

# Rykneild

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# Homes

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North East Derbyshire District Council

May 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](http://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).

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# Summary

- 1 Services inspected at Rykneld Homes are 'good' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services have a number of strengths. Frontline staff are providing effective customer care, written information for residents is of a high standard and the website is also enhancing access. Complaints processing is generally robust. The approach to identifying and addressing the vulnerability of individual customers is also strong.
- 3 There is a strong focus on achieving the decent homes standard and a programme of works agreed with residents is being effectively delivered. The programme is also well linked to the provision of aids and adaptations. Performance on completing repairs in timescales is very strong and a customer focused repairs appointment system is in place. Performance on completing gas servicing in timescales is strong and processes are comprehensive. Empty properties are being repaired to reasonable standards and a backlog of works has recently been cleared. The housing application and bidding process is well managed with housing applicants being housed within reasonable timescales and a customer focused viewing and sign up process.
- 4 Performance on minimising rent arrears compares well and partnership working is ensuring that residents receive timely welfare benefit and debt advice and access to housing benefits. A clear, well promoted resident involvement structure is allowing residents to become involved at a level which suits them and is producing positive outcomes. There is effective partnership working in tackling antisocial behaviour and enforcement action is being taken regularly and appropriately. There is a well developed approach to monitoring the quality of the environment including an effective estate inspection process. Leaseholder services are easy to access and well managed. Services provided under a Supporting People contract are of a reasonable standard and there is a positive approach to support planning for all residents receiving housing support. There is a strong corporate approach to value for money including effective identification and addressing of value for money issues with significant savings having been delivered.
- 5 However, there are some weaknesses. Local office facilities are of a variable standard and performance on telephone answering and responding to correspondence is inconsistent. Accessibility of sheltered housing schemes and other residential communal areas has also not been adequately addressed and customer profiling is underdeveloped. Financial inclusion activities are still underdeveloped and communication with partners to prevent evictions is underdeveloped. Mediation is not being effectively used to deal with neighbour disputes and support for customers reporting antisocial behaviour outside of standard hours is limited. Service standards for estate service are underdeveloped. There are still inconsistencies in the way that tenants are charged for supported housing services and some supported housing facilities are out of date.

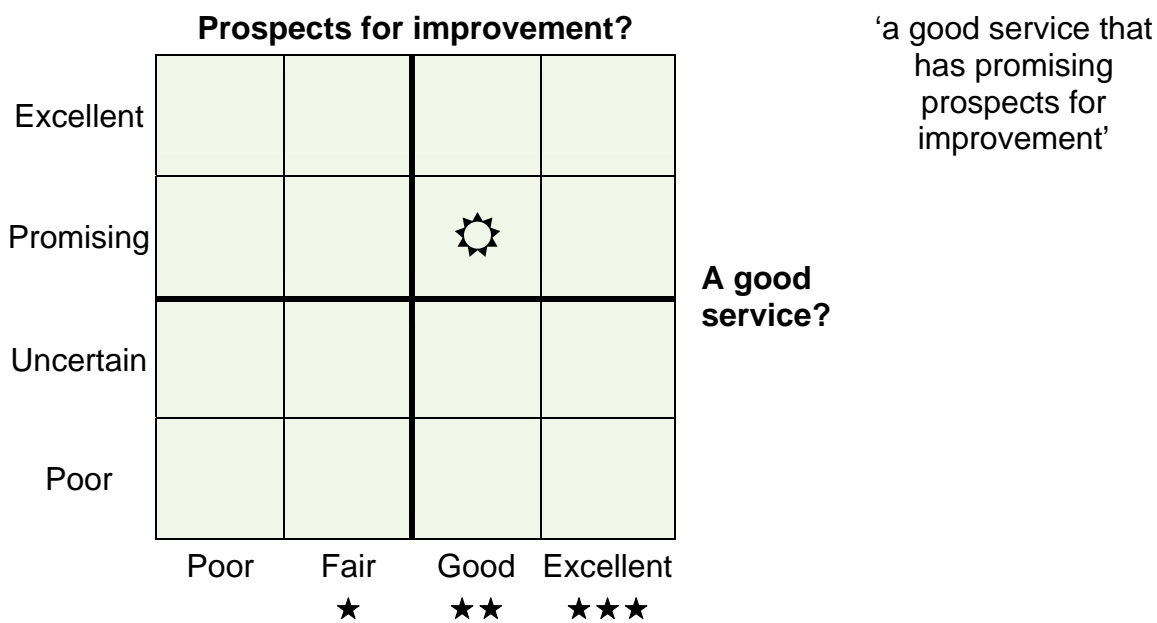
## Summary

- 6 The overall level of stock condition information is relatively low, customer care has not been comprehensive in some areas of major works delivery and asbestos information is not being effectively shared with residents. Performance on the time taken to re-let empty properties, until very recently, has been poor. There are significant delays in delivering major aids and adaptations and performance on delivery of minor adaptations is mixed. The approach to dealing with under-occupation is not comprehensive and mutual exchanges are not being effectively promoted.
- 7 Prospects for improvement are 'promising'. Performance indicators overall show a positive direction of travel and progress against improvement plans is also strong. A track record of improvement is demonstrated in a range of service areas. There is a clear hierarchy of plans in place, an effective approach to improvement planning including partnership working and planned improvements focus on key issues for the service. There is a strong approach to performance reporting and effective performance management arrangements for staff. The Board and Senior Management team demonstrate the skills and capacity to oversee the running of the business. Partnership working and procurement is increasing capacity and there is a pro-active approach to seeking additional funding to deliver improvements. The Human Resources strategy is delivering significant improvements including an effective approach to training, and information technology is effectively supporting service delivery.
- 8 However, progress in improving some services has been slow, there are still some weaknesses in performance management and some plans and strategies are underdeveloped. In addition, average sickness days per employee are still too high, the last staff satisfaction survey showed mixed results and has not been repeated to assess progress and capacity to improve the aids and adaptation service is limited.

# Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- frontline staff are providing effective customer care, written information for residents is of a high standard, the website is also enhancing access and complaints processing is generally robust;
  - there is strong strategic approach to diversity and equality with effective partnership working, good use of Equality Impact Assessments and a proactive approach to managing equality and diversity issues among contractors;
  - the approach to identifying and addressing the vulnerability of individual customers is also strong and adult and child safeguarding issues are well promoted;

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Scoring the service

- there is a strong focus on achieving the decent homes standard and a programme of works agreed with residents is being effectively delivered including comprehensive customer choice in the major works process, strong resident liaison and satisfaction with works is very high;
- programmes for cyclical decorations, solid fuel servicing and electrical testing are being delivered effectively;
- performance on completing repairs in timescales is very strong, a customer focused repairs appointment system is being effectively delivered and there is a high level of satisfaction with the service;
- works to empty properties are being delivered to an agreed lettable standard and resident satisfaction is relatively high;
- performance on completing gas servicing in timescales is strong, the importance of gas safety is well publicised and there are effective arrangements to encourage residents to provide access;
- a variety of methods are being used to publicise the aids and adaptation service, there are effective links between the aids and adaptations process and the decent homes programme, and there is a focus on making best use of adapted properties;
- performance on arrears recovery is strong and partnership working is ensuring that residents receive timely welfare benefit and debt advice and access to housing benefits;
- there is a clear, well promoted involvement structure which allows residents to become involved at a level which suits them and there are a range of positive outcomes from resident involvement;
- there is effective partnership working in tackling antisocial behaviour and enforcement action is being taken appropriately and case management is robust;
- there is a well developed approach to monitoring the quality of the environment including an effective estate inspection process and resident satisfaction with neighbourhoods is also high;
- the Right to Buy is well publicised, applications are being effectively processed and leaseholder services are easy to access and well managed;
- the housing application and bidding process is well managed and housing applicants are being housed within reasonable timescales;
- the viewing and sign up process is comprehensive and customer focused and satisfaction with the housing application and lettings process is high;
- there is a positive approach to support planning for all residents receiving housing support and levels of satisfaction with both the Carecall service and Community Warden Service are high; and
- there is a strong corporate approach to value for money including effective identification and addressing of value for money issues with significant efficiencies having been delivered with benchmarking shows positive performance on costs in a large number of service areas.

- 11 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the quality of local offices is mixed and performance on telephone answering and responding to correspondence is inconsistent;
  - some elements of the approach to service standards, measuring satisfaction and monitoring performance on access are underdeveloped;
  - the accessibility of sheltered housing schemes and other residential communal areas has also not been adequately addressed;
  - customer profiling is underdeveloped and neither the Board or staff team reflects the profile of the local community;
  - the overall level of stock condition information is relatively low and there are some gaps in customer care in the delivery of major works;
  - asbestos information is not being effectively shared with residents;
  - there are significant delays in delivering major aids and adaptations, performance on delivery of minor adaptations is mixed and some aspects of joint working with Social Services are underdeveloped;
  - financial inclusion activities are not comprehensive, communication with partners to deal with and prevent evictions is underdeveloped, and some information provided to residents during rent collection is misleading and not comprehensive;
  - mediation is not being effectively used to assist in dealing with neighbour disputes and support to customers reporting antisocial behaviour outside of standard hours is limited, 'hotspot' analysis of antisocial behaviour is also underdeveloped;
  - performance on the average re-let time for empty properties has until very recently been weak, the approach to under-occupation is not comprehensive and there is not an effective process to promote and maximise the impact of mutual exchanges;
  - there are inconsistencies in the way that tenants are charged for supported housing services, some supported housing facilities are out of date and some performance indicators for the supported housing services show mixed performance; and
  - costs in some areas are still above average and reporting of unit costs is not comprehensive.
- 12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- performance indicators overall show a positive direction of travel and progress against improvement plans is also strong;
  - there are a range of areas where the track record of improvement is strong;
  - there is an effective approach to improvement planning and planned improvements focus on key issues for the service;
  - there is strong partnership working on developing improvements;
  - there is a comprehensive approach to performance reporting and effective performance management arrangements for staff;

## Scoring the service

- the Board and Senior Management Team demonstrate the skills and capacity to oversee the running of the business;
- partnership working and procurement is increasing capacity and there is a pro-active approach in seeking funding to deliver improvements; and
- the human resources strategy is delivering significant improvements including an effective approach to training, and information technology is effectively supporting service delivery.

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

- the track record of improvement is mixed in some areas;
- there are some weaknesses in performance management and some plans and strategies are underdeveloped;
- average sickness days per employee are still too high;
- the last staff satisfaction survey showed mixed results and has not been repeated to assess progress; and
- capacity to improve the aids and adaptation service is limited.

# Recommendations

- 14 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 costs<sup>2</sup> 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 Improve customer care and access to services by:

- ensuring that local offices are of a consistently high standard and that facilities are customer focused;
- ensuring that telephone answering and responding to correspondence is carried out promptly and effectively across all service areas;
- ensuring that all reasonable adjustments are made to sheltered housing schemes and other residential communal areas to maximise accessibility;
- further develop the level of customer profiling information and using it to tailor services to individual needs;
- addressing the gaps in customer care in the delivery of major works;
- ensuring asbestos information is shared with residents;
- working with partners to reduce delays in delivering aids and adaptations and ensuring that joint working with Social Services is comprehensive;
- the Council reviewing the level of resources required to deliver an effective aids and adaptation service;
- addressing areas of underperformance in supported housing services;
- further developing financial inclusion activities;
- ensuring timely communication with partners to deal with and where possible prevent evictions;
- ensuring information provided to residents during rent collection is clear and comprehensive;
- developing and using effective mediation services to assist in dealing with neighbour disputes; and
- ensuring that there is comprehensive support to customers reporting antisocial behaviour outside of standard hours.

<sup>2</sup> 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 benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction; and
- improved access to services.

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

### Recommendation

**R2** Improve use of homes and value for money by;

- ensuring that empty properties are quickly repaired and relet including developing a comprehensive approach to hard-to-let homes;
- developing a comprehensive approach to addressing under-occupation;
- promoting and maximising the impact of mutual exchanges;
- developing a comprehensive approach to analysing lettings trends to inform management of the service;
- addressing service areas where there are indications of weaker value for money;
- delivering plans to resolve inconsistencies in the way that tenants are charged for supported housing services and working partnership with the Council to deliver a equitable and transparent approach to service charges for all residents; and
- working in partnership with the Council to address out of date supported housing facilities.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased income for the organisation;
- improved facilities for residents;
- increasing mobility for residents; and
- freeing up additional resources to address key priorities.

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

### Recommendation

#### **R3** Improve planning and performance management by:

- ensuring that there is a comprehensive and customer focused approach to measuring service standards, obtaining robust satisfaction information and monitoring performance on access;
- developing the level of stock condition information to increase confidence in the planning of future investment;
- working to ensure that the Board and staff team reflects the profile of the local community;
- developing antisocial 'hotspot' analysis to inform planned interventions;
- ensuring the improvement is comprehensive across all service areas;
- addressing the weaknesses identified in performance management and the areas where plans and strategies are underdeveloped;
- reduce the average sickness days per employee;
- survey staff satisfaction and attitudes to assess progress and use the results to inform improvement planning; and
- work in partnership with the Council to improve capacity to deliver improvement in aids and adaptation services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved performance;
- better targeting of resources;
- improved performance management; and
- increased capacity.

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

- 15** We would like to thank the staff of Rykneld Homes and North East Derbyshire District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 8 February to 19 February 2010.

# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 16 North East Derbyshire is a rural district in Derbyshire in the East Midlands, close to the major city of Sheffield, and covering the heart of the former North Derbyshire coalfield. The main towns in the district are Clay Cross, Dronfield, Eckington and Killamarsh.
- 17 The population is around 98,000 and is older when compared to national averages. Population growth over the next decade is expected to be much lower than average, whilst the growth in the older population is expected to be above average. The ethnic origin of the majority of the population is white British with only 1.1 per cent from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.
- 18 The level of deprivation is mixed with some wealthier areas developing in recent years but with areas of significant deprivation remaining. Formerly an area of traditional industry, employment in manufacturing, construction and public services is now high, and tourism related industries also feature. Overall, unemployment is lower than average and the population are generally qualified to a higher level than the national average, and earnings are between the regional and national average. House prices in the district are generally below average. The health of people in the district is generally better than average, however there are inequalities within the area by gender and level of deprivation.

### The Council

- 19 There are 53 elected Councillors representing the 25 wards in North East Derbyshire. There are currently 10 Conservatives, 27 Labour, 9 Liberal Democrats and 7 Independents.
- 20 In its Comprehensive Area Assessment report in December 2009, the Commission said that, overall, North East Derbyshire District Council performs adequately. This is in terms of both managing performance and in its use of resources.

### The service

- 21 The Council established an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Rykneld Homes (RHL) on the 1 April 2007. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to 8,193 tenanted homes and provides services to 71 leaseholders. The organisation also supports 2,444 households through a Community Warden and Care Call service which includes some housing association and private sector residents. Services to 1,339 of these customers are funded through a Supporting People contract with the County Council. There are two sheltered housing schemes.

- 22 It receives a management fee for this service which was £10.4 million in 2009/10. In addition it manages the Council's capital programme budget for housing works which was £7 million in 2009/10.
- 23 The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:
- tenant consultation/involvement;
  - tenancy and estate management (incl. under-occupation and caretaking);
  - responsibilities and procedures for dealing with actual antisocial behaviour incidents;
  - cleaning communal areas;
  - voids management and lettings;
  - revenue collection – rent/rechargeable repairs (including rent collection and rent arrears);
  - Care Call and warden services – Council tenants and private residents, including the delivery of housing related support services;
  - management and procurement of responsive repairs;
  - planned maintenance and capital investment programme, including adaptations – Council housing stock;
  - leasehold management; and
  - public sector adaptations services.
- 24 The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
  - determining policies on lettings and antisocial behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
  - managing the Supporting People programme;
  - homelessness, general housing advice; and
  - administering the Housing Register.
- 25 The ALMO is managed by a Board that is made up of five tenants or leaseholders, five Council nominees and five independents. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team, headed by a Chief Executive.
- 26 Housing services have not been inspected since late 2006 when we inspected Housing Repairs and judged it to be a poor, zero star service with promising prospects for improvement. We published our report in December 2007. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of what we said then.
- 27 If the standards of service provided by Rykneld Homes meet Government criteria, the Council will become eligible to receive additional Supported Borrowing to help it improve all its homes to the government's decent homes Standard.

# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28 North East Derbyshire DC has worked with local people and agreed five ambitions to enable it to deliver its long-term vision for the District. These are:
- safe, healthy and respectful communities;
  - a thriving local economy;
  - clean, green and attractive environment;
  - decent and affordable homes for local people; and
  - excellent service, high performance and value for money.
- 29 Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire have a joint Local Strategic Partnership (CHART), of which Rykneld Homes is an Executive member. CHART's Sustainable Communities Strategy is driven by these particular concerns:
- industrial decline has left pockets of high deprivation, with impacts on people's life chances, housing and health;
  - access to employment and services is a problem due to low car ownership and the dispersed nature of settlements;
  - considerable difference in health and life expectancy between different parts of the area, with more older people, more people with disabilities and more unpaid carers than the national average;
  - gaps in workforce skills and lack of qualifications; and
  - despite falling levels of crime, crime and fear of crime, including antisocial behaviour remain major concerns.
- 30 Rykneld Homes' vision is:
- To make a real difference to the lives of our tenants and the communities they live in.**
- 31 Its mission is to provide excellent services that meet people's needs. The ALMO's strategic aims are:
- to sustain and regenerate North East Derbyshire's local communities through neighbourhood management, and involving customers in decisions affecting their quality of life;
  - to successfully manage, maintain and improve, the Council's homes and surrounding environment; and
  - to be an efficient and effective organisation which provides value for money in the way it conducts its business.

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

**Access and customer care**

- 32** In 2007, we found that strengths balanced weaknesses. There had been a corporate focus on improving access and telephone repair reporting had improved, as had the approach to consulting tenants about service developments. There was insufficient customer focus, however, with repairs cancelled without tenants' knowledge and an ineffective appointments system.
- 33** In this inspection, we still found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Local offices are well located and offer an appropriate range of services. Frontline staff are providing effective customer care, written information for residents is of a high standard and the website is also enhancing access. Complaints processing is generally robust. However, there are still some weaknesses in the local office facilities and performance on telephone answering and responding to correspondence is inconsistent. Some elements of the approach to service standards, measuring satisfaction and monitoring performance on access are also underdeveloped. The accessibility of sheltered housing schemes and other residential communal areas has also not been adequately addressed.
- 34** Local offices are well located, generally accessible and offer an appropriate range of services. There has been a strategic assessment of local offices including consultation with customers which is being used to develop the approach to access across the district. This supported the provision of office based face to face services in a number of areas. There are five well located local access points, two of which are located in 'one-stop shops' which also provide a range of Council services. Offices comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and opening hours meet customer needs. This is helping ensure there are appropriate locally based services available to residents.
- 35** However, front line facilities are not always customer focused. The condition of the ALMO's own three local offices is poor because there has been only limited investment, pending two moving to modern buildings and one being extensively refurbished by April 2010. In addition, there has been a policy of erecting glass partitions in all reception areas and interview rooms which does not create a welcoming environment and customers have been required to use a freephone in reception areas to report repairs because staff have been unable to order the work direct from reception desks. Although both of these issues were immediately addressed in response to our feedback, these weaknesses mean offices were not providing a consistently high standard of service.

## How good is the service?

- 36** Telephone accessibility is inconsistent. Rykneld Homes contracts this service to the Council's contact centre, which provides a freephone telephone number and takes both general enquiries and repairs between 8am-8pm on weekdays and on Saturday mornings. Performance in handling many calls is reasonable, with 81 per cent answered in 20 seconds and 86 per cent being dealt with at the first point of contact. However, the average call answering time between April 2009 and January 2010 was 39 seconds and there were some very long delays at particular times. Also, although performance improved slightly as the year progressed, the level of abandoned calls was relatively high, at 8.4 per cent. The ALMO is not effectively monitoring the level of resident satisfaction with the contact centre service and this quality of performance means customers cannot always rely on it for prompt and effective service.
- 37** Performance in answering direct calls to the ALMO is better. Calls to Rykneld Homes' staff were answered in an average of eight seconds during the six months prior to the inspection, with 91 per cent answered in 15 seconds. Although this performance information is not being effectively reported and abandoned calls are not being monitored, it does indicate that customers who have a direct dial number to ring, as in the case of ongoing neighbour nuisance, receive a more prompt response than those using the contact centre.
- 38** Although performance monitoring in some aspects of access to services is not robust, the information which is available indicates that quality is variable. Response times to correspondence, email and phone calls have only been measured since September 2009 and are only monitored through a general customer care satisfaction survey, rather than through assessment of actual performance. This indicates that the seven day response standard for correspondence was only met in 64 per cent of cases against an unambitious target of 75 per cent and that the one day response standard for phone calls was only achieved in 78 per cent of cases against an unambitious target of 75 per cent. This means customers cannot expect a consistent response.
- 39** Staff are customer focused. Frontline staff at local offices and in the contact centre are professional, helpful and friendly and are able to deal effectively with basic enquiries. Neighbourhood Champions and other staff are committed to solving customer problems in a comprehensive way, have ambitious aspirations for their patches and are enthusiastic about their roles. This approach means residents are likely to have a positive experience of dealing directly with staff and 81 per cent found them able to deal with their problems at the time of the last STATUS survey (2008), which is above average (79 per cent) among comparator organisations..
- 40** Written information for residents is of a high standard. The tenant handbook is comprehensive, accessible and well presented. It has recently been revised, with significant customer involvement in how it should look. The new version was delivered to every household during December 2009 and is issued at sign up. The resident newsletter is accessible and interesting. It includes a range of articles about services, reports performance in key areas, offers advice on housing-related issues and reports community news. Leaflets are also well designed and informative. This helps ensure that residents are aware of the available services and how to access them.

- 41 The Rykneld Homes website is generally effective. Although weaknesses in the accessibility of the translation function were only addressed when we identified them, the site is accessible for most users, with a font-size changer and browsaloud<sup>3</sup> facility. The site is easy to navigate and although it does not allow access to rent account balances, it does allow online payment, choice-based letting bidding, repair and complaint reporting. It displays key information like service standards, the improvement programme and a range of performance information. It has a section encouraging customers to get actively involved and has useful external links to other websites. This level of accessibility results in approximately 3,200 visits per month.
- 42 The approach to service standards is robust in some service areas but underdeveloped in others. Consultation with residents took place to develop a range of 52 indicators, covering 13 service areas. In some areas these are customer focused, clear and measurable. In others, however, they are less clear and challenging or relate to internal processes rather than to the customers' experience. Also, monitoring arrangements in some areas are weak because they are based on asking customers whether standards were met, using satisfaction surveys with low return rates, rather than on actually measuring the standard being delivered. This means that, although customers know what to expect in some areas and performance is regularly reported, results can be misleading.
- 43 Rykneld Homes has not followed good practice in applying Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements to sheltered housing schemes and other residential communal areas and access routes. The Council carried out a DDA audit in its two sheltered schemes in 2006 but did not share this with the ALMO, even though one scheme did not meet minimum requirements. Rykneld Homes has carried out some minor works that have improved accessibility following estate inspections at both schemes. But it only commissioned an audit and put in place an action plan to address the most immediate accessibility issues in response to concerns we raised during this inspection. The ALMO also manages six blocks of general needs flats which it only audited after this inspection and which also fail to meet minimum standards. This means that residents and their visitors may have been significantly inconvenienced while the ALMO has managed these properties and potential tenants may have been deterred from applying for housing.
- 44 There is an effective approach to dealing with complaints. A robust three stage complaints procedure is in place, supported by staff training and a central monitoring system. Performance is reported and there is evidence that learning from complaints is being used to improve services. Although performance in responding to complaints was poor in the first quarter of 2009/10, with only 65 per cent being addressed within target timescales, this improved to 99 and 97 per cent in the second and third quarters of the year. This means customers can be confident that their complaints will be responded to promptly.

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<sup>3</sup> A facility which provides the information in a spoken form

## How good is the service?

- 45 Satisfaction with complaints handling is not being effectively measured. A detailed survey is used but the rate of return in the first three quarters of 2009/10 was only 5 per cent. Response rates have also declined as performance has improved, with only one response from a potential 116 in the third quarter. The ALMO has not addressed the poor rate of return and, although reports do acknowledge the low return rate, performance is still reported with only 43 per cent of customers happy with the outcome of their complaint and only 35 per cent with the process in the first three quarters. This means that Rykneld Homes does not know whether the improved service is better meeting customer expectations.
- 46 The overall approach to measuring customer satisfaction is underdeveloped. The organisation conducted what it describes as a 'mini-STATUS' survey in 2009 but this was based on a sample of only around 2 per cent of customers and the full range of STATUS questions were not asked, so its outputs are largely irrelevant and cannot be used alongside STATUS to demonstrate any trends. Surveys are carried out in all key service areas, but some sample sizes are very low. For example, the samples for the call centre and arrears handling are below 2 per cent and antisocial behaviour returns are around 9 per cent. Incentives to encourage returns have recently been introduced but no work has been done to gather further data to supplement low return rates. The ALMO has also standardised some questions in its surveys to try and build a general picture of satisfaction but its approach to tracking trends by consolidating these figures is not robust because it is not only based on variable return rates, but also adds together responses based on the delivery of different services over different time periods. This means the usefulness of satisfaction data to drive service improvement is limited.
- 47 Overall satisfaction with services is slightly above average. The 2008 STATUS survey indicates a figure of 78.15 per cent, compared with a benchmark of 77.95 per cent for similar organisations (based on Housemark benchmarking). This indicates that the services meet the expectations of a reasonable proportion of customers, but do not yet achieve high levels.
- 48 Compensation policy is not well publicised or sufficiently pro-active. It includes compensation in response to complaints, with approximately £3,200 paid to 20 residents between April 2009 and January 2010. However, the policy is not proactive in automatically paying compensation for service failures, such as missed appointments and is not advertised in key publications such as the tenant handbook. This means that residents are sometimes compensated for service failure, but must, in practise, first make a formal complaint, which might be a deterrent for some.

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## Diversity

- 49 In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. There had been a focus on understanding diversity issues but progress had been slow. Vulnerable tenants' needs were not always known or addressed effectively and the organisation did not meet the relevant CRE code of practice. There had, however, been an emphasis on access for people with disabilities and all housing offices were accessible.
- 50 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. There is a strategic approach to equality and diversity (E&D) and strong partnership working in this area. Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are being used effectively and there has been a proactive approach to managing E&D issues among contractors. The approach to identifying and addressing the vulnerability of individual customers is also strong and adult and child safeguarding issues are well promoted. However, customer profiling is underdeveloped and neither the Board or staff team reflects the profile of the local community.
- 51 There is a strategic corporate approach to ensuring equality and diversity. A joint single equality scheme has been developed with the Council, which outlines how Rykneld Homes will promote equality and diversity and meets the statutory duty to produce race, disability and gender equality schemes. An outcome-focused equality and diversity action plan is in place and being progressed effectively. The ALMO's Chief Executive has taken the role of policy lead and a Board champion has helped raise the profile of these issues at staff and Board meetings and at training events. All staff, board members and resident representatives have received training on equality and diversity. Although opportunities have been missed to better embed a diversity culture in, for example, appraisal processes and team meetings, this overall approach is helping ensure equality and diversity issues are addressed.
- 52 Assessments against national equality and diversity codes and standards have been completed and show broadly positive results. The ALMO assessed itself against the old Local Government Equality Standard and had a peer review from another ALMO which identified Level 3 being achieved. It has also been externally assessed against the new Equality Framework for Local Government which judged the organisation to be at the 'developing and achieving' level. Consultants were engaged to assess compliance against the Equality Commission's Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing (previously the Commission for Racial Equality Code) and, following actions in response to this, the organisation has self-assessed compliance with the code. These initiatives have resulted in improved processes, such as the regular monitoring and reporting of access to all key services and the profiling of satisfaction survey results by six diversity strands.

## How good is the service?

- 53** There has been a positive approach to carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs). EIAs were done in all key service areas by groups of staff, board members and customers during 2008/09 and are now incorporated into the strategy and policy review programme. The work done demonstrates significant levels of research and consideration about barriers to access for all potentially disadvantaged groups. They have led to changes in the way services are delivered. For example, the finance EIA led to tailoring of contact methods for different groups of customers who are in rent arrears, such as the use of visits instead of letters for older people and people with literacy issues, and out of hours contact for people in employment. This approach is helping ensure that services meet the diverse needs of all residents.
- 54** The ALMO works effectively with partners to address equality and diversity issues. A joint community cohesion strategy has been developed with the Council which focuses on reducing crime, empowering local people, integration and financial inclusion. It has resulted in initiatives such as a partnership film project which delivered a range of positive outcomes for the various groups of young people, including: each of the young people who were not in education, employment or training taking up either a job or a training opportunity; a young person who was excluded from school finding a work experience placement; a reduction in antisocial behaviour incident reported from 5.5 per 1000 members of the population to 4 per 1000 in the area during the project; and the removal of barriers between those young people involved who had learning disabilities and those who did not. The ALMO also actively engages in the Council's equality forum which liaises with a range of voluntary sector and customer forums. This helps deliver a more joined up approach to addressing diversity issues.
- 55** There is a positive approach to identifying and addressing vulnerability. A clear vulnerability policy is in place, with assessments carried out on the basis of set criteria and the customer signing it off to confirm that the information collected is accurate and can be used. Assessments may be prompted through customer profiling, but can also be done following a referral from any staff member who has concerns about a customer. There are currently 400 cases of vulnerable customers flagged and each has had some form of action to signpost support. This helps ensure the needs of individuals are met, either by the ALMO or another agency.
- 56** Rykneld is promoting adult and child safeguarding issues effectively. Safeguarding policies are in place and have been distributed to staff and safeguarding posters are on display at appropriate sites. Formal child safeguarding training has been provided to frontline staff as part of a County Council initiative. Adult safeguarding cards, raising the key issues to be aware of have been distributed to all staff and the County Council has provided training for the Independent Living Team. The County Council is also organising further training sessions on adult safeguarding issues which will be attended by all the ALMO's frontline staff. Appropriate referral arrangements are in place and the ALMO has an identified manager accountable for ensuring safeguarding issues are addressed in line with procedures. This helps ensure residents are appropriately protected.

- 57** Rykneld Homes is working effectively to ensure the survivors of domestic violence and hate crime are given sufficient support. There are very clear clauses in the tenancy agreement in relation to domestic abuse and harassment. Rykneld makes good use of the Council's sanctuary scheme and safe at home scheme and does focus on helping the survivor to stay at home if this what they prefer. It also works closely with Womens' Aid, which provides specialist support and tenancy advice. Customers can access the Council's target hardening scheme for domestic violence and hate crime, along with a specialist 24 helpline, both of which have been publicised in the resident newsletter. There is only limited reporting of hate crime and domestic violence directly to Rykneld Homes despite attempts to increase reporting by publicising the issue in the resident newsletter. However, overall residents do receive strong support.
- 58** Arrangements for providing information in different languages and formats are generally robust. All key public documents have straplines offering information in common community languages and other formats such as large text or Braille. A telephone-based interpretation service is also available to staff. Some documents have been translated into alternative languages where a demand has been identified. For example, the tenancy agreement is translated into Polish and gas servicing letters have straplines in community languages which identify the importance and content of the letter. Staff demonstrate an awareness of language issues and repair operatives, for example, use language cards to explain the reason for their visit where English is not spoken. Although there is limited tailoring of service-specific communication to meet customer needs, large print versions of the newsletter are sent out to residents with sight difficulties. This approach helps ensure information for customers meets their specific needs.
- 59** The ALMO has a proactive approach to managing equality and diversity issues among its contractors. For example, its most significant contracts are those with the decent homes works partners. They were required to provide E&D method statements as part of the procurement process and satisfaction surveying with the programme is monitored on the basis of six diversity strands. Contract performance indicators linked to payment mechanisms include the use of local labour and workforce profile targets are set around gender and ethnicity, which helps ensure the issue is regularly discussed at contract monitoring meetings. Targets around disability are underdeveloped and the 7.5 per cent target for female employees against the current level of 3.6 per cent is not ambitious, but this approach gives the ALMO some degree of control over the profile of the workforce operating on its behalf. It will also allow it to encourage the employment of more people from excluded groups as the size of these contracts increases.

## How good is the service?

- 60 Customer profiling is underdeveloped. It is positive that information is being collected across the six main diversity strands, but the ALMO had only profiled 67 per cent of its customers by the time of this inspection and there is significantly less information held on some issues than others (for example, although it knows the age and gender of all customers, it has ethnicity data on only 60 per cent, disability data on only 58 per cent, faith data on only 54 per cent and sexuality data on only 30 per cent). Collection of information is continuing via sign-ups, two yearly visits, yearly gas servicing and support planning, but the opportunity is being missed for the Council's contact centre to collect missing data when customers make telephone contact. Also, because the data is held only on Rykneld's own system and not on the Council's software, it can be used more effectively in some points in delivering services than at others. This means that, for example, it has been well used for strategic planning as part of EIA work, in developing the adaptations policy and in arrears profiling, but it is less well used at an operational level.
- 61 Rykneld Homes does not have a clear picture of the extent to which involved residents reflect the community and limited work has been done to make groups representative. It has defined 'low', 'moderate' and 'high' levels of representation, asked groups to self assess against these categories and they indicate 'low' to 'moderate' ratings. However, these definitions are based on global figures for the district, rather than the relevant neighbourhood. Also, no targets are in place and no monitoring is done. Some action has been taken to help groups break down barriers to access, such as supporting individual young people to attend meetings and encouraging groups to consider their meeting times and venues. There has also been work to ensure focus groups are broadly representative. However, this overall approach does not ensure the views of the whole community are reflected in resident participation activities.
- 62 The Board and staff profile is not fully representative of the community. The Board is reasonably representative in terms of disability and ethnicity but not gender or age, with 60 per cent being male and all of its members being over 40. Insufficient data is held about faith or sexuality to make valid comparisons between the Board and customer profiles. Although some action has been taken to interest younger people in joining the board and it routinely mentions under represented groups in adverts for vacancies, it has not adopted targets or focused on recruiting from these groups. The staff ethnicity profile is broadly representative, but its concentration of men in trade roles means there is a gender imbalance and staff with disabilities only make up 8 per cent of employees, against a 16 per cent target. The organisation has been externally validated as a 'two ticks' organisation in its approach to disability but opportunities to change the staff profile have been limited by a contracting workforce and this means excluded groups are under represented.

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## Stock investment and asset management

### Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 63** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Stock condition information was only robust with regard to decent homes work. Major works programmes were not sufficiently influenced by a long-term investment strategy that incorporated comprehensive viability and sustainability analysis. An asset management strategy had recently been agreed and further work was needed to establish the viability of some of the stock. There had been substantial overspends on the capital programme, the IT systems were not fully interfaced, there was a largely traditional approach to procurement and there were inconsistencies in delivering improvement programmes.
- 64** In this inspection we found strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong focus on achieving the decent homes standard and a programme of works has been agreed with residents and is being delivered effectively. There is comprehensive customer choice in the process, strong resident liaison and satisfaction with works is very high. Programmes for cyclical decorations, solid fuel servicing and electrical testing are being delivered effectively. However, the overall level of stock condition information is relatively low, customer care has not been comprehensive in some areas, and asbestos information is not being effectively shared with residents.
- 65** There is a strong focus on achieving the decent homes standard based on stock condition information and an overarching asset management strategy. Stock condition survey information is held on an effective asset management database with information cloned where there are gaps. A major works software programme is linked to the database and automatically updates information where works are carried out. An asset management strategy is in place and sustainability issues have been considered. The delivery of the strategy is overseen by an Asset Management Review and Implementation Group comprising officers and resident representatives. This approach has been effectively used to identify investment needs and prioritise the decent homes programme currently being delivered.
- 66** However, the overall level of confirmed stock condition survey information is still relatively low and there has not been a comprehensive approach to collecting information. There were formal surveys during 2007/08 of traditional and non-traditional stock covering 25 per cent of homes and information on a further 5 per cent has been gathered as part of the lead in to decent homes work. There are no other surveys taking place to build on this information and void inspections are also not used to collect stock condition information. The improvement works completed to date have not shown a significant variance against the investment needs identified through analysis of existing stock condition information but the programme so far has been relatively small and the potential for variation is increased by not having a higher level of stock condition information.

## How good is the service?

- 67 There has been positive consultation with residents on the overall approach to the delivery of decent homes. This included roadshows during 2008 and consultation with formally constituted resident groups. It resulted in the adoption of a 'worst first' approach based primarily on stock condition information from September 2008 and the division of works into three programmes – internal, windows/doors and other external improvements. The programme of decent homes improvements has been clearly publicised to residents in the resident newsletter and on the Rykneld Homes website.
- 68 There has been strong delivery of the decent homes programme in line with delivery plans and budget. In 2008/09 a £5.9 million programme was delivered in line with budget and the level of works expected. The 2009/10 £7 million programme is also on track. The 2009/10 programme includes brought forward Major Repairs Allowance. Rykneld Homes and the Council sought agreement from Government to for this to enable works to be delivered more quickly. The quantity of works completed this year is ahead of original plans as efficiencies have been £400,000 greater than expected. The overall level of decent homes is still low at 48 per cent which reflects the historical under-investment in the stock. However, the current performance on the programme shows that Rykneld Homes can deliver major works to residents without unnecessary delays.
- 69 There has been a considered approach to the introduction of the new decent homes works partners and transfer of responsibility for delivery of the programme. New partners were appointed in September 2009 following a robust tendering process. The handover of operations from the in-house team took place during January 2010. Robust contract management arrangements, working arrangements and performance standards were developed during the lead-in period to support delivery of the programme. This has included the use of the construction excellence toolkit to guide the development of the contract delivery arrangements. This has minimised any disruption in the programme during the handover.
- 70 There is comprehensive tenant choice in the delivery of works. Customers have significant choice about the fixtures, fittings and finishes where works are completed in their homes. The choices were agreed in consultation with residents. For example eight choices of kitchen unit are offered in different styles and colours, along with a range of tiles and door furniture. Designers also carry out home visits (and use Computer Aided Design) in advance to ensure kitchen layouts meet customer needs. Removal of pantries is also offered to create additional kitchen space. This helps ensure works meet resident tastes and reduce the likelihood of refusals.
- 71 There is a strong approach to resident liaison during major works. This includes well attended open days for all residents in the area including owner occupiers to explain the works process and answer any questions. Surveyors and Tenant Liaison Officers (TLOs) carry out a series of visits during the lead-in period with the TLOs visiting every day when works are on-site. Comprehensive information on customer needs is collected. There is a robust publicised appeals process for residents who disagree with the assessment of the works required in their home. The documentation provided to residents outlining the process has recently been redesigned with the introduction of the new contractors although some aspects are still underdeveloped. However, overall the approach ensures residents are well informed about the delivery process.

- 72** There are positive aspects to customer care in the decent homes process. Where residents are unable to package up or move items assistance is arranged and paid for by Rykneld Homes. There are service standards in place which confirm that washing, WC and cooking facilities will be available at the end of each day. Microwaves and mini-cookers are offered to provide daytime cooking facilities. On the rare occasions where residents are unable to remain in occupation the TLO coordinates respite care. This has only happened on two occasions to date. This helps reduce the disruption to residents caused by the works.
- 73** However, some aspects of customer care during the delivery process are underdeveloped. While specific identified needs are dealt with, the approach is not proactive. For example general daytime respite arrangements where residents can 'escape' the work or use WC facilities are not provided. In addition there has been no concessionary decorating scheme for customers who are unable to make use of the decorating vouchers issued following completion of works, although this was introduced following the issue being highlighted during the inspection. This has reduced the level of customer care offered.
- 74** Refusal of decent homes works is very low and there is a clear process in place for dealing with refusals. Refusals are running at 2 per cent. Where residents say they do not want the work completed a TLO visit is still carried out and the process of the work is explained in detail with photographs. Residents are also offered the opportunity to visit other tenants who have had the work completed. If residents still do not want the works they are asked to sign to confirm their decision. This ensures that works are maximised at the same time as ensuring resident choice.
- 75** Satisfaction with decent homes works is very high. Satisfaction levels are running at 100 per cent for the first three quarters of 2008/09 and our visits to residents who have had works completed confirmed high levels of satisfaction. Satisfaction surveys are carried out at the end of the works process and can be returned direct to Rykneld Homes, but in practice the majority are chased and collected by the TLO. This is a weakness as TLOs are heavily involved in the delivery of service and their involvement in collecting satisfaction information is therefore inappropriate. Return rates are also relatively low at 42 per cent. Despite this, works do appear to be effectively meeting customer expectations.
- 76** The scope of works included in the decent homes programme is limited. It is positive that failures of elements such as bathrooms and kitchens are assessed individually rather than across the property as whole<sup>4</sup> and full kitchen replacement is always carried out including upgrading electrical fittings where required. However, partial replacement of bathrooms is taking place where particular elements such as a bath do not fail the standard which has occurred in 19 per of works so far. Matching WC seats, bath panels and taps are provided in partial replacements. Floor coverings are not replaced during kitchen and bathroom upgrades although any gaps are sealed and decorations are not carried out with allowances of only £30 per room being provided. While this is an approach agreed with residents and reflects the financial position of the Council it means that residents are not benefiting from comprehensive improvement works.

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<sup>4</sup> Not all individual elements of a home have to meet modern facility requirement for a property to achieve the decent homes standard

## How good is the service?

- 77** There is a positive approach to delivering affordable warmth. The organisation is engaged in the delivery of the LSPs<sup>5</sup> affordable warmth strategy. It is delivering a significant programme of insulation upgrades to non-traditional properties following a successful bid for grant funding from the Homes and Community Agency. Significant insulation works have also been delivered to traditional homes over a number of years. A programme of heating upgrades is part of the decent homes programme to address the 1,670 properties which still have solid fuel systems. All new boilers are 'A rated' for energy efficiency. There has also been an extensive window replacement programme to install double glazing. The average SAP rating at the end of 2008/09 was 61 which is low compared to similar landlords and is a reflection of the low energy efficiency of the non-traditional homes which are currently being improved. However, the improvement programme is now well focused on ensuring heat efficiency in homes.
- 78** There is a strong approach to identifying asbestos and sharing information internally and with contractors. There has been a rolling programme of surveys with 70 per cent of homes having had full type two surveys with 100 per cent to be completed by the end of March 2010. Where information is held on specific property types this information is cloned across properties which have not been surveyed. There is a web-based database in place where contractors and Rykneld Homes staff can check for the presence of asbestos and alerts print on repair job tickets. All repairs operatives and surveyors have been trained in asbestos safety and identification. This helps ensure asbestos safety in homes and for staff.
- 79** There are some weaknesses in the approach to asbestos. Information on asbestos is not being effectively shared with residents. There is general publicity on asbestos safety in the form of a leaflet which is provided as part of the sign up pack and is shared with all residents annually with a mail out of the resident newsletter. In addition, where residents contact Rykneld Homes regarding the presence of asbestos they will be informed of the outcomes of any survey work. However, copies of survey results are not provided to residents on completion of surveys, available online or provided to new residents at sign up. In addition, control mechanisms to ensure reports of asbestos issues are dealt with promptly have been underdeveloped, although this was rectified after being highlighted during the inspection. These weaknesses mean the health and safety risks relating to asbestos are not being minimised.
- 80** A comprehensive programme of electrical safety testing is ongoing. Prior to the setting up of the ALMO there was no electrical testing programme. Electrical testing is now carried out on all homes as part of the lead-in to the internal works element of the decent homes programme. This also covers homes where no decent homes works are required. This means that all homes will have been tested by the end of the programme. Tests are also carried out as well as part of the void repair process. At the time of inspection approximately 41 per cent of the stock has been tested. None of the testing to date has suggested that electrical installations are inherently unsafe. Although the current level of homes tested is relatively low, the ongoing programme does now demonstrate a focus on ensuring electrical safety in homes.

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<sup>5</sup> Local Strategic Partnership – a body comprising a range of organisations delivery services in the district.

- 81** An annual solid fuel servicing process is in place which generally shows a high level of performance against the programme. There has been some recent slippage in the programme with 92 per cent of homes having been serviced in the target of one year at the time of the inspection. The programme has been affected by the poor weather with increased access issues and residents not willing to leave fires out during this period. At November 2009 performance was at 99 per cent. The safety checks and servicing is carried out by qualified engineers. This helps ensure the safety of solid fuel systems in residents' homes.
- 82** Cyclical decorations to homes are being regularly carried out. This is being carried out in line with a five-year cycle which also takes into account the window replacement programme. However, there are no satisfaction surveys for the cyclical decoration programme. This means that properties are being effectively maintained through external decoration but that the organisation does not know if this work is meeting residents' expectations.

### Responsive repairs

- 83** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Tenants received a mixed service that lacked sufficient customer focus. Some tenants had to make more than one call to get someone to inspect or to carry out repairs. Appointments were not always made and repairs were cancelled without informing tenants. Changes to the service meant that only minor repairs were attended to in a timely manner and no appointments were offered except for these smaller repairs. Pre-inspection levels were high and post-inspections were limited. Performance information was not robust.
- 84** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. A customer focused appointment system is being delivered effectively. Performance on completing repairs in timescales is very strong. There are effective quality control mechanisms in place and a high level of satisfaction with the service. However, there is only average performance on jobs completed right first time and there is insufficient monitoring of the out of hours service.
- 85** A customer focused appointment system for repairs is being delivered effectively. A flexible range of appointments is offered including two hour slots and evening and weekend appointments. All non-emergency appointments are confirmed in writing and operatives telephone residents on the morning of the appointment to remind them about the appointment. There is very strong performance on making and keeping appointments. From April to December 2009, appointments made and kept were at 99.9 per cent. Non-access due to residents not being at home for an appointment is running at a reasonable level of 4 per cent. An automated telephone/text reminder service is not in place but apart from this the appointment system provides a very high standard of service to residents.

## How good is the service?

- 86** Performance on completing repairs in timescale is very strong. Combined performance on all categories shows 99.72 per cent of repairs completed in timescale from April 2009 to December 2009. Emergency repairs show 99.83 per cent completed in timescale over this period. On average emergency repairs are being attended to in four hours although it is a weakness that performance is not specifically monitored against a commitment to attend serious emergencies in a four hour target. Benchmarking shows that performance on completing repairs in timescales is in the best 25 per cent of ALMOs. The average time to complete routine repairs is 7.86 days which is above average compared with other ALMOs. This ensures that residents receive a timely repair service.
- 87** Repairs can be ordered in a wide range of ways and there is effective guidance for staff and residents for diagnosing and ordering repairs. In addition to traditional methods repairs can be ordered online and by text. A repairs handbook is in place which has been distributed to residents and is also used by staff. This uses actual pictures of Council homes which are more likely to be similar to residents' homes. Whilst a computer-based version would be beneficial for call centre staff the process is assisting in repairs ordering. A straightforward repair ordering system is in place which simplifies the process and also reduces variations which are running at only 3.7 per cent. This is helping enable accurate repairs diagnosis reducing potential disruption in the repairs process for customers.
- 88** There is average performance on jobs completed 'right first time'. Reported performance from April 2009 to December 2009 is 91.34 per cent although this includes pre-inspected repairs which are around 5 per cent. Actual performance therefore, is of 86 per cent which is about average when benchmarked against other ALMOs. This performance also approximately matches the tenant satisfaction survey feedback on repairs completed right first time which further validates these figures. As well as a focus on accurate diagnosis mentioned above this performance has been assisted by an extensive process of identifying the appropriate range of stock for vans and a high level of multi-skilled operatives. This approach reduces disruption to residents and increases the efficiency of the service.
- 89** There is strong satisfaction with the responsive repairs service. From April 2009 to December 2009 satisfaction was at 92.13 per cent. This is based on an ongoing postal survey of residents following completions of a repair. Response rates are relatively low running at 13 per cent but the number of repairs carried out means that in this service area this level of response still provides sufficient feedback to assess performance. This demonstrates that the repairs service is meeting the expectations of the majority of residents.

- 90** There is an effective approach to pre-repair and post-repair inspections. All inspections are carried out by appointment with pre-inspection appointments made at the point of contact and delivered between 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday. Both are being carried at appropriate levels with 5 per cent of works being pre-inspected and 10 per cent post-inspected. There are clear criteria for call centre staff to appoint pre-inspections and post-inspections are risk-based with links to value and a mix of repair types. Post-inspection failure levels are monitored and are running at 2 per cent of those inspected. Failures on quality results in a recall of the job to rectify the problem. This is also fed into performance management arrangements for operatives. This ensures that there is sufficient quality control in the repairs process at the same time as minimising disruption for residents.
- 91** It is positive that operatives have the flexibility to vary orders on-site including carrying additional works. There is clear guidance on authorisation levels and where variations exceed those at operative level the operative will telephone the team leader. Variations and additional work normally will be carried out during the same visit assuming parts are available.
- 92** There is effective performance on spending against budget in responsive repairs. During 2008/09 actual expenditure was £1.58 million against a budget of £1.61million and expenditure year to date for 2009/10 is in line with budget. Effective budgeting for repairs ensure that there is sufficient funding to maintain the service to residents.
- 93** There has been an analysis of the profile of residents who have not accessed the repairs service over the last 3.5 years. This has not shown any particular trends in categories of people not accessing the service, with those not accessing the service reflecting the overall profile of tenants. Those not accessing the repairs services are being prioritised for tenancy visits to check vulnerability issues and property maintenance issues.
- 94** There is insufficient performance information on the out of hours repair service. A contract is in place for a neighbouring authority to deal with out of hour emergencies and the contractor does have access to Rykneld repairs history if this is required. However, while Rykneld Homes monitors the level of works carried it does not receive information on call answering performance and these residents using this service have not been surveyed for satisfaction. This means that Rykneld Homes cannot fully assess the quality of this service.

### Empty (void) property repairs

- 95** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Void costs were increasing, the Council was not effectively monitoring all aspects of the void process to identify service improvements needed and some voids were let in poor condition.
- 96** In this inspection, we found that that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is an effective pre-termination process in place, works are being delivered to an agreed lettable standard and resident satisfaction is relatively high. However, although effective processes are now in place for repairing voids, performance on processing times has until very recently been poor for both minor and major works voids.

## How good is the service?

- 97** There is an effective approach to pre-termination visits. These are carried out by the surveyor and neighbourhood champion where notice of termination has been given and an appointment can be agreed. This is used to inspect the void and identify repair needs, tenant repair responsibilities and other management issues such as arrears or support issues. Pre-termination visits are being achieved on approximately 50 per cent of void properties. Orders are placed following pre-termination visits so that completion of repairs can commence from the termination date. Where additional repairs are found on vacation the voids team can add this to the works schedule if they are part of the void standard and within authorisation limits. This helps ensure empty properties are left in a good condition and that voids works commence promptly.
- 98** It is positive that a prize draw incentive scheme linked to void processing has been introduced. Residents who leave properties without rechargeable repairs and assist in the relet process are entered in a monthly £100 prize draw. However, this is very recent commencing in January 2010 and publicity for the scheme is still developing. The scheme is due to be evaluated at three months and six months. Although this has not yet had time to impact on the service it does show a positive approach to encouraging residents to leave properties in a good condition to enable prompt void processing and to enable repairs and viewing during the notice period.
- 99** It has been taking too long to process repair works for standard voids although recent performance is much improved. The average time from termination to completion on works was 21.7 days in quarter one, 31.2 days in quarter two and 31.9 in quarter three. A weekly voids performance clinic was established to address void control issues with a more structured approach to programming and monitoring of works. This has significantly improved performance with 14 days achieved in December 2009 and 8.7 days in January 2010. There is a clear process for monitoring the progress of voids with a specific IT system in place which tracks each stage of the voids and reports accordingly. This is supported by a voids board which provides a visual list of current voids and the stage they are at. Void repairs processes are now maximising availability of properties and potential rental income but the impact is limited as performance has only recently improved.
- 100** Processing of major voids has been slow although a backlog has now been completed. There were 36 major works voids between 1 April and 31 December 2009, and the average void repair processing time was 107 days. There have been problems of organisation and capacity in how works to major voids were being carried out which resulted in a backlog of works. An external contractor was engaged to assist in clearing the backlog and this work has recently been completed. The current position is that there are four major voids and none have been void for more than three weeks. However, as a result of the previous backlog the properties have not been made available at the earliest opportunity which also results in unnecessary rent loss.

- 101** There is a clear lettable standard in place which was developed in consultation with residents and is appropriately publicised. Significant consultation with residents took place in the development of the standard including examination of standards used by other organisations and consideration of the relationship with the decent homes programme. This has resulted in a standard which is focused on achieving set minimum standards with additional minor repairs completed when the new resident moves in. The standard does lack a commitment to provide watertight flooring in bathroom and kitchen areas which can be beneficial for maintaining the property as well as being a benefit for new residents. The standard is appropriately publicised including being issued to housing applicants prior to viewing. This approach is helping ensure re-let properties achieve agreed standards and that residents are aware of the standards that should be achieved.
- 102** There is a clear and customer focused approach to dealing with decent homes works in void properties. Decent homes works are not completed when a property becomes void unless elements are uneconomic to repair. Where works are carried out, these are completed by the decent homes partner in areas where the programme is ongoing. In other areas it is done by the voids team although this will also pass to partner contractors in April 2010. Decent homes programme products are used in all upgrades. Resident choice in fixtures and fittings is facilitated where a new resident has accepted the void property and the most popular choices are installed where this is not the case. Where properties are not brought up to decent Homes standards the new resident is informed about the future decent homes programme at letting. This ensures that properties are upgraded where necessary and that tenants are clear on the overall approach.
- 103** Voids are being repaired to a reasonable standard. All voids we visited were repaired to the lettable standard and some significantly higher, although we did find some minor issues in some properties. Our discussions with residents also confirmed achievement of lettable standards. All voids are post inspected by surveyors. Resident satisfaction that homes achieve the lettable standard is reasonable at 88 per cent although returns are low at approximately 30 per cent. Dissatisfaction has been investigated and found in most instances to be due to the age of major elements. As a result the organisation is trying to manage expectations in relation to properties by explaining the decent homes programme. The void repair service is meeting the expectations of a significant proportion of residents.
- 104** The approach to decorations in void properties is generally positive but lacks flexibility for properties in a particularly poor state of decoration. Voids are not normally decorated but a decoration assistance scheme is in place. This provides residents with a card that can be used at selected DIY stores which is credited to an amount linked to the condition of the decorations in the property. Where a new resident is unable to decorate due to special needs the work will be carried out by Rykneld Homes. However, our discussion with residents identified that the assistance scheme is not sufficiently flexible to provide increased amounts where existing decorations are damaged and require more than just painting. This means that while the scheme is helping ensure residents have decorated homes in some instances it is not providing sufficient resources.

## How good is the service?

### Gas servicing

- 105** In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in this area. Gas servicing data was collected effectively and input onto the database. Performance for servicing gas appliances in tenants' homes was at 99.5 per cent, and satisfaction was high at 94 per cent. However, post-inspection targets were not being achieved and access procedures were not yet fully embedded.
- 106** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Performance on completing gas servicing in timescales is strong and an effective quality control process is in place. The importance of gas safety is well publicised and there are effective arrangements to encourage residents to provide access. Added value is being provided through carrying out additional activities alongside gas servicing.
- 107** The importance of gas safety is well publicised. There is an article in each resident newsletter, information is available on the website, a comprehensive leaflet was sent to all tenants, is issued at sign up and a smaller leaflet is included with the servicing appointment letter. Letters and leaflets include information in common community languages. Leaflets and posters have been placed in GP surgeries and local offices. There has also been internal awareness training for Neighbourhood Champions. This helps ensure residents understand the importance of gas safety.
- 108** Performance on completing gas servicing in timescales is strong. All gas appliances are required to be serviced every year. Currently 99.9 per cent of properties have a current gas safety certificate and performance has been at consistently high level since April 2009. Of the seven properties currently without an up-to-date certificate, the longest is six days beyond the due date. All of those overdue have appropriate action being progressed. This helps ensure gas safety in residents' homes.
- 109** There is a customer focused approach to arranging appointments for gas servicing. In the first instance the resident is telephoned to make a convenient appointment with evening and weekend appointments offered as well as weekdays. If no contact can be made then a letter is sent out with an appointment which the resident can change if it is not convenient. The gas servicing team have access to customer profile information and this is used in appointment setting and more generally in arranging access. This provides effective customer care as well as helping ensure access to properties.
- 110** There is a strong focus on encouraging residents to provide access for gas servicing. In addition to the flexible appointment system there is a prize draw for residents who enable access on first visit. Approximately 85 per cent are being serviced on the first visit. Where there are problems in gaining access a series of letters, visits and telephone calls are completed. Letters have a gas safety alert stamp on the outside and emphasise the importance of ensuring access. Lists of outstanding services are circulated to all staff in case they have contact with the resident and there is a specific alert on the responsive repair system. Where there are persistent cases of non-access warning stickers are placed on properties and boiler restrictors are used (if the resident is not considered vulnerable). Appropriate legal action will be utilised where necessary although forced entry has not yet been required. This encourages residents to enable servicing to be carried out in a timely manner.

- 111** There is an effective quality control process for gas servicing. A post-inspection process is in place with 10 per cent of gas servicing checked. This is conducted by two appropriately qualified in-house staff with the process validated by the external agency Gas Safe. There is also a positive approach to surveying satisfaction with gas servicing and satisfaction levels are very high at 99.25 per cent. This ensures that gas safety is well controlled and that the service meets residents' expectation.
- 112** Added value is being provided by carrying out additional activities alongside gas servicing. Engineers instruct customers on the most energy efficient way to use boilers and also how to re-pressurise combination boilers which was a common repair request. Smoke alarms, carbon monoxide monitors and water storage tanks are also tested as part of the process and minor repairs to these or any other aspects of heating and plumbing will be completed at the same time as servicing. Engineers are multi-skilled to enable this. Servicing of tenant installed gas appliances is also carried out following initial inspection to assess quality of installation. Annual gas servicing visits also now include updating of customer profile information. This increases efficiency in the delivery of services.
- 113** Systems for holding gas servicing information are robust. Information technology is being effectively used with operatives using handheld technology which enables them to record completion of jobs and to transfer gas safety certificates electronically to a central database in addition to providing a hard copy to the resident. This means that gas safety information is up to date and easily accessible.
- 114** There has been action to ensure leaseholders have gas appliances serviced but this has not been comprehensive. Gas safety is covered in the leaseholders' handbook and the standard lease was amended in 2008 to include a clause requiring the leaseholder to provide Rykneld Homes with up to date gas safety certificates each year. However, although there has been some consultation with leaseholders about offering the opportunity to buy into Rykneld Homes' gas servicing this was only progressed during the inspection. This means that while some work has been done to ensure gas safety in leaseholder properties this has not been maximised.

### Aids and adaptations

- 115** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. The service was effective in aspects such as joint working with social services and in prioritising cases. However, there were significant weaknesses, such as ineffective promotion and customer information and the time taken to install major adaptations, which meant that the service is not customer focused.
- 116** In this inspection, we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. There are significant delays in delivering major aids and adaptations, performance on delivery of minor adaptations is mixed and some aspects of joint working with Social Services are underdeveloped. However, a variety of methods are being used to publicise the aids and adaptation service, there are effective links between the aids and adaptations process and the decent homes programme, and there is a focus on making best use of adapted properties.

## How good is the service?

- 117** There are significant delays in delivering major aids and adaptations. Urgent major adaptations are completed reasonably quickly in an average of 34 days from referral. However, routine cases being progressed at the time of inspection date back to September 2008 for major routine adaptations although this excludes stairlift requirements which date back to February 2009. Stairlifts are provided more rapidly because a set level of expenditure is linked to contract arrangements. However, this means a different level of service is provided on the basis of the type of adaptation required. At the end of December 2009 there was a total backlog of 230 cases. County Council OT assessments are taking place in an average of 28 days but there are delays following this due to insufficient resources to cover the direct costs of the programme. This is a budget set by the District Council. Residents are regularly updated on the position of their application and the likely wait time but overall this service is far too slow to effectively meet residents' needs.
- 118** Performance on delivery of minor adaptations is mixed. Where minor adaptations (up to £500) are identified these are dealt with directly by Rykneld Homes. This speeds up the process but the performance on the time taken to complete works, although improving, has not been strong. Routine minor adaptations have taken an average of 47 days to complete in the first three quarters of 2009/10 but with 37 days achieved in quarter three and 22 days in January 2010. Urgent minor adaptations were delivered in an average of 11 days from April to December 2009 but were delivered in an average of two days in January 2010. Ordering processes have recently been changed to speed up this element of the service. However, overall there has not been a prompt response to requests for minor adaptations.
- 119** Some aspects of joint working with Social Services on aids and adaptations are underdeveloped. Monitoring of performance on timescales is not a joint process and Rykneld Homes does not have details of initial contact if this was made via Social Services. In addition it was agreed in July 2009 that priority adaptation cases would be jointly assessed by telephone and outside of the formal assessment panel to ensure there are no processing delays but this is not being consistently applied by the Occupational Therapy service. There is not a joint approach to marketing of services. This reduces the effectiveness of the adaptation service.
- 120** There are effective links between the aids and adaptations process and the decent homes programme. The decent homes team have details of all current adaptation applications and these works are completed at the time of other decent homes work where this is the residents preferred option. There are questions at the survey stage of decent homes work (normally six months prior to commencement) designed to identify potential aids and adaptations. Identified cases for major adaptations are referred to Social Services for formal assessment so any adaptation works can be identified prior to commencement of decent homes works. This ensures that improvements take into account adaptation needs and that there are no delays to these works.

- 121** There is a robust assessment process for major aids and adaptations. Occupational Therapist (OT) proposals are considered by a panel comprising of representatives of County Council Adult and Children services, Rykneld Homes Choice Based Letting team and its Adaptations team. This meets monthly to consider routine adaptations with the capacity to consider urgent adaptations by telephone where necessary. The panel considers the options available to meet the resident's needs and what other options the resident may wish to consider eg moving home. This ensures full consideration of all options and an agreed approach across the agencies involved.
- 122** A variety of methods are being used to publicise the aids and adaptation service and there is a responsive referral system in place where a need is identified by Rykneld Homes. Leaflets about aids and adaptations have been distributed to GP surgeries, hospitals, sports centres and other Council offices. Neighbourhood champions and sheltered housing managers have been trained to identify adaptation needs. Where information on a potential adaptation is received a neighbourhood champion will visit (currently in an average of 4 days) and complete an appropriate referral form where necessary. There is also information on aids adaptations on the website. This is helping ensure residents are aware of the service and that where there is a need a prompt referral takes place.
- 123** There is a strong focus on trying to match residents requiring adaptations to already adapted properties. This links to a major review of adaptations and the development of a new adaptations policy by the Council 2009. Rykneld Homes had a significant input into the review and new policy which was focused on trying to address the inability to meet demand. A customer focused incentive and assistance scheme was established in October 2009 following extensive consultation with residents awaiting adaptations. This is now being proactively promoted to residents awaiting adaptations with a range of support and financial assistance in place should they decide to move to an adapted property. Although the impact of this has not yet fully developed one resident has been moved through the scheme and there are ten more interested residents. A database of adapted properties is maintained and when adapted properties become vacant these are matched with housing applicants requiring adaptations who are given priority for these homes. Adaptations are also being regularly recycled were they are not required by an incoming resident. This ensures best use of existing adaptations and may provide some residents with an alternative option to waiting for an adaptation to their own home.

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### Housing income management

- 124** In this inspection we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Performance indicators on arrears show comparatively strong performance, there is an effective approach to former tenant arrears and rent profiling is being used to target resources more effectively. Partnership working is ensuring that residents receive timely welfare benefit and debt advice and access to housing benefits. More innovative ways to chase arrears are being used but the variety of approaches is not yet fully developed. Although financial inclusion activities are taking place they are not yet comprehensive. Communication with partners to prevent evictions is underdeveloped, measurement of resident satisfaction with the service is not effective and some information provided to residents is misleading and not comprehensive.
- 125** Performance indicators on arrears show comparatively strong performance. Arrears as a percentage of annual debit was at 1.72 per cent at the end of December, only 3.97 per cent of tenants have arrears over seven weeks and the proportion of tenants served with a Notice of Seeking Possession for arrears is 4.88 per cent. Rykneld Homes is in the best 25 per cent of performers on all these indicators when compared with other ALMOs. The proportion of tenants evicted is currently running at 0.2 per cent which is just better than average performance compared with the ALMO average of 0.23 per cent. These indicators demonstrate generally positive outcomes from arrears recovery activity.
- 126** There is an effective approach to enabling and encouraging rent payment. There is a wide range of payment methods, which help customers, particularly those living in more rural communities to pay their rent. This includes direct debit, standing order, online, swipe cards and via automatic cash payment machines in offices. Prize draws have also recently been introduced to encourage residents to maintain clear rent accounts and to pay by direct debit. This provides effective customer service and helps ensure opportunities to pay rent are maximised.
- 127** Rent profiling is being used to target its resources more effectively. As a result of the recent rent profiling exercise a 'pay ahead' campaign has been launched to try and encourage monthly rent payers to switch from paying in arrears to paying in advance to reduce the high levels of 'technical arrears' owed by this group. A repayment agreement is signed with monthly payers so that they can gradually bring their account into credit. This is a positive initiative, however, no targets have been agreed or performance measures put in place to measure the success of this campaign. All new tenants are required to pay their rent in advance and a trial benefit calculation is offered at tenancy sign-up. This focuses residents' attention on ensuring timely rent payment.

- 128** Rykneld Homes is working effectively to ensure that tenants can receive timely welfare benefit and debt advice. Finance Champions have received debt awareness training which enables them to complete an income and expenditure assessment before reaching a repayment agreement. Customers can be referred to the in-house Tenancy Support Champion who provides more in depth assistance. A recent protocol with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) ensures the advice service they provide is timely and delivering an appropriate level of support. Self help packs are available as well as formal debt advice appointments and the CAB operate from four bases as well as a number of outreach services. A similar protocol has recently been signed with the Chesterfield Law Centre. Access to debt advice has been analysed and there are debt advice campaigns in two areas where access appears low. The County Council also provides a welfare rights helpline number. Although outcomes data for these arrangements is still underdeveloped they are ensuring that support is available to assist tenants in managing their finances, including rent payments.
- 129** There is effective quality control in the arrears recovery process. Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure that performance on collecting rent arrears is being closely monitored. The Customer Finance Team Leader runs various performance reports which show arrears by patch, by banding and by amount. This information is used during six weekly supervision sessions with Finance Champions to manage their performance and to talk through action taken on individual cases. Completed file checks of arrears cases showed that the arrears procedure is being followed. Each Finance Champion has a target of reducing the arrears on their 'patch' by 10 per cent during 2009/10. This helps ensure consistent performance on arrears recovery.
- 130** There is a positive working relationship between the Customer Finance Team and Legal Services at the Council. A service level agreement is in place and this is monitored on a regular basis. Finance Champions have recently started to submit their own court applications online and this has speeded up the process of getting a court date, which is currently taking an average of five weeks. Finance Champions provide evidence at court but are represented by a solicitor from Legal Services. There is a court users' group, which the Council attends on behalf of both the Council and Rykneld Homes. This helps ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of legal action.
- 131** There is a very positive working relationship between Rykneld Homes and the Council's benefit team. Rykneld Homes' staff have access to all Housing Benefit systems and also have verification rights. A service level agreement is in place and regularly monitored and includes benefit staff providing training to Rykneld Homes' staff. The Benefits team provide a breakdown of claims that they are dealing with by age and type of case on a monthly basis. Arrears cases that have reached court stage are given priority and Finance Champions have telephone access to Benefit Team Leaders so they can discuss more difficult cases. Current performance on benefit processing is within the service level agreement target at 17.5 days for new claims and four days for change of circumstances. This ensures that where benefits are due they are paid in a timely manner and that the impact of outstanding benefit payments on the arrears is minimised.

## How good is the service?

- 132** There is an effective approach to dealing with Former Tenant Arrears (FTAs). There is a clear procedure in place with tracing and debt collection agencies used appropriately when attempts to find a forwarding address and reach an agreement are not successful. A member of staff is dedicated to FTA recovery and targets for reductions are in place. The level of FTAs is currently at 1.38 per cent of the rent debit which is in the best 25 per cent of performers when compared with other ALMOs. There is also a clear write off procedure in place for FTA's. Write-offs are done on a quarterly basis with a report sent to the Council who authorise the write off. Approximately £35,000 has been passed over for write off so far this year. This ensures that appropriate efforts are made to collect FTAs and to write them off when they are not recoverable.
- 133** Measures in place to monitor satisfaction with the rent payment and advice service are not effective. Although customer satisfaction with the finance team appears high at 100 per cent, the rate of return is very low with only six surveys returned since they were introduced and customers surveyed are only ones who have reached a repayment agreement. The 2008 STATUS survey did show a positive level of satisfaction with rent advice at 84 per cent. However, the lack of robust up to date satisfaction information means Rykneld Homes cannot effectively assess the quality of service from a customer perspective, or how to improve it.
- 134** Financial inclusion activities are taking place but are not yet comprehensive. A Financial Inclusion Strategy has been developed and there are some positive examples of activity such as joint working with the CAB, advice work by the Tenancy Support Officer and some promotion of benefit take up by Neighbourhood Champions. Rykneld Homes is also actively involved in LSP activities to re-establish credit union facilities. However, in other areas outcomes have been limited with, for example, Rykneld Homes providing advice about basic bank accounts but not monitoring of how many tenants open an account and not having targets in place to increase the number of tenants using the home contents scheme which is relatively low at 18.5 per cent. This means that while residents are benefiting from some financial inclusion work this is not being maximised.
- 135** The Customer Finance team are beginning to use more innovative ways to chase arrears but the variety of approaches are not yet fully developed. There was a successful campaign to promote payments by residents in arrears during rent free weeks over the Christmas period which drew in an additional £31,000. Text messaging is being used more widely to contact tenants in arrears although the success of this is not being measured. While the Finance Champions can utilise flexi-time to work outside normal hours in the morning and early evening there is not a structured approach to contacting tenants outside normal office hours. Residents can make arrangements to pay arrears or set up payment plans in respect of low level cases up to 8.00 p.m. by contacting the Call Centre but this service is not being effectively promoted. This means that while some positive initiatives are developing in the approach to arrears recovery the service is not maximising the potential of innovative approaches.

- 136** Rykneld Homes is giving insufficient notice to its partners where it intends to evict a resident for rent arrears. The current arrears procedure states that the Finance Champion should notify the Housing Options Team and Social Services two weeks before the eviction takes place. This is far too late, given that the Housing Options remit is to prevent homelessness wherever possible. While in some instances contact will be made earlier than two weeks the procedure does not ensure this happens systematically. Rykneld Homes did amend its procedure to ensure earlier contact during the inspection after this issue was raised but the approach has not maximised joint working to deal with evictions.
- 137** Some information provided to residents is misleading and not comprehensive. Arrears letters give inconsistent and misleading information about what will happen to tenants if they are evicted. Some letters state that the Council will not be responsible for providing alternative accommodation, which may not always be the case, while another does provide more appropriate advice relating to contacting the housing options team if they are potentially homeless. The misleading standard letters were corrected immediately when this issue was highlighted. In addition, while information on the rent statement is clear it does not effectively break down non-rent debt and rent accounts cannot be checked online. This makes it more difficult for residents to understand the rent collection and arrears process.
- 138** There is not an effective approach to identifying and charging for service charges. Service charges have not been disaggregated (apart from for leaseholders) from the rent which means that all residents pay for these services whether they receive them or not. The ALMO does not have responsibility for rent and service charge policy but has agreed a Service Charge Strategy for 2009-2012 which addresses the issues but the current approach means that charges are not being applied in a transparent and equitable manner.

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### Resident involvement

- 139** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in resident involvement. Rykneld Homes has established a clear, well-promoted involvement structure which allows residents to become involved at a level which suits them. Involved residents are trained to enable them to participate fully in decision making, the organisation allocates an appropriate level of resources to support involvement and there are a range of positive outcomes from resident involvement. However, indicators of satisfaction with resident involvement show a mixed picture and participation is not fully reflective of the resident profile.

## How good is the service?

**140** Rykneld Homes has established a clear involvement structure which allows residents to become involved at a level which suits their personal circumstances and interests. Key elements of the structure include:

- an Involvement Management Group which provides tenant scrutiny of key issues and decisions at strategic level and challenge to reported performance information;
- an Asset Management Review and Implementation Group that includes resident representatives which coordinates delivery of the asset management strategy and a Tenant Audit Group which examines operational performance on the delivery of decent homes and repair services;
- a tenant editorial panel which checks quality of resident facing publications;
- a 'Village Voice' initiative which enables involvement in rural areas;
- service improvement and review groups which involve residents in service reviews and developing policies and procedures in specific service areas;
- a mystery shopping team with six tenants currently trained which works as part of a Derbyshire Tenants Network carrying out shops in Rykneld Homes services and other organisation to enable cross-organisation comparisons;
- a 'Viewpoint Panel' comprising 164 residents is in place, where residents have specified areas of interest and a level of involvement they have selected, which is used in carrying specific consultation exercise and focus group; and
- an effective relationship with the Federation of North East Derbyshire Tenants and Residents.

This is delivering a tailored approach to resident involvement enabling participation at both strategic and operational level.

**141** There is a range of positive outcomes from resident involvement. For example, residents shaped the development of the new tenant handbook, chose the materials used in decent homes contracts and improved the use of voicemail following mystery shopping. This results in services better meeting residents needs.

**142** There is an effective approach to training for residents. A skills audit was undertaken at the tenant conference in March 2009 and subsequently a wide range of courses have been developed which are delivered by a number of social landlords in Derbyshire. Involved residents spoken to gave us examples of training courses that they had requested and attended which had further enabled their ability to participate effectively. This helps ensure that residents have the right skills to enable them to participate fully in decision making.

**143** Rykneld Homes has committed reasonable resources to support its community and resident involvement activities. A budget of £58,500 is in place for 2009/10 in addition to the staff salaries of the Community Involvement Team. A £15,000 grant is paid to the Federation of North East Derbyshire Tenants and Residents to fund its activities and which also provides grant funding to affiliated resident groups. Rykneld Homes also makes small grants available to resident groups who are not affiliated to the federation. This helps ensure resident involvement activities can be effectively supported.

- 144** In addition to the provision of direct resources there has been a positive approach to ensuring that all staff are actively involved in community involvement activities. The Community Involvement Team have provided training sessions for all staff and a Staff Guidance Booklet is also in place. Staff briefings sessions have also been held to identify where resident involvement was impacting on their work with case studies developed to share good practice and publicised. There have also been articles covering these issues in the staff newsletter. This approach is helping embed the resident involvement across the organisation.
- 145** Resident involvement is being effectively promoted. For example, there is a clearly written tenant and resident involvement agreement outlining ways in which residents can get involved and a range of involvement service standards. A useful tenant involvement timetable has been produced and a 'complaints and grumbles' record with actions in response identified. The community involvement team also produce a quarterly briefing for involved residents that identifies the impact of involvement and future activities. The quarterly resident newsletter also has articles on the impact of resident involvement including a 'you said we did' section. This helps ensure that residents are aware of the opportunities for involvement and the potential benefits.
- 146** There is a commitment to ensuring all sections of the community are reflected in resident involvement activity but some groups are still under-represented. Equality Impact Assessments have been completed on the resident involvement strategy identifying issues in relation to the service. An Older People's Champion from the Community Involvement Team is working closely with the supported housing service to develop community involvement activities. Residents are involved in the Older Persons' Service Improvement Group (OPSIG) which has been developing the new Independent Living Service. However, young people and BME groups are still under-represented in resident groups. This means that the organisation is expanding the range of residents involved but has not achieved adequate representation across all groups.
- 147** Indicators of satisfaction with resident involvement show a mixed picture. Satisfaction with opportunities for participation was 68.14 per cent in the 2008 STATUS survey which is in the best 25 per cent compared with other ALMOs. However, satisfaction that resident views are taken into account measured in the same survey was 58.09 per cent which is below the benchmarked average of 60.85 per cent. A quarterly survey sent out to Viewpoint panel members (100) and all of the Tenant and Resident Groups throughout North East (196) Derbyshire shows year to date satisfaction at 70.11 per cent. This suggests that resident participation is not consistently meeting expectations.

### Tenancy and estate management

#### Tenancy Management

- 148** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in tenancy management. There is effective partnership working in tackling antisocial behaviour and in developing preventative initiatives. Antisocial behaviour (ASB) enforcement action is being taken regularly and appropriately, case management is robust and residents are generally positive about the service. Tenancy support is delivering positive outcomes. However, mediation is not being effectively used, support to customers outside of standard hours is limited, 'hotspot' analysis is underdeveloped and surveying of satisfaction is not robust.
- 149** Rykneld Homes is working effectively in partnership to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. It is an active member of both the core group and strategy group of the North East Derbyshire Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). The 2009-2012 CDRP strategy specifically refers to Rykneld Homes in a number of areas such as the role of Neighbourhood Champions acting as 'eyes and ears' for reporting incidents. It participates in local tasking meetings for a joined up approach to dealing with nuisance and ASB and in multi-agency outreach evenings in 'hotspots' and in family intervention activities. It has also worked closely with the police on a specific initiative to address ASB and criminal damage, running 'clean up' days and helping with 'cracking crime' days where target-hardening advice was given. The Police identified a drop of 8 per cent in ASB and 18 per cent in criminal damage as a result of this work.
- 150** There is a positive approach to developing diversionary activity to prevent antisocial behaviour. This work includes nine 'dream schemes' usually involving young people in clean-up initiatives, to be rewarded by trips and a 'summer scramble' which was a three mile activity walk for young people organised on a multi-agency basis. A film project which involved 20 young people in making a film about their area was also organised by the ALMO and Council with external funding obtained to cover costs. This approach demonstrates the organisations commitment to trying to ensure residents do not become involved in antisocial behaviour.
- 151** Rykneld Homes has been reasonably active in taking enforcement action using a range of enforcement mechanisms. From April 2009 to January 2010, enforcement activity included demotion notices and demoted tenancies, extended introductory tenancies, Notices of Seeking Possession resulting in two possession orders and a suspended possession order and terminations of introductory tenancies. It also participated in the closure of a crack house, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and a parenting contract. Ten victims of ASB were moved through gaining additional priority for the choice-based letting scheme. Much of this activity was carried out in partnership but overall it shows that the organisation has taken some form of formal enforcement action in around a quarter of cases. File checks also demonstrated appropriate action being taken. This indicates Rykneld Homes is using its powers appropriately to tackle antisocial behaviour.

- 152** Rykneld Homes does make effective use of a range of tools for evidence collection for antisocial behaviour and publicising successes to encourage residents to come forward. For example, it has used professional witnesses, provides Dictaphones for evidence recording by customers and has easy access to the Council's noise monitoring equipment and cameras. Successes such as the recent closure of a 'crack house' are publicised to help develop customer confidence in reporting issues and to further discourage perpetrators. This approach effectively supports enforcement action.
- 153** Information on ASB activity is not being comprehensively analysed to target prevention and enforcement work. Information on ASB levels in different areas has not been analysed to identify and target hotspot areas. The ALMO's estate assessment data, covered in more detail below, is being fed into multi-agency work to target some activities such as diversionary schemes and there has also been some analysis of diversity strands in relation to ASB cases although this is still at an early stage is positive. However, overall, work in this area is underdeveloped.
- 154** Mediation is not being used effectively to deal with neighbour disputes. There have only been three cases in the last ten months where mediation has been used and this was carried out by Rykneld Homes' staff. The ALMO does not have arrangements in place for independent mediation which means some residents may be reluctant to enter into mediation where there is a potential threat of breach tenancy action. In addition an external agency can bring in specialist expertise. The organisation is not providing residents with appropriate opportunities to resolve problems through mediation.
- 155** The ALMO only offers limited support to customers outside standard office hours. As the organisation's flexi-time system does enable staff to work up until 8pm there is an opportunity to carry out some support and investigation work during the early evening. However, although a 24 hour reporting line has been in place for two months, this is simply a reporting facility which passes messages onto the ALMO during the next working day. While staff will advise contact with the police in emergency situations there is no on-call Neighbourhood Champion or other support services available. This means the ALMO is missing opportunities to collect evidence at the time incidents occur and is not offering optimal support to customers during the periods when they are likely to feel most intimidated.
- 156** Processes to assess satisfaction with ASB services and to assess performance against some service standards are underdeveloped. It is positive that satisfaction surveys are carried out at different stages in case resolution but the questions are not sufficiently tailored to each stage of the process and importantly the level of returns are low with 10 per cent at stage one and 14 per cent at stage two. The service standards in this area are also not challenging such as a requirement to get back to the victim within 10 calendar days following the initial report. While it is reported that performance is well ahead of this target we found that the monitoring arrangements to measure this and the regularity of ongoing contact are not robust. This reduces the ability of the ALMO to understand how far the service is meeting customer needs and expectations.

## How good is the service?

- 157** There is an effective approach to ASB case management. Despite the weaknesses in some performance monitoring arrangements examination of cases does show appropriate action planning and regular contact being made with victims. There is a supportive approach and a focus on sustaining tenancies. Cases are also not closed until the complainant has been informed and if they object to case closure, a negotiated extension time is agreed. Appropriate IT is also in place to track the progress of individual cases. This indicates that residents do get a customer focused response when they report ASB problems.
- 158** Satisfaction in dealing with ASB, based on the limited information available, is reasonable. Of those responding to surveys at stage one 91 per cent were satisfied with the service and 75 per cent at stage two. Residents we met who have experienced ASB during the past 12 months confirmed that they had found it easy to report their complaints and that they had been satisfied with the responsiveness of Neighbourhood Champions. There was less satisfaction with the outcome of cases, an issue which the ALMO is seeking to address through discussion of expectations early in the case management process. Although the evidence is not comprehensive there are indications that the service is broadly meeting customer expectations.
- 159** The use of incentive schemes to encourage positive resident behaviour is underdeveloped. A range of prize draws make up the organisation's resident reward scheme and positively these include good neighbour and gardening awards. However, the reward matrix does not properly consider ASB issues and does not ensure that in cases of proven ASB, perpetrators are excluded from the award scheme. This means the scheme has not been designed to maximise support to ASB prevention work.
- 160** There is a positive approach to keeping in touch with residents. Rykneld Homes carries out visits to new tenants after six weeks. These are used to ensure the resident has moved in and that any problems such as benefit entitlement or repairs are being addressed. It has been successful in carrying out 92.5 per cent of visits to date this year. In addition in October 2009, the ALMO commenced a programme of yearly visits to longer-standing customers, which aim to update profile information, review property condition and identify rechargeable repairs, help identify any unmet need for adaptations or any outstanding repairs and to promote direct debit and contents insurance. There have also been 1,300 visits carried out by Neighbourhood Champions and Wardens to identify potentially unmet need support needs. This helps ensure residents' needs are being effectively met.
- 161** Rykneld has a positive approach to tenancy support. It has its own specialist worker who carries out home visits and assessments on cases referred. The worker provides short term support, normally up to six months across a range of issues and has dealt with 73 cases in the first three quarters of 2009/10. The service can demonstrate strong outcomes in terms of preventing homelessness, income maximisation and support in ASB cases. In addition, satisfaction levels are high at 90 per cent. More complex cases are referred on to a range of specialist external agencies for support. Referrals are also made to an external agency for handyman services for vulnerable people. This is ensuring that appropriate support is provided to residents where required.

**162** Tenancy conditions are being effectively used in tenancy management. The tenancy agreement is accessible and comprehensive. It clearly outlines the rights and responsibilities of landlord and tenant and has very clear clauses in relation to domestic abuse and harassment. Introductory tenancies are used for new tenancies as an additional deterrent to tenancy breaches, with the limited security being clearly explained at sign up. There are also appropriate arrangements in place to deal with tenancy management issues such as abandonment, assignment and succession. This helps ensure that residents are clear on their rights and responsibilities and that tenancy changes are effectively dealt with.

### Estate management

**163** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in estate management. There is a well-developed approach to monitoring the quality of the environment including an effective estate inspection process. Residents have some influence over neighbourhood improvements, graffiti is effectively dealt with and garage areas are well managed. Resident satisfaction with neighbourhoods is also high. However, service standards are underdeveloped and cleaning charges are not being applied fairly.

**164** Rykneld has a generally well developed approach to monitoring the quality of the environment in its 65 neighbourhoods. There is an estate assessment framework which was developed with customers, which is based on weighting 21 indicators such as the volume of ASB reported, incidents of vandalism and graffiti identified. These are informed through performance monitoring data and based on judgements during estate inspections. This then identifies estates as being red, green or amber with this information being updated monthly and published on the website, as well as being discussed with residents groups. Any estates which are shown as being red or amber generate an estate improvement plan. The process is oversensitive in some areas where smaller issues can sometimes cause an amber or red assessment but overall the approach is assisting in maintaining and understanding the quality of the environment. There is a high level of satisfaction with neighbourhoods with the 2008 STATUS survey showing 87 per cent satisfaction. This shows that the standards being achieved in neighbourhoods are meeting the expectations of a significant proportion of customers.

**165** There is an effective approach to estate inspections. Rykneld Homes carries out monthly inspections with resident representatives, where they exist, and six monthly estate walkabouts with a wider group of stakeholders including the police, councillors and relevant contractors. All inspections are well publicised in advance. Problematic issues are noted and there is accountability for actions arising. Performance on completing inspections in line with the programme is monitored and reported, and shows that they are all being completed on time. The inspection process is helping ensure estates are well maintained.

**166** There is a positive approach to the management and maintenance of garage areas. A garage strategy is in place and cyclical maintenance is carried out. Garage areas viewed were generally positive in appearance. There is a demand for garages in the district so there are no plans for significant demolition. This is ensuring that garages are used effectively and do not become unsightly or attract antisocial behaviour.

## How good is the service?

- 167** Rykneld Homes has a responsive approach to dealing with graffiti. It has a contract in place for 14 day and 24 hour responses, depending on the nature of the graffiti and performance is checked before invoices are paid. These are also published service standards and performance of 100 per cent is being achieved. Customers are generally positive about how quickly the ALMO deals with graffiti and vandal damage. This helps maintain a positive appearance on estates.
- 168** Residents are able to influence environmental improvements although the budget is limited. There is a neighbourhood improvement budget of £30,000 in 2009/10 which will increase to £100,000 in future years for carrying out identified environmental and neighbourhood improvements. Bids are made from a variety of sources such as Neighbourhood Champions and resident group with decisions made by the resident led Involvement Monitoring Group. The availability of this funding is widely promoted. A range of works such as play areas, additional security lighting and fencing have been funded. Grants have sometimes been given on the basis of match funding from other organisations. Rykneld Homes does not have direct responsibility for large open space areas but does have a role in working with the Council to identify wider estate issues. There is evidence that it has exploited partnerships by, for example, working with the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) to gate off an area in Killamarsh where nuisance was regularly taking place with £18,000 coming from the CDRP. This is enabling residents to influence the delivery of improvements on estates.
- 169** There is an inequitable approach to recovering costs for the cleaning of the six, three storey blocks which Rykneld Homes manages. The costs have not been disaggregated from the rent, except for leaseholders. The Council has responsibility for service charge policy and the ALMO has sought to change the Council's approach and a strategy has been agreed. This means that the costs of the service are currently being subsidised by tenants who do not receive it.
- 170** There is only very limited information provided to residents about estate management standards. Rykneld Homes' published standards focus primarily on the estate inspection process and graffiti removal but not for example on the quality of ground maintenance on estates. Although the Council has responsibility for ground maintenance services Rykneld Homes still has a role in monitoring the overall condition of estates and working with the Council to ensure high standards. Rykneld Homes Involvement Group did have input into the standards set with the Council in the grounds maintenance protocol but Rykneld Homes has not publicised the standards the Council is seeking to achieve. There was also a lack of published standards for the cleaning services provided to the three storey blocks and sheltered housing schemes the ALMO manages, although this was rectified during the inspection. However, overall there is insufficient information for residents to effectively assess the performance of estate services.

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## Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 171** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in leasehold management and Right to Buy services. The Right to Buy is well publicised and applications are being effectively processed. Leaseholder services are easy to access and involvement opportunities are promoted. Service charges, maintenance and estate management issues for leaseholders are also being well managed. However, the level of leaseholder profile information is low, limiting the ability to tailor services and financial assistance has not been extended beyond statutory minimum requirements.
- 172** Right to Buy applications are being effectively processed. The ALMO is responsible for issuing section 124 and section 125 notices, instructing surveyors and drawing plans, before passing cases to the Council's legal team for completion. Despite market conditions, 28 cases have been processed to date this year, with only three being denied the Right to Buy. Rykneld Homes has complied with legislative timescales in all cases last year and in the year to date. The Right to Buy is effectively promoted to tenants, such as on a website page, via leaflets in customer access points and through an article in the tenant handbook. Staff also signpost customers who want to buy but cannot afford to do so to low-cost home ownership schemes in the area. This ensures residents can effectively exercise their Right to Buy.
- 173** Access to leaseholder services is robust. Leaseholder awareness-raising sessions have been carried out with all frontline staff to ensure they understand how leaseholder issues differ from those of tenants. Leaseholders have the same payment options as tenants and receive 'Homing In' which contains inclusive articles for all customers on issues such as estate management, as well as specialist ones for leaseholders. Individual letters are also routinely sent about new initiatives with, for example, a recent letter about the launch of the independent living service resulting in an enquiry from one leaseholder. Leaseholders have been informed of their statutory rights in relation to enfranchisement and a comprehensive leaseholder handbook is also in place. This is ensuring leaseholders can easily access services.
- 174** Opportunities for leaseholder involvement are in place although actual level of involvement has been limited. The leaseholder forum takes place annually but is not well attended with seven leaseholders attending the last meeting. Rykneld Homes has made every effort to encourage attendance by holding it in different parts of the district and exploring different start times, offering transportation and paying expenses. All 71 leaseholders are sent minutes of the meeting, which takes the form of information giving by the ALMO and an opportunity for leaseholders to raise issues of concern. Survey results are circulated each year and will be accompanied this year by a brief performance report as well. There has been a proportionate response to enabling leaseholder involvement.

## How good is the service?

- 175** Rykneld Homes takes an active approach to maintaining leaseholder properties. It highlights leaseholder repair and maintenance responsibilities in the welcome pack and has sent gas safety leaflets to all leaseholders. New leases include the requirement to provide an annual gas safety certificate to the ALMO which is being monitored. It has also very recently begun offering gas servicing at a competitive rate. Section 20 procedures are robust, although the limited amount of larger scale work done to date means they have not been regularly used. This approach is helping ensure leaseholder properties are well maintained.
- 176** Appropriate management services are in place for leaseholders. There are currently no ongoing ASB cases but appropriate processes are in place to deal with any that emerge. Although only 68.42 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied with management services in December 2009 (based on a representative 30 per cent sample), the ALMO can demonstrate that it pursued every negative comment which were largely about the quality of grounds maintenance, quality of workmanship on major improvement schemes and the absence of caretaking services on estates and responded individually to leaseholders about its findings. Leaseholders are receiving generally effective estate management services.
- 177** Rykneld Homes is effective in raising and managing the collection of leaseholder service charges. Although leaseholders have not been consulted about how service charges are raised, the process is based on economic recovery of actual costs and leases specify how this will be done. Charges cover all appropriate costs. Despite the economic climate and that six leaseholders are paying in ten instalments, which will not clear their debts until the next financial year the 87 per cent collection rate for 2008/09 is forecast to increase to 93 per cent in 2009/10. There is a policy of negotiating with leaseholders and their mortgage lenders, if appropriate, to agree reasonable repayments of arrears rather than taking enforcement action. Correspondence on service charges signposts advice services. Rykneld Homes has recently introduced a fixed management fee, based on the actual costs of delivering leasehold management services. This is transparent and ensures tenants do not subsidise the service. This ensures that charges are applied fairly and collected appropriately.
- 178** Limited profile information is held about leaseholders. An audit has been carried out which included questions about the six diversity strands and questions about communication methods but return rates were relatively low. Profile data is held on a leaseholder spreadsheet as well as on the housing management IT system and large print documents are routinely provided for five customers with sight impairments, but the limited profile held (63 per cent on age, 40 per cent on disability, 47 per cent on ethnicity, 21 per cent on sexuality, 17 per cent on religion and 100 per cent on gender) means services have not been further tailored to meet need.

**179** Rykneld Homes and the Council do not offer financial services to leaseholders, other than the statutory minimum. Leaseholders are not offered insurance and loans to cover improvements (based on a charge on the property) are only available from the Council if costs of essential works exceed the statutory threshold level (no work or loans around decent homes improvements are currently offered). A buy back policy was considered by the Council but due to its financial position and the potential impact on the improvement programme this was rejected. This means that additional financial assistance for leaseholders is limited.

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### Allocations and lettings

**180** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in allocations and lettings. The housing application and bidding process is managed well and housing applicants are being housed within reasonable timescales. The viewing and sign up process is comprehensive and customer focused. Satisfaction with the housing application and lettings process is high. Rykneld Homes is also effectively influencing the development of allocations policy. However, performance on average turnaround time for void properties is weak, the approach to under-occupation is not comprehensive and there is not an effective process to promote and maximise the impact of mutual exchanges. Understanding of lettings trends is also underdeveloped.

**181** The housing application registration process is being managed effectively. Application forms are widely available including online. Lettings officers and local office staff provide assistance with completion of forms including home visits, although there is no facility for telephone applications. The time to fully process applications from initial receipt to final decision is average at 15 days. Although the application form is overly long, the process is thorough and the agreed allocations policy is being effectively applied by Rykneld Homes. This includes independent expert assessment of medical issues. There is a clear publicised review procedure in place and review requests are low at approximately one per month. There is also a formal annual review of registrations to ensure information is up to date. This helps ensure a responsive housing application process which support residents and the lettings process.

**182** There is a robust bidding process for the Choice-based Lettings (CBL) scheme. Property adverts appear weekly on the CBL website, through newsletters in local offices and with newsletters sent directly to applicants where requested. Adverts are clear and contain the relevant information for bidding including outcomes from the previous week giving details of priority bandings that resulted in successful bids. The housing application asks if people require assistance in the bidding process and an auto-bidding process is in place for customers who want this option. Personal housing pathway plans are also developed for vulnerable clients. Bids can be made in a variety of ways including by telephone, text and over the internet. Applicants who are not bidding are written to and telephoned to establish why they are not bidding and if they need any further support. This helps ensures council housing is accessible to those in need.

## How good is the service?

- 183** There is strong performance on the average time for rehousing applicants following registration. The average rehousing time is 16 days for band one priority, 19.5 days for band two, 39 days for band three and 63 days for band 4. Refusal rates are running at approximately 34 per cent but applicants are allowed three bids per week which contributes to this and most refusals actually occur prior to viewing. Overall, the service is ensuring that applicants are rehoused in reasonable timescales according to priorities.
- 184** The viewing and sign up process is comprehensive and customer focused. Rykneld Homes' staff are present at all viewings to highlight key features of the property and any outstanding repair issues. Multiple viewings speed up the lettings process. The sign up process covers all key issues such as rent payments and benefits as well as information about the local area. Documentation is of a high standard. New tenants are also issued with a useful 'welcome pack' which includes essentials for the moving day. This ensures an effective introduction for new residents.
- 185** Satisfaction with the housing application and lettings process is high. Postal surveys are carried out after sign up and there is a reasonable return of 57 per cent. However, applicants who have not been rehoused are not surveyed for satisfaction which is a weakness. Approximately 94 per cent of residents surveyed were happy with service which shows it is meeting the expectations of most new residents.
- 186** The average turnaround time for void properties is high. The average time taken to relet homes from April to December 2009 was 51 days. There is a positive trend with performance improving consistently over the last four months with the average turnaround time being 34 days in January. Void repair delays covered earlier in this report have impacted on performance but there are also a number of hard-to-let properties affecting performance. Properties are advertised as soon as the property has been inspected which is often prior to tenancy termination and there is now close monitoring of each stage of the process. However, overall performance is still below the average of 28 days achieved by other ALMOs. This means that income for the organisation is not being maximised.
- 187** Problems with hard-to-let homes are being addressed although some actions are still at the planning stage. Some properties which were designated for older people are in low demand and these are being redesignated for use by other client groups as part of a controlled process agreed with the Council. This process commenced in May 2009. A hard-to-let action plan is in place which has delivered a more detailed analysis of refusals, additional marketing of properties and work by the Neighbourhood Champions to address perceptions of specific areas including partnership working eg cracking crime days. However work on the provision of additional incentives, property improvements and enhanced facilities such as furnished/carpeted dwellings are still at planning stage. Rykneld Homes actions are starting to reduce problems with hard-to-let homes but actions are not yet comprehensive.
- 188** The approach to under-occupation is not comprehensive. While some work has been done directly with residents of four bedroom properties and residents under-occupying homes receive a higher banding in the allocation policy, there has not been a full analysis of the extent of under-occupation and there is no publicised incentive scheme for residents to move smaller accommodation. This means that the organisation is not maximising actions likely to make best use of homes.

- 189** There is not an effective process to promote and maximise the impact of mutual exchanges. There is no monitoring of the level of mutual exchanges that are taking place or the number of applications. The CBL scheme is not being used to advertise properties and there is no mechanism for automated matching. This means resident mobility through mutual exchanges is not being maximised.
- 190** Analysis of letting trends to inform services has commenced but is still underdeveloped. There is analysis of lettings by the six main diversity strands which shows that the profile of both applications and lettings is broadly in line with the profile of the district. There is also an awareness of turnover in different parts of the district and an understanding of refusal rates across property types. However, the information has not been analysed together across areas to show the turnover, refusals and reason for refusals. Exit surveys have not been used to identify why people are moving out. This means that understanding of letting trends is not fully developed to support management of the service.
- 191** Rykneld Homes is actively engaged in allocation policy development. Responsibility for the allocation policy rests with the Council. It is currently being reviewed and is now in the consultation stage. The input of Rykneld Homes has been a key factor in driving this review and it has had a significant impact on shaping the draft policy. The new policy simplifies the allocation process (which will enable the overlong application form to be redesigned) and reforms a complicated rural lettings policy introducing a better framework for local lettings policies. Rykneld Homes is helping to ensure allocations policy better meets the needs of customers.

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### Supported Housing

- 192** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in supported housing. There has been a positive review of the supported housing service and delivery of a redesigned service is ongoing. Services provided under a Supporting People contract are of a reasonable standard and there is a positive approach to support planning for all residents receiving housing support. Levels of satisfaction with both the Carecall service and Community Warden Service are high. However, there are still inconsistencies in the way that tenants are charged for supported housing services, some supported housing facilities are out of date and some performance indicators for the supported housing services show mixed performance.
- 193** There has been a positive fundamental review of the supported housing service and delivery of a redesigned service is ongoing. This meant that at the time of inspection the service was in the process of transition. An out-dated tenure-linked service for older people was inherited from the Council. The review led to a decision to replace the existing community warden service with an Independent Living Service with a new structure, jobs and roles. Independent Living Officers have recently been appointed replacing the previous mobile wardens and training processes are ongoing. The new developing service is providing a package of support based on an individual's needs, the vulnerability matrix and a regularly updated support plan. The Carecall service is switching to an external provider from the end of February 2010 linked to an agreement to update existing alarm call equipment. This demonstrates the commitment and ability of Rykneld Homes to modernise supported housing services.

## How good is the service?

- 194** Services provided under a Supporting People contract are of a reasonable standard. Initially services were assessed by the County Council Supporting People team as achieving a 'C' rating under the Quality Assessment Framework with concerns raised about the level of support plans in place. Support plans are now in place for all 1,423 residents covered by the contract and a desktop assessment by the Supporting People team has confirmed the self assessed 'B' rating under the new Quality Assessment Framework although a validation visit is still to take place. Residents can expect reasonable standards from the supported housing service.
- 195** There is a positive approach to support planning. This is linked to a vulnerability matrix and outcomes from support plans are monitored as part of an annual renewal. Case studies are also produced to demonstrate positive outcomes for service users. The support planning principle is now being applied across all designated accommodation for older people where support is required even where supporting people funding is not in place. Support plans are in place for 90 per cent of residents in all the 2,348 older person properties. Performance on reviewing support plans and visiting in agreed timescales is running at 100 per cent. This is helping ensure effective support for older people.
- 196** There are still inconsistencies in the way that residents are charged for supported housing services. Residents living in homes with alarm call equipment whose tenancies commenced since April 2009 can opt in or out of the supported housing services but are required to pay for this service where they are outside of the supporting people contract. Residents who moved in prior to this date are unable to opt out of this service but are not directly charged as costs are being pooled across the organisation. This will change from the 1 April 2010 when services to all residents will be provided on an opt in or out basis with residents charged to reflect the costs. Rykneld Homes has worked with the Council who retain responsibility for rent and service setting to deliver these changes but at the time of inspection charges were not equitable.
- 197** The majority of housing designated for older people is of an adequate standard. The tenants' lounge of one of the two sheltered housing schemes has recently been completely refurbished following a consultation exercise with residents. This scheme is an attractive, well located and very well managed scheme and is very popular with residents. Facilities for mobility scooters are limited although do form part of improvement plans. Other designated accommodation takes the form of self contained bungalows and ground floor flats spread throughout the district. Overall this accommodation is providing a reasonable standard of accommodation for older people.

- 198** However, some supported housing accommodation lacks modern facilities. One of the two designated sheltered housing schemes is no longer fit for purpose. The accommodation is a 20 unit bedsit scheme which has shared bathing facilities and low accessibility standard. While Rykneld Homes has effectively maintained the scheme and made it a pleasant place to live the scheme does not provide a high standard of accommodation for residents and demand is low. Rykneld Homes have been working with the Council, who have responsibility for deciding the future of scheme, as part of a wider housing regeneration strategy but currently this property is not providing facilities which are appropriate for the designated client group. In addition alarm call equipment being used by the organisation is out-dated and hard to maintain. This weakens the service provided to residents.
- 199** Some performance indicators for the supported housing services show mixed performance. The Carecall service answered 91.41 per cent of calls in 30 seconds against a 94 per cent target in the first three quarters of 2009/10 and performance on annual equipment checks is at 93.38 per cent against a target of 100 per cent. This reduces the quality of services to residents.
- 200** Resident satisfaction with both the Carecall service and Community Warden Service are high. For the period April to December 2009 surveys show satisfaction at 92.9 per cent for the Carecall service and 90.3 per cent for the warden service. This demonstrates that the service is meeting the expectations of the majority of existing residents.
- 201** The supported housing service is benefiting from additional resources funded by the Supporting People programme. Since November 2009 an officer from Age Concern has been funded to provide benefits advice for residents for 1.5 days per week. This officer visits residents in their homes and has also been training the new Independent Living Officers. Information on outcomes will be provided so that Rykneld Homes can track the difference this intervention has made.
- 202** There is an effective hospital discharge policy in place. This ensures that discharge from hospital is linked to updating of support requirements when a resident returns home. The protocol has been in place since 2007 and is currently being updated with both Rykneld Homes and the Council involved in the review with the Health Authority and Social Services. This is ensuring residents who have been in hospital receive appropriate support when they come out.

## How good is the service?

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 203** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in the significant area of repairs and maintenance. The Council did not have an overall value for money strategy for this service. It was not making effective use of benchmarking data. The approach to modern methods of procurement was underdeveloped. However, the Council had begun to externalise some of the service, it had used e-procurement successfully and it could demonstrate some efficiency gains.
- 204** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in the approach to value for money. Benchmarking shows positive performance on costs in a large number of service areas. There is a strong corporate approach to value for money including effective identification and addressing of value for money issues with significant savings having been delivered. There is a robust approach to procurement and this is being used to deliver value for money improvements. Service level agreements have been effectively reviewed and a modern efficient responsive repairs service has been established. However, costs in some areas are still above average and reporting of unit costs is not comprehensive.

### How do costs compare?

- 205** There are positive indicators of value for money across a range of service areas. Rykneld Homes is a member of a national benchmarking club and is using this to track its costs alongside performance. This shows below average and low costs in a range of areas when compared with similar organisations. These include repairs and maintenance costs, voids management, antisocial behaviour, resident involvement, neighbourhood and estate management and leasehold management. Office costs, central costs per property, finance costs and overheads as a percentage of direct costs also compare very well. While these need to be considered alongside the performance detailed in the sections above they do indicate that the organisation is not a high cost organisation.
- 206** There are a small number of areas where costs are higher than average. The direct costs of rent arrears recovery, tenancy management and supported housing are all above average. The cost of lettings is high. The cost of IT per employee is also above average. While there are actions ongoing to address higher cost areas currently there are indications of lower value for money in these areas.
- 207** In some service areas there has been more detailed assessment of value for money which has shown generally positive results. The efficiency of the repairs, gas servicing and void repairs has been externally assessed through an independent health check in 2008 which showed generally positive results when comparing cost and efficiency. Following further modernisation of the service during 2008 a further more detailed external examination was carried out in November 2009. This demonstrated positive comparative value for money in all areas apart from voids where costs are still high.

**208** Work to assess value for money in the contact centre shows mixed results. Rykneld Homes commissioned an independent assessment of the Council's contact centre in 2009 which found that comparatively costs were reasonable but that performance needed to improve to deliver value for money. While this demonstrates the commitment of Rykneld Homes to understanding the value for money in the service, it also shows that work is still to be done to ensure value for money in the contact centre.

### How is value for money managed?

**209** There is a strong corporate approach to value for money. A value for money strategy provides a framework for the approach with a value assurance policy supporting this by providing further details of the approach to assessing the competitiveness of services and the action that should be considered to address resulting issues. Value for money is a standard item on reports and team meeting agendas. At the commencement of the ALMO a zero-based budgeting approach was taken and it has since been linked closely to business planning with identification of how savings from efficiencies can be invested in other areas of services. Benchmarked service costs are also reported alongside performance in the organisation's quarterly comprehensive performance report. While we found some managers had incomplete understanding of costs in their service areas the overall approach is ensuring a focus on value for money.

**210** The strategic approach has focused on identifying and addressing value for money issues in the organisation. High-cost elements of the service have been prioritised for attention and benchmarking and external challenge have been used to test value for money. There has also been a systematic approach looking at each budget heading for the organisation and assessing the work required to ensure value for money in that area and prioritising this according to value and potential savings. This has resulted in a number of significant initiatives such as tendering of major works, reorganisation of older person services and a generic working project in housing management focused on improving value for money.

**211** Significant efficiency savings have been delivered since the ALMO was established in April 2007. A log of savings is maintained and these amount to £2.4 million. These are a range of areas but with significant savings being made in the reduction in the use of agency staff and in the operations of the DLO and rationalisation of premises. This has provided additional resources to invest in priority areas of the service.

**212** There has been a robust approach to reviewing Service Level Agreements (SLAs). All SLAs with the Council have been reviewed and a variety of changes have been made as a result of this. Benchmarking cost data has been used in assessing the services provided. Approximately £100,000 has been saved through negotiations on SLAs and improved performance levels have also been negotiated in a number of areas. Major changes included the return of responsibility for grounds maintenance back to the Council and also changes to the Human Resources service provided. In areas where, following review Rykneld Homes there were still ongoing concerns about value for money further action is being taken. For example IT support costs are still felt to be too high so the service is to be tendered. This approach is helping ensure that value for money is delivered in SLAs with the Council.

## How good is the service?

- 213** There is an effective approach to procurement. A procurement strategy provides a clear framework for procurement. A central list of contracts is held with details of the contract term and this is used in coordinating ongoing procurement activity. The number of suppliers has been reduced from 1,299 when the ALMO was established to 453 currently. This has also helped reduce administration costs. A range of procurement arrangements are being utilised following assessment of the options available including e-procurement, procurement consortia and partnering. Procurement is being used in range of areas to improve the efficiency of the organisation.
- 214** Effective contracts have been established to deliver the decent homes programme although this is recent and the impact is still developing. Two partnering contracts are in place with open book accounting and shared savings mechanisms from the outset. External partnering expertise has been employed to assist in setting up and initial management of the contracts. A range of key performance indicators has been agreed including customer satisfaction which link to contractor payments. The cost of supplies being used by the contractors have been benchmarked against procurement consortia costs and found to be cheaper through the contractor's suppliers. However the contracts only formally commenced in January 2010 and the service prior to this was recognised as not providing value for money. This is indicated by the £430,057 savings that are projected to be achieved in the final quarter of 2009/10 compared with previous costs.
- 215** A strong approach to efficiency and value for money is demonstrated in the responsive repairs service. There is a very high level of multi-skilling in the service, modern well stocked vans with tracking systems and a simple schedule of rates. Operatives use PDAs to receive and confirm orders and there is flexibility to carry out all required works when on-site. The stores operation has been streamlined and now operates with three staff with robust procurement arrangements for supplies. A trading account is used to assist in managing value for money and this is approximately in balance. Performance in this service area is also strong and therefore there are strong indications that value for money is being delivered.
- 216** However, emergency repairs are running at relatively high levels. From April 2009 to December 2009 approximately 22 per cent of all responsive repairs were carried out as emergencies. Urgent repairs are at reasonable levels at approximately 23 per cent. Rykneld Homes does batch a proportion of non-urgent repairs reported responsively and completes them as a planned programme which are excluded from the figures but may impact on the proportions. A high level of emergency repairs reduces the efficiency of the repairs service.
- 217** There are still some areas where IT is not yet maximising efficiency. For example, surveyors receive inspection and other activity requests on PDAs but cannot yet place orders on these and PDAs are not used in the collection and transfer of stock condition survey information. Mobile technology has also not yet been introduced to housing management services. This means that IT is not ensuring value for money in some areas of the service.

- 218** There is a focus on planned maintenance and investment programme although the ratio between planned and responsive revenue spend is not yet in line with best practice. In 2008/09 the ratio of planned and responsive revenue spending was 37 per cent to 63 per cent and is on track to achieve 52 per cent to 48 per cent in 2009/10. The Audit Commission has recommended best practice is 60 per cent to 40 per cent. The historic under-investment in the stock is impacting on progress in this area as component failures increase demands of the responsive repairs service. Rykneld Homes has sought to maximise the funding available to improve homes to address this issue and is batching specific repairs in a planned cyclical programme which is delivering efficiencies in repairs services. These are generally larger jobs and enable concentrated working in particular areas with materials delivered to site. Value for money is improving in this area but will not achieve optimum levels until more improvement works are completed.
- 219** Fundamental service reviews are being used to improve value for money. For example, it was identified that the current supported housing service was not providing value for money. The review showed that the Carecall element of the service was not getting sufficient calls to justify the ongoing costs of approximately £262,000 and that a large investment is needed to bring the existing equipment in the call centre and homes up to date. The result is an outsourcing of the Carecall service which will commence in April 2010 and will reduce costs to £91,500.
- 220** There is a positive approach to accessing additional funding to deliver services. There are a range of examples where this is taking place including accessing free gas connections for residents from which is saving approximately £12,000; an annual claim made to British Gas for re-imbursment of insulation and other heating related work which amounted to £187,000 over the last year; £800,000 from the HCA for insulation works to non traditional homes and £135,000 from the PCT for adaptations. This helps the organisation maximise value for money for residents.
- 221** There are some areas where there is insufficient tracking of costs. Some unit costs are not being regularly reported to enable effective tracking. For example, average cost of a repair and average void costs are not tracked in performance reports. There has also been insufficient benchmarking of unit costs in major works to assist in management of the major works contract. This information is important in driving efficiencies through the new contract.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 222** In 2007, we found a balance of drivers and barriers. The service had improved in some areas and there had been a focus on improving access which had led to better call handling and more appointments and a much improved performance on gas servicing. Tenant involvement in the service had also improved. However, the overall pace of improvement was slow and lacked sufficient customer focus. Not all the recommendations from a previous report had been completed and the service could not demonstrate a sustained track record in delivering value for money.
- 223** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Performance indicators overall show a positive direction of travel and progress against improvement plans is also strong. Improvement in standards to tenants has been strong in major works, responsive repairs, gas servicing, resident participation and tenancy and estate management. It has been more mixed in housing income management, customer access, voids and allocations and supported housing. There has been insufficient improvement in aids and adaptations.
- 224** Rykneld Homes has made effective progress against the Audit Commission recommendations published in 2007 following the Audit Commission inspection of the repairs and maintenance service. These are listed in Appendix 1 and most of these have been completed. There are a few areas where progress has been slow but overall they demonstrate the ability to deliver improvement in response to external recommendations.
- 225** Performance indicators show a positive direction of travel. The proportion of key performance indicators on target has increased from 25 per cent at the end of March 2009 to 63 per cent at the end of December 2009. Quarterly 'Housemark' benchmarking of 26 indicators also shows an increase in the number of indicators in the best 25 per cent from six in quarter one of 2009/10 to 13 in quarter three. This demonstrates a track record of improvement across a range of performance indicators.
- 226** Progress against improvement plans is strong. Progress is reported to the Board quarterly, using a traffic light system. This shows that implementation of 99 per cent of actions is on track, with slippage primarily in the area of asset management where there have been a number of overruns due to inter-dependencies with the Council. This demonstrates a positive approach to delivering improvement.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 227** Improvements have been delivered in customer care and access although these have not been comprehensive. The quality of information for customers has improved including an increased range of service standards and complaints processing has improved. Although still not strong, performance of the call centre has improved with calls answered within 20 seconds increasing from 64.49 per cent in 2007/08 to 79.74 per cent in 2009/10 to December 2009. Similarly, the percentage of calls abandoned at the call centre has dropped from 10.84 per cent in 2007/08 to 8.64 per cent in the year to date. Work to ensure the accessibility of sheltered housing and communal areas has not been effectively progressed and office accommodation still requires further improvement although this is planned.
- 228** The approach to diversity has improved in some areas although not consistently across all. For example a positive approach to identifying and addressing vulnerability has been developed, services now show positive results against national equality and diversity codes and standards and equality impact assessment have delivered improvements. However, the organisation has been slow to develop customer profile information and to address the staff and Board profile which does not reflect the resident profile.
- 229** The approach to major works has improved. This is now effectively focused on achieving the decent homes standard and a range of improvements have been delivered to residents' homes. The level of non-decent homes has remained static at approximately 53 per cent since April 2008 but 1000 units have fallen into non-decency since Rykneld Homes was established so this does not give a clear indication of the works being completed. The level of stock condition information has not increased quickly enough and SAP ratings have remained static but overall the service can demonstrate improvement in this area.
- 230** Significant improvements have been delivered in the responsive repairs and gas servicing. These services have been effectively modernised with a range of efficiencies introduced. There has also been consistent improvement across key performance indicators since 2007/08. Performance in timescales across all repairs categories have improved from 94-96 per cent in 2007/08 to over 99.5 per cent in all categories now. Similarly appointments made and kept have improved from 94.55 per cent to 99.72 per cent over the same period. Gas servicing performance in timescales has improved from 98.89 per cent in 2007/08 and 98.2 per cent in 2008/09 to 99.96 per cent now.
- 231** Void processing and allocations is now more effectively organised but stronger performance has only very recently been reflected in performance indicators. Voids are now being repaired to reasonable standards and satisfaction with let properties has increased significantly from 21 per cent in 2008/09 to 88 per cent from April to December 2009. The letting process has also become more customer focused. Timescales for reletting empty homes have improved consistently over four months from October 2009 to January 2010 although average performance for the period from April to December 2009 is 51 days which is a deterioration from the average of 38 days achieved in the previous year. This means that the organisation has been slow to address poor performance on voids which results in unnecessary loss of rental income.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 232** Improved outcomes in aid and adaptation services have been limited. While timescales for delivery have improved it is still taking too long to deliver minor adaptations and routine major adaptations. The increased focus on making best use of existing adaptations is positive but in terms of outcomes for residents improvement overall has been limited.
- 233** Housing income management collection shows improved performance although progress on financial inclusion work has been more mixed. Current arrears as a proportion of the rent debit has reduced from 1.85 per cent in both 2007/08 and 2008/09 to 1.72 per cent at December 2009. Former tenant arrears as a proportion of debit have also reduced from 1.98 per in 2007/08 to 1.38 per cent at December 2009. However, development of financial inclusion activities has been inconsistent.
- 234** There have been positive improvements in tenancy and estate management. Partnership working has been effectively developed including joint working on new enforcement powers and diversionary activities. However, there are still areas where the service has been slower to develop such as mediation services and service standards for estate management.
- 235** Supported housing services are in the process of significant restructuring which is delivering improvement but at the time of inspection these were not developed fully. For example, the service has improved in relation to support planning and satisfaction has been maintained at high levels, but some facilities are still outdated and the flexibility of services is still limited.
- 236** Improvements have been effectively delivered in resident involvement. For example opportunities for involvement have continued to expand and are having an increasing impact on services. Training for residents has been effectively developed and publicity around the service has also expanded. There is insufficient historical information on resident satisfaction to assess trends but current information shows a mixed picture.
- 237** Right to Buy and leaseholder services have been developed effectively although there are still some gaps. Right to Buy processing times are being effectively maintained at high levels and publicity around the service has continued to expand. Information for leaseholders has been developed well including recent leaseholder services awareness training for all front line staff. However, gas servicing for leaseholders has only recently been established although the major works programme has not yet impacted on leaseholders there are no formal arrangement in place to offer the opportunity to buy into these services.
- 238** There has been a strong approach to delivering value for money improvement. For example a strong corporate approach has been established and significant savings have been achieved. Procurement mechanisms are also driving value for money and service level agreements with the Council have been effectively reviewed.
- 239** There is evidence of improved resident satisfaction overall but data is not up to date. Overall satisfaction with services has increased from 75.89 per cent in 2005/06 to 78.15 per cent in 2008. However, there has not been an effective mechanism to track satisfaction overall on an ongoing basis.

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### How well does the service manage performance?

- 240** In 2007, we found a balance of drivers and barriers within the repairs and maintenance service. Corporately, there were robust improvement plans and milestones were being achieved. Corporate leadership had been strengthened and the housing service was a recognised priority. However, improvement planning was underdeveloped and performance information was not always collected and reported accurately. Staff lacked the appropriate IT skills, a problem exacerbated by the fragmented nature of the IT. The leadership of the repairs and maintenance service was hampered by fragmented management arrangements.
- 241** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. A clear hierarchy of plans are in place and there is an effective approach to improvement planning. Partnership working on developing improvements is strong and planned improvements focus on key issues for the service. There is a comprehensive approach to performance reporting and effective performance management arrangements for staff. However, there are still some weaknesses in performance management and some plans and strategies are underdeveloped.
- 242** There is a clear hierarchy of plans in place. A robust Business Plan is in place which is annually updated and a range of supporting strategies has been developed in key areas such as asset management. A high level service improvement plan outlines key tasks to meet corporate objectives and service action plans sit below these and provide the detailed delivery programme. These lower level plans are generally SMART although there is often a focus on outputs rather outcomes. However, overall the approach is providing a clear vision for the organisation and is driving improvement in the service.
- 243** There is an effective approach to improvement planning. The current Business Plan was the product of a comprehensive review that involved the Board, staff, residents and partners. This is supported by a robust service review process. A series of 23 workshops for residents and staff were held in 2007/08 which identified where the organisation wanted to be and how services needed to be shaped to achieve this. From this service reviews were prioritised. Service reviews have clear scopes, objectives and effective resident involvement and are resulting in some significant changes to services. For example, the review of older person services and generic housing management have both resulted in major restructuring and plans to improve services.
- 244** There are some positive examples of learning from other organisations. For example process benchmarking has been taking place in allocations and lettings and has been used to inform service improvements such as multiple viewings and the review of the allocation policy and application form. The ALMO also uses both national and regional 'Housemark' data and some 'Housing Quality Network' data for benchmarking performance to inform improvement planning and target setting. Although, more detailed process benchmarking is relatively new in some service areas benchmarking activity is increasingly driving service improvements.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 245** Rykneld Homes is making a significant contribution to developing and driving improvements in partnerships. This has been particularly important where the Council has retained responsibility for policy in areas which directly affect the delivery of services by the ALMO. For example, Rykneld Homes has played a key role in driving improvement planning in relation to service charge strategy, allocations policy and housing regeneration activity. The organisation takes a very inclusive approach to service improvement as demonstrated in the wide range of partners involved in the older persons services review. It is also an active member of the LSP. For example, the ALMO is project managing the LSP's forthcoming healthy communities' assessment which will be carried out by Sheffield Hallam University. This is ensuring that delivery of improvement for residents is linked to wider partnership working.
- 246** Planned improvements are effectively focused on key issues for the service. A wide range of improvements are planned and are being delivered across services and many relate to issues raised in judgement one of this report. For example:
- improvements to local offices;
  - increasing financial inclusion activity;
  - redesign of older persons services;
  - delivery of service charge strategy;
  - improved access to services on the website; and
  - improving void processing, hard-to-let dwellings action plans and work on under-occupation.
- 247** Improvement plans have a strong focus on value for money. A specific value for money action plan linked to the value for money strategy provides overall coordination and specific actions in service plans deliver these. For example value for money was the key driver in the recent tendering of partnering contracts for major works and the efficiency improvements being delivered to responsive repairs services. Ongoing improvements also include an integrated working review which is designed to improve the balance between generic and specialist working and should reduce the costs of rent arrears recovery and overall estate management. The purpose of the tenancy management and supported housing review are designed to achieve better value for money. IT efficiencies also form part of plans in a range of areas.
- 248** Rykneld Homes has demonstrated the ability to respond quickly to the need for improvement. A range of improvements identified through the inspection process has been incorporated in future improvement plans or in some cases delivered during the inspection. For example, following on-site feedback, arrears letters were immediately revised to address misleading information, cleaning standards were publicised in blocks, signage in offices was improved and partitions in interview rooms were removed. This helps demonstrate a commitment to improvement and delivering 'quick wins' where possible.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 249** There is a clear approach to performance reporting. A comprehensive quarterly performance report brings together a wide range of performance information. It includes a balanced scorecard on a basket of business-critical performance indicators and reports against service standards and service level agreements. It also provides an update on the delivery of the service improvement plan. Information is presented effectively using traffic lighting, graphs and supporting text where appropriate. There is also a link with cost and performance benchmarks where data is available and valid. Managers also use more detailed 'directorates reports', produced monthly.
- 250** There are effective performance management arrangements for staff and specific projects. A six-monthly performance appraisal system is in place and is being effectively applied. These provide both broad objectives as well as specific targets for individuals. Regular supervision sessions are also used to provide ongoing performance management. A summary of performance information is included in the core briefing, so it is always discussed at team meetings. At staff events, exercises have included exploration of how individual roles contribute to corporate objectives. Performance clinics are also used in every area where performance has slipped and involve a range of relevant staff to explore solutions. A project management approach is in place for major improvements. This helps ensure a culture of performance is maintained and that planned improvements are delivered.
- 251** There is a structured approach to risk management. The national federation of ALMO's risk model has been used and tailored to meet the needs of Rykneld Homes. This ensured that all elements of the business were assessed to address risk. Risks are regularly reported to the Board through a corporate risk register which rates and scores the risk and identifies mitigating actions. This is helping minimise risks to the organisation.
- 252** There are effective financial controls in place. There is a clear procedure around delegated authorities and effective financial reporting. Variances are reported against and mitigating action is taken.
- 253** The Council has effective arrangements in place to monitor the performance of the ALMO. A strategic liaison and monitoring group (SLMG) meets monthly and is attended by senior officers from both organisations. Discussions centre on the comprehensive performance report with drilling down into areas of underperformance. Detailed policy issues are also discussed. There is robust challenge and debate during these meetings. In addition to SLMG there are a range of opportunities for dialogue and discussion. There are regular liaison meetings between senior management teams from both the Council and the ALMO and regular 'get-togethers' between the Chief Executive, Leader and Cabinet Member from the Council and the Chief Executive of Rykneld Homes and Board Chair. Overall these processes are ensuring the performance of the ALMO is being monitored and that there is regular liaison at operational and strategic level.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 254** There are some weaknesses in performance management. Some monitoring arrangements are underdeveloped such as for introductory tenancy visits. There are also areas where the outcomes of activities are not being effectively monitored such as use of cards by frontline staff to identify vulnerabilities and pass them on to the appropriate team for support investigation. Collection of satisfaction information is not robust in some areas. There is also no ongoing monitoring of the proportion of rent collected. This weakens the ability to manage performance in some areas.
- 255** Some plans and strategies are underdeveloped. For example the leaseholder improvement plan is vague about dates, timescales and outcomes and bears little relation to the work underway or actually planned in the service and the antisocial behaviour strategy does not clearly set out proposed changes. This makes it more difficult to monitor delivery of improvements.

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## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 256** In 2007, we found that drivers significantly outweighed barriers. Corporate capacity was strong and capacity issues within this service had been recognised and additional capacity provided by consultants and by training to ensure that all operatives were multi-skilled. Financial capacity was strong. However, there were gaps in capacity in key areas which had hampered the delivery of improvements.
- 257** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Board and Senior Management Team demonstrate the skills and capacity to oversee the running of the business. There is a positive and professional working relationship between the Council and Rykneld Homes. Partnership working and procurement is increasing capacity and there is a pro-active approach to seeking funding to deliver improvements. The human resources strategy is delivering significant improvements including an effective approach to training, and information technology is effectively supporting service delivery. However average sickness days per employee are still too high, the last staff satisfaction survey showed mixed results and has not been repeated to assess progress, and capacity to improve the aids and adaptation service is limited.
- 258** Overall, the Board demonstrates the skills and capacity to oversee the running of the business. Board members show a positive awareness of key issues facing the organisation and a willingness to take difficult decisions. For example there is a strong understanding of key issues around decent homes works, choice-based lettings and the operation of the call centre. Difficult decisions have been taken around externalisation of services and significant restructuring of some services. A governance review has been carried out which has streamlined Board operations to improve efficiency.
- 259** There is also a robust approach to Board development. There is an annual appraisal process for Board members which has informed training needs. An independent consultancy has been used to provide external expertise in Board development on two occasions. Awaydays are arranged to provide training on how different areas of the service operate and Board members have also attended training alongside staff and residents. Training is provided for all Board members on key areas such as governance, risk management and finance and equality and diversity. The range of skills on the Board is also taken into account when new recruitment takes place.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 260** There is robust leadership from the Senior Management Team (SMT). There has been a strong lead from the SMT to improve services. The capacity of the SMT has been developed with new members recruited to the team following some departures. The SMT has striven to provide a more systematic approach to staff management and delivery of improvement.
- 261** There is a positive and professional working relationship between the Council and Rykneld Homes. This relationship has matured over time which enables robust discussions about contentious issues and effective agreement being reached. The Council has confidence in the capacity and capability of the SMT at Rykneld Homes. This mutually supportive relationship assists in the delivery of improvement.
- 262** Partnership working is increasing capacity. In addition to joint working with the Council a range of partnership work is being carried out which is increasing capacity. This is particularly evident in work on combating antisocial behaviour. It is also demonstrated in wider partnership activities such as identifying potential wildlife sites on waste ground which it will use for LSP inter-generational projects later in 2010. This is helping the organisation deliver improvements for residents.
- 263** Rykneld Homes in partnership with the Council is pro-active in seeking funding to deliver improvements. For example a range of funding options to support the decent homes programme are being utilised and explored in consultation with key partners such as the HCA and CLG. Rykneld Homes and the Council obtained agreement to bring Major Repair Allowance forward to provide additional funding for the current programme. Other funding sources have also been utilised such as £800,000 from the HCA for insulation works to non-traditional properties and a European funding bid has been submitted. This approach is also demonstrated in other areas. For example £135,000 was obtained from the Primary Care Trust for adaptations, and £187,000 for insulation works from British Gas. The Council and Rykneld Homes have also engaged consultants to assist in assessing the impact of changes to the Housing Revenue Account. This is helping ensure that resources for improvement are maximised.
- 264** The human resources strategy is delivering significant improvements. Effective workforce planning has been essential through the various reviews and restructures carried out over the last two years, with a number of staff being redeployed and retrained. It has also been necessary to provide managers with significant support in addressing performance and capability issues as the organisation evolved. Appraisal processes have been essential in working towards a performance culture and helping staff understand how they contribute to the objectives and values of the new organisation. Rykneld is modernising a number of its traditional services in order to better meet the changing demands of customers in future. Staff turnover was at 13.5 per cent during 2008/09 but is now at running at an appropriate level of 9.5 per cent. This approach is increasing the capacity of the organisation.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 265** Workforce capacity planning has included ensuring the capacity required to deliver a potentially enhanced decent homes programme. The asset management team is structured to deliver the programme for the next 18 months at various levels of delivery with the potential for expansion following this. Funding arrangements for the management of an expanded programme have been agreed with the Council. Part of the assessment of contractors in the procurement process was the ability of the organisations to quickly increase capacity to deliver an enhanced decent homes programme. This helps ensure the organisation is resourced to deliver improvement in this area of the service.
- 266** External expertise is being effectively utilised to expand capacity for particular projects. For example, it was recognised that the tendering of partnering contracts for the Decent Home programme required additional expertise to support the process and therefore external consultants were engaged. Consultants have also been used to provide an independent expert assessment of the performance of some service areas such as responsive repairs and the Council's contact centre.
- 267** There is an effective approach to the provision of training although mechanisms to measure outcomes are underdeveloped. Assessment of training needs is linked to performance and appraisal processes but also driven centrally according to corporate needs. For example competencies skills training has been delivered for all managers to develop management skills and to ensure a consistent standard of management across the organisation. Where services are being restructured staff training needs are being effectively assessed and addressed. Frontline staff are generally positive about their training needs being met. However, while staff complete course evaluations there is not a clear assessment of outcomes for the service.
- 268** Average sickness days per employee, although reducing, are still high. During 2008/09 average sickness levels were at 19.08 days per employee. This has reduced to 15.53 days in the first three quarters of the year. Although there has been significant action to tackle staff sickness by more active absence management, sickness levels remain high. This reduces the capacity of the organisation.
- 269** Information technology is effectively supporting service delivery. The software, hardware and support in place generally allows frontline services to function effectively and there are plans to address the few weaknesses identified. Plans to explore replacement of current systems to maintain up-to-date technology are also in place. Similarly although mobile technology is not yet maximising capacity in all areas there are plans to roll this out to the service areas not currently covered. This means IT should continue to support the business development.
- 270** The approach to procurement is expanding capacity. A procurement strategy provides a clear framework for procurement. A central list of contracts is held with details of the contract term and this is used in co-ordinating ongoing procurement activity. The number of suppliers has been reduced from 1299 when the ALMO was established to 453 now. This has also helped reduce administration costs. A range of procurement arrangements are being utilised including procurement consortia where this demonstrates reduced costs. Partnering contracts have recently been established for delivery of decent homes works which are delivering significant efficiencies. Procurement is being used in a range of areas to increase the capacity and efficiency of the organisation.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 271** The last staff satisfaction survey showed mixed results and has not been repeated to assess progress. Although the survey demonstrates a fairly strong understanding of, and commitment to, the organisation's mission and values other results were not strong. For example, 37 per cent of respondents did not feel they received useful and constructive feedback from managers, and 41 per cent disagreed that senior managers demonstrate strong leadership skills. This contradicts direct feedback we had from staff during the inspection and significant changes, including senior staff, have taken place since the survey in 2008 but as it has not been re-run progress can not be effectively assessed.
- 272** The ALMO has done a great deal to improve internal communication since it was set up. In the 2008 staff satisfaction survey there were some negative responses about communication, such as 60 per cent disagreeing that information and knowledge were shared openly in the organisation and 51 per cent disagreeing that senior managers communicate well. Although the survey has not been re-run, staff interviews to support a self assessment for Investors in People accreditation indicates that staff feel this area has improved significantly and we found staff to be positive about communication.
- 273** There have been errors in the administration of elections for Tenant Board members. An election in July 2009 only provided for one vote per household when it should have been one vote per resident. Some papers were sent out late for an election in December 2009 and another administration failure resulted in a number of residents not receiving a ballot paper. Rykneld Homes apologised for this mistake to the Tenants Federation and put an apology to residents on the website and confirmed a planned re-run of the election, but these errors potentially damage the reputation of the organisation.
- 274** Capacity to improve the aids and adaptation service is limited. There is an increased focus on making sure that best use is made of homes with existing adaptations but the funding available to carry out adaptations is not meeting demand. This is a budget set by the Council and it was increased in 2008/09 to £970,000 to try to address the level of demand but has returned to previous levels at £659,000 for 2009/10 with similar resources proposed for 2010/11. This means that the Rykneld Homes is unlikely to have the financial capacity to significantly improve performance in this important service area.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 1 North East Derbyshire 2006/07 to 2008/09**

<b>Performance indicator (former BVPI ref)</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>England top 25% 2008/09</b>
63 Average SAP rating	56	61	61 <sup>6</sup>	73
66a Percentage rent collected	97.61	98.66	98.19	98.64
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	4.57	5.32	n/a	n/a
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	13.61	6.28	n/a	n/a
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.37	0.25	n/a	n/a
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	76	76	78.15	n/a
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	68	68	58.09	n/a
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	20	52	52.66	6
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	35.5	-1.3	n/a	n/a
212 Average re-let time (days)	45	32	37.83	24.1

<sup>6</sup> A new method of measuring SAP rating was introduced in 2008/09 and therefore this figure cannot be effectively compared with previous years figures

# Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

**Table 2 Recommendations of repairs and maintenance inspection 2007**

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R1 Ensure that the service is delivering value for money and that there is effective financial and performance management of the organisation by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that all services can demonstrate they are delivering value for money through accurate benchmarking, accurate comparison and market testing;</li> <li>• taking steps to improve financial management, review all budget areas and take action to ensure that financial information is presented in a format so as to enable close financial management of the service;</li> <li>• ensure that all IT systems are integrated and contain the necessary information about the repairs and maintenance service and that all relevant staff are sufficiently trained in the use of IT systems to access the information and run and analyse performance reports;</li> <li>• ensuring that all aspects of the service are subject to accurate and reliable performance information and reporting;</li> <li>• reviewing all service areas to ensure that staffing levels are appropriate to deliver the service;</li> <li>• utilise stock condition and component failure information to devise a comprehensive planned repairs programme; and</li> <li>• developing an effective procurement strategy and improving the procurement skills and capacity within the organisation so it can achieve improved value for money from goods and services.</li> </ul>	<p>Significant progress made</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Significant progress although satisfaction surveys in some areas not robust</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p>

## Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R2 Ensure that customers are able to access the service easily and customers needs and views are understood and met by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• review the operation of the repairs call centre and ensuring that sufficient resources are available to answer customers calls promptly, without delay and that customers calling outside of traditional office hours receive a similar service;</li> <li>• ensuring that call centre staff have up to date information about the progress of reported repairs through shared IT systems;</li> <li>• reviewing the repairs categories with a representative group of tenants to ensure that all responsive repairs are carried out in a timely manner;</li> <li>• reviewing the appointments system and operating hours of the responsive repairs service with a representative group of tenants to ensure that all tenants are offered appointments, when they report a repair for all but emergency repairs, including repairs inspection;</li> <li>• reviewing the process of cancelling repairs jobs to ensure that repairs are only cancelled where a tenant has failed to be in for an agreed appointment and where sufficient notice has been given to the tenant to allow them to re-arrange the appointment;</li> <li>• effective use of IT systems to gather information about customer profile and needs information when tenants call the repairs call centre;</li> <li>• ensuring that all tenant needs information is responded to and that an increased service is offered, where relevant, to vulnerable tenants, including respite facilities where appropriate; and</li> <li>• reviewing the customer satisfaction and complaints process to ensure that all complaints are responded to, effectively and efficiently and the complaints are tracked and monitored about all aspects of the service. Publish the actions taken to address complaints to customers</li> </ul>	<p>Partially complete – flexible opening hours but some call still not answered promptly</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Not completed – not collected by call centre</p> <p>Generally complete although could be more pro-active in offering respite arrangements</p> <p>Completed</p>

## Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R3 Undertaking a full systems analysis of the responsive repairs process from the point of a repair being reported by a tenant through to delivery and post inspection to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● repairs reporting is as accurate as possible, with call centre staff fully trained in repairs reporting and with access to technical advice;</li> <li>● that repairs reports are raised by fault reported rather than limited schedule of rates codes;</li> <li>● that the repair is responded to by a multi-skilled operative who has the technical skill, materials and authority, to complete the repair on the first visit;</li> <li>● that where a repair cannot be completed on the first visit, that this is recorded accurately as an ongoing repair and that tenants are kept fully informed about the process and that all return visits are made through an agreed appointment;</li> <li>● that there are clear guidelines on pre-inspection and that these are reduced to a minimum and delivered through appointment; and</li> <li>● that the appointments system is flexible and allows jobs to be completed on the first visit.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p>
<p>R4 Ensure that all void properties are let in good condition and that there is clear information for prospective tenants about the level of repairs they can expect to a property by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● undertaking a whole systems analysis for the repair and reletting of properties to identify accurately the inefficiencies in the current process;</li> <li>● reviewing the lettings standard with a representative group of tenants to ensure that the standard required means that repairs, cleaning and rubbish removal are completed to a good standard;</li> <li>● ensuring that all prospective tenants are given a copy of the lettings standard when they are viewing prospective properties;</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p>

## Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that repairs to vacant homes are completed within challenging target times and reviewing the quality assurance processes to ensure that void repairs are carried out to the required standard;</li> <li>• develop realistic targets that reflect the level of repairs needed to void properties to ensure quicker re-let times;</li> <li>• offer vulnerable tenants assistance with decoration;</li> <li>• review, with a representative group of tenants the process of decoration allowances and negotiate discounts with local DIY firms; and</li> <li>• collecting and monitoring customer satisfaction with the voids service.</li> </ul>	<p>Not completed – although there has been very recent improvement this has not been demonstrated over a sustained period</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p>
<p>R5 Improve the maintenance and investment in tenants homes by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that maintenance to tenants homes is carried out in a timely manner;</li> <li>• ensuring that tenants receiving improvement works are offered a consistently high level of choice of fittings and fixtures and that this same level of service is enjoyed by all tenants;</li> <li>• identify sufficient resources to meet the needs of tenants who require adaptations and reduce the time that tenants have to wait for much needed adaptations to their homes; and</li> <li>• improving the performance information available about all aspects of the repairs and maintenance service to ensure that the information that is collected is accurate and timely and can be used to effectively monitor performance.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Not complete</p> <p>Completed</p>

AC inspection report 2007

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# Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - interviews with officers, Board members, Council officers and Councillors;
  - visits to public office;
  - estate visits;
  - focus group of residents;
  - focus group with frontline staff;
  - focus group with ASB partners;
  - shadowing of staff;
  - interviews with partners and stakeholders;
  - inspection of empty properties;
  - document reviews; and
  - file checks.

# Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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## ‘Added value’ in gas servicing

- 1 There is a comprehensive approach to providing ‘added value’ by carrying out additional activities alongside gas servicing. Engineers instruct customers on the most energy efficient way to use boilers and also how to re-pressurise combination boilers which was a common repair request. Smoke alarms, carbon monoxide monitors and water storage tanks are also tested as part of the process and minor repairs to these or any other aspects of heating and plumbing will be completed at the same time as servicing. Engineers are multi-skilled to enable this. Servicing of tenant installed gas appliances is also carried out following initial inspection to assess quality of installation. Annual gas servicing visits also now include updating of customer profile information. This increases efficiency in the delivery of services.

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

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

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