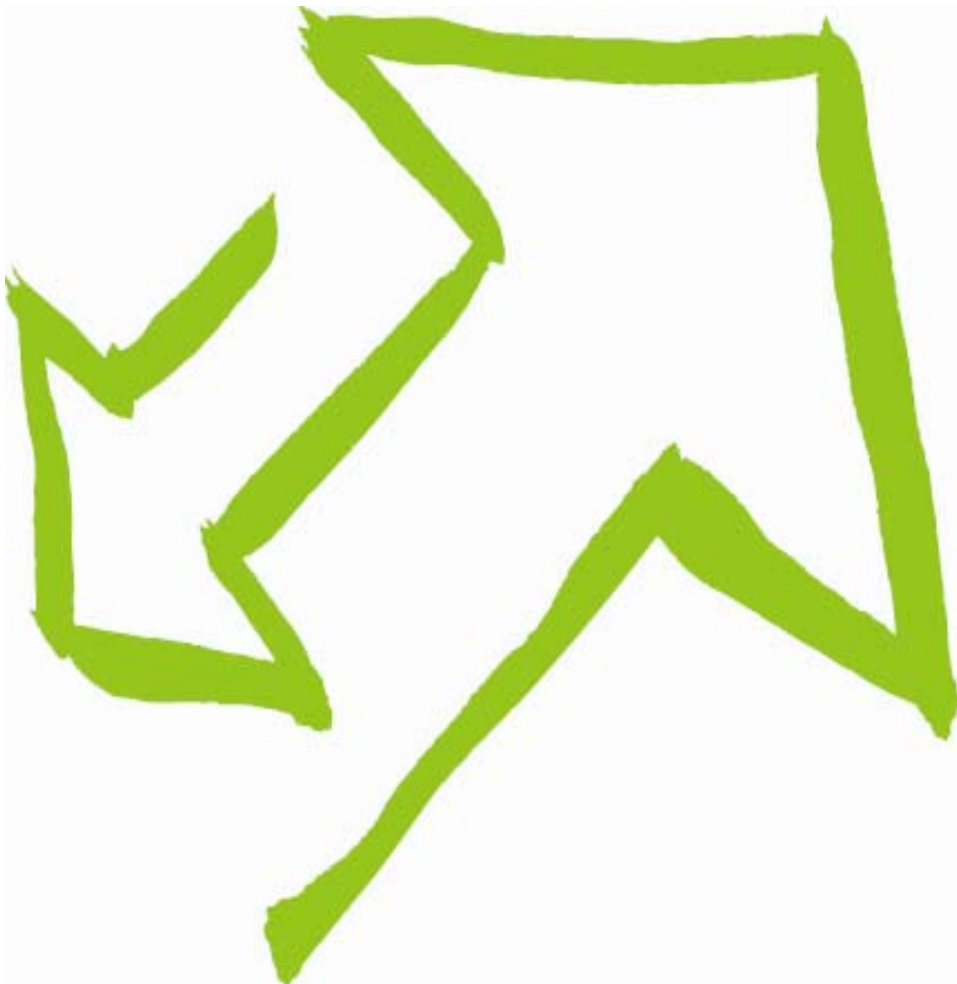


Salix Homes

Salford City Council

March 2010



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Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local 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, arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

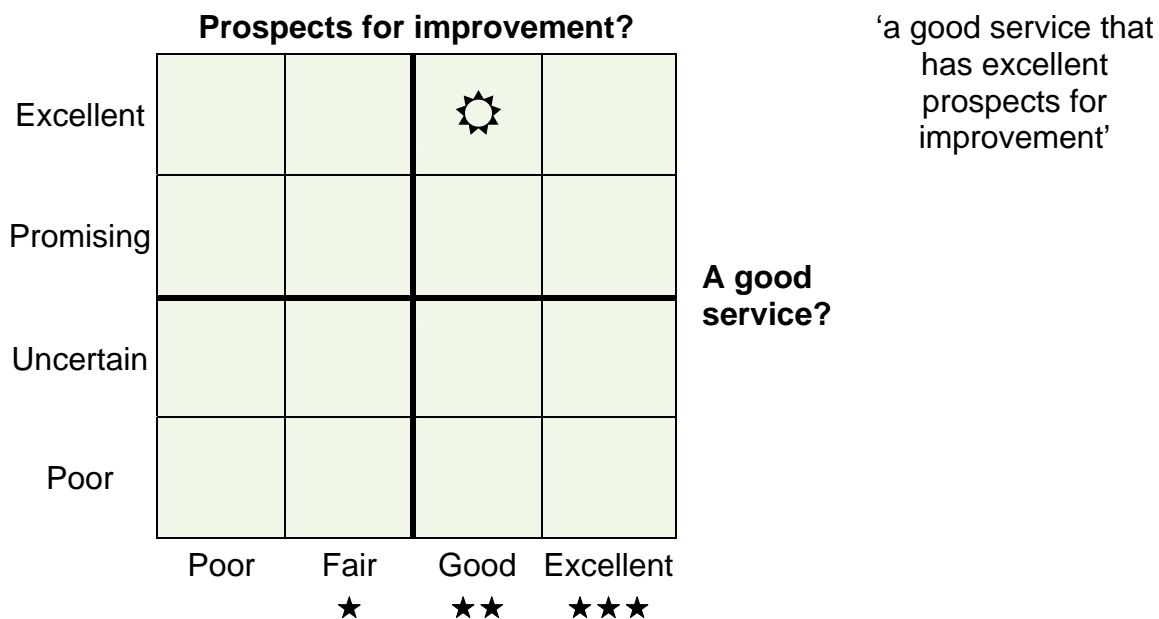
Summary

- 1 Salix Homes (Salix) provides a good housing service with excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 Salix are customer-focused. Services are easy to access and good quality information is available in a range of formats. Residents are involved effectively in a wide range of ways. Tenant satisfaction is strong and is improving. Salix understands and supports the diverse needs of its customers. Housing support and benefit advice helps vulnerable people to keep their tenancies.
- 3 Salix improves homes to a high standard and most repairs are done by appointment, and are completed at the first visit. Performance on gas servicing is strong. Tenants can pay rent in different ways and benefit advice is very good. Performance in collecting rent is positive. A balance between preventive work and enforcement effectively tackles antisocial behaviour. Homes are relet quickly and estates are mostly well managed. Salix works well with the Council and other partners to regenerate neighbourhoods. Value for money is embedded and delivers significant efficiency savings.
- 4 A number of areas require further improvement. Many homes do not meet the decent homes standard and planned maintenance programmes are underdeveloped. Service standards often lack measurable outcomes, and performance in meeting targets is not routinely measured. Performance in recovering former tenant arrears and repair recharges is weak. Service charges do not always reflect the true cost of providing the service. Leaseholders are increasingly involved but their satisfaction with services is low. They are not offered loans for more expensive capital works or options to repay service charges over longer periods.
- 5 Services will continue to improve. Services have improved significantly over the last two years and delivered real benefits for customers. Effective leadership and governance has transformed the culture of the organisation. Joint working with the Council and partners is strong. Performance management, improvement planning and budget and risk management is robust. Salix learns from customers and uses benchmarking to improve services. Salix effectively supports its staff.
- 6 There are a few barriers to improvement. Progress has been slower improving the aids and adaptations service and improving leasehold management. Salix is not robustly measuring the impact and outcomes of its work. The quality of staff appraisals is not consistent and sickness absence is high. The staff profile of Salix does not fully reflect the local community. Some key risks affect medium-term financial plans. ICT systems are improving but are not yet fully supporting services.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed Salix Homes as providing a ‘good’, two-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

8 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:

- a strong customer focus with easy to access services;
- information for customers is comprehensive, easy to read and is available in a range of formats;
- customers are effectively involved;
- high levels of customer satisfaction;
- a strong corporate commitment to equality and diversity;
- using information about the profile of its customers to help vulnerable people;
- a customer-focused repair service and nearly all homes have valid gas safety certificates;
- improving homes to a high standard and regenerating neighbourhoods to make them more sustainable;

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.

- allocating homes and reletting empty homes quickly, and supporting new tenants;
 - it is easy to pay rent and get benefit advice, and performance on collecting rent is positive;
 - managing tenancies effectively, tackling antisocial behaviour and taking preventive action;
 - generally maintaining estates to a high standard; and
 - a culture of value for money is embedded, making significant efficiency savings.
- 9 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- many service standards lack measurable outcomes, and performance in meeting targets is not always measured;
 - weak performance on handling telephone calls at the first point of contact;
 - lacking a strategic approach to ensure that the workforce reflects the profile of the local community;
 - people are waiting too long for major adaptations;
 - not robustly monitoring the take-up of all services by diverse groups;
 - a high number of homes are still non-decent and a strategic approach to environmental work and planned maintenance is underdeveloped;
 - having too many emergency and urgent repairs;
 - not monitoring performance against targets in the regeneration ancillary services agreement;
 - weak performance in collecting repair recharges and former tenant arrears;
 - leasehold management services are underdeveloped, and some service charges do not reflect the true cost of provision; and
 - caretaking and cleaning standards are inconsistent.
- 10 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:
- it has significantly improved services with clear customer benefits;
 - governance arrangements are sound;
 - effective leadership has transformed the culture of the organisation;
 - improvement planning and performance management are strong;
 - value for money is embedded throughout the organisation and budget and risk management is sound;
 - effective joint working with the Council and partners increases capacity;
 - strong human resource management supports staff; and
 - it is a learning organisation and uses customer feedback to improve services.

Scoring the service

- 11 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- progress has been slower in some areas such as improving the aids and adaptations service and leasehold management;
 - improvement plans lack measurable outcomes for customers;
 - the quality of staff appraisals is inconsistent;
 - sickness absence is high; and
 - ICT systems are not yet fully supporting services.

Recommendations

- 12** 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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Work with customers to strengthen service standards and ensure that:

- they are clear, measurable and comparable with other similar organisations;
- they specify what customers can expect every time they use a service; and
- report on performance against standards is provided regularly to the Board and published for customers.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- customers know what to expect, services are delivered consistently and performance is managed to continually improve services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2010.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen how customers access services and how their diverse needs are met, by:

- ensuring that challenging targets to handle calls at the first contact are met;
- ensuring that timescales for all parts of the adaptations process are challenging, published, and are met;
- establishing clear arrangements to monitor and manage access to all services, ensuring that access is equitable for all sections of the local community; and
- developing plans and realistic targets to help ensure that all parts of the organisation, tenant groups and the Board represent communities they serve.

¹ 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.

Recommendations

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- customers are dealt with appropriately and are helped to manage and sustain their tenancies.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2010.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the value for money of services by:

- developing and implementing a strategy to redirect expenditure from response repairs to more planned maintenance, including ways to reduce the high levels of emergency and urgent repairs;
- ensuring that a strategy for de-pooling all service charges is agreed with the Council and customers; and
- reviewing and strengthening arrangements to improve performance collecting former tenant arrears and rechargeable repairs.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more income collected;
- tenants only pay for the services that they receive; and
- the improved quality, efficiency savings and better value for money of services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by October 2010.

Recommendation

R4 Strengthen performance management, improvement planning and organisational capacity by:

- ensuring measurable outcomes for all actions in service plans and that the impact of work and initiatives is routinely measured and reported;
- ensuring that clear targets and outcomes are monitored for regeneration work through the ancillary services agreement with the Council;
- monitoring and managing the quality of employee appraisals; and
- reducing the level of sickness absence.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- being able to measure the success of work and plans; and
- increased capacity, and staff understand how their personal targets support corporate objectives.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2010.

Recommendation

- R5** Address all other weaknesses identified in this report, particularly by:
- improving leasehold management, ensuring that leaseholders are more involved with improvement programmes and are supported to pay service charges through loans and longer repayment options; and
 - ensuring that all communal areas and estates are maintained consistently to high standards that are agreed with customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increase in leaseholder satisfaction and less debts; and
- better appearance of estates and higher resident satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by October 2010.

- 13** We would like to thank the staff of Salix Homes and Salford City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 8 to 19 February 2010

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Salford City lies to the West of the Greater Manchester conurbation. It includes the towns of Swinton, Irlam, Eccles and Walkden. Salford is located close to major transport networks and shares a border with Manchester city centre.
- 15 After decline, Salford's population is starting to grow. It is home to 221,300¹ people. Over 17 per cent of the population are aged 65 or over. Over 25 per cent of households include someone with an identified support need (national average 14 per cent). Salford is increasingly diverse, with 7 per cent of the population from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups.
- 16 The local economy is changing and there is less reliance on traditional manufacturing. Salford remains an area of significant poverty, although this is improving. Salford ranks 15th in the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation (improving from 12th in 2004). However, residents experience marked differences in quality of life depending on where they live. Central to economic recovery is the revitalised Salford Quays. The Quays plays an important role both culturally and economically, seeing major expansion of new businesses and opportunities for local residents. It includes a new centre for the BBC.

The Council

- 17 The Council is Labour led and the city is divided into 20 wards, represented by 60 ward councillors. The Labour party has a majority with 36 seats; the Conservatives hold 13 seats; the Liberal Democrats have seven seats, there are three Independents and one non-aligned Independent. The Council has a leader and cabinet model of governance with six scrutiny committees monitoring the performance of the Council. A lead member for housing is also a member of the cabinet.
- 18 In its Comprehensive Area Assessment report in December 2009, the Audit Commission said that, overall, Salford City Council performs well. This is in terms of both managing performance and in its use of resources.

¹ ONS estimate mid-point 2008

The service

- 19 Salix Homes (Salix) was launched on 2 July 2007 to manage over 10,000 homes and deliver regeneration services and programmes in Central Salford and Beech Farm. It replaced a former ALMO, New Prospect Housing. This was part of Salford City Council's 'fresh start for housing' following extensive housing investment options appraisal which also included the transfer of around 15,000 homes to a new registered provider in the western part of the city. It also developed a private finance initiative (PFI) to improve 2,000 homes in the Pendleton area of Central Salford from 2011. The ALMO manages the PFI area up to transfer in 2011, after which it will manage the remaining 8,000 Council homes. Salix has 311 leaseholders.
- 20 The housing stock is a mixture of low-rise homes of traditional construction as well as 29 tower blocks of various construction types. Flats comprise 50 per cent of the stock.
- 21 Central Salford is an area of housing market failure. It lies within the boundary of the Central Salford Urban Regeneration Company (URC) and the Manchester Salford Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder (MSP). The Council commissions Salix to deliver a housing market renewal and regeneration programme as part of the MSP programme. Salix delivers a £26 million regeneration capital funding programme in 2009/10.
- 22 The ALMO receives a management fee for its services - £24.6 million in 2009/10. This finances £10.9 million repairs and £13.7 million management costs. Salix has 224 staff within three directorates: finance and ICT, improvement and customer services, and services in neighbourhoods.
- 23 Salix Homes has a Board of 12 directors comprising four customer representatives, four Independent and four council members. To help carry out its responsibilities effectively, the Board has set up four committees with suitable terms of reference to lead on particular areas: performance, audit and finance, neighbourhoods and learning and diversity. An independent customer senate of 14 residents scrutinises and recommends improvements to services offered by Salix Homes.
- 24 The Audit Commission has not previously inspected any housing services at Salix Homes. If the standards of Salix Homes' services meet government criteria, the Council will become eligible to receive additional Supported Borrowing to help it improve its homes in Central Salford to the government's decent homes standard.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 Salford City Council's priorities are set out in its corporate plan, 'the Salford City Council plan'. They are:
- improving health;
 - reducing crime;
 - encouraging learning, leisure and creativity;
 - investing in young people;
 - promoting inclusion;
 - creating prosperity; and
 - enhancing life.
- 26 Salford aims to achieve its ambition through the work of the Council's own services and through Salford's local strategic partnership (LSP), known as 'Partners IN Salford'.
- 27 Salix Homes vision and aim is:
- 'More than just a place to live - To become an excellent organisation that provides quality homes and services and helps to make neighbourhoods in central Salford popular places to live and work'**
- 28 It aims to achieve this vision by SPIRIT.
- S - Services that continuously improve, meet the needs of all customers and achieve value for money.
 - P - Promoting respect and making neighbourhoods safe.
 - I - Improving neighbourhoods, making them better by working in partnership to improve the choice of homes and the environment around customers' homes.
 - R - Reducing inequalities in Central Salford.
 - I - Improving homes by making them decent.
 - T - Three Stars: an employer of choice, a leader in the field, delivering excellent services to customers.

- 29** Salix's values place customers at the centre of everything it does through PRIDE.
- P - Partnership - Work in partnership with customers, communities and organisations.
 - R - Real Difference - Embrace new technologies to achieve effective ways of working.
 - I - Integrity - Be well managed and financially sound.
 - D - Diversity - Be inclusive - recognise Equality and Diversity.
 - E - Empowerment - Well trained, empowered and valued staff encouraged to make a difference to customers' lives.
- 30** The Salix Way is how the ALMO says it will go about business in Central Salford. It prides itself on positive attitudes and behaviours which seek to define its culture. Its culture as an organisation is to:
- listen to customers and respect what they are saying;
 - take ownership of the individual needs and requests of customers with actions that seek to get it right first time;
 - deal with customers quickly and keep them informed at all times;
 - negotiate and communicate with others on behalf of customers;
 - support each other and be willing to try new things;
 - learn from each other, from customers and from other organisations; and
 - become a champion for neighbourhoods, customers and their communities.

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

Access and customer care

- 31** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Salix has a strong customer-focused culture. It is easy to access services and customer satisfaction is high. Published information is of high quality. Salix handles complaints well and routinely uses feedback to improve services. Salix has a wide range of service standards, but many lack measurable targets, and it is not routinely measuring performance meeting standards. Performance handling calls at the first point of contact is below target.
- 32** A culture of customer focus is embedded in Salix. All staff are trained in the Salix Way which details the behaviour expected towards customers. The customer access strategy gives a strong strategic approach, and was developed through extensive consultation with customers, partners and staff. Customer service quality guides help to ensure a consistent approach for telephone and face to face contact. Staff are knowledgeable, professional, helpful and wear identification badges. Staff signpost customers for other help where appropriate. Over 87 per cent of tenants in the 2009 tenant survey find staff helpful. Salix received Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation in 2008. Salix treats customers with respect.

How good is the service?

- 33** It is easy to access services by telephone, local offices, post, and by the website. Access to services is shaped around what customers want. Over 82 per cent of tenants contact Salix by telephone. Opening hours and contact centre services meet customer preferences. The contact centre, Salix Direct, is open weekdays 8.00am to 6.30pm and Saturday mornings. Salix local offices open weekdays 8.30am to 4.30pm, late evening on Tuesdays and Thursdays until 7.00pm, and Saturday mornings (although take-up of late-night and Saturday morning opening is limited). Salix uses a single freephone number and local rate landline for mobile phone users. Salix Direct offers a two-hour call back service when calls cannot be resolved at the first point of contact. Salix Direct makes appointments for staff and the repair contractor makes appointments for follow-up work when in the tenant's home. Salix 1st Response provides a comprehensive out-of-hours service. Customers can report repairs, antisocial behaviour or domestic abuse 24 hours a day. Over 75 per cent of tenants find it easy to contact the right person (2009 tenant survey). Salix listens to customers and makes it easy to access services.
- 34** Performance in answering telephone calls is mixed. Salix Direct answer over 86 per cent of calls within 30 seconds (target 80 per cent), and 9 per cent of calls are abandoned (just above the average of 6 to 8 per cent in the social housing sector¹). Ninety-two per cent of direct calls to staff are answered in 20 seconds (target 80 per cent). However, having different target response times for call centre and direct calls is confusing, and prevents comparison of performance. Only 69 per cent of calls to the contact centre are dealt with at the first point of contact. Positively, Salix give customers direct numbers for staff, but this can lead to customers calling the wrong person. In a monitoring exercise of direct calls Salix found that of the calls classified as 'avoidable' 42 per cent were due to the customer calling the wrong person. Salix is tackling this weakness through training, and 'avoidable contact' is only 19.6 per cent for the first two weeks of February 2010. Customers are not always dealt with quickly and effectively.
- 35** Office reception areas are welcoming, well managed, and are generally suitable for visitors with different needs. Opening hours are clearly displayed outside offices. Offices comply with DDA² requirements and are accessible for people with disabilities. All offices have comprehensive information and advice about other agencies. Customers can use online facilities in all offices. Hearing loops are not available at one local office. Customers are treated efficiently and satisfactorily.
- 36** The website is easy to use and provides up-to-date information. Search facilities work well. Information can be viewed in larger text, different languages, and is speech-enabled. It has some interactive services, including paying rent, reporting repairs and an online benefits calculator. Customers can easily get information that they want.

¹ Contact Centre Survey Report - Social Housing Sector 2009

² DDA - Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and 2005

- 37** A wide range of high-quality information is readily available. It is in a professional style and is easy to read. A customer communications panel approve all publications. Advice leaflets, newsletters and the customer handbook (also available on CD) are helpful. A brochure of service standards covers all service areas. All information is available in various formats. Salix has profile information for 81 per cent of tenants (see section on 'diversity') and increasingly ensures that customers can get information in formats to suit their needs. Over 80 per cent of tenants are satisfied that Salix keeps them informed (2009 survey).
- 38** Satisfaction with services is high and is improving. The 2009 survey shows that over 81 per cent of tenants are satisfied with Salix as a landlord. Eighty-four per cent are satisfied that staff deal with their problem (79 per cent in 2008), and 72 per cent are satisfied with the final outcome. However, less than 50 per cent of tenants are satisfied with feedback. Most performance compares with top ALMO performers in 2008/09.
- 39** Salix routinely collects feedback from customers who have recently used a service (except for leasehold management and estate management). Satisfaction is mainly high. Salix groups satisfaction by six key themes (timeliness, access, information, effectiveness, staff attitude and overall satisfaction) to allow comparison between service areas. At December 2009 satisfaction with timeliness varies from 84 per cent with the time to be interviewed for antisocial behaviour (ASB) complaints to 95 per cent for gas servicing and Salix Direct. Satisfaction with access to services is high at 100 per cent with Salix Direct. Effectiveness is above 90 per cent for most services but is lower for ASB (78 per cent) and income management (62 per cent). Satisfaction with staff attitude is above 90 per cent, but is lower for income management at 78 per cent. Overall satisfaction ranges from 74 per cent with ASB to 100 per cent with gas servicing.
- 40** Salix deals with complaints well. Procedures are well publicised and it is easy to make complaints in person, by telephone, email or by letter. Salix monitors and manages complaints closely. Performance in dealing with complaints is high. All stage two complaints are acknowledged in three days, and 91 per cent responded to within the target ten days. Salix responds to dissatisfaction and now contact complainants more regularly. This has led to an increase in customers satisfied with complaint outcomes from 54 per cent in November 2009 to 58 per cent in January 2010 (but still below target of 64 per cent). None of the seven complaints to the Ombudsman have been upheld. Salix listens to customers.
- 41** Salix uses feedback to improve services. Customers are effectively involved in Salix - see section on 'resident involvement'. A programme of mystery shopping by customer inspectors checks standards. Feedback is published in 'you're saying; we're doing' articles. Effective involvement ensures that services are based on what customers want.

How good is the service?

- 42 Service standards lack measurable targets and some standards are unchallenging. Service standards provide helpful advice, but many standards are unspecific and are hard to measure. Some standards are not ambitious, such as answering calls within 30 seconds (although this was agreed with customers). Some target times are inconsistent between publications (such as with adaptations) and office opening hours are inconsistent in publications. Salix is reviewing service standards with customers. Without clear and measurable targets Salix cannot ensure that services meet agreed standards.
- 43 Routine satisfaction surveys of service users are not carried out consistently, or by the best method. Some are done face to face, some by post and some by telephone. Face to face surveys can put pressure on customers, and they may not say what they really feel. Salix surveys are duplicating the repair contractor's own surveys. Best use is not being made of contact centre staff to do sample surveys.
- 44 There are some other weaknesses.
- The website link to performance only gives basic information.
 - Emergency contact details are not displayed outside offices.

Diversity

- 45 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The strategic framework is strong and Salix shows a clear commitment to diversity. It has a good understanding of its customer profile, and increasingly uses information to improve services and meet individual needs. It addresses hate crime and domestic abuse appropriately. Salix is not representative of the local community at some levels. Salix is not robustly monitoring the take-up of all services by diverse groups.
- 46 Salix is committed to equality and diversity. A strong strategic approach provides a framework to improve services. Salix meets the 'achieving' standard of the equality framework¹. It is one of the first ALMOs to be assessed under the new framework. The equality and diversity strategy is comprehensive. It includes a single equality scheme and covers wider themes such as poverty, dealing with the effects of the credit crunch, worklessness and financial exclusion. Training is mandatory for all staff and Board members. Joint training has been provided with the investment and the repair contractor (but not with other contractors). Diversity is a core competency in staff and board members appraisals. Feedback informs training programmes. This approach ensures that customers' diverse needs are catered for.
- 47 The use of equality impact assessments (EIAs) to improve services for diverse groups is reasonable. A useful tool kit guide helps staff to complete EIAs. EIAs have led to offering same sex interviews, providing portable hearing induction loops for gas servicing engineers, improving website accessibility, and providing more flexible repairs appointments. However, some staff have low awareness of EIAs, and it is not clear how some EIAs have improved outcomes for customers.

¹ EF - The Equality Framework for Local Government (EFLG) builds on the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG).

- 48** Salix understands the profile of its customers and increasingly uses information to meet their needs. It has profile information for 80 per cent of tenants, including 100 per cent for gender and age, 82 per cent for disability, 79 per cent for ethnicity, 58 per cent on faith/religion and 59 per cent on sexuality. This compares well with top performing ALMOs except for ethnicity. Salix knows the communication preferences for nearly all tenants, and 900 prefer communication in different formats. All communication, such as standard letters, using existing ICT systems is automatically sent to customers in their preferred formats. Over 850 tenants receive the tenant newsletter in large print; 12 in Braille, and 19 on audio tape/CD. However, communication preferences are not used for rent statements. Profile information was used to develop a protocol for communication with customers who are partially sighted or have hearing difficulties. Ten staff are training as signers. Salix responds well to individual needs.
- 49** A strong commitment to helping vulnerable people is embedded in Salix. This was demonstrated during recent extreme weather conditions when staff gave up their own time and reprioritised work to help vulnerable people. Salix used profile information to telephone all older and vulnerable people to see if they needed help. Staff visited people and arranged to pick up prescriptions, issue blankets, and provide additional heating and food. Staff ensured that offices and the contact centre stayed open, and worked out-of-hours, including the weekend. Feedback has been very positive from customers, the Council and partners.
- 50** Salix only holds profile data for 34 per cent of leaseholders. It has written to and visited all leaseholders to increase information, and positively uses the information it has to deliver newsletters to five leaseholders in large print.
- 51** It is easy for people with diverse needs to access services. Salix use translation and interpretation services (including by multilingual staff), typetalk and all publications include community languages symbols for translations, and options for other formats. Repair orders include 'alerts' to highlight individual needs, communication preferences, passwords, asbestos and potentially aggressive residents. Salix responds suitably to the diverse needs of customers.
- 52** Salix ensures that vulnerable people receive support. Support needs are identified for new tenants and during all other contact with tenants. Partnerships with community groups and support agencies are strong. A robust diversity customer care kit helps staff to deal with diverse needs when visiting people and arranging meetings. Risk assessments in sheltered housing help to refer people for additional support. Contractors do not work in properties with unaccompanied minors. Operatives use domestic abuse training to report concerns, such as young children left on their own. A contractor in a regeneration area with a significant Orthodox Jewish community liaised with a rabbi to amend working arrangements. This included not touching prayer boxes, not working during Sabbath hours, not visiting lone women and ensuring that female staff wear trousers. Intervention in rent arrears cases helps to arrange support packages and prevent eviction. People are helped to live independently.

How good is the service?

- 53** Worklessness initiatives provide employment opportunities. Under one scheme long term unemployed people have six month placements with Salix. Salix helps with business start up grants and supported work projects help people move into independent working. Future jobs funding is used to provide employment experience and to maintain gardens for vulnerable people.
- 54** Satisfaction surveys identify feedback by six diversity strands. In general people from diverse backgrounds have higher levels of satisfaction. Only satisfaction with the value for money of rent and how enquiries are dealt with shows significant levels of disparity. Salix has not yet taken any action to address disparity.
- 55** Salix addresses hate crime appropriately. All offices are registered hate crime reporting centres. Domestic abuse and racial harassment policies and procedures are comprehensive. Salix uses a sanctuary scheme and has a victim oriented approach. Staff are trained to deal with victims of hate crime. The tenancy agreement is clear that hate crime will not be tolerated (even by a third party). A multi-agency approach agrees suitable action. Clear procedures and publicity have seen an increase in reported incidents. Hate crime increased from six cases in 2008/09 to 22 in 2009/10, and domestic violence cases from two to 14 over the same period. People are confident that reports are dealt with appropriately.
- 56** The profile of the organisation does not fully reflect the local community. Just over 4 per cent of staff has a disability; 9 per cent of senior managers and 15 per cent of the Board (compared to 20 per cent of the customer profile). Nearly 7 per cent of staff are from a BME background; 4.7 per cent of senior management and 10 per cent of the Board (customer profile 8.7 per cent). Fifty-six per cent of staff are men but only 37 per cent of top earners are women (52 per cent of senior managers are women). The workforce compares broadly to the customer profile for sexuality. Salix lacks a targeted approach to ensure that its workplace reflects the economically active local community. It is not showing that employment is fair and equitable for all parts of the community.
- 57** Salix is not fully monitoring the take-up of services by diverse groups, or ensuring that all contractors comply with its equality and diversity policies. It has some information (particularly for lettings and repairs), and it is using an equality standard for procurement to promote the diversity agenda. However, contracts contain limited objectives and Salix is not routinely managing contractors' performance meeting equality and diversity targets. By not robustly monitoring access to all services Salix is failing to comply with the Statutory Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing, and is not effectively managing contractors and agencies working on its behalf.
- 58** Not all communal areas of blocks of flats comply with Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements. The previous ALMO and the Council failed to undertake a DDA audit of communal areas in sheltered schemes and other blocks. Council legal advice was that it was not necessary. Salix decided to do the work and undertook an audit in 2009. A £2.5 million programme of remedial work is just starting, but will not be completed until May 2012. Positively, Salix is using profile information to target work where there is a higher level of residents with disabilities. The Council and Salix have not ensured that homes are accessible to residents, and their visitors with disabilities.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 59** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The strategic approach to investment planning is strong. Homes are improved to a high standard in line with what customers want. Programmes are well managed, published, and work is customer-focused. Energy efficiency work is strong and helps to make homes and areas more sustainable. Salix tackles low demand homes, garages and shops well. A strategic approach to environmental work and planned maintenance is underdeveloped. A high number of homes are still non-decent.
- 60** Stock investment planning is strong. The investment and asset management strategy is comprehensive, integrates with other strategies, shows a clear understanding of the local and national context, and of the key issues affecting Salix. Salix has a good understanding of stock condition through surveys of 68 per cent of its homes (80 per cent by April 2010). Surveys include a full HHSRS¹ and decent homes assessment as well SAP² details. The database is routinely updated. Salix uses robust data to ensure that investment programmes are in line with organisational priorities.
- 61** The approach to sustainability is strong. Resident feedback, neighbourhood indicators and stock condition information shape investment programmes. A broad range of neighbourhood indicators measure the health of neighbourhoods and identify problem areas that need action. A useful 'neighbourhoods' section on the website provides easy to explore information for customers. Indicators show improvement. Between January and December 2009 Beech Farm saw the percentage of new tenancies failing in the first year reduce from 20 to 16 per cent; average relet times reduced from 19 days to 12 days; new ASB cases per 1,000 tenancies reduced from 11 to 6. The overall stability of areas is also improving. Turnover has reduced from 13 per cent in 2008/09 to 12 per cent in January 2010. The percentage of tenancies failing in the first year has fallen from 12 per cent in 2007/08, to 3.5 per cent in 2009/10.
- 62** Salix manages asbestos effectively through a comprehensive asbestos management plan. A robust asbestos register is based on 20 per cent type two surveys³. All communal areas have been surveyed. Contractors have a copy of the register, and the location of asbestos is flagged on repair orders. A helpful customer leaflet and the decent homes DVD explain the risks to residents. Call centre staff have a list of frequently asked questions to help them deal with queries. This approach protects the health and safety of staff, contractors and residents.

¹ HHSRS: Housing Health and Safety Rating System

² SAP - standard assessment procedure: a way to measure energy efficiency

³ Type of asbestos survey: Type 1 - a visual inspection to identify potential location; Type 2 - sampling, identification and assessment survey

How good is the service?

- 63** Non-traditionally built and low demand homes are dealt with effectively. All non-traditional homes have been reviewed and are included in the decent homes programme. Salix is redeveloping four flats at Beech Farm to family houses, and long term empty homes at Winster Avenue have been improved and brought back into use. Alternative use is made of eight bedsits. Four will be used by the primary care trust (PCT) for respite/short stay accommodation for people coming out of hospital, and four are being converted for community use in partnership with the Police. Investment ensures the long term future of non-traditional and other types of housing.
- 64** Salix has reviewed the future of sheltered schemes with the Council. Six schemes will be improved to a Salford Sheltered Standard¹ in a four year programme from 2011/12; the remaining three will be re-designated as supported housing schemes and will be improved to the Salix Standard over the same timescale. Tenants are kept aware of progress.
- 65** Homes are improved to a high standard. A published 'Salix Standard' (decent homes plus standard) was agreed with customers. Programmes are managed effectively with 98 per cent of programmes delivered on time and within budget. A four-year decent homes programme is published for residents. Responding to customer feedback the programme has been changed to focus on 'worst first' and whole house refurbishment. Residents can search the website by post code to see when their homes will be improved. Salix offer adjacent owners the option to use the investment partner to do work on their homes. However, there is little take-up. Residents know what home improvements they will get and when.
- 66** Salix and customers closely monitor contractor performance and use information to improve services. Residents are involved in selecting contractors and components. Tenant inspectors report back on completed work. Responding to criticism the investment partner now provides 'roll and stroll' dust sheets to minimise dust and damage during work. Satisfaction with keeping disturbance to a minimum increased from 86 to 97 per cent. Homes are improved to meet customer requirements.
- 67** Communication and support for tenants during improvement work is strong. Information includes a helpful DVD, and leaflets/advice that explains how work will affect residents. Better communication has helped to reduce the number of tenant refusals from 12 per cent in 2007/08 to only 3 per cent in the 2009/10 programme.
- 68** Salix consults residents about all stages of work. Residents are supported during work by both Salix staff and the partner's resident liaison officers. Extensive support includes respite facilities and help choosing kitchen layout, colours and finishes. Where appropriate temporary moves and individual support plans are provided. Salix respond to individual needs, such as helping one resident with agoraphobia by providing temporary fencing while a rear yard wall was re-built. Cultural awareness training for staff and contractors in an area with a large Jewish community enabled specific needs to be catered for. Salix uses the opportunity of decent homes work to adapt homes for people with disabilities or limited mobility (see later section on adaptations). Satisfaction with improvement work is high at over 94 per cent.

¹ Salford Sheltered Standard – a decent homes plus standard for sheltered schemes. It includes higher standards for bathrooms and facilities for recharging electric scooters.

- 69** Work improving the energy efficiency of homes is strong. An energy efficiency and affordable warmth strategy targets investment at the worst properties. Salix is piloting the use of photovoltaic cells on three tower blocks. It has secured £800,000 external funding to support programmes and is currently negotiating £4.5 million funding through the CESP¹ with a national supplier. Residents are given free energy efficiency devices (power downs), low energy kettles, light bulbs and power monitors. Energy performance certificates (EPCs) are given to all new tenants. The average SAP rating is 74, equivalent to the top performing metropolitan councils in 2008/09. Improvement work makes it easier and cheaper for residents to heat their homes.
- 70** Salix manages garages, shops and other assets effectively. Over 200 garages are mainly in good repair, are in high demand and there are no plans to demolish any. Salix manages 111 shops and is currently reviewing future options. Where demand is viable shops are included in decent homes programmes; others are undergoing option appraisal with the Council. Salix supports local groups by letting 23 properties to resident groups and four to charitable organisations. Programmed maintenance work is integrated with decent homes work on estates. Maintaining garages and other assets improves an area's appearance and reduces vandalism.
- 71** Salix works closely with the Fire and Rescue Service and has completed fire risk assessments on all blocks of flats. It has started a two-year programme of remedial works to meet all Fire Service requirements. The Fire Service provides advice to residents where requested. Partnership working protects the health and safety of residents.
- 72** A strategic approach to environmental work and carbon free homes is satisfactory, but is still developing. It has completed an environmental audit and is about to consult local residents. Salix tackles identified 'hotspots' and uses external funding (such as NDC² at Littleton Rd) to improve some external areas. On the New Barracks estate alley gating, painting, graffiti removal, clean-ups, target hardening and security works have improved the area. Resident satisfaction with the neighbourhood has improved by 15 percentage points. A community room at Canon Hussey Court was improved with materials provided by contractors and labour as part of a WIN³ days initiative. Contractors provided recycled timber and materials for residents to make planters for an alleyway at the Strawberry Road block improvements. Seventy-five per cent of waste is recycled (on target). However, work is piecemeal and the appearance of some estates is marred by, for example varying type and standards of fencing.
- 73** Salix manages a range of cyclical servicing contracts effectively. Cyclical servicing contracts are in place for gas appliances, lift maintenance, Legionella testing, fire safety equipment and door entry systems. A ten-year electrical testing programme follows the decent homes work and void repairs. Performance is closely monitored - in the year to December 2009 98.5 per cent of lift services were done within schedule and 92 per cent of call-outs were attended to within the response time. Essential equipment is maintained in good condition.

¹ CESP - Community Energy Saving Programme

² NDC - New Deal for Communities

³ WIN - working in neighbourhood days by Salix staff. See also 'estate management' and 'capacity to improve' sections

How good is the service?

- 74** Other planned maintenance programmes are underdeveloped. Salix lacks a comprehensive programme for external works to footpaths, fences and component renewal. The cyclical painting programme lapsed pending decent homes work. The last year of the programme was 2004/05 and many homes have not been painted since 1998/99. Some blocks with an uncertain future have not been externally painted for over 20 years (Blackfriars Court for 29 years). Salix is introducing a new cyclical maintenance programme to commence after decent homes work. The ratio of revenue spending on planned maintenance to reactive repairs is currently 33:67 (improving from 23:77 in 2008/09), but is below good practice of 60:40. Salix lacks a formal strategy to redirect expenditure from response to planned maintenance. Without a structured programme Salix is not reducing the need for expensive response repairs.
- 75** A high number of homes are still not 'decent'. Non-decent homes have increased from 50 per cent to 55 per cent of homes over the last two years (due to the age of components). Salix will only achieve 100 per cent decent homes between 2014 and 2015 (dependent on additional ALMO decent homes funding). Revised timescales have been agreed with the government and tenants are kept informed. Tenant satisfaction with the quality of homes has reduced from 81 per cent to 79 per cent (2008/09), below top ALMO performance of 81 per cent (2008/09). Too many residents live in non-decent homes.
- 76** Contractor performance information is limited. Summary performance reports lack a breakdown of customer satisfaction with various parts of the process (although detailed satisfaction reports are discussed each month with contractors and customers). Reports lack any information about equality and diversity. Salix is not routinely monitoring contractors' adherence to equality and diversity requirements.
- 77** There are some other weaknesses.
- Asset management, repairs and stock condition database ICT systems are not yet integrated - a new system will address this by June 2010.
 - Salix lacks a formal approach to 'mop-up' tenant refusals for decent homes work.
 - Leaseholders are only starting to be involved with proposed improvements.
 - Outcomes of energy efficiency work, such as lower heating bills, are not measured.

Responsive repairs

- 78** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The repair service is customer-focused and performance is good completing repairs, by appointment, on time and at the first visit. Tenant satisfaction is high. Working practices are generally efficient, but there are too many emergency and urgent repairs. Salix lacks a robust approach for minor repairs.

- 79** The repairs service is customer-focused. It is easy to report repairs through Salix Direct and Salix's out-of-hours 1st Response team. Contact numbers are widely promoted. A comprehensive repairs handbook includes repairs diagnosis diagrams and handy hints. Appointment slots are flexible and include evenings and Saturday mornings, although take-up is limited. Appointments are confirmed by text, a reminder text the day before, and also when the operative is on the way. Operatives are empowered to do additional repairs. Overall tenant satisfaction with the repair service is only 75.5 per cent (2009) which is below the 78 per cent for top ALMO performers. However, current satisfaction with completed repairs is high at 97.8 per cent.
- 80** The repair service is mostly efficient. The repair contractor uses mobile working methods (including PDAs) to schedule and manage repairs in real time. Staff use repairs diagnostic software to ensure that repair orders are accurate (confirmed by independent audit). Operatives can go to the first job directly from home. About 50 per cent of operatives are multi-skilled, and imprest stocked vans and bar code reordering help to ensure that 93.7 per cent of repairs are completed 'right first time'. The repair contractor is piloting making appointments direct with tenants for any follow-up work - avoiding unnecessary calls to chase progress. Efficient working methods give a better service and saves money.
- 81** Performance is good, is improving, and is mostly above target. Performance in completing emergency repairs on time improved from 97.7 per cent in 2007/08 to 99.5 per cent at December 2009. Over the same period completing urgent repairs on time improved from 98.7 per cent to 99.5 per cent; the average time to complete non-urgent repairs improved from 9.4 days to 7.3 days; and appointments made and kept from 88 per cent to 94 per cent. Performance is mixed compared to the ALMO benchmarking group, but is generally positive. Performance compares to top performers for repairs completed on time and is above average for the average time taken to complete repairs and for the proportion of repairs made by appointment. However, the percentage of appointments made and kept is among the worst performers. Performance is routinely reported to customers in reception areas, on the website and in newsletters.
- 82** Salix uses feedback from pre- and post-inspections to improve the service. It has reduced pre-inspections from 13 per cent of repairs in 2008/09 to 9.5 per cent at December 2009 (target 10 per cent). Post-inspections are slightly below the 10 per cent target (9.5 per cent). A range of jobs are inspected and all dissatisfaction is followed-up. Detailed feedback is discussed at weekly operational meetings and is used to improve services. For example, Salix innovatively repairs failed double-glazing (drilling and clearing condensation rather than replacing glazing) saving expensive reglazing.
- 83** There are some inefficient practices. Salix batches some repairs (around £320,000 a year for kitchens and doors) but it lacks a formal strategy to re-direct expenditure from response to planned maintenance. Too many repairs are emergency or urgent repairs - 45 per cent at December 2009 (good practice 30 per cent). Salix attributes the high level to the poor condition of homes. It has thoroughly reviewed processes to ensure that jobs are correctly prioritised. Completing a high proportion of emergency and urgent repairs is expensive and does not give value for money.

How good is the service?

- 84** The repair contractor employs two handymen for minor repairs, but Salix lacks a formal approach for estate-based staff to do minor repairs. Caretakers have not yet been formally trained to carry out minor repairs. This saves time and money sending skilled repair operatives.
- 85** There are other weaknesses with repairs.
- The number of disrepair claims is quite high with 20 cases outstanding, including nine this year.
 - Repairs diagnostic software is not yet available on the website and customers can only report, not order, repairs directly.
 - Salix lacks formal approach to increasing multi-skilling.
 - Leaseholder satisfaction with the repairs service is low, although it has improved from 41 per cent in 2008 to 48 per cent in 2009.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 86** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The management of empty homes is strong. Empty homes are repaired to the agreed standard. Homes are relet quickly and Salix provides good support to new tenants. Although there are few long term voids, some have been empty too long. Salix lacks an arrangement with a preferred utility supplier to speed-up connection for new tenants.
- 87** Salix Homes manages empty homes (voids) effectively. Following a comprehensive review of procedures it set up an empty property team to control the whole process from termination to new letting. An empty property champion and team manage over 600 voids a year. Clear processes include guidance on hard to let properties, pre-termination inspections and using the termination period for allocations. Weekly liaison with the repairs partner ensures that homes are quickly relet. An incentive scheme helps to ensure that properties are handed back in reasonable condition. The £100 incentive has resulted in 33 back-to-back lettings, saving an estimated £48,000 on average void costs.
- 88** Abandoned properties are dealt with effectively. Abandoned homes (11 per cent of all voids) are quickly identified by frequent estate walkabouts, routine visits and by information provided by residents and the Police. Salix acts quickly to recover possession, manage any unauthorised occupants and ensure homes are relet quickly.
- 89** Performance on reletting empty homes is strong and improving. Average relet times have reduced from over 70 days in 2007/08 to 24 days at December 2009 (target 34 days). This compares to top ALMO performers. Void rent loss has reduced from 2.2 per cent in November 2008 to 1.5 per cent in November 2009 (top ALMO performance). The average time to complete void repairs has improved from 16 days in April 2009 to 11 days in January 2010. Only 16 homes are classed as long-term voids. Letting homes more quickly helps people in need find homes, improves estate appearance and makes more efficient use of resources.

- 90 Homes are repaired to a reasonable standard, agreed with tenants. Pictorial lettable standards are given to prospective tenants ensuring that they know what they can expect. It includes an appeals procedure, although, so far this has not been used. Tenant inspectors test that standards are met. All homes we inspected met the standard. Clear standards and better conditions reduce the risk of offers being refused (reasons for refusal are currently informing a review of the allocations policy). The percentage of lettings that are accepted at the first offer increased from 39 per cent in July-September 2009, to 47 per cent in January-February 2010.
- 91 Reletting procedures are customer-focused. All viewings of empty properties are accompanied by Salix staff. This helps prospective tenants to make informed decisions. Salix identifies support needs in a move-in plan. Sign-up procedures are comprehensive and help new tenants to understand roles and responsibilities, assess benefit entitlement, establish a positive relationship and help to make the tenancy a success. Photographs of meters readings ensure new tenants are not overcharged. All new tenants are visited within six weeks. Over 98 per cent of post-letting repairs are done within the target two weeks. Expenditure is charged to void work to ensure that all void costs are measured. Tenant satisfaction is high ranging from 8 out of 10 for satisfaction with the repair of property, to 9.2 for satisfaction with the new tenancy visit.
- 92 Salix improves the quality of empty homes as well as making efficiency savings. It agreed with tenants to provide carpets where extensive retiling is required. Salix estimate that it will save £80,000 in a year.
- 93 The decoration policy is positive. Tenants reviewed the policy giving new tenants the choice of obtaining materials from a local supplier (15 per cent discount to Salix), or ordering paint at up to 50 per cent discount to the tenant from the supplier. This includes home delivery and online ordering.
- 94 Although there are only 16 long term voids, four have been empty for between 12 and 18 years. An administrative error stopped one being removed from the rent debit in June 2008. An alternative use in partnership with the PCT has now been found for the other three bedsits. Long term empty homes have an adverse impact on neighbourhoods and lose rental income.
- 95 There are some weaknesses managing empty homes.
- Too many homes are still secured by steel grilles. Positively, Salix is starting to use other options such as polymer screens, alarms and nets. Grilles are unsightly, adversely affecting popularity of area and can attract vandalism.
 - Salix lacks an arrangement with a preferred supplier for gas/electric, and does not advise new tenants about the best tariffs. It is currently investigating options.
 - Performance with the number of homes vacant and unavailable for letting was below average for the ALMO benchmarking group in 2008/09 at 0.92 per cent. This improved to 0.49 per cent at December 2009.

How good is the service?

Gas servicing

- 96** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. A customer-focused approach ensures that access arrangements are effective and performance in completing gas servicing is high. Quality checks and file management are robust. Smoke detectors are provided and checked during gas servicing. ICT systems are not integrated and Salix is not monitoring that leaseholders have valid safety certificates.
- 97** Performance with gas servicing is very strong. At the time of inspection only six homes had outstanding gas safety certificates. Of these, five are outstanding for less than one month and the sixth just over one month. One home has solid fuel heating and has an annual service and chimney sweep. Performance is closely managed and is routinely reported to the Board. Reports detail the number of any outstanding services, including the period overdue. Strong performance protects the health and safety of residents.
- 98** Gas servicing procedures are effective. A robust gas servicing policy and procedure details roles, responsibilities and access arrangements. The operational director has clear responsibility for gas service provision. Servicing is programmed over ten months. Servicing that is approaching its expiry date is flagged on the ICT system to ensure that access is arranged if a tenant telephones Salix. The importance of servicing is well publicised through newsletters, leaflets, letters and on the website, helping to avoid costly legal action.
- 99** Access procedures are robust. Legal proceedings are taken using the Housing Act 2004 section 239 (HHSRS) to gain warrants. From August 2009 to February 2010 Salix has visited 196 properties using section 239 notices. It gained a warrant for 99 of these cases. There have been no challenges to this legal process.
- 100** Salix ensures that all homes have smoke detectors. Smoke alarms and carbon monoxide (CO) detectors are tested and serviced as part of the gas safety check. Mains-powered smoke detectors are provided during decent homes work. In partnership with Greater Manchester Fire Service, ten-year battery operated smoke alarms are installed pending decent homes work. Over 300 CO detectors are provided where there are open flue appliances. They are robustly tested through a spray test. This costs more but helps to ensure the health and safety of residents.
- 101** Quality checks are robust. Up to 10 per cent checks are done (by the contractor, external assessor and by Salix). This is a higher level than normal due to the age and wide range of heating appliances. The contractor checks all safety certificates. A comprehensive database helps to manage and monitor performance. Data is updated in real time by handheld PDAs. Salix has a paperless recording of safety certificates. All engineers are on the Gas Safe Register. Robust controls ensure high performance and that the quality of servicing continually improves.

- 102** Servicing is customer-focused. The first letter gives 14 days notice of an appointment. Tenants can request weekend, early morning or evening, and Saturday morning appointments to suit their needs. The gas contractor has made almost 2,000 appointments to meet individual requirements since April 2009. A prize draw provides an incentive to allow access at the first visit. Text reminders one week and 24 hours before the service help to ensure access. Sixty-seven per cent of first appointments are kept and 92 per cent within eight days (second visit). The contractor collects and shares vulnerability information with Salix, and has used this to provide additional heating. Salix offers leaseholders the opportunity to use the gas servicing contractor. Customer satisfaction is high at 99.6 per cent.
- 103** Salix deals with any illegal activities identified during gas servicing visits. It has taken action to terminate tenancies against tenants growing cannabis. Suspected child abuse has been identified and dealt with through clear procedures.
- 104** ICT systems for gas servicing interface but are not integrated. Salix has to individually input data from safety certificates. The ICT system 'flags' outstanding gas servicing but is not integrated to the database to check the current status. Weaknesses will be addressed by the new ICT system.
- 105** There are some other weaknesses with gas servicing.
- Safety certificates are posted to tenants in seven days, although the procedure has the unchallenging target of 'within 28 days'.
 - Gas servicing engineers have not had the same range of training as the general repair contractor and do not carry interpretation cards.
 - A requirement for leaseholders to annually service heating appliances is not included in the standard lease, and is not monitored by Salix. Salix immediately responded to this concern by contacting all leaseholders to request information. This could present a health and safety risk to other residents.

Aids and adaptations

- 106** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The backlog has been addressed and performance is good with installing minor adaptations. Positive information makes it easy for customers to apply for adaptations. Vulnerable people wait too long for major adaptations. Service standards lack challenging targets.
- 107** Salix has a positive relationship with the Council who are responsible for the overall aids and adaptations service. Salix has supported the Council to improve its performance through additional resources and taking responsibility to install minor adaptations. Arrangements are detailed in a service level agreement. Monthly meetings share performance information. Other alternatives such as rehousing or using temporary extensions to properties are discussed. Joint working improves performance and makes better use of resources.

How good is the service?

- 108** The service is accessible and is well publicised through leaflets and on the website. A comprehensive guide is widely available, including in GP surgeries and with local community and voluntary agencies. The guide clearly defines what adaptations are available, what happens at each stage of the process and outlines service standards. It includes useful information about council tax reductions for people with a disability (but not other related benefits). Salix understand how customers access the service, including 39 per cent through leaflets and posters, 8 per cent from GP surgeries and 33 per cent from social services. It is easy for customers to apply for adaptations.
- 109** Salix makes good use of decent homes work to identify and provide adaptations. Staff are trained to identify requirements. Adaptations meet 'lifetime homes' standards. Work caters for fitting additional features later. Lever taps are fitted as standard, and Salix provide push-button water stop taps, push-button testers for smoke detectors, low sided baths and level access showers where necessary. The Council pays for adaptations above general decent homes costs. Customers are helped to live comfortably in their homes for longer.
- 110** Salix use a good understanding of existing aids and adaptations when reletting empty homes. A comprehensive register of adaptations is recorded on the stock condition database. When adapted properties become empty details of the property are shared with other social landlords to identify suitable applicants. Equipment is recycled when possible. This makes good use of existing resources.
- 111** Minor adaptations are well managed. All minor adaptations up to a cost of £1,000 are funded and delivered by Salix. A trained repairs inspector assesses individual requirements. Minor adaptations take just over eight days to install (slightly over target of seven days) from when residents request help. Satisfaction is high at over 98 per cent, improving from 70 per cent when the Council managed the service.
- 112** Although performance is improving, customers are still waiting too long for major adaptations. Salix and the Council understand the demographic profile and growing need for adaptations. Priority is given to improving the performance and reducing waiting lists. The Council has increased investment by £300,000 in 2009/10 and Salix is temporarily funding an additional occupational therapist (OT). Improved performance has reduced the backlog of 80 cases in April 2009 to three in February 2010. The average time to provide major adaptations is still too long, but has reduced from 416 days in 2008/09 to 238 days in 2009/10 (target 275 days). Performance with cases that have applied during 2009/10 has improved to 194 days. Vulnerable people wait too long for major adaptations to help them live independently in their homes.
- 113** Service standards lack challenging targets. New arrangements for minor adaptations have led to inconsistency between published target times. This will be addressed through the review of service standards. The overall target of 275 days for major adaptations is unchallenging. A major delay is in taking 75 days to get an OT assessment. Customers are only told after the OT assessment how long it will take to do work. Customers do not know when they apply how long it is likely to take.
- 114** The value for money of the adaptations service is not demonstrated. A limited benchmarking exercise has been carried out and all minor works are given to Salix's responsive repairs contractor.

Regeneration

- 115** Strengths outweigh weaknesses with Salix's approach to regeneration. Salix works well with the Council and partners to help regenerate local neighbourhoods. It involves local residents in developing plans and supports them through development work. Resident satisfaction is high. Salix is not robustly measuring outcomes from all aspects of its work. Salix caters for the known diverse needs of the community, but it lacks comprehensive information.
- 116** Salix Homes undertakes regeneration work for Salford City Council within the boundary of the Central Salford Urban Regeneration Company (URC) and the Manchester Salford Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder (MSP). This includes the Charlestown and Lower Kersal New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas. Salix's role covers neighbourhood consultation and customer involvement, gathering and using local housing market data, delivering block improvements and relocation assistance to customers, managing acquired properties in clearance areas, and some capital works to private properties as part of the housing regeneration programme.
- 117** Salix helps to improve local areas by replacing obsolete housing with new and diverse forms of tenure. Salix supports the strong performance of the MSP. Clear analysis of local data contributes to the MSP's knowledge of local housing markets. Salix supports significant regeneration in neighbourhoods on behalf of the Council (£59.8 million 2008-2011), covering 2,000 homes, external improvements to 700 properties and demolition of 580 properties. Salix successfully levers in additional private and public investment (over £3.7 million so far). It works closely in partnership with the private sector despite the market slowdown, and major improvement work is continuing. Work delivers major improvements in Central Salford.
- 118** Salix has a sound strategic approach to its regeneration work. It gathers information and understands the causes of existing problems. Through the better neighbourhoods strategy 2009/12, it is developing neighbourhood profiles. They provide summary community and property profiles across 13 neighbourhoods in Central Salford. Information forms the basis for consultation for future investment programmes. So far five have been produced, and Salix is working with local residents to develop neighbourhood blueprints (as action plans) where more concentrated action is required.
- 119** Salix ensures that residents are clear about the implications of its investment and better neighbourhoods strategies. Residents understand the longer term aims to address housing market failure, retain local people and attract new economically active people to the area. In Seedley South an options appraisal is underway to see if future phases of development can be brought forward, to increase external refurbishments while development on cleared sites is stalled. Residents are kept involved and support the longer-term aims for regeneration in the area.

How good is the service?

- 120** Salix works with partners to add value to the regeneration programme. Block improvement programmes employ local labour and invest in the local economy. Lottery money helps fund a community shop. In Charlestown and Lower Kersal Salix works with a local building company (B4 Box) to employ long-term unemployed people, bringing six properties back into use. B4 Box employs 14 local workless people with four full-time skilled staff as part of its pilot programme in Salford. Salix works with partners to help sustain local communities and minimise the financial impact of clearance and redevelopment. Free independent financial advice is available for residents affected by redevelopment proposals. Residents point to an increase in education attainment, and a new primary school and nursery, as evidence of overall change in their neighbourhood. Residents are very positive about the long-term approach and support given to local people by Salix. Salix help to increase confidence in the area.
- 121** Residents in regeneration areas are well informed, involved and supported during development work. They express high levels of satisfaction with how Salix handle relocation. They are given practical help to move. Residents were supported to revitalise a residents' association in one intervention area. They were given training, financial help and guidance with the 'master planning' process. Neighbourhood planning events give information about proposals. Salix funds local community groups to help establish neighbourhood profiles of residents affected by regeneration proposals. Neighbourhood renewal activities are accountable to local people.
- 122** Salix contributes to thorough options appraisal of regeneration schemes. In the Gainsborough renewal area, up-to-date housing market data helped to develop future options. Feedback from resident surveys in the Seedley South intervention area played a big part in changing the plans from wide scale demolition to improving 173 homes.
- 123** Customer satisfaction is high. Feedback is closely monitored and reported. Almost 92 per cent of residents are satisfied with completed work in 2008/09. Satisfaction with neighbourhoods as a place to live has increased from 73 per cent to 77 per cent (2008/09). Salix respond to dissatisfaction. In one scheme concerns were raised that not everyone was able to attend pre-contract start launch events. Salix now do home visits on request. Salix receive few complaints. One complaint to the Ombudsman about the quality of work was resolved amicably.
- 124** Salix promotes community cohesion and addresses the diverse needs of some residents during regeneration programmes. As mentioned in the diversity section Salix worked with the Jewish Community to meet their requirements. In Pendleton, a resident neighbourhood champion worked with TPAS¹ to engage with hard to hear residents in the area. However, although Salix holds profile information for 80 per cent of tenants less is known about residents in some intervention areas. In Broughton, where 14 community languages are identified, intensive work by translators still only obtained a 50 per cent customer profile. Salix recognises that more work is needed to understand how well it is meeting the needs of all sections of the community.

¹ TPAS - Tenant Participation Advisory Service

- 125** Salix lacks a robust approach to measure the outcomes from regeneration work. There are few regeneration specific service standards. There are few outcomes as yet from consultation with all its diverse communities. Salix has set up multi-task teams with the Police and other partners, but is not yet clear about how outcomes will be evaluated. Salix is not thoroughly measuring and evaluating the success of its work.
- 126** Neighbourhood data systems are not integrated. Neighbourhood blueprints provide detailed neighbourhood-level assessment of local conditions. However, this is not integrated with the MSP 'tracking neighbourhood change data' across Salford and Manchester. The two processes run parallel to each other and partners are not clear if the two sets are integrated. Duplication wastes resources and the opportunity is missed to integrate data and incorporate information about the private rented sector.
- 127** It is not clear how performance is monitored against output targets in the ancillary services agreement (ASA) set by the Council. Overall performance is reported regularly to regeneration partners, including the MSP and the Council. However, performance on the ASA is less clear. The ASA does not clearly set detailed targets. There are a number of areas where funding is identified but no output given. The ASA is not effectively being monitored and top level performance reports to the Board are not specific to regeneration.
- 128** There are some other weaknesses.
- There is no strategic approach to the current empty shops review.
 - Outcomes from referrals to agencies such as warm front are to be developed.

Housing income management

- 129** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. It is easy for tenants to pay rent. The range of advice and information is positive and the most cost effective payment methods are promoted. Salix gives comprehensive debt and benefit advice. Rent collection performance is positive. Although performance on reducing current and former tenant arrears is improving it compares poorly with other ALMOs. Performance in setting service charges and recovering rechargeable repairs is weak.

Rent accounting and collection

- 130** The strategic approach to income management is strong. A clear income management strategy shows how Salix will meet strategic objectives through income maximisation, sustaining tenancies, reducing evictions and homelessness, and continuous improvement. The policy and income management team balances prevention, recovery and financial inclusion. Tenants are closely involved in agreeing rent collection policy, procedures and in managing performance.
- 131** Rents are set by the Council in line with government guidelines. However, tenants are not involved in setting rents and service charges with the Council. The Council estimates that it will achieve rent convergence by 2015. Clear rent accounting itemises rent, service charges and other sundry debts. New rent accounts are set up promptly and are kept up-to-date with payments. New tenants receive a payment card at the tenancy sign-up. This improves income collection and helps to reduce arrears.

How good is the service?

- 132** Salix encourages a payment culture through thorough pre-tenancy affordability interviews and new tenancy visits. Dedicated staff support new tenants with Housing Benefit (HB) claims, tenancy support and other welfare and money advice. Customers are referred to appropriate advice agencies. Different payment options are clearly explained. Support helps tenants to pay rent and maintain clear rent accounts.
- 133** Salix provides clear information about rents. Rent-setting letters clearly itemise service charges. Newsletters and leaflets promote rent payment and benefit advice. Quarterly rent statements were designed with tenants and breakdown rent and service charges. Statements are easy to understand and tenants can get additional statements on request (including online). Customer satisfaction with rent advice is high at 78 per cent. Tenants know how rents are set and have accurate rent account information.
- 134** It is easy to pay rent in a wide range of well-advertised ways. This includes by cash, cheque and debit card at various pay points, online and by direct debit. Easy to use website options enable tenants to order a new rent card, make payments, check balances and use a benefit calculator (140 customer have used this identifying £8,291 in benefits and tax credits). Advice on methods of payment is clear. Salix understands the costs of different payment options and promotes the most cost effective methods. Incentive schemes promote payment by direct debit and a £1,000 prize draw encourages clear rent accounts. Tenants paying by direct debit have increased from 12.4 per cent in 2007/08 to 17.5 per cent. Recent surveys show that 84.6 per cent of tenants are happy with the overall rent service. Making it easy to pay rent helps tenants and reduces the risk of non-payment.
- 135** Positive relationships between Salix and the HB section improve rent collection. A formal agreement clearly sets out respective responsibilities. The Council has clear performance targets to process claims. However, the agreement is not clear about resolving disputes or failure to meet commitments. Quarterly liaison meetings monitor performance. Salix staff can track individual claims through access to the Council's ICT system. All income management officers can verify documents on behalf of the Council. Salix and HB staff share training and work together on HB take-up campaigns. Arrangements and 'fast tracking' ensures new HB claims are processed quickly in two days, compared to 14 days in 2007/08.
- 136** Performance in collecting rent (excluding arrears brought forward) is positive. Performance is 100.3 per cent at December 2009 (just below the top performing ALMOs in 2008/09). However, as a percentage of total rent due (including arrears) performance has only slightly improved from 96.4 per cent in December 2008 to 96.8 per cent at December 2009. Top ALMO performance is 98.2 per cent (2008/09). Performance against total rent due is adversely affected by historically high rent arrears passed to Salix in 2007.

137 Performance in setting services charges is weak. Reasonable progress has been made de-pooling service charges. Charges for four key services have been de-pooled and are separately charged on rent accounts. Some charges including grounds maintenance and lift maintenance have not been de-pooled, and Salix/the Council lack an explicit strategy to address this. Service charges do not reflect actual costs and in February 2009 there was a shortfall of £730,000. Positively, the caretaker and security review has reduced the estimated shortfall for 2009/10 to £450,000. The housing revenue account (HRA) subsidises service charge losses which means some tenants are indirectly paying for the services they do not receive.

Current and former tenant arrears recovery

138 The approach to recovering rent arrears is satisfactory. Procedures provide a balance between recovery and prevention, and focus on taking early action. Clear procedures trigger action at specific stages. Eviction is carried out as a last resort. The pre-court protocol is followed before any application for possession is made to court. Salix checks that support has been provided for tenants, including income and benefit advice, support for vulnerable people, referral to an independent advice agency and eligibility for any direct payments. Salix is an active member of the court user group. The Council's homeless families unit is advised when possession proceedings are taken. Tenants receive advice and support to help manage their rent accounts.

139 Performance and case management is strong. Salix closely manages staff performance in recovering rent arrears. Staff have individual targets and Salix targets different estates for intensive arrears management every two weeks. Targeting rent payments during 'rent free' weeks secured £200,000 off arrears in 2008/09 and £80,000 during Christmas 2009. Salix used profile data to target young people in arrears through text messaging. This led to a 23 per cent response rate and a reduction in arrears of £7,654. Targeting action reduces rent arrears.

140 Performance in reducing current rent arrears is slowly improving, but is weak in comparison to other ALMOs. Current tenant rent arrears have reduced slightly from £1,050,000 in July 2007 to £996,000 in February 2010. However, Salix compares poorly to other ALMOs, largely due to the high level of historic rents arrears. Just over 7 per cent of tenants have rent arrears of more than seven weeks (similar to 6.8 per cent at transfer in July 2007), well below top ALMO performers at 3.6 per cent in 2008/09.

141 Salix has a high level of evictions for rent arrears compared to other ALMOs. This shows that long standing serious cases are dealt with appropriately. However, Salix provides a range of advice and support to tenants in arrears and the number of tenants evicted is likely to reduce in future.

How good is the service?

- 142** Performance in collecting former tenant arrears (FTA) is mixed. The policy and procedures are clear, focusing on early contact to agree repayment plans and provide support. During 2009/10 522 tenancy terminations left £466,000 of FTAs. A new dedicated officer has successfully recovered £93,000 in the year to January 2010. FTAs have reduced from 5.4 per cent of the rent debit in 2007/08 to 2.5 per cent in January 2010. Total FTAs have reduced from £1.5 million in November 2009 to £804,000 in January 2010. Salix has written off irrecoverable FTAs on a quarterly basis since its launch. Following a detailed review of all FTAs with the Council, Salix recently wrote off £700,000 historic debts. Salix is not using a range of legal options to recover FTAs. The overall level of FTAs is still high and compares to the worst performing ALMOs in September 2009.
- 143** Performance collecting rechargeable repairs is weak. Since transfer £143,613 costs for void repairs and clear-outs have been recharged and only 2 per cent collected. Few response repairs are recharged (between £3,000 and £5,000 a year) and only 13 per cent has been collected since 2007. Salix is not maximising its income.
- 144** There are other weaknesses.
- The FTA procedure does not allow for small debts to be written off by delegated powers (all cases are submitted to the audit and finance committee).
 - The lack of integrated ICT systems means that customers are invoiced separately for different types of debt.

Debt advice

- 145** Salix gives comprehensive debt and benefit advice to customers. A strong strategic approach (through a comprehensive financial inclusion strategy) covers a range of initiatives including access to banking, affordable credit, savings opportunities, maximising income and reducing fuel poverty. Clear advice and information promotes ways to avoid debt, such as through local credit unions. A financial information pack 'work pays: money counts' gives advice on setting up home and budgeting. Telephone advice is available early evenings and Saturday mornings. The website includes links to local benefit and advice agencies and the Council's website on tackling the recession. Maximising income helps to prevent customers falling into debt.
- 146** A Salix welfare benefit advisor coordinates advice on financial inclusion, welfare benefits, income maximisation and debt management. The advisor has identified additional income for customers of £460,000 (to October 2009).
- 147** Salix understands the profile of tenants in rent arrears. It understands reasons for non-payment and targets help for vulnerable people. A range of initiatives with partners promotes the take-up of benefits. Advice agencies provide surgeries at Salix offices. Joint campaigns give benefit advice and address other issues such as fuel poverty and budgeting. 'Money matters roadshows' identified an additional £18,300 in benefits. Salix contacted all customers over 60 years of age, and surgeries about HB changes at sheltered housing schemes secured £69,000 benefits. Neighbourhood profiling targets help for low income tenants. A high rise block of 138 residents was targeted gaining £4,500 benefits, and reducing rent arrears by £1,700. Targeting all tenants with over eight weeks rent arrears, resulted in 50 tenants receiving more benefits. Support maximises customers' income and reduces debts.

148 There are a few weaknesses with debt advice and recovery. There is no corporate debt recovery policy with the Council. Different sections of the Council pursue debts without coordinating and prioritising repayment arrangements. The recent quarterly satisfaction survey shows that only 51.4 per cent of tenants in arrears thought that help with advice with other debts was satisfactory. In addition, Salix is not routinely measuring performance and customer's satisfaction with partners giving benefit advice services. This is needed to ensure that tenants are signposted to partners giving good advice.

Resident involvement

- 149** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Salix respects residents' views and effectively involves them in managing and developing services in different ways. Salix listens to customers and improves services in line with their requirements. Leaseholders are not effectively involved.
- 150** Involving customers is at the heart of everything Salix does. Salix has transformed its approach since 2007. A commitment to involving customers and acting on feedback is central to Salix's culture. It prioritises developing involvement through a fully resourced customer involvement team with an annual budget of £272,000. Although this is the highest cost service in the ALMO benchmarking group, Salix feels it is necessary to establish a robust framework (from a low base). Salix supports local voluntary and community groups through £35,000 funding in 2009/10. All staff are trained how to involve customers. All staff attend resident meetings on a rota basis and encourage tenants to get involved. Salix has received TPAS¹ accreditation for resident involvement. Involving residents is embedded throughout the organisation.
- 151** The framework for resident involvement is robust. The customer involvement strategy is comprehensive, but lacks a focus on benefits for customers. Opportunities for resident involvement are regularly promoted. This includes at tenancy sign-up, tenancy audits, new tenant visits, through leaflets, newsletters, on the website and in correspondence to tenants. Over 80 per cent of residents are satisfied with how Salix keeps them informed (78 per cent in 2008), equivalent to top ALMO performers in 2008/09. Residents understand how they can get involved.
- 152** Residents are routinely involved in different ways. This ranges from providing strategic direction by resident board members, scrutiny by the 'senate', to individuals giving feedback in routine satisfaction surveys. The framework has developed from 27 loosely constituted TARAs² in 2007, to 34 groups and about 50 informal groups/contacts. Over 5,000 people have had direct involvement with Salix since its launch, with 800 customers participating in customer involvement activities for the first time from April 2009. Salix 600 is a list of residents who get involved in ways that suit them. Service specific customer panels (SSPs) play a crucial role developing and monitoring services for each service area. Residents are involved with external groups, such as being members of GM Procure special interest groups. Involvement ensures that services are improved in line with what residents want.

¹ TPAS - Tenant Participation Advisory Service

² TARA - tenant and resident associations

How good is the service?

- 153** Salix engages with hard-to-reach groups. Of the 800 new people becoming involved 44 were young people and 80 were from BME communities. Salix involves young people and families through informal means such as advice sessions and community festivals. Diversity details (for all six diversity strands) are recorded on a tenant participation tracker. Data is analysed to identify ways to improve involvement. Following a disability day forum Salix revised decent homes specifications, set up a garden scheme for vulnerable people, and promoted the aids and adaptations service in GP surgeries. A partnership with an asylum seekers' and refugees' scheme led to 11 customers receiving financial advice and support. Salix ensures that the views of people who are harder-to-reach are obtained.
- 154** Residents shape improvements and service delivery. Changes following resident involvement include the approach to decent homes programmes, changes to the cleaning and caretaking services and support for local TARAs. The customer communications panel edits all publications to meet the needs of customers. A rent panel improved the quality of information in standard letters and rent statements. Imminent changes to the choice-based lettings system include the number of bids applicants can make and the number of refusals before suspension. Website changes make it easier to navigate, obtain information and report repairs online. Setting standards for cyclical work in high rise blocks increased overall satisfaction to 96 per cent (89 per cent in 2007/08). Salix improves services in line with what customers want.
- 155** Comprehensive training increases the capacity of the senate to enhance its role promoting more customer involvement. External funding helps the senate to develop its independent role with Salix by not having to rely on administrative support. Promotion of its work encourages customers to become involved.
- 156** Residents assess the quality of services. Mystery shopping by customer inspectors (28 inspectors) has identified variable standards of service such as cleaning standards in some high rise blocks. Inspectors include young people (36 per cent) and people from BME communities (11 per cent). Mystery shopping has led to Salix introducing pictorial letting standards, monthly block inspections and a telephone answering protocol. However, outcomes from mystery shopping are not centrally recorded and incorporated into wider service improvement plans. It is left with service managers to implement improvements. Inspectors may feel their feedback is not given full attention.
- 157** The Salix 600 panel is used to test changes to services and gather information on such issues as the local environment. Despite it being the preferred means of involvement for most residents there is less evidence of how it has led to improved services.
- 158** Satisfaction with resident involvement has slightly declined but is still high. The 2009 tenant survey shows that only 69 per cent of tenants of customers are satisfied that their views are taken into account (70 per cent in 2008). National benchmarked performance includes respondents with 'no opinion'. On this basis Salix's performance is, at 64.7 per cent, among best ALMO performers (64 per cent).

- 159** Leaseholders are not effectively involved. There is a leaseholder forum (see later section), but they are not invited to some events and can not nominate schemes for participation funding. Leaseholder satisfaction that their views are taken into account has improved from 41 per cent in 2008 to 43 per cent in 2009, but is still low.
- 160** There are some other weaknesses. Salix lacks evidence of outcomes following the equality impact assessment of the resident involvement strategy. Feedback to residents on performance does not routinely include comparison with top performers. Without this residents do not know how Salix compares with other landlords.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 161** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. A clear tenancy agreement ensures that tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities. New and existing tenants receive effective housing support. Salix works with partners to balance prevention, support and enforcement action for antisocial behaviour. Satisfaction with ASB cases is positive and is improving. However, Salix does not keep complainants fully informed.
- 162** Clear information ensures that tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities. A new fit for purpose tenancy agreement reflects legislative changes and customer feedback. Salix widely consulted on the agreement and used feedback to include specific clauses, such as smoking in public areas and domestic violence. A comprehensive tenancy agreement helps Salix to enforce responsibilities.
- 163** The management of introductory tenancies is satisfactory. Prior to April 2009 introductory tenancies changed to secure tenancies without checking how the tenancy had been conducted. Three visits to new tenants are now done in the first year of tenancy (six weeks, four months and nine months). Before making tenancies secure staff check for antisocial behaviour (ASB) and rent arrears. Visits also check how well new tenants are coping and if any support is required. Introductory tenancy visits identify success in addressing a range of problems. The percentage of tenants in arrears has reduced from 46 per cent (September visits) to 24 per cent (November visits). The condition of property improved over the same period.
- 164** Salix effectively manages other tenancies by tenancy audit visits. A five-year risk based programme focuses on customers identifying themselves as 'vulnerable' in the first year, 2009/10. All staff have targets to visit properties, ensure tenancy conditions are met, identify support needs, check for unauthorised possession, tenancy fraud, overcrowding and other issues. Performance is closely monitored and is on target. Visits are used to gather customer profile information. Tenancy audits help tenants and ensure that the best use is made of housing stock.
- 165** Tenants are supported to sustain tenancies. Support needs are identified at tenancy sign-up and through ongoing contact. Furniture packages are available for tenants who need them. Tenants are signposted to partner agencies for other support where necessary. Neighbourhood indicators track changes. Better allocations ensure that new tenants can move into properties where they want to live, and that they are given suitable support to maintain their tenancy.

How good is the service?

- 166** Salix effectively tackles antisocial behaviour. Policies and procedures are comprehensive. Salix provides a suitable balance between enforcement and prevention. A dedicated safer neighbourhood team tackles ASB, domestic violence, hate crime and harassment cases. Salix has a good understanding of where ASB and crime is most prevalent. Identifying 'hotspots' allows Salix to target resources and action. Salix's 1st Response Team provides a comprehensive out-of-hours service. It is a multi-functional team that manages an extensive network of CCTV cameras as well as immediately responding to reports of ASB and noise nuisance. Regular visits focus on 'hotspots', and property-marking kits are distributed in areas with high levels of burglary. Reports of ASB have reduced by 53 per cent in high rise accommodation.
- 167** Joint working with partners is effective. In two areas a range of agencies (including the Police and council environmental teams) are co-located in the same building. Regular neighbourhood meetings are held where agencies discuss local issues, exchange information and coordinate action. The security of building sites and maintenance of cleared sites has improved. Joint working delivers better neighbourhoods.
- 168** Salix takes a range of enforcement action. Legal action for 43 serious cases of ASB, includes 18 injunctions, 15 emergency injunctions, four injunction breaches, four possessions/postponed possessions and two antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs). Salix is the first non-pilot northern ALMO to receive benchmarking accreditation of its ASB service 'with excellent examples of good practice'. It is a key partner in the Salford Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) that has secured 'respect area action status'. Salix is a signatory to the Respect Standard for Housing Management. Enforcement action is regularly publicised in newsletters and the local press. Strong enforcement action helps to deter ASB.
- 169** Support is provided for victims and perpetrators. Staff are trained to identify tenants who may be vulnerable and those who maybe suffering abuse. Witnesses are supported during any legal action and by the CDRPs witness outreach worker. Target hardening such as security lighting is provided and the most vulnerable victims are supported through the Sanctuary scheme. A witness mentoring scheme is being developed to provide additional support by previous witnesses. Support is also arranged for perpetrators. Support encourages witnesses and reduces ASB.
- 170** Antisocial behaviour cases are managed effectively. The database records 227 current cases ranging from low level to serious cases. As reported in the diversity section, Salix has also managed 19 hate crimes and ten domestic abuse cases. Care is taken in closing cases to ensure that complainants understand the reason for the outcomes. Staff ensure records are up-to-date.
- 171** Satisfaction with dealing with ASB is positive and is improving. Satisfaction with the final outcome has improved from 67 per cent in July 2007 to 75 per cent between September and December 2009 (below the top ALMO performance of 78.3 per cent in 2008/09). Satisfaction in the 2009 tenant survey is lower but is also improving: 75 per cent found staff helpful compared to 64 per cent in 2008. Over 55 per cent felt that staff dealt with the problem compared to 48 per cent in 2008. Performance is strong in comparison to national benchmarking.

- 172** Salix undertakes a range of prevention initiatives and diversionary activity. Twenty three young people attended a football tournament organised jointly with GM Police, and young people helped to produce an ASB DVD. This led to an 80 per cent reduction in youth-related verbal abuse, harassment and intimidation on Lower Kersal in 2009. Young persons' holiday play-schemes in areas with high levels of ASB engaged over 700 families. A 'fun day' led to a young parents' project and a 66 per cent reduction in nuisance in local areas during school holidays. Prevention initiatives include designing-out crime through alley gating, improved lighting and door entry systems.
- 173** Salix is not keeping complainants fully informed when they report antisocial behaviour. Only 55 per cent of tenants in the 2009 tenant survey were satisfied with being kept informed when reporting ASB. This is reinforced by only 79 per cent satisfaction with 'information' that Salix gives in the most recent ASB survey (September to December 2009). This was the lowest score for 'information' in all service area surveys. Complainants do not understand what Salix is doing to try and resolve their problems.

Estate management

- 174** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Estates are generally maintained to a high standard in very challenging areas. Salix works closely with partners to improve neighbourhoods. Areas are more sustainable and tenant satisfaction is good and improving. Caretaking and cleaning arrangements are new and some areas are not well maintained.
- 175** Salix has a clear strategic approach to improving neighbourhoods through its strategy for better neighbourhoods. It works successfully in neighbourhoods that are difficult to manage. Many estates include high density housing with poor road and footpath layout, hard to manage open spaces, and high levels of social and economic deprivation. Salix has a comprehensive understanding of the condition of local areas. As described under stock investment the neighbourhood matrix uses key indicators to reflect an area's sustainability including the general appearance of an area. The matrix acts as an 'early warning' system and is used to target resources where most needed.
- 176** Salix works closely with partners to improve neighbourhoods. A specialist neighbourhood team and neighbourhood champions coordinate local services. Champions use small budgets to deal with local problems such as installing additional security measures. The co-location pilot integrates action with partners. Salix sponsors a Police mobile patrol vehicle in partnership the URC in the Ordsall and Langworthy areas. A joint protocol with the Council and Police uses 15 day notices to remove abandoned vehicles. The level of crime has fallen in Central Salford. Over 77 per cent of tenants are satisfied with the area as a place to live (74 per cent in 2008 - top performing ALMOs 78.5 per cent in 2008/09). However, surveys do not include the views of other residents and local businesses.

How good is the service?

- 177** Staff and tenants work together at community events such as neighbourhood and WIN days. Salix improves the environment through developing community gardens and clearing rubbish. Regular 'estate walkabouts' are widely advertised and give residents an opportunity to raise concerns directly to their neighbourhood champion. Advertised skip days reduces fly tipping. This helps to makes areas more popular and sustainable.
- 178** Salix has taken difficult decisions to improve services and reduce service charge deficits. It stopped using residential caretakers and introduced mobile working arrangements. Changes have achieved considerable savings. Customers took part in a 'priority game' (VfM budget setting exercise) helping to inform the decision to develop the 24 hour responsive ASB service. The in-house mobile security service (part of 1st Response) improves the security of high rise blocks. Complaints about neighbour nuisance in high rise blocks have reduced by 53 per cent (October 2009 to February 2010) compared to the same period last year.
- 179** Estates are generally maintained in good condition. A dedicated cleaner greener neighbourhoods team (CGNT) coordinates cleaning services with the Council. It was set-up following consultation with residents to address key concerns in the 2008 tenant survey. The appearance of some high rise blocks is very good with well maintained communal areas and no graffiti. A grounds maintenance service level agreement (SLA) with the Council is monitored on a monthly basis. Grassed areas and landscaping is neat and tidy. Monthly block and neighbourhood inspections are widely publicised. Over 98 per cent of grounds maintenance sites achieve an 'acceptable' or above rating in regular inspections. Customer satisfaction with caretaking standards in all blocks has increased by five percentage points since April 2009. Between October 2009 (new service introduced) and January 2010 satisfaction levels increased by 41 percentage points in high rise blocks.
- 180** Despite significant successes some initiatives are recent and the standard of some areas varies. Common areas in some blocks are not clean or clear of litter. Although Salix measures resident satisfaction through publicised joint block inspections there is no regular satisfaction survey for the caretaking and cleaning service. Salix is not seeking the opinion of a wider group of residents, and some of them are receiving a poor service. Unattractive blocks and estates are unpopular.
- 181** Other weaknesses include:
- security is less effective in some blocks with mobile guards less able to stop unauthorised people entering blocks; and
 - a garden service for vulnerable tenants has only recently been introduced. It is too soon to see positive outcomes.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 182** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Leaseholders helped to develop service standards and a handbook. They are consulted about cyclical and improvement work. Leaseholders can pay charges in a range of ways. However, capital improvement work cannot be repaid over longer periods, and the Council does not offer loans. Leaseholder satisfaction is increasing but is still low.

- 183** Service delivery is managed by Salix but the Council retains responsibility for setting, invoicing and collecting service charges.
- 184** The strategic approach to leasehold management is underdeveloped. Salix lacks a leaseholder strategy to give clear direction. Leaseholders are not mentioned in the financial inclusion strategy or the income management strategy. The Council would consider buying back homes, but this is not explicit in any policy. Salix is not ensuring that it focuses improvement on what matters most to leaseholders.
- 185** Salix has increased resources through a dedicated team. Positive guidance includes a service guide for staff that gives clear procedures about statutory consultation. Salix complies with the statutory requirements¹, including consultation requirements for major works and procurement. Leaseholders are notified several weeks before any communal improvement works. A clear protocol explains how leaseholders and owner occupiers can access the same capital works that are offered to tenants. Leaseholders receive an indicative cost of the works. Leaseholders are offered gas servicing at a reasonable cost of £52.50. Little decent homes work has been done on blocks of flats with leaseholders, and there has been no take-up by leaseholders of home improvement work.
- 186** Information for leaseholders is reasonable. Service standards, the leasehold handbook and a dedicated page on the website were agreed with the leaseholder forum in 2009. The handbook is clear about what services are included and gives welfare and debt advice. It explains how to dispute charges and gives information about the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal. However, it not easy to read and it lacks advice about whether the Council offers loans, alternatives such as the credit union or buyback facilities. The section explaining statutory consultation lacks detail about the right to nominate contractors and that Salix must inform leaseholders why any work is necessary. Salix has enforced lease covenants on subleasing where a nuisance was being caused. Leaseholders generally understand what they are entitled to.
- 187** Leaseholders are not yet fully involved shaping leasehold policy and procedures. A leaseholder forum meets every six weeks. Since its commencement it has developed and monitored the leasehold improvement plan. This has helped to develop new service protocols. Leaseholders are starting to influence the services they receive from Salix, but this has led to few outcomes so far.
- 188** It is generally easy for leaseholders to pay service charges in a range of ways including by direct debit or online. The service charge invoice includes advice about what to do if leaseholders have difficulties making payments. It gives contact details of an advice agency. Leaseholders can make payments weekly or monthly; however, full payment is required within ten months without any incentives for early payment. The Council does not offer longer repayment periods for any capital work and does not offer loans. Leaseholders may have difficulty paying charges.

¹ Including those contained in the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002

How good is the service?

- 189** Setting service charges is weak. The Council lacks a clear and transparent service charge setting policy that has been consulted with leaseholders. Leaseholders are not given accurate information about service charges. An annual summary of management charges is not provided as required by the lease. Annual statements show 'estimated costs' for the next year, but leaseholders do not receive an invoice for 'actual' costs taking into account any over/under payments. Leaseholders are being charged inconsistently and may be contributing disproportionately to the Council's deficit on service charge income (currently £450,000). Leaseholders are generally unaware of 'de-pooling' and complain about paying for services that they do not receive (such as the regularity of grass cutting). A sinking fund to help finance future repairs has not been built up (although the lease allows this). Leaseholders are being treated unfairly about service charges.
- 190** Salix addressed the inequality between charges made for leaseholders and tenants through the caretaking and security review. Salix were open throughout the review and informed customers of the service charge disparities. In one block of flats tenants pay £4.99 a week compared to £7.99 a week for leaseholders. From April 2010 both tenants and leaseholders will be charged the same amount for caretaking services.
- 191** Customer satisfaction with leasehold services is low, but is improving. Only 18 per cent of leaseholders replied in the 2009 survey, and Salix does not routinely carry out other satisfaction surveys aimed at leaseholders. The 2009 survey shows that overall satisfaction with services provided by Salix was only 52 per cent (improving from 43 per cent in 2008) compared to 82 per cent for tenants. Overall satisfaction with the repairs service was also low at 41 per cent compared to 75 per cent for tenants. Only 44 per cent felt that their views were taken into account and only 51 per cent thought Salix was good at keeping them informed. Satisfaction with the VfM of the service charge increased from 28 per cent in 2008 to 44 per cent in 2009.
- 192** Benchmarking leasehold management is limited. Salix has started to benchmark leaseholder services with other ALMOs. It focuses on customer satisfaction, and is not comparing the costs of services and other quality of service measures. Positively, Salix introduced offering gas servicing after benchmarking.

Allocations and lettings

- 193** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The allocations policy complies with statutory requirements and applicants are offered choice through choice-based lettings. Positive information makes it easy to bid for properties. Support is given throughout the lettings process. Allocations are made in a clear and transparent way. Local lettings policies have not had equality impact assessments and it is not clear how analysis of lettings is used to ensure fair access to housing.

- 194** The Council is responsible for the allocations lettings policy and managing the waiting list. The allocations policy complies with statutory requirements to meet priority needs such as homelessness and medical needs, but also gives access for lower priorities such as management transfers. Homeless applicants are not adversely affected by the choice-based lettings (CBL) system. More preventive work has seen homeless acceptances in Salford reducing from 1,600 a year to 400 in 2009/10. The allocations policy ensures that 30 per cent of all properties are available to homeless applicants. The Council manages nomination agreements with all registered providers in Salford. Customers are given choice through the CBL system.
- 195** Salix has effective working arrangements with the Council's housing connections partnership who administer CBL. Roles, responsibilities and timescales are set out in a service level agreement. Appropriate monitoring arrangements manage risk. Monthly meetings with housing connections consider suspensions, appeals and offers for ex-offenders. Weekly meetings decide allocations, including relocating tenants from regeneration areas. Reasons for refusals are closely monitored to strategically manage the allocations process. As a result of analysis the Council are reviewing the allocations policy to help reduce the levels of refusals (due for approval in June 2010). The policy offers informed choice for applicants and ensures fair access.
- 196** CBL is publicised effectively. Information in leaflets, on the website, posters and advertisements explain how categories prioritise the housing need of applicants and explain the bidding process. Customers have helped improve the quality of information. Information for applicants is satisfactory and is currently being developed through 'your home your neighbourhood' guides. Links to mapping websites help applicants to see the location of a property before bidding (this should help to reduce the number of refusals). All registered applicants are contacted every six months to update circumstances. It is easy to apply for homes and customers understand how allocations are made.
- 197** New tenants are supported. The sign-up process identifies tenant profile information and explains what an 'introductory tenancy' is and how it progresses to a secure tenancy. Salix provides furnished tenancies and packages where needed. Tenants get the help they need to help settle in their new homes. The previous section on managing empty homes confirmed that new tenants are supported moving into their homes. Customer satisfaction with the overall allocations process is high at 92 per cent (September 2009).
- 198** Salix encourages tenants under-occupying their homes to move to smaller accommodation. Estimated cost savings of running smaller properties are used as incentives, as well as covering removal costs, decorating and carpets. After benchmarking other ALMOs Salix decided not to offer cash incentives due to potential abuse. Since August 2007, 37 tenants have moved to smaller accommodation, releasing family homes to help meet high demand (further flexibility will be included in the new policy / CBL system from June 2010).

How good is the service?

- 199** Salix analyses lettings data and sets targets for access to housing by diverse groups. Lettings broadly reflect Salford's demographic profile. However, the overall target of 15 per cent lettings to BME applicants is exceeded (22 per cent to November 2010). Some groups are under and over-represented (Asian/Asian British and Chinese lettings are under-represented and Black/Black British lettings are over-represented). However, information from the analysis of lettings is not being used to ensure fair access to housing by all sections of the community. The current review of the allocations policy will address this.
- 200** There are some other weaknesses. Local lettings policies have not had robust equality impact assessments. A review was not undertaken until November 2009 and a tenancy sustainability strategy is due to be completed. The CBL procedure does not explain how overall equity and fairness of access to housing is monitored. This will be addressed in the revised policy.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 201** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. A corporate culture of value for money (VfM) is embedded. Salix understands its costs, the relationship with the quality of services and how it compares with other organisations. It focuses on improving the VfM of high cost/low quality services. Budget management is strong, and the approach to procurement is satisfactory. Salix make significant efficiency savings which are reinvested to improve key services. The cost of services compares poorly to other ALMOs and Salix is not fully sharing procurement with partners.

How do costs compare?

- 202** The quality of Salix's services compared to other ALMOs in 2008/09 is mixed. It compares well with SAP ratings; appointments as a percentage of repairs orders; average time complete repairs; and most areas of tenant satisfaction. Indicators showing the quality of services compares poorly in some key areas. This includes decent homes failure; priority repairs as a percentage of the total; average relet times; void rent loss; arrears as a percentage of rent due; and tenancy turnover. Positively, performance has improved in many of these areas during 2009/10. A clear understanding helps to identify areas for improvement.
- 203** The costs per property of services generally compares poorly with other ALMOs. Costs per property are high for housing management; resident involvement; repairs and void works; estate services; and office costs per employee. Central overheads per employee are the second highest in the ALMO group. Ranking is positive for the management cost per property of void works. Overheads as a percentage of direct costs have improved from being worst in the benchmarking group of 24 ALMOs in 2007/08 to 9th best. Average void repair costs reduced from £1,974 in November 2008 to £1,601 in November 2009 (compares to top ALMO performance 2008/09). Comparisons help to identify areas for improvement.

How is value for money managed?

- 204** The strategic approach is strong. VfM is enshrined in Salix's corporate objectives, business planning and its performance management framework. Salix has clear and robust plans for achieving VfM. The VfM strategy sets clear objectives and targets to achieve efficiencies. A robust action plan addresses weaknesses identified in the earlier inspection. The finance and audit committee, VfM champions and a VfM board provide scrutiny, challenge and direction.
- 205** A VfM culture is increasingly embedded in Salix. Staff and Board members are aware of the importance of VfM. Salix focuses on engaging employees through a programme of briefings and productivity targets in team plans. A VfM suggestion log on the intranet tracks all suggested savings. Staff suggestions have delivered £33,000 savings through, for example, the use of mobile telephones. Other feedback led to securing £22,000 external funding and annual savings of £33,000 for communal boilers. All parts of the organisation contribute to improving VfM.
- 206** Residents and contractors are proactively involved in VfM. Residents are involved procuring contractors and components, and in improving the quality and VfM of services through service specific panels (SSPs). A contractor uses its purchasing power to reduce the cost of asbestos removal by an estimated 25 per cent. The repair contractor invests in mobile working methods (including PDAs) to save £400,000 through dynamic scheduling and managing repairs in real-time. Foregoing annual price increases saves a notional £120,000 a year. Tenant satisfaction with the VfM of rent is 74 per cent in 2009 (above average for ALMOs in 2008/09).
- 207** Salix understand costs and how they compare to the quality of services. It benchmarks the cost and quality of services through a national benchmarking club, and particularly with peer group ALMOs. Managers routinely use benchmarking information to improve services. Salix focuses on tackling high cost and low quality services such as reviewing the repairs service, empty property management and caretaking services. This helps to make the best use of resources.
- 208** Salix addresses inefficiencies and targets re-investment to improve key services. Savings of £64,000 from customer access changes were reinvested in mobile technology to allow more home visits to customers. Salix reinvested savings to provide more benefit and debt advice for customers. Expenditure on customer-facing services has increased by £300,000 in 2009/10. In 2010/11 it will invest an additional £264,000 on a range of improvements including £15,000 for video handbooks, £20,000 on mobile surveillance equipment, and £40,000 on financial inclusion. Bids totalling £345,000 were not approved including £40,000 for new build business growth and £100,000 for re-investment in repairs. Salix tackles areas of inefficiency and re-directs savings to improve what customers want.

How good is the service?

- 209** Efficiency targets are reasonable. Efficiency targets are integrated with budgets, business and service plans. All efficiencies are recorded in a VfM and efficiency register. A revenue cost efficiency target of 3.3 per cent stretches the Council's 3 per cent target by £73,000. Salix made efficiencies of over £1 million (4.2 per cent) in 2008/09, exceeding the 3.8 per cent target. Managers identify further 5 per cent savings to re-invest in improving services. Planned efficiencies for teams and staff are made on an individual basis rather than as fixed percentages. Staff assess what they can contribute rather than have targets forced on them.
- 210** Budget and efficiency target setting is robust. Salix staff have VfM and budget management training and support. Managers are closely involved in setting and managing budgets, supported by finance staff. Monthly expenditure is closely monitored against ensuring that appropriate corrective action is taken where necessary. Overall expenditure is kept close to expected projections.
- 211** Service reviews deliver significant cost savings. A review of voids procedures reduced rent loss from 2.2 per cent in 2008/09 to 1.5 per cent at November 2009 (£190,000 additional rent income). The caretaking and cleaning service review saves £84,000 a year, gives £106,000 additional income and has improved resident satisfaction. Progress reviewing service level agreements (SLAs) is good and delivers savings and improved services. All SLAs have been reviewed or re-negotiated, reducing total costs by £261,000 since 2007/08. The in-house 1st Response Team won a competitive tender for the out-of-hours service, reducing costs by 64 per cent (£48,000 a year), as well as increasing customer satisfaction. Other savings with SLAs include £40,000 for ASB (as well as increasing capacity through the co-located team); £6,000 with the CBL SLA; and £12,000 with financial services. Efficiency savings help to improve services.
- 212** Better management is delivering significant efficiencies and savings. Other examples of efficiency savings include: possession claims online has reduced costs by an estimated £12,500 a year; £910 per property (6 per cent) through the GM Procure framework for decent homes work; and £100,000 a year combining Legionella, smoke detector, immersion heaters and gas servicing.
- 213** Salix attracts significant external funding. This includes funding of £3.7 million in 2009/10 from the new deal for communities for environmental works, and funding from the DECC¹ for photovoltaic cells. Salix has an initial allocation of £436,000 CESP² funding for further energy efficiency work. External funding increases resources to improve services.
- 214** The approach to procurement is satisfactory. Procurement decisions are objective using a transparent procurement framework. An up-to-date procurement strategy includes modern procurement methods. VfM, sustainability, equalities, resident consultation, probity and staff skills are all considered when procuring contracts and services. The strategy is supported by a robust action plan. Tenants are closely involved in selecting investment partners and other services. Re-procurement of a tracing agency for FTAs is expected to deliver a 60 per cent efficiency gain. Procurement delivers efficiency savings and improves services.

¹ DECC - The Department of Energy and Climate Change was created in October 2008, bringing together energy policy previously with BERR and Defra.

² CESP - Community Energy Saving Programme

- 215** Despite efficiencies Salix expenditure on response repairs is not reducing. Total budgets have increased from £6.4 million in 2008/9 to a forecast spend in 2009/10 of £6.5 million (budgets have increased by 4 per cent for 2010/11). Although the budget for 2009/10 includes £0.9 million for planned works, Salix cannot demonstrate that actual spend on response repairs is reducing.
- 216** Salix lacks a robust approach to VfM in its regeneration activities. It has established a VfM working group and has carried out some benchmarking on demolition and block improvement costs with Manchester City Council (costs were comparable). Other efficiencies have been produced through aligning neighbourhood management teams and private and public investment teams. However, Salix does not comprehensively compare its costs and practices with other pathfinder or regeneration areas.
- 217** Salix is not taking full advantage of shared service procurement with partners to deliver VfM. Shared procurement has successfully delivered efficiencies with legal services and Salix is exploring other shared procurement such as with auditing. The lack of integration between ICT systems is not making the best use of resources (new systems will address this).

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 218** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Salix has made significant progress improving services over a short period of time. Improvements deliver clear benefits for customers. A customer-focused culture helps vulnerable people. Efficiency savings are sustained over the last few years. Improvement with key performance indicators is generally good. Progress has been slower in some areas, such as ensuring that communal areas are DDA compliant, and with improving leasehold management and the adaptations service.
- 219** Salix has made significant improvement to services since it was formed in July 2007. A 'major change programme' and a robust inspection project plan focused improvement on customer facing services. Salix made good progress implementing all advice and assistance recommendations by the Audit Commission. The scale and pace of change has been considerable, particularly as many services improved from a low base. Salix has established a culture that values customers, strives to meet diverse needs and aims to deliver value for money. Services improve in line with what customers want.
- 220** Salix works with customers and partners to focus on the right things. More repairs are done on time, by appointment and at the first visit. Support and benefit advice helps new tenants and antisocial behaviour is tackled effectively. A comprehensive out-of-hour service covers ASB, repairs and domestic abuse. Staff are motivated and empowered to take responsibility to improve services. Almost 800 new customers have been involved with Salix. Involving customers is central to everything that Salix does.
- 221** Improvement delivers clear benefits for customers. It is easy to access services through improved office reception and website facilities. Salix understands the profile of its customers and increasingly contacts them in their preferred way. Salix was able to target help for vulnerable people during the recent extreme cold weather. Debt and welfare advice has secured £460,000 additional income for tenants. Support helps to reduce the number of tenancies failing in the first year and new tenants in rent arrears. Homes are improved to a high standard and are easier to heat. Salix works with partners to regenerate neighbourhoods. Customer satisfaction is increasing.
- 222** Other significant improvements include working closely with the Council to secure additional funding of £3.9 million for decent homes investment in 2010/11. Implementing the ICT strategy is helping to support better services for customers. Salix are committed to improving services and responded positively and quickly to address weaknesses during this inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 223** Salix has steadily improved the VfM of services, delivering efficiency savings. Efficiency targets have been exceeded and savings redirected to improve frontline services, such as employing a welfare benefits officer. Salix has made positive progress in reviewing, or renegotiating, all service level agreements with the Council. This has given 14 per cent efficiency savings and improved the quality of services.
- 224** Sustained improvement with key performance indicators (KPIs) is mostly positive. Most KPIs are on target and are improving. Performance against KPIs is detailed in Appendix 1. Performance in respect of overall tenant satisfaction, and satisfaction with individual service areas has improved steadily over the last three years. Performance has improved with average relet times, completing emergency and urgent repairs on time, keeping repair appointments, gas servicing, and rent collection. Salix focuses on improving performance with things that matter most to customers.
- 225** Improvement in performance has been weaker, or more recent, in some areas. This includes the percentage of telephone calls resolved at the first contact; percentage of rent lost from empty homes; reducing rent arrears; caretaking and cleaning, and performance addressing high levels of sickness absence.
- 226** Progress has been slower in some areas. The Council has not ensured steady and sustained improvement since the original ALMO was set up in 2004. It has not ensured that all communal areas are DDA compliant and that all service charges are de-pooled. Progress improving the aids and adaptation service has been recent. Progress by Salix has been slower improving feedback to customers, setting and monitoring measurable service standards and improving leasehold management.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 227** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Salix shows clear vision and leadership. It takes difficult decisions to improve key services for customers. Improvement planning and performance management are strong. Budget and risk management is robust. Salix is a learning organisation and seeks to continually improve. Plans are generally SMART¹ but projected outcomes lack measurable targets.
- 228** The Board gives clear strategic direction through robust business planning. The vision, objectives and values are clear. The Board engages staff, customers and stakeholders reviewing the annual business plan. Salix reviews and manages key risks with business plan priorities. A strong business plan assesses key business strengths, weaknesses and priorities to be addressed. Ensuring the financial viability of the business has become a higher priority in the 2010/11 business plan. A 'golden thread' through the business plan, individual action plans (IAPs), service action plans (SAPs) and directorate action plans (DAPs), ensures that all parts of the organisation work together to achieve corporate objectives.

¹ SMART - an improvement plan with action that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced, Timebound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 229** Salix is self aware and understands where further improvement is needed. Improvement plans include action to address most weaknesses identified in this report. Key areas include leasehold management, caretaking and security services, developing and integrating ICT systems, and continuing to improve the provision of aids and adaptations. Service standards are being reviewed with customers, and Salix has implemented direct calls to the ASB team rather than going through Salix Direct. Choice-based lettings procedures will improve through text bidding. The new ICT system from summer 2010 will support further improvement. Salix plans to centralise the collection of service charges, FTAs and rechargeable repairs to improve performance. Salix prioritises work to reflect organisational needs and customer preferences.
- 230** Improvement plans are effectively managed through the STEM (steps to excellence management) system. Actions are clearly linked to corporate objectives and the risk register. A comprehensive spreadsheet tracks progress (red/amber/green), by directorate and service area. The database shows outstanding items. Managers explain reasons for delay and any action that they are taking. Evidence is attached through hyperlinks. Salix reports on progress to a monthly joint business manager and EMT meeting, and regularly to the performance committee, Board and council scrutiny committee. Robust control ensures that improvements are delivered.
- 231** Visible leadership by the Board and executive team provides clear direction. Salix takes difficult decisions, such as reviewing caretaking services to both improve services and make savings. Salix promotes a strong brand, the 'Salix Way' that is recognised by customers. Managers are approachable and listen to staff. 'Ask the chief' questions are well used and queries are responded to within 48 hours. Clear change management procedures ensure that staff are involved at an early stage, and have the opportunity to influence new structures and procedures.
- 232** Performance management is very strong. Salix involves customers in selecting KPIs (and targets within new SLAs) to ensure that they are measuring the right things. Most targets are realistic and challenging. A balanced scorecard shows performance against corporate objectives including VfM measures (budget variance percentages and cashable savings). Performance is monitored regularly at the appropriate level and intervals. Reports show performance implementing plans and SLAs, as well as with a suite of KPIs. Overdue tasks and weak performance is explained (for example for recent delays implementing mobile working and with the cleaner greener team). Reports shows trends, comparison with last year and top ALMO performance, and give a traffic light assessment. Performance information is published and is reported to customers. Performance is monitored with customers on estate walkabouts and by tenant inspectors. The Board is well informed, customers provide challenge and Salix focuses attention on the right things.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 233** Salix tackles poor performance. Weak performance dealing with calls at the first point of contact is being addressed by giving call centre staff access to diaries (to make appointments for staff). A review into low satisfaction with complaints identified problems with complaints handling and the timeliness of information. Procedures were amended and Salix now keep customers advised of progress on the first day, after five days and ten days. Satisfaction with the timeliness of information improved from 36 per cent to 66 per cent, and with complaints handling from 49 per cent to 58 per cent.
- 234** Financial management and budget monitoring is sound. Strong financial management is supported by the external annual audit letter. Financial planning and service improvement are integrated. Improvement plans inform financial plans and EMT monitors both together. A schedule of VfM and service reviews is prioritised, and focuses on key customer services. Managers are closely involved in budget setting and receive close support from finance staff to monitor and manage budgets. Monthly expenditure is closely monitored against budget targets and is scrutinised by EMT, the finance and audit committee and by the Council. Timely reports ensure that appropriate corrective action is taken.
- 235** Salix challenges charges to the housing revenue account (HRA). Central recharges are open and transparent. This helps to ensure that inappropriate expenditure is not charged to the HRA, and that overall tenants only pay for services they receive.
- 236** Risk management is sound. Risks are carefully monitored and managed through a risk management strategy. Risks are kept under regular review - the Board reviewed strategic risks in October 2009. Risks to the organisation are managed effectively.
- 237** Salix continually improves services and learns from others. Salix is a member of networks, good practice groups and benchmarking clubs. It routinely benchmarks the costs and quality of services against other ALMOs. Benchmarking is tracked through the benchmarking register and is reported quarterly to the VfM project board. Salix adopts good practice such as with the caretaking review. Salix has shared its own successful initiatives, such as the customer senate, with other housing providers. Quality accreditation has been recognised through the customer service excellence award and investors in people (IIP).
- 238** There are some weaknesses with how Salix manages performance.
- Strategies are robust and plans are SMART, however they lack measurable outcomes for customers. Without this the organisation and customers are not clear about the potential impact of plans.
 - Website reporting of performance against service standards is weak.
 - Salix is not reporting on performance with key partners and agencies it works with.
 - The programme for mystery shopping is not robust. Arrangements are inconsistent. Salix is reviewing procedures in line with the review of services standards to ensure that performance is monitored for all service standards.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 239** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Governance is strong. Staff are committed and are led by an effective management team. Strong relationships with key partners and the Council increases capacity and makes good use of resources. Human resources provide strong support and training for staff. However, sickness absence is high and ICT systems are not yet fully supporting services.
- 240** Governance is sound and the Board has the necessary skills to direct improvement. Members understand their roles and are knowledgeable and challenging. The Board meets every eight weeks and has a clear programme of business for the year. Meetings are well attended and are open to the public (although few attend). Roles and responsibilities are clear. One of two annual Board away days keeps arrangements under review. A thorough governance review informed the 'excellent governance action plan'. Salix uses co-optees to add capacity on subcommittees and help with succession planning. Strong governance delivers improved services.
- 241** The Board is supported to help it direct the organisation effectively. All Board members have 360 degree appraisals and a tailored training programme. Induction training is provided for new Board members. Board members have influenced the style of reports and information they received to enable them to make effective decisions. Reports are timely and are available electronically or in hard copy. A professional relationship exists between the Board and senior staff. Customers are engaged strategically in scrutiny and consultation on services, performance and business planning.
- 242** The executive and senior management teams have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to ensure that key issues are tackled effectively. Managers and staff are empowered to take responsibility to improve and deliver services. Restructuring has re-directed resources to customer facing services, including debt and benefit advice and the 1st Response Team. Staff are professional, enthusiastic and committed to improving services. A strong customer focus is embedded in Salix, demonstrated by its exemplary approach to helping vulnerable people during recent cold weather.
- 243** Relationships between Salix and the Council are positive. There is mutual trust and effective joint working. Senior council officers and members understand the key issues for Salix. Roles and responsibilities are clear. Regular liaison and performance monitoring at both strategic and operational levels ensures that key issues are tackled. Greater trust has led to more open discussions and challenge to SLAs. Negotiations have led to an additional £300,000 for aids and adaptations, and charges for ASB services have reduced by 35 per cent (£60,000). Co-location of teams provides added value. An additional 4 per cent for the 2010/11 repairs budget was agreed after an opening position of no change. The relationship demonstrates the right balance between ensuring good performance and allowing Salix to get on with the job.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 244** Salix's strategic role in the area is increasingly influential. Senior officers are members of key strategic groups including the Local Strategic Partnership. Strong partnership within the MSP¹ has attracted additional resources for regeneration and help in building community capacity. Joint project working with the Urban Regeneration Company influenced the change in direction from widespread clearance to a balance of redevelopment and improvement. Salix works with range of partners to improve services, for example dealing with domestic abuse, hate crime and providing support for victims. Salix works closely with the Council and other partners to mitigate the impact of the recession. Effective joint working increases capacity.
- 245** Salix keeps the Council and partners informed about progress with regeneration work. The Council receives regular reports about spend compared to budget and performance with a range of indicators. Monthly progress reports, presentations and tours with the pathfinder committee and Board members ensure that all partners are kept up-to-date. The Council has confidence in the ability of Salix Homes and sees a continuing role for the ALMO in future regeneration work.
- 246** Salix has very positive open relationships with investment partners. Partnership working is better than with many other housing providers that they work with. Salix and contractors work together to share ideas and improve services. Two contractors have shared staff resources. Joint equality and diversity training has been provided with contractor and Salix staff. Salix and partners learn from, and adopt good practice.
- 247** Salix works closely with local communities. All staff are entitled to six WIN days a year with pay to engage with community projects. Staff work in teams on 'walkabouts' within the community on neighbourhood days. Salix works with partners to improve training and employment opportunities for the long-term unemployed. All investment partners have taken on apprentices (around 15 at present) and one contractor employs 80 per cent local labour. They participate in other initiatives including B4 Box, enabling ten apprentices to obtain qualifications. B4 Box is currently refurbishing six homes. Apprentices in a local garage help to service contractors' vans. Salix helps to sustain local communities.
- 248** Financial capacity is generally sound but there are some key risks over the next few years. The Council is confident about Salix's financial management and it has delivered its efficiency targets. The Pendleton PFI and reduction in regeneration funding will have a major impact on the financial business plan. Salix understand the potential risks from the transfer of around 2,000 homes in April 2011. It has established a project board to assess and mitigate the potential impact of risks. Not securing ALMO funding for decent homes work is also a key risk, and Salix is working with the Council to mitigate this. Salix is looking at a range of ways to develop business opportunities. Opportunities include providing services on behalf of the PFI, managing other housing association stock in the area, and working with other ALMOs to share services. Salix will manage some new build stock currently being developed by the Council. The Council seeks innovative ways to increase resources and is exploring self-financing arrangements to protect planned investment programmes in 2010/11.

¹ MSP - Manchester Salford Partnership

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 249** Human Resource management is strong. Salix supports staff through the workforce development strategy. The appraisal system is centrally monitored and is generally robust. Annual appraisals are competency based and IAPs are linked to service and departmental action plans. All staff have an annual 360 degree appraisal which measures performance against individual objectives and core competencies. All staff have monthly 1:1 meetings with their manager. Employees are recognised through employee of the month awards and an annual Salix Stars Event. Bonuses up to 10 per cent of salary are paid to staff who perform exceptionally well. Rewards of £50 and £100 vouchers are given for good performance, based on personal targets and competencies. Staff are supported and encouraged to improve services.
- 250** Salix supports and develops staff. Salix Academy provides a wide range of vocational, professional, skills based and mandatory training that is tailored to individual requirements picked up during appraisals. In partnership with Salford City College front line staff obtain a NVQ level two qualification 'Salix Way'. Salix provides health and wellbeing initiatives such as health MOTs and team building events. A high take-up (96 per cent) of the health scheme is complemented by 30 per cent of staff taking up a higher level of cover. Salix estimate that savings on optical and physiotherapy costs cover its contribution to the scheme. Over 82 per cent of staff are satisfied with Salix as a place to work compared to 76 per cent in 2007, and 85 per cent feel that Salix invests in staff to develop and empower them (69 per cent in 2007).
- 251** Communication with staff is effective. The staff 'insights group' helped to address initial staff concerns with new offices (such as car parking and kitchen facilitates). It has developed into a formal staff consultative group. The group represents most parts of Salix. Staff are also involved through consultation days and 'ask the chief' opportunities. A monthly staff newsletter, the Salix Way and a monthly 'Team Salix' briefing brings all staff together for key messages. The IIP accreditation noted the strengths of staff engagement and empowerment. Staff are well informed and this helps then to deliver sustained improvement.
- 252** Sickness absence is managed robustly and staff receive appropriate support. Sickness absence is high at 12.5 days (benchmark average 9.7 days). Most absence is due to long-term sickness. Cases are proactively managed through a comprehensive attendance management policy, performance clinics and the health and wellbeing initiatives. However, sickness absence reduces Salix's capacity.
- 253** Salix is building capacity through a new ICT system in 2010/11. The asset management system has already been set up and will integrate with other systems by summer 2010.
- 254** Salix takes action to tackle under representation in the workforce by some sections of the community. However, turnover is low and Salix aims to retain existing staff through secondment and promotion. This limits opportunities to tackle imbalances. Salix take on apprentices from harder to reach groups, such as long-term unemployed and ex-offenders. The percentage of younger people employed by Salix has increased from zero to 7 per cent since 2007. Salix provides eight employment and training placements and eight modern apprentices (four now have permanent positions). The percentage of staff with disabilities is still below target, but has increased to 5 per cent and people from BME communities to 7 per cent.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 255** The Board recognises that its appraisal system and succession planning is underdeveloped. Existing appraisal and 360 degree feedback is quite basic. Salix uses a full complement of nine co-optees to four sub committees. However, there is no formal succession plan to address identified skills gaps (such as legal experience), under-representation of diverse groups, or to develop members' skills to take on future chairing responsibilities.
- 256** The staff survey highlights some weaknesses. Only 40 per cent agreed that Salix has effective IT Systems (Salix ensures that frontline staff are involved in workshops developing the new system). Only 63 per cent felt that 'managers are strong and positive role models', although 87 per cent felt that 'managers are visible and accessible to all staff'. Response to the staff survey was low by some teams (38 per cent of the cleaner greener team, 43 per cent of safer neighbourhoods and 42 per cent of maintenance staff). Salix has an action plan to address weaknesses. Results can be analysed by gender and area of work, but not currently by other diversity strands or by organisational grade. Salix is considering options to enable such analysis, while protecting anonymity.
- 257** The quality of individual performance plans varies and appraisals lack detail about how staff perform against targets. A large proportion of appraisals were not signed or dated. Salix recognise these inconsistencies and are addressing them.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator (former BVPI ref)	Salford 2006/07	Salix 2007/08	Salix 2008/09	Salix 2009/10 Quarter 3 (un-audited)	Top 25% Met ALMOs 2008/09 (benchmark)
63 Average SAP rating	66	72	74	n/a	72
66a Percentage rent collected	96.67	96.99	97.01	96.79	98.2
Percentage rent collected (excluding arrears brought forward)	n/a	99.70	99.81	100.34	100.8
72 Percentage urgent repairs completed on time	99.0	98.7	99.4	99.5	98.6
73 Average time taken to complete non-urgent repairs	11.2	9.4	7.5	7.2	6.95
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	78	80	80.7	81.4	80.7
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP/views taken into account	60.1	n/a	64.1	64.7	64
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	53	49.6	54.5	n/a	5.2
185 Percentage of repairs appointments made and kept	n/a	88.1	89.3	94.0	98.7
212 Average relet time (days)	40	54	48	24	27.8
% properties with a valid gas safety certificate	n/a	89.6	99.7	100	99.9

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 Before going on site we reviewed the documents included on our standard document request list and a number of additional documents which the ALMO and stakeholders felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.
- 2 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. This included interviews and focus groups with a range of people including tenants, leaseholders, a range of staff, Board members, key staff and councillors from the Council and partners.
- 3 Reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service, and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - visits to estates, empty (void) properties, office reception areas and schemes where improvement work had been undertaken;
 - observation of a Board meeting, tenancy sign-up and the customer contact centre; and
 - file checks and mystery shopping of services and the website.

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)

Using tenant profile information to support vulnerable people

- 1 Salix Homes used customer profile information to support vulnerable people during extreme cold weather. Salix used profile information to telephone all older and vulnerable people to see if they needed help. Staff gave up their own time and reprioritised work to focus on providing support. Staff with four-wheel drive vehicles visited people and arranged to pick up prescriptions, issue blankets, and provide additional heating and food. Staff ensured that offices and the contact centre stayed open, and worked out-of-hours, including the weekend. Feedback has been very positive from customers, the Council and partners. This demonstrates a commitment to helping vulnerable people is embedded in Salix.

Customer Senate

- 2 The views, aspirations and priorities of customers, are at the heart of how Salix Homes behaves and performs. The Customer Senate enables real scrutiny and accountability of the organisation and its services. The Senate plays a key part in the governance structure. It works with the Board, Executive Management Team, officers and stakeholders, and is accountable to the wider customer body. It is allowed open access to performance information, staff and partners. The Senate scrutinises and recommends improvements to services offered by Salix Homes. The structure ensures that customers are measuring, testing and monitoring the services they receive.

Approach to energy efficiency

- 3 Salix Homes takes a proactive and innovative approach to energy efficiency, and understands the impact housing can have on climate change. A retrofit pilot project on solid wall properties improves energy efficiency and helps residents to understand how to conserve heating. Salix is also piloting the use of photovoltaic cells on three tower blocks. It has secured over £5.5 million in external funding including £5.1 million inward investment through the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) and a bid for ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) funding.

Gas servicing

- 4 Salix Homes uses the powers within the Housing Act 2004 under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System to gain access to service gas appliances. This has reduced timescales to gain entry and allows access to be gained prior to the expiry of the safety certificate, ensuring customer safety. As a result Salix has achieved 100 per cent valid gas safety certificates for properties with a gas supply.

1st Response Team

- 5 The 1st Response Team delivers Salix Homes' out-of-hours services. It is also the first contact point for customers reporting antisocial behaviour, hate crime and domestic abuse. The 1st Response Team attend customers' homes, in high rise blocks, to witness nuisance and antisocial behaviour, out-of-hours. Where appropriate the 1st Response Officer will issue a tenancy warning and initiate a formal antisocial behaviour case.

Co-Located Teams

- 6 In November 2007 Salford City Council commissioned a 'spotlight' review of the way agencies worked together in the Ordsall and Langworthy areas. Partners were concerned by high levels of antisocial behaviour, vehicle crime and a public services regime that was not effectively meeting the needs of local people.
- 7 The review led to the establishment of the co-located team managed by Salix Homes, and including Police, council and other agency representation. Joint tasking and operational coordination takes place every two weeks. The team's performance and actions are monitored and maintained via an action tracker which also includes information as to how the Local Area Agreement and Community Action Plan objectives are being met.

Regeneration ALMO – integration of regeneration

- 8 Salix Homes has taken an innovative approach to regeneration. In developing its neighbourhood profiles and blueprints, it ensures that the Housing Market Renewal work within the private sector stock is fully integrated with improvements to council owned homes. It works closely with residents across all tenures and helps to improve neighbourhoods by coordinating action with local partners. Neighbourhoods have improved and are more sustainable.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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