Frequency of estate inspections has been prioritised according to assumed risk, taking in to account various factors including number of communal areas and bin stores. The frequency will be revisited as more information is built up through the implementation of inspections. The estate management framework currently sets out minimum frequencies for inspections; at least every six months for flat blocks and at least once a year for other areas. Staff may visit the blocks more frequently than this ensuring that problems are promptly identified and responded to.
- 151** Estate management services are publicised regularly in Streets Ahead which has recently included articles on estate inspections and bulky refuse. There are no other leaflets or information on the website that inform tenants about the services and the standards that they can expect in respect of communal cleaning or estate inspections. Information is available more generally on the website about grass cutting frequency and locations and this helps residents understand what to expect.
- 152** RCC and Spire Homes offers tenants the opportunity to influence spending on small environmental or improvement projects. It operates the Tenants Incentive Scheme (TIS) whereby residents can bid for funding for small projects; the scheme has been in operation for a number of years and the current budget is £20,000. A small panel involving members of the RTLP, staff and a councillor decide on applications which meet the criteria and subject to sufficient funds in the budget. The TIS is well promoted, although this has not always been the case, contributing to the limited spend to date. Promotion has improved over the last few months through articles in Streets Ahead, the use of a flyer and application form and posters in RCC and Spire Offices and sheltered housing schemes. Effective promotion should lead to an increase in the uptake of the scheme.

Allocations and lettings

- 153** In our last inspection we found a balance of strengths and weakness in this service and this remains the case. Access to the service is clear and easy, information available has been improved, and satisfaction levels are high. The service is due to be reviewed in 2009 and it is clear that this is necessary. There are a number of inconsistencies; refusal rates are not analysed, incentive schemes have had mixed results, properties are not marketed effectively and the pre-termination process is not fully effective. Information about choice has been improved although a Choice Based Lettings system is not being operated.

- 154** Access to the service is easy for prospective tenants. Prospective applicants are provided with information to help them decide whether to apply for housing. Information is available on the website, although applications cannot be made on line, by telephone and by calling in to the offices. The Housing Waiting List Application Guide is an easy to understand jargon free guide to the process and includes explanations of the way that applications are assessed and where properties are located. It also explains how points are awarded and where to obtain further advice. Satisfaction with the application process is measured by way of a survey. Satisfaction has improved with levels currently at 100 per cent, compared to last year when levels were 94.1 per cent.
- 155** There is clear information for housing applicants. The range of information has been improved by the inclusion of supply and demand information which outlines the number of properties in an area, the number of vacancies that have arisen in the last year and the number of points for which allocations were made. This information enables applicants to make informed decisions about their choice of area. Service user views were sought on the content and presentation of the information before it was finalised and Spire Homes responded to this by simplifying information about supply and demand in the main towns of Oakham and Uppingham.
- 156** New tenants are generally happy with the condition of their new home, although satisfaction levels are not hitting Spire Homes' ambitious target of 100 per cent. New tenants are provided with surveys to complete at sign-up, which include questions about their new home. Results from surveys in the first nine months of 2007/08 show satisfaction for each quarter at 90 per cent, 91 per cent and 75 per cent. Ninety-four per cent of new tenants were satisfied with the condition of their new home in 2006/07. Results of 75 per cent for quarter three during the year to date were investigated by Spire Homes staff who found that this lower figure arose through lack of understanding among tenants about the lettable standard. A customer-focused lettable standard may have helped avoid this issue.
- 157** New tenants are provided with adequate information to help them start their tenancy including the Customer Charter and other Spire Homes documents, as well as information about rent payment methods and a decoration allowance if appropriate. Low energy light bulbs and a 'power down' unit are also provided to assist tenants conserve fuel.
- 158** Choice for potential applicants is mixed. The Housing Allocation Policy includes a statement on choice and there are no limits on the number of areas that prospective tenants are able to identify. Following development of the supply and demand information, applicants are now able to make informed decisions about areas that they wish to live in, taking into account the prospective number of vacancies and so on. Applicants are able to refuse an indefinite number of offers. This shows that Spire Homes is enabling applicants to exercise discretion without penalty.

- 159** RCC does not currently offer a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, although Spire Homes operates schemes in other areas. There are no plans to pursue setting a scheme up, despite improved choice being a government target to be met by 2010. RCC recognises that CBL is an attractive way of increasing choice in the allocation process and has been approached by a neighbouring authority with a view to joining together in developing a scheme. However, RCC has agreed that any decision about adopting a CBL scheme will be left until a decision about the long term future of the stock has been made. This seems a practical approach, given the size of the stock and the relatively low turn over of approximately 80 properties each year.
- 160** Spire Homes is not taking steps to ensure that appropriate offers are made to people with disabilities. Although lettings are monitored to ensure fair and equal access by diverse groups, it is a weakness that Spire Homes does not operate a register of applicants with disabilities and have the facility to easily search the register and match such applicants to suitable properties. There is however liaison with RCC's OT service to assist with assessing properties which become available before offers are made to applicants to ensure that the offer is suitable. The dispersed nature and size of the housing stock means this approach is workable although more cumbersome than a more systematic approach. It may result in opportunities for suitable re-housing being missed. It also means that RCC and Spire Homes do not have readily available information to inform assessment of overall housing need in the county.
- 161** Spire Homes uses incentives to encourage the release of property types that are in demand. In addition to points awarded for the release of under-occupied properties and general needs properties, it offers a £1,000 incentive for eligible tenants to move from general needs accommodation into sheltered accommodation. This is because general needs accommodation, particularly smaller units, is in greater demand than sheltered accommodation despite the age profile of the county. Take up of the incentives has been relatively limited to date, resulting in a missed opportunity to maximise the use of properties.
- 162** Spire Homes makes effective use of accompanied viewings. All prospective tenants are accompanied to view the property unless there are exceptional circumstances. Accompanied viewings enable staff to give prospective tenants on the spot advice and information about the property and neighbourhood and to answer queries relating to the letting, repairs to the property and other issues. Pre-termination inspections are also undertaken which assist in identifying any issues with the property, such as adaptations in the property or repairs which may be the outgoing tenant's responsibility, as well as identifying which properties may be ready to let quickly. Although applicants are offered an opportunity to view the property they are offered, Spire Homes does not enable viewings while the outgoing tenant is still in occupation. This could have a direct impact on refusal rates and consequently void performance.

- 163** Work to ensure re-let times are prompt is not maximised. Spire Homes does not actively market its homes other than through publicity at RCC and Spire offices. It has not publicised availability of housing through other community venues, action which may assist it in raising awareness of what homes are available and in letting some of its more difficult to let property types. This also means that it is not maximising access to the service.
- 164** Spire Homes does not maximise its contribution towards promoting balanced communities in its allocations work. For example, risk assessments are not undertaken at the time of allocation to determine whether a prospective tenant is able to sustain a tenancy. In addition, Spire Homes does not routinely monitor exclusions from the housing list or the reasons for them and does not operate any local lettings schemes which enable specific issues to be taken into account when allocating properties, such as ASB. This means that Spire Homes is unable to track whether offers of accommodation have resulted in sustained tenancies.
- 165** Spire Homes does not systematically monitor refusals or the reasons for them. Anecdotally, the main reasons for refusals relate to offers coming at a time that does not suit the applicant or the specific location of the property not being what the applicant wants and offers can be refused without penalty to the applicant. There are also no trigger points which prompt staff to take action such as increasing decorating allowances or marketing a property when it has been refused more than once or twice. In not formally monitoring refusals, Spire Homes cannot easily identify any common reasons and address these, which would assist it in ensuring more first offers are accepted and so enabling properties to be let more quickly.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 166** In our last inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. In this inspection we have found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. Costs remain competitive and both organisations have a track record of maximising partnerships to make savings in procurement processes. There are satisfactory budgetary processes in place and the management of budgets specifically has improved. Modern methods of procurement have been used where possible during the tendering of new contracts and it is clear that value for money is embedded in parts of the organisation. There has been improved performance in many areas, without additional costs being incurred. However, some parts of the service cannot be tested for value for money as costs are still not known and there remain some operational issues that impact on delivering sustained value for money outcomes.

How do costs compare?

- 167** RCC is able to demonstrate that costs to deliver the housing management service compare favourably with previous costs. The housing management contract itself has achieved value for money for RCC as it was awarded to Spire Homes to operate for £100, 000 less than RCC could provide the service for. The fee payable to Spire Homes under the terms of the management contract totals £818,700 for 2007/08, an increase of 3.3 per cent from last year. The budget of £1,213,000 for responsive repairs, cyclical and programmed maintenance is delegated to Spire Homes to manage. The saving of £100,000 has been ploughed back in to the Housing Revenue Account for investment in improvements to properties.
- 168** The management contract includes targets for Spire Homes to improve performance at no extra cost to RCC and allows RCC to penalise Spire Homes for under-performing. Extensive work has been undertaken to improve services delivered without increasing cost, including improvement in the delivery of responsive repairs, the service identified by customers as being the most important to them. As a result some services are now delivering improved outcomes that tenants would notice and these has been delivered by Spire Homes at no additional cost to RCC or, indirectly, tenants.
- 169** Overall costs for delivering the service compare positively with other local organisations and with others within the Longhurst Group (LG). Benchmarking and cost comparison within the Group regularly takes place. Comparisons are also made with neighbouring local authorities in Melton Mowbray and Market Harborough. Average weekly management costs per property during the year to date are £13.98 for Spire Homes in Rutland which has is a reduction from £14.35 in 2006/07, comparing with £14.46 for other Spire properties in the East Northants area and £13.47 across the LG generally, with Market Harborough at £16.41. This demonstrates that Spire Homes has been able to effectively manage costs.
- 170** Cost information about delivering services within the Housing Management contract is limited and this is an area that needs developing. Spire Homes has taken the decision to deliver improved services for the fixed sum payable for the housing management contract and therefore work has not systematically taken place to assess whether individual services deliver value for money. It is not known whether commonly used techniques to resolve ASB offer the best value for money as well as being the most effective. Although Spire Homes is a member of Housemark, there is no information available to compare costs with other providers. RCC and Spire Homes cannot therefore be sure that all areas of service deliver value for money.

- 171** There has been some analysis in respect of the providing the most appropriate staffing levels required to deliver improved performance and a restructure has taken place that has sought to more effectively resource areas of service that needed improving. This has included an additional member of staff appointed in the tenancy services team predominantly to recover low level rent arrears, although no work has been undertaken to assess whether this outcome is being delivered. Additional resources have also been provided by Spire Homes to undertake a 100 per cent stock condition survey having made the strategic decision that this area of work is an organisational priority.
- 172** Cost comparisons are systematically made with other housing providers in respect of responsive repairs and voids. Average repair costs per property are comparable as are the costs of void repairs, with component costs offering greater value for money in some instances, especially heating. This is an improvement upon what we found in our last inspection, when costs were significantly higher than comparisons, demonstrating that value for money outcomes are being delivered that have a direct impact on the resources available to deliver services.
- 173** There are monitoring systems in place to ensure that expenditure committed to capital works is delivered on time. Spire meet six weekly with RCC to examine spend against budget and surveyors are each responsible for a discrete area of the capital works budget. Monthly meetings are held with the contractors and resources have been identified to ensure works are completed on time - for example two contractors are delivering the roofing works. RCC and Spire have also been quick to respond to pressures on budgets. The responsive repairs budget has been pressurised by late submission of some £50,000 in late invoices from a contractor. Members were fully involved and through their improved understanding of service improvements and delivery targets agreed to support the overspend. In addition to this, processes have now been put in place to ensure that invoices are promptly received. This approach demonstrates that issues can systematically be identified early and any necessary interventions taken.
- 174** RCC regularly receives detailed information from Spire Homes to enable elected Members to fully understand performance, demand and budgetary implications. Expenditure is specifically monitored and challenged through Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee; this has meant that Members are able to make informed appropriate decisions about issues such as the late invoices problem mentioned above. There are structures with Spire Homes and the Longhurst Group more generally that also monitor expenditure, including the Board of Management and Audit Committee. Regular reports are also presented to the PB on performance, but it is a weakness that there is little reference to cost of services within the reporting structures, which leaves PB members with little or no understanding of the true extent to which value for money either has or has not been achieved.

How is value for money managed?

- 175** RCC has a value for money statement in place supported by the SIP which includes a value for money section with clear actions that will deliver value for money outcomes; these include establishing clear reporting arrangements against value for money targets, introducing cost effective rent payment methods and addressing ineffective working practices. There is a LG procurement and value for money strategy in place, but there is no overarching statement or policy for Spire Homes that takes into account local issues and sensitivities. This means that, other than through the SIP, staff may not have a detailed understanding of the value for money strategy that is employed locally.
- 176** RCC has a good track record of delivering efficiency targets, generally maximising options for improving value for money by procurement methods, with the outsourcing of the housing management contract a typical example. This approach has resulted in a Use of Resources score for RCC¹⁸ of three. There is emphasis on increasing quality of the housing service at no extra cost, and it is expected that the delivery of the housing management services by Spire Homes will generate savings. There is ambition at a corporate level to increase quality still further without impacting on cost. This ambition has resulted in savings being made through joint procurement initiatives with Spire Homes themselves. For example, members of staff from both organisations have undergone IT training together.
- 177** RCC has benefited from the contract with Spire Homes by more than the predicted savings of £100,000. For example, some services are delivered free of charge by either Spire Homes or the Longhurst Group including marketing, IT and Health and Safety. Arrangements have been made for Spire to enable payments to be made by direct debit and on-line from April 2008 at no cost to RCC. In addition, Spire Homes has recently procured a new asset management database, with technical support at no cost to RCC. This is supported by property information gathered using handheld technology.
- 178** Procurement strategies and innovative contract packaging arrangements implemented by Spire Homes have resulted in improvements to services. There are a number of examples where value for money has been achieved through joint procurement with others. For example, joint training for PB members was undertaken in conjunction with Spire Homes in Rushden. Spire Homes is also a member of Procurement for Housing and this has led to savings in respect of office supplies and agency staff which have been reinvested in delivering services.

¹⁸ Use of Resources Score - an assessment of how well the council manages its finances and provides value for money.

- 179** As mentioned previously in this report, new tendering arrangements include modern procurement techniques to enable quality to be assessed during selection of contractors. There are examples of where this has delivered value for money. For example, joint procurement on the new gas servicing contract has saved an estimated £6,000, bulk procurement of level access showers has resulted in savings and increased satisfaction and external painting works are post-inspected at no cost by Dulux. These are improvements to services that would be noticed by tenants that have been delivered at no additional cost.
- 180** It is a weakness that tenants that have been involved in the procurement process have not had specific training on value for money or procurement generally. Spire Homes is therefore unable to demonstrate that tenants have had the impact on procurement that was hoped for.
- 181** RCC and Spire Homes have also been effective in achieving value for money in improving services with existing contractors. For example, work has been undertaken with the responsive repairs contractor to provide increased value for money by offering appointments for all routine repairs at no extra cost. Value for money has also been achieved following the resolution of some difficulties with the gas servicing contract, with work now being undertaken by an existing Spire Homes contractor at no extra cost to RCC. One hundred per cent of properties now have a gas safety certificate in place. Spire has demonstrated that it is able to influence services provided by others that have resulted in improvements that deliver a direct benefit to tenants.
- 182** Expenditure of capital works has been prioritised to reduce expenditure on responsive repairs over time. Spire Homes has made this decision to improve the balance between planned and responsive repairs. Although there is a target in place to achieve this, it is a weakness that at present the split of expenditure between planned and responsive repairs is in the region of 25:75. There is a target to move to 50:50 by 2009, which is moving towards meeting the recommended optimum split of 70:30. There are limited examples of where additional funding has been achieved to assist in reducing the imbalance and to improve the condition of properties generally. By failing to meet this target, Spire Homes is not making the best use of resources, but is reflecting the need for repairs to properties that are in poor condition. RCC and Spire Homes are aware of the works necessary to reduce the emphasis on responsive repairs and this demonstrated by the investment in capital programmes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 183 Our last inspection found that RCC had a weak track record of making improvements to its landlord services, but in this inspection, we found that RCC and Spire Homes have responded positively in focusing on achieving improvements linked to the weaknesses identified in our previous inspection and also to those identified through their own reviews and feedback processes. Notable improvements in both performance and services can be identified in a number of areas. Some improvements have only been made recently and are in line with Spire Homes' plans and as a result are not yet fully embedded.
- 184 All recommendations from the previous inspection have either been fully completed or are progressing well.

Table 1 Recommendations from previous inspection

Landlords Services 2007.

Recommendation	Progress
Devise and publicise clear and challenging service standards.	completed
Revise the tenants' handbook and produce a range of user friendly service leaflets, making them available in a variety of formats.	completed
Update both the Council's and Spire Homes' websites so that customers can easily access clear information about services.	on-going
Develop clear, user friendly information about planned works.	on-going
Complete the tenant profile and ensure that this information is up to date and routinely used to inform services provision.	partially completed
Ensure that IT effectively supports staff to provide responsive and flexible services that take account of customers' diverse needs.	on-going
Improve the accessibility of the Pinewood Office and sheltered housing schemes and ensure they meet Disability Discrimination Act requirements.	on-going
Establish clear and publicised response arrangements for race and other hate crime.	completed
Reduce the time taken to complete repairs in all categories and ensure repairs performance is accurately recorded.	completed
Ensure gas servicing is completed in a timely manner, records are kept up to date and publicity for the service improved and that a servicing programme for solid fuel heating systems is implemented.	completed

Recommendation	Progress
Reduce the time taken to repair and re-let homes, review the lettable standard and ensure that homes are repaired in line with the standard.	partially completed
Develop a clear asset management strategy which incorporates plans to improve energy efficiency of the stock.	completed
Effectively involving tenants in planning and prioritising improvements.	completed
Develop a set of clear ASB policies and procedures to ensure that customers receive a consistent and appropriate response and that cases are adequately recorded to support possible future actions.	completed
Ensure provision of, or access to, advice and support for victims and witnesses of ASB and publicise this support.	completed
Introduce effective monitoring of grounds maintenance and cleaning to help ensure common areas are maintained to a high standard.	completed
Agree a robust value for money strategy and action plan, in consultation with tenants and other stakeholders, which sets out a clear direction, priorities for action and targets.	partially completed
Establish clear and regular reporting arrangements by which managers and the board can track progress against its value for money targets and objectives.	completed
Introduce more cost effective rent payment methods and address inefficient practices within repairs service.	partially completed
Develop partnering arrangements for major areas of expenditure, which clearly seek to deliver service improvements and efficiencies.	completed
Review housing and support services provided outside the current management contract, such as grounds maintenance, to ensure they represent value for money.	completed
Ensure effective monitoring of performance against service standards and report performance to tenants.	completed
Set clearer targets and objectives for diversity in housing services.	on-going
Improve the use of IT, for example, to produce user friendly management and exception reports across all housing services.	completed
Set clear targets and report on performance for key areas not already specified in the management contract.	completed
Make more effective use of benchmarking information to compare costs and performance with others and to identify good practice.	partially completed

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- 185** RCC and Spire Homes have been successful in delivering a number of clear and discernable benefits to tenants. This is particularly positive given the time that has elapsed since our last inspection. A number of clear benefits in service delivery can be identified and include:
- improvements in repairs performance;
 - delivery of improvement works;
 - improvement in gas and solid fuel servicing;
 - tenant profile information; and
 - estate inspections.
- 186** Tenants have also noticed improvements to the way they are involved in shaping and monitoring service delivery. This has led to improvements that tenants have directly influenced, including:
- development of service standards;
 - development of new information leaflets;
 - development of a new Tenants' Handbook; and
 - procurement of new contracts.
- 187** Performance has improved across a range of indicators since our last inspection. The most significant area of improvement has been in responsive repairs. Performance in respect of day to day repairs has improved when comparing 2006/07 with the year to date. 91.6 per cent of emergency repairs were completed on time during 2006/07 and this has increased to 100 per cent in quarter three in the year to date against a target of 96 per cent. Tenants would also notice that completion of routine repairs (30 days) has improved from 83.1 per cent to 98.6 per cent in the year to date against a target of 87 per cent. Performance has now exceeded targets for the current year across all aspects of the responsive repairs service, and in some areas has also exceeded the target for 2008/09.
- 188** RCC and Spire Homes recognise that service improvement in income management and voids management has been limited; this is attributed to the attention and resources which have been devoted to the priority areas of repairs, customer service and resident involvement. These are areas which tenants have clearly prioritised and where improvements are most apparent. Despite this, there have been some improvements in these areas. The average cost to repair void properties has reduced during the year to date and the number of NSPs served for rent arrears has reduced significantly and is now in quarter one performance.
- 189** Spire Homes recognise that managing expectations in Rutland is an issue for them and that they need to make it clear that the current service and level of resources supporting the contract delivery means that it is in effect 'going the extra mile'. This approach has already delivered clear outcomes for tenants, and is evidenced by satisfaction rates that are generally well above 90 per cent across all services.

- 190** RCC and Spire Homes are not yet able to demonstrate improvements over time to the condition of the properties measured against the DHS. Performance information shows that the percentage of properties that are non-decent has dramatically increased as a result of a new stock condition survey. Estimates at the time of our last inspection suggested that non decent stock would have been cut to around 8 per cent by March 2007. More accurate stock condition information has now revealed that 48 per cent of stock is currently non-decent and the DHS cannot be met by 2010.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 191** In this inspection we found a fully developed sophisticated service improvement plan covering recommendations from our previous inspection, contract requirements and additional objectives identified from feedback and other sources. Leadership has been strengthened and has identified, driven and supported change. PIs have been expanded and reporting mechanisms are systematic and robust. Performance management is embedded in many areas and is strongly linked with the improvement plan. Learning and benchmarking is developing and has led to some demonstrable improvements in some areas of service.
- 192** There is a clear route through which organisational and contract delivery objectives are translated into service objectives and plans. The process involves the partnership board and Spire's management team and is also informed by current performance, feedback from staff and tenants and legislative and good practice obligations.
- 193** Plans and objectives are largely co-ordinated, sound and deliverable. RCC and Spire Homes have been able to translate vision into outcomes by using the Service Improvement Plan (SIP). The SIP is one document that integrates all actions required to deliver improved services and this helps to focus resources and energy. The SIP shows that, on the whole, actions are on track for completion against target dates. There is a clear thread in place linking the SIP with team and individual targets, helping staff to remain focused on organisational priorities.
- 194** RCC and Spire Homes have given priority to improving the responsive repairs service as this is the service that matters most to tenants. In response to understanding tenants' concerns, RCC has set performance targets for all aspects of the repairs and maintenance service to achieve quartile one performance by 2009.
- 195** To help achieve this, a strategic decision has been made to take a measured and long term approach to delivering the capital works programme in the way that works were procured and tenants were involved. Spire Homes plans to involve customers in agreeing a rating system to measure satisfaction with the new improvement programme for planned works. This will enable customer feedback to directly influence future contractor performance.

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- 196** Although there are plans in place to achieve a better balance between responsive and planned repairs, the target set is to achieve 50:50 by March 2009. This still does not meet good practice guidelines but it is anticipated that the new capital works programme will assist in rebalancing expenditure.
- 197** There are also plans in place to undertake a review of the responsive repairs strategy. This will include an analysis of current performance and how to improve the current split between emergency, urgent and routine repairs which currently stands at 22 per cent/28 per cent/50 per cent. Tenants will be involved in the review to ensure their support and understanding of the need to revise priorities for specific works, supported by training for staff. Part of the review includes analysing the increase in demand for repairs and work has already started. Categories of repairs are now coded to establish whether there are any trends and to determine which properties are having more work completed than others. Although systems appear robust, it is too early to assess the outcome of this work.
- 198** There are plans in place to deliver a new responsive repairs contract by December 2008. Work has started on this and an action plan is in place to ensure tasks are completed on time. Learning opportunities have been maximised and include experience of a new contract in Spire Homes in Rushden. Residents are involved in developing the new specification. The contract will include the requirement to provide multi-skilled operatives as experience elsewhere has demonstrated that this way of working can lead to improvements.
- 199** There are also plans in place that have specifically involved tenants. A draft customer services strategy includes a detailed and outcome focused action plan, and the strategy has been devised using information from various sources including KPIs, customer profile information, complaints and known staff training needs. The Customer Care Working Group, including tenants, was involved in setting the priorities. The strategy is monitored for effectiveness by the Group. This demonstrates Spire Homes' response to understanding issues that are important for customers.
- 200** There are clear organisational targets in place against which performance can be measured. For example, there are challenging targets to increase customer satisfaction. There is a target of 92.5 per cent satisfaction with overall landlord service by 2009 (compared with the 2006 figure of 80 per cent) and satisfaction with the repairs service of 97 per cent by 2009 (compared with the 2006 figure of 73 per cent). The target for customer satisfaction with the outcome of their last contact with their landlord is similarly challenging, at 90 per cent (compared with 2006 figure of 60 per cent). These targets will help focus staff on continually improving services.

- 201** Both RCC and Spire Homes have visible and effective leadership. Managers have ensured that staff understand the vision of both organisations and what they must do to deliver change. Staff are supported through training and development mechanisms, as well as through a culture of openness to perform well. Change in leadership at RCC has resulted in a heightened awareness about the issues faced by the housing service. This has resulted in staff from support services at RCC, including customer services and IT, being more aware of the impact they may have on the performance of the housing service. The Chief Executive of RCC has ensured that support is made available to RCC senior managers involved with housing services, by regularly facilitating training events for staff.
- 202** The PB undertakes its role efficiently and supports the staff. The members of the PB have had regular training to ensure that they are able to undertake their roles effectively. This has included being able to attend joint training with Spire staff on issues around, for example, diversity and finance. As a result, PB members feel able to actively challenge performance and can point to examples of where they have directly driven progress and improvement including the Stock Option Appraisal and the sheltered housing review. The PB is an important link in the process of delivering change.
- 203** Performance monitoring is effective and is used to inform and manage performance. Information collected is presented in an understandable format and is relevant to support service improvements. There is effective challenge from RCC to Spire on aspects of performance and delivery of the housing management contract and from Spire to RCC on areas within RCC's control. This challenge has helped to ensure that significant progress has been made on issues such as customer profiling, improving the responsive repairs service and equality and diversity issues. The CE of RCC meets regularly with senior managers at Spire and has used this to challenge performance. This helps keep Spire Homes focused.
- 204** Regular reports are provided for tenants about Spire Homes' performance against service standards. The information is provided in a clear and attractive format and displayed in the office and at sheltered schemes. Performance against service specific standards is monitored by team leaders and service managers; information about this performance is included in the six-monthly reports to tenants.
- 205** Performance management is becoming embedded across the organisation. Staff are aware of targets in their own service areas, such as target costs for voids and targets for repair and re-let of empty properties and of the wider customer service standards such as call answering and response to complaints. They are aware of the targets they need to meet and their role in achieving these targets. This has had a direct impact on performance.
- 206** There are systems in place to support performance management and staff development. There are effective staff appraisal processes in place, supported by one-to-ones and team meetings, with clear links to performance management. All staff are able to see the contribution they make as individuals.

- 207 There are some areas where performance reporting and monitoring is under developed. Managers and the PB receive activity reports on ASB but no information on, for example, performance against the service standards or on effectiveness of action. This means they are not in a position to judge how the service is performing. The ASB recording system is an improvement on the previous system as it enables staff to log reports and track actions taken, but it does not prompt actions within target response times and has not been used to manage performance of the service.
- 208 There is also limited systematic monitoring of the whole repair of void properties and re-letting process. While staff in relevant teams monitor parts of the process, such as whether or not the contractor meets its deadlines for repair, there is no regular and systematic overview of performance at each stage of the process. This contributes to the fact that Spire Homes does not have a clear understanding of the reasons for current performance levels and reflects a lack of a clear focus on improving performance in this area.
- 209 Spire Homes is pro-active in seeking learning from both its own experiences and from established good practice elsewhere. There is evidence of learning from other organisations, but Spire Homes has been careful to discuss with residents the reasons for changing services or practices in line with good practice where these mirror practices from either Spire Homes elsewhere or outside the organisation, to ensure that residents understand the reasons for change. Examples of learning from others include diary sheets for recording ASB incidents from Manchester City Council, guidance on how to use injunctions from Charter HA and, from the same HA, some parts of its ASB leaflet. This approach ensures a focus on continuous improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 210 In this inspection we found capacity to have been strengthened as a result of time and resources invested in staff training and development. The use of information and communication technology has improved, with further improvements to follow. Partnership working has already resulted in increased capacity, with new procurement arrangements increasing capacity for more improvements over time. RCC is seeking to increase capacity to deliver the housing management service by taking steps to transfer the housing stock.
- 211 The HRA Business Plan clearly sets out priorities for the future and the resources required to deliver the necessary improvements to service delivery, detailing immediate improvements and those necessary over a longer period of time. The housing management contract includes devolvement of the capital programme budget of £1.2 million per annum to Spire Homes over the length of the contract. This is insufficient to deliver the improvement necessary to bring all properties up to the DHS.

- 212** RCC has plans in place to increase capacity by undergoing a large scale voluntary stock transfer to address the funding gap. This recommendation was approved by the Stock Option Appraisal Group when we were on-site. In the meantime, the contract with Spire Homes is designed to deliver improved outcomes for residents and the number of properties that meet the DHS be in the region of 83 per cent by 2010.
- 213** Both organisations have the skills and abilities to deliver services. Spire Homes and RCC have a positive working relationship which has enabled difficult issues to be addressed and progress to be made on service improvement. RCC are supportive when change is proposed, such as to the management structure which included removal of a manager post dedicated to the Rutland contract. Solutions to problems are sought and agreed jointly with a focus on service improvement rather than dwelling on why the problem arose. Staffing and capability issues amongst staff have been tackled robustly, for example, in the repairs and maintenance service. This created temporary difficulties and required intensive management resources. This has resulted in improved capacity to deliver the necessary service improvements and level of customer care with a more stable workforce and more robust procedures in place.
- 214** The staff restructure has led to increased capacity. Managers are able to draw on their experience and colleagues else where within Spire and the Longhurst Group more generally. This has been vital during periods of change and when posts are vacant and has resulted in services not being affected.
- 215** Staff are supported to undertake their roles by effective human resource (HR) planning. There is an HR strategy in place that identifies the strategic framework and strategies that need to be delivered. The strategy highlights clear links between staff and customer aspirations. There is a staff forum consisting of elected representatives, and staff are consulted on new policies that may affect them. However, Spire Homes has not carried out a recent staff survey, although work is currently underway to develop one, in consultation with the staff forum. This limits Spire Homes' ability to gauge staff morale, how well aware staff are of organisational aims and objectives and how they view communication and staff management within the organisation. Progress on these issues cannot therefore be assessed over time.
- 216** Spire Homes recognises the need for well trained staff. Training activity is well planned and includes PB members as well as staff of Spire Homes. Training needs are identified through the Staff Development Interview. Training plans are well co-ordinated and some budgets are held locally by managers, with group wide budgets for conferences to support this. The budget for training per member of staff is set at £250 for 2007/08, increasing to £375 during 2008/09. Training delivery is a mixture of bespoke training, accessing public courses and in-house coaching or 'buddying'. Some is delivered locally, but staff are also able to join colleagues from elsewhere in the LG for some events.

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- 217** There is an emphasis on training and developing the leaders of the organisation. There is in-house training offered to all Spire Homes staff at team leader level encompassing fundamental skills required by team leaders. A bespoke leadership and lifelong learning programme has also been developed for managers which is supported by all parts of the LG. Attendees report personal benefits in terms of leadership style and improved understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses.
- 218** Effective HR procedures are in place. Staff turnover in the organisation is now relatively low and sickness levels are reducing as a result of communication with staff about the levels of sickness and related implications. Staff are supported to respond to sickness issues by the human resources section. Taking this approach has meant that sickness levels are now average.
- 219** IT is being used more effectively to deliver services. RCC has provided additional resources to support developments required to the existing IT system. This has resulted in significant training on the system, new report writing software and the renumbering of all rent accounts. In addition to this Spire has taken on the role of systems management for housing and is supported by IT staff within the LG to do this. There are plans in place for RCC to procure new IT systems that will enable direct links with the performance management framework. Spire has taken a pragmatic approach to deciding not to design new systems that could be supported by IT to monitor performance in some areas of service delivery. Resources have been directed at service areas that have been a high priority for residents such as repairs and maintenance, with other areas, such as ASB continuing to rely on some manual systems. IT is being used to effectively deliver improvements that tenants would notice, for example being able to make rent payments by direct debit.
- 220** As mentioned earlier in this report, there is a clear relationship between cost and quality of the works delivered through the capital works improvement programme and this will increase capacity to deliver good quality work that offers value for money and meets tenants' expectations. Satisfaction with the improvement programme is already high with responses ranging between 84 per cent and 100 per cent satisfaction. A limited amount of properties have been affected by the programme so far, but there is now in place a four year plan, from which tenants will derive direct benefits.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	Rutland 2004/05	Rutland 2005/06	Rutland 2006/07
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	57	57	57
BVPI 66a Percentage rent collected	97.1	97.5	97.81
BVPI 74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	83	83	80
BVPI 74b Percentage BME tenants satisfied with overall service	n/a	n/a	n/a
BVPI 75A Percentage tenants satisfied with participation	64	64	68
BVPI 184a LA Homes which were non decent at start of year	13%	15%	48%
BVPI 184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	-78.9	-33.6	12.5
BVPI 185 Percentage repairs appointments made and kept	83.4	n/a	n/a

Appendix 2 – 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:
 - focus groups with staff and customers;
 - interviews with staff, councillors and partners;
 - viewing property improvements;
 - inspection of ready to let properties;
 - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
 - visits to all local offices;
 - estate inspections;
 - talking to tenants;
 - various file checks;
 - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Tenant profiling exercise

- 1 Spire Homes has conducted a tenant profiling exercise and plans to reach 100 per cent of tenants in the next few months. Housing officers and surveyors have been given lists of addresses where profiles are outstanding, with the aim of completing the information as they make visits in the area. The IT system also shows an alert on the screen if an address is entered on the system, enabling staff to ask the tenant to complete the profile information. Current performance is at 84 per cent which has enabled Spire Homes to ensure services and information meet individual tenants' needs. Alerts on the IT system indicate communication needs and have been used to prompt use of translated letters and to advise contractors via job tickets about tenants they are visiting who may need extra time to reach the door. Other changes have been made in response to the tenant profile information such as changing the format of 'Streets Ahead' to a larger print A3 version, in recognition that a high proportion of tenants are elderly and may have impaired vision but may not have specifically indicated that they need large print documents.

Gas safety certificate procedure and monitoring tool

- 2 Spire Homes have developed an in-house tracking system that automatically alerts the surveyor responsible for this area of work 60 days before the current gas safety certificate is due to expire. The system also automatically alerts the surveyor at 30 days and 7 days to enable progress to be monitored. This has meant that properties have not been overlooked. The system also accurately shows in real time how many properties are due for a safety check.