

Doncaster ALMO -

St Leger Homes of Doncaster

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

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Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

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

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

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

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

This service was inspected as part of the Government's arms 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 arms length body has received at least a 'good' rating from the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate.

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

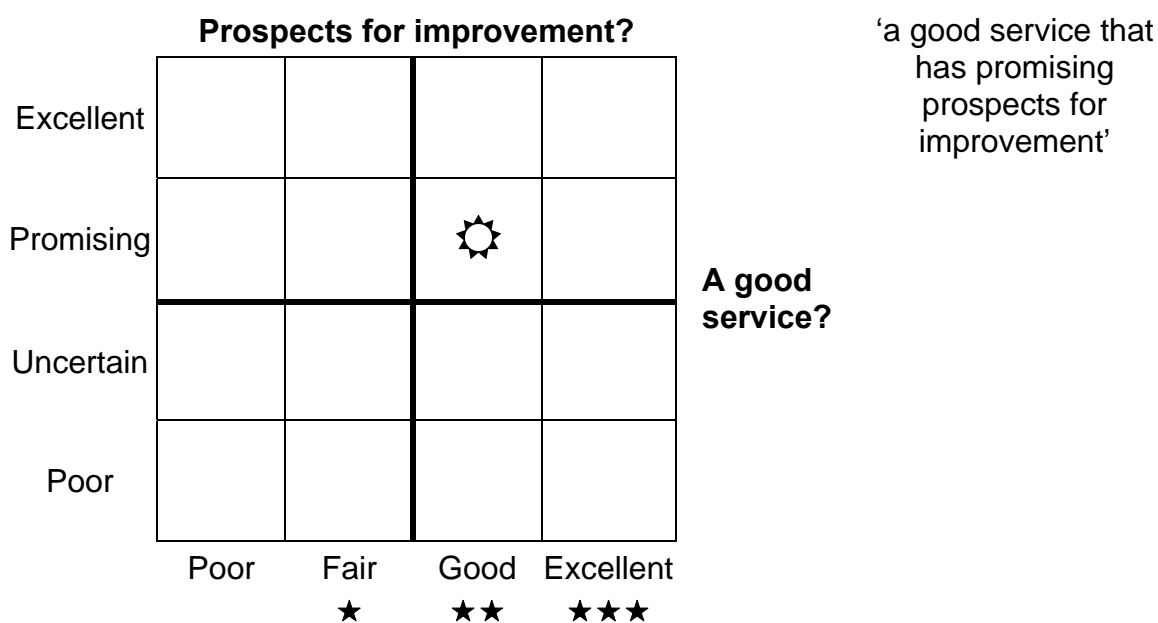
Summary

- 1 St Leger Homes of Doncaster provides a 'good' service with promising prospects of improvement.
- 2 Tenants can access services in a range of convenient ways and the specific needs of tenants living in rural areas are met. Challenging and realistic service standards have been agreed with tenants, and information is extensive and accessible, being well presented, easy to understand, and available in different languages and formats. The communication needs of tenants are being profiled and arrangements are in place to meet these requirements.
- 3 SLHD's ability to meet the needs of diverse communities is developing. Strong corporate commitment is evident and staff and board member awareness of diversity issues has improved through training. SLHD is taking action to meet the 'Respect' agenda and arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour and harassment comply with legislation and best practice.
- 4 SLHD is in a strong position to deliver property improvements. There is a comprehensive understanding of stock condition and tenants influence contractor appointment decisions and property improvement choices.
- 5 There is a range of ways for tenants to get involved in the activities of SLHD, individually and in groups. The tenants' federation is well established and has clear arrangements to influence service delivery. SLHD has recently been successful in engaging with hard to reach tenants, such as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and people with disabilities.
- 6 Some areas are relatively undeveloped however. SLHD has not market tested the in house maintenance service to assess whether it delivers value for money, there is no access strategy to drive customer care objectives, there is limited analysis of tenant satisfaction surveys and tenant entitlement to welfare benefits is not fully assessed at tenancy sign up to maximise incomes.
- 7 Arrangements to manage the waiting list for allocations and lettings are weak. There is ineffective publicity to show how applicants are prioritised, and the IT system has ineffective controls. Responsive repairs have improved, but there are still inefficiencies, such as high levels of emergency repairs and low levels of planned maintenance.
- 8 Prospects for improvement are promising. SLHD reviews services to identify improvements, involving tenants, and there is learning from other organisations. Value for money is embedded and modern procurement methods are in use. Efficiency targets are exceeded and inward investment is evident. However, it is not always clear from performance reporting whether services are improving or targets are being met.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council as providing a 'good' two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- challenging, realistic and publicised service standards agreed in consultation with tenants;
 - consistent services to all tenants, including those living in rural areas;
 - an understanding of the communication needs of tenants and the delivery of services in ways which meet these needs;
 - accessible visual information through the use of DVDs involving tenants;
 - an impressive Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) tenant and resident group involving hard to reach communities in the activities of the ALMO;
 - support for vulnerable people to sustain their tenancies and maintain their homes;

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

- effective prioritisation of Decent Homes property improvements using an extensive range of indicators;
- tenant representatives influence property improvement choices which are comprehensive and reflect modern aspirations;
- information to tenants on property improvements which is timely and of a high standard;
- a publicised comprehensive relet standard, agreed with tenants, and properties available to let meet the standard;
- prompt action to recover current rent arrears in accordance with robust procedures prioritising early intervention through personal contact and signposting to debt advice services;
- successes in addressing or diverting anti-social behaviour, including through effective joint working with partners;
- tenants have a range of ways to be involved or consulted on service delivery through a menu of involvement;
- the use of modern procurement methods to deliver capital and Decent Homes property improvement programmes which are effective and customer focused; and
- efficiency targets are exceeded.

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

- the lack of an access strategy to co-ordinate how access and customer care objectives will be delivered;
- restrictive office opening hours;
- limited analysis and reporting of tenant satisfaction;
- non-compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Rented Housing;
- Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance for sheltered accommodation and communal areas of multi-storey accommodation is not assessed;
- a property standard which has not been reviewed to reflect component improvements available in the market place;
- a repairs contact centre which has a track record of significant poor performance;
- an income management IT system which does not prompt action in line with procedure;
- cases of anti-social behaviour not being formally closed;
- the menu of involvement not being included in the tenant compact to explain how tenants can access involvement commitments;

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- the absence of a procedure outlining current arrangements to let properties to people on the waiting list, plus ineffective recording of revisions to priority points or circumstances; and
- a responsive repairs service which has not been market tested to assess value for money.

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- SLHD is aware of service weaknesses and takes steps to review delivery arrangements to make improvements, involving tenants;
- there is learning from other organisations and extensive training for staff, tenants and board members;
- there is a clear plan to improve IT and SLHD procures new technology to meet emerging priorities;
- financial planning is from a zero base;
- membership of a consortium gives access to competitive purchasing rates;
- there are successes in leveraging in inward investment; and
- there is a clear timetable for putting the in house maintenance service out to tender;

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

- SLHD has been slow in delivering some recommendations from previous inspections;
- resourcing of aims and objectives is not always clear;
- the implementation plan for the procurement strategy is not robust;
- it is difficult to understand through reporting arrangements whether performance has improved over time or that targets are being met; and
- the IT system does not always ensure that procedures are being complied with, or that records are maintained equitably.

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 costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access and customer care by:

- *agreeing an access strategy to set out how access and customer care objectives will be delivered;*
- *including targets in performance information reported to tenants;*
- *enabling tenants to access services using text messaging;*
- *reviewing the accessibility of current office opening hours in consultation with tenants;*
- *analysing tenant satisfaction surveys and breaking down results by geographical and demographic categories;*
- *researching barriers to access preventing some customers from accessing services as frequently as others;*
- *ensuring customer complaints are responded to in writing and on target; and*
- *including the menu of involvement in the tenant compact.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- ambitions to develop access and customer care will be effectively and efficiently co-ordinated, avoiding duplication;
- services will be accessible at convenient times and in convenient ways;
- tenant feedback identifies service improvements and best practice to be shared;
- barriers to access are identified and these if addressed will drive equality in access; and
- the tenant compact will explain how tenants can access involvement commitments.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve arrangements to service heating appliances by:

- *agreeing procedures for servicing solid fuel appliances;*
- *providing information to tenants on maintaining solid fuel appliances;*
and
- *maximising opportunities to install and service smoke detectors.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- solid fuel appliances are operating efficiently and safely;
- tenants have clear guidelines on how often servicing should take place and the potential health and safety risks of non-compliance of these recommendations; and
- there is early detection of fire risks to tenants, their family and home.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve diversity by:

- *meeting the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Rented Housing;*
- *ensuring the workforce reflects the local community;*
- *carrying out impact assessments for all service areas;*
- *profiling tenants reporting harassment; and*
- *assessing Disabled Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance for sheltered accommodation and communal areas of multi-storey accommodation.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a greater understanding of the priorities and needs of diverse communities;
- services and information will be accessible to all tenants;
- levels and types of harassment will be profiled to inform service delivery and partnership working; and
- services will be accessible to tenants with disabilities.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve allocations and lettings by:

- *agreeing procedures and publicity for allocating properties to people on the waiting list;*
- *ensuring the IT system provides a clear audit trail of waiting list applications and properties offered to applicants;*
- *collecting supporting documentation for registration;*
- *not excluding households in rent arrears from offers of accommodation if they can demonstrate compliance with repayment agreements or vulnerability;*
- *ensuring partners meet nomination targets; and*
- *agreeing local lettings policies to promote balanced communities.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- criteria for how applicants are prioritised for offers of accommodation is set out and clearly explained to applicants on the waiting list;
- offers are made fairly and equitable; and
- properties are offered to applicants most in housing need.

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

Recommendation

R5 Improve income management by:

- *investigating reasons why tenants do not pay rent;*
- *identifying arrears due to housing benefit;*
- *itemising charges for different services, such as communal cleaning, in rent statements and letters;*
- *maximising the potential of the former tenancy arrears debt recovery agent so that it concentrates on long standing cases or where the location of the former tenant is not known; and*
- *ensuring housing benefit assessments are calculated at sign up.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- action can be taken to address circumstances causing rent arrears;
- tenants fully understand how their rent and debts are made up;
- in house staff can concentrate on more recent and easily recoverable former tenancy arrears cases; and
- benefit entitlement of tenants is assessed to maximise income levels.

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

Recommendation

R6 Improve services to leaseholders by:

- *agreeing a formal protocol between SLHD and DMBC;*
- *accurately charging for all services received, including caretaking and concierge services;*
- *considering the offer of additional services leaseholders are likely to find beneficial for a charge, such as gas servicing and internal repairs;*
- *consulting leaseholders under the requirements of section 20 of the Leasehold and Commonhold Reform Act 2002; and*
- *agreeing a policy for leaseholders who cannot meet their contribution to programmed repairs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- responsibilities for delivering the service are clearly defined, resulting in accountability;
- legislative requirements are met;
- tenants no longer subsidise leaseholders for some services;
- arrangements are in place to support leaseholders unable to meet the financial costs of property improvements; and
- leaseholders are fully consulted about matters that affect them.

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

- 15 We would like to thank the staff of SLHD who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 26 March - 5 April 2007

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Report

Context

The locality

- 16 Doncaster is a metropolitan borough council in the Yorkshire and Humberside region which has a population of 289,600³. At the centre of the borough is the town of Doncaster itself which with its suburbs, accounts for about one quarter of the total population. Until the 1980s the area was a major centre for coal mining and manufacturing, with a number of large working collieries located in the rural area surrounding Doncaster. The closure of these collieries had a significant effect on the local communities. The type of employment in the area is now similar to the region as a whole with 26 per cent working in manufacturing and construction, 32 per cent in distribution and transport and 25 per cent in public services. The area has good transport links. It is close to north-to-south and east-to-west motorways and is on the east coast rail link between Scotland and London. Robin Hood International Airport, to the south of the town, commenced commercial operation on 28 April 2005.
- 17 The age structure of the population is very similar to the national profile. The borough has high levels of deprivation, with over 40 per cent of the population living in wards which are in the bottom 10 per cent of the wards in the country. Household incomes are low, with 27 per cent of children living in low income families compared to 18 per cent nationally. Unemployment is still in excess of national and regional averages, at 3 per cent of the economically active population, but has fallen substantially over the last ten years. A relatively high proportion of residents of working age are dependent on incapacity benefits.
- 18 The area has a black and minority ethnic population which accounts for 3.5 per cent of the population compared to a national figure of 13 per cent. The gypsy and traveller population is estimated to account for over 4,000 residents, and there are approximately 1,000 asylum seekers in the borough.
- 19 Between 1991 and 2001 the population in Doncaster fell, as in many northern towns, but more recently the population has been growing as employment levels have improved. These changes are giving rise to some problems which are new to the area such as growing demand for housing and rapidly rising house prices.

³ Mid-point 2005, Office of National Statistics

The Council

- 20 The Council adopted the mayoral system of governance in 2002. The Mayor of Doncaster was elected for a second term in May 2005. The Mayor, who was the official Labour candidate, chose the cabinet which currently consists of nine councillors from the Labour group. Labour accounts for 28 of the 63 councillors. The other groups on the Council consist of 12 Liberal Democrats, nine Conservatives, nine Alliance of Independent members, and five from the Community Group. The last elections to the Council were in May 2004 when Labour lost its overall majority for the first time.
- 21 Cabinet members each hold a portfolio of responsibilities and are accountable with the Mayor for the delivery of his manifesto pledges which relate to the general areas they cover. The portfolio areas are policy and strategy development (covered by the Deputy Mayor who is also the lead member for children and young people), crime and public safety, older people, public health, human rights and equalities, schools and children, neighbourhoods, transport and connectivity and business and commerce.
- 22 The Council has just completed a major reorganisation which involved a complete review of the top four tiers of management. There are now five directorates, one of which, neighbourhoods, communities and children's services, is responsible for the delivery of most services provided directly by the Council through 15 neighbourhood based teams. As a consequence of this reorganisation most of the senior and middle managers are new to their posts and in some cases new to Doncaster.
- 23 The Doncaster Strategic Partnership completed a review of the community strategy (the Borough Strategy) earlier this year and published a new strategy for 2005-2010 in July 2005. This comprehensive document, Shaping our Future, sets out the ambitions for the area under the five main areas which reflect national shared priorities. The partnership itself consists of the overarching strategic partnership and nine key strategic partnerships (KSPs) which cover the main themes of the Borough Strategy. Doncaster has a pilot Local Area Agreement that is closely aligned with the Borough Strategy.
- 24 In 2005/06 the Council had a net revenue budget of £341.8 million and a capital programme of £143.4 million. Council tax is below the national average. External funding in addition to the revenue support grant plays an important part in funding Doncaster's programmes. For example, between 2001 and 2006 Doncaster was allocated £37.4 million of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and £23.7 million of Single Regeneration Budget funding. In addition Doncaster has benefited from £24.3 million of Objective 1 funding specifically for Doncaster projects.

The service

- 25** Doncaster established an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called St. Leger Homes of Doncaster (SLHD) in October 2005. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to its 22,000 homes, and receives a management fee for this service. It manages the Council's £14.8 million budget for repairs and £32.5 million capital programme budget. It employs 727 staff, representing 694 full time equivalents, to deliver the service.
- 26** The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
 - rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
 - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMOs responsibility;
 - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
 - similar functions for leaseholders;
 - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation;
 - administration of the housing register; and
 - estate management, caretaking and housing related support services under the Supporting People programme.
- 27** The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
 - managing the Supporting People programme; and
 - homelessness, general housing advice.
- 28** SLHD meets Government criteria to receive Supported Borrowing of £58.1 million initially and to be allowed to seek up to a further £234.5 million if the ALMO progresses well.
- 29** 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, comprised of a Chief Executive and three Directors.
- 30** We have not inspected any housing services at Doncaster since late 2003 when we inspected housing repairs, maintenance and empty properties and judged it to be a fair, one-star service with uncertain prospects for improvement. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of what we said in 2003.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31 The vision for the area is ambitious and challenging, and it is relevant to local circumstances. It was first set out in the Borough Strategy in 2002, and has been built on more recently in an updated Strategy. The Council agreed with the Doncaster Strategic Partnership (DSP) a medium and longer term vision. The longer term vision is for Doncaster to become a city of European significance. The vision in the medium term is that:

'By 2010 Doncaster will be a major contributor to regional and national prosperity. The Borough will enjoy a high growth economy, supported by a substantial increase in educational attainment, the consolidation of commercial strength and widespread improvements in quality of life. Our communities will be vibrant and sustainable and Doncaster will be able to offer everyone living and working here the opportunity to achieve their full potential.'

- 32 The Council has adopted a Corporate Plan to guide its contribution to the achievement of the Borough Strategy under its new neighbourhood model. The Corporate Plan describes the Council's values and the five theme areas which are as follows.
- Children and Young People - integrated neighbourhood based children's services that place the child at the heart of service delivery.
 - Safer and Stronger Communities - actively involving communities in making neighbourhoods safer, cleaner and greener.
 - Healthier Communities and Supporting Vulnerable People - targeting resources at those most in need across the Borough.
 - Sustainable communities - making Doncaster an attractive place to live, work and visit.
 - A Winning Council - an absolute focus on customers and excellence in delivery.
- 33 SLHD's mission is to create 'Quality Homes in Quality Neighbourhoods'.

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

Access and customer care

- 34** In our previous inspection, we found that access arrangements were generally reasonable, and the Council had produced a good quality repairs handbook. We had concerns about how easily tenants could telephone the new repairs centre - response times were slow and many could not get through first time.
- 35** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. There are challenging and realistic service standards, agreed in consultation with tenants. Tenants can access services in a range of convenient ways and these have been designed to meet the specific needs of tenants including those in rural areas. Enquiries are dealt with promptly, with appropriate and accurate advice given. There is a wide range of information available to tenants and this is well presented, easy to understand, and available in different languages and formats. The communication needs of tenants have been identified and responded to. SLHD has arrangements in place to learn from complaints, but there are high levels of dissatisfaction with how these are dealt with. SLHD does not have an access strategy to deliver customer care objectives and performance against service standards is yet to be reported. Tenants cannot use text messaging to access services and office opening hours are restrictive. There is limited analysis of tenant satisfaction surveys and no research has taken place to identify any barriers preventing customers from accessing services.
- 36** There is a clear customer focus in business plan objectives to provide responsive customer services and empower tenants. Staff demonstrate commitment to delivering customer focused services and are supportive of changes being introduced at SLHD to further improve services. This includes training on customer care to ensure they deliver services that meet best practice. SLHD is aware of service weaknesses and has taken steps to review delivery arrangements to make improvements. This has been successful for repairs call answering and empty property management. Tenants have been involved in these initiatives to ensure their priorities are identified and responded to.
- 37** It is a weakness that there is no access strategy to co-ordinate how access and customer care objectives will be delivered. Some customer service initiatives have been delivered inefficiently, such as the production of information, and other areas for development are not included in plans to ensure they are delivered on time.
- 38** Challenging and realistic service standards have been set for key services in consultation with tenants and these are publicised through leaflets. Performance is yet to be measured however although the ways in which this will be done are clearly defined, mainly through mystery shopping and reality checks using a consultant and tenants. This is scheduled for reporting to tenants to ensure accountability. Tenants are therefore aware of the quality and frequency of services they can expect, and can challenge SLHD if these are not delivered.

- 39 Performance information on the quality of customer care is reported to the board of management and tenant representatives. Data assesses whether targets are met, and a separate report details weak performance and action taken to ensure improvement. Performance is reported to tenants through the tenants' newsletter and posters displayed in all public reception areas. This is relevant and informative, although the lack of targets for some areas means that tenants can not always assess whether SLHD is meeting standards set.
- 40 There are a range of ways for tenants to access services, but some options are undeveloped. Local offices are conveniently located on estates near tenant homes and there is a repairs call centre, which tenants can contact using a freephone number. Tenants can use the Internet to view rent accounts and make payments, make complaints about services and report incidents of anti-social behaviour, but not yet responsive repairs. It is a weakness that tenants can not use text messaging to contact SLHD if they prefer, as a low cost, instant access option using modern technology. Office opening hours are restricted, with no weekend or evening opening. SLHD has recently extended the opening times of the repairs call centre from 8am to 7pm and offers Saturday appointments for responsive repairs and gas servicing. This is improving accessibility for these services.
- 41 Positively, SLHD is innovatively delivering services to tenants in rural areas, through its rural MOT initiative. This commits to sending multi-trade operatives to all rural properties annually to identify and complete minor repairs, carry out gas servicing and identify and report any additional works or queries for other staff to follow up. This is supported by a rural focus group of tenants, who are regularly consulted on service delivery issues to identify improvements. This demonstrates SLHD is committed to providing consistent services to all its tenants and that it is exploring ways to remove barriers to access.
- 42 There are a range of tenant satisfaction surveys for individual services, however no action is being taken to analyse survey results across the ALMO to identify themes of best practice or areas for improvement. Results are not broken down by geographical areas or demographic categories to identify differences in satisfaction levels and SLHD is not carrying out any research to identify customers not accessing services as frequently as others. It is therefore missing the opportunity to identify other barriers to accessing services to inform its approach for developing inclusive services.
- 43 SLHD generally responds to customers promptly over the telephone and in person, and staff are well presented, welcoming and usually give their name. Queries are dealt with effectively, with appropriate and accurate advice given for a range of services, followed up by written information if required. It is however a significant weakness that until the time of the inspection phone calls to area offices outside of office hours rang unanswered, denying tenants access to services. SLHD had no arrangements to inform tenants of its emergency service. This was addressed during the inspection, due to its seriousness.

- 44 Written information available to tenants is extensive and easy to understand. Leaflets and letters are approved by staff and tenant reading groups to ensure they are well presented and appropriate. There are strap-lines on the front of information offering translation in community languages, or other formats such as large print, Braille and audio tape. This ensures that tenants have access to information on key services in ways that meet their communication requirements.
- 45 Bi-monthly tenant newsletters are interesting, easy to follow and contain concise and relevant information about policies, procedures and performance. Tenant involvement activities are promoted including opportunities to have an input into newsletter production. SLHD initiatives and achievements are publicised, particularly changes to services in response to tenant feedback. Positively, the communication needs of tenants have been identified through a tenant profiling initiative and this is being used to send out newsletters in large print and audio tape to tenants requesting these formats. SLHD is therefore meeting the communication requirements of some tenants.
- 46 The website is accessible and easy to navigate, using language which is easy to understand with jargon clearly explained. Information is up to date and there is a comprehensive list of publications which tenants can download for use. There are links to a wide variety of services provided by partners and other agencies, and the tenant federation website. The website is 'double A' compliant ensuring it meets best practice in ensuring accessibility and the text size can be adjusted for people who are visually impaired and/or converted into different languages for customers whose first language is not English. Tenants are consulted about website design and services to be accessed over the Internet to ensure their needs and expectations are met.
- 47 SLHD produces highly effective DVDs to provide information to tenants on key services. This includes the Decent Homes improvement programme and tenancy sign ups. These clearly explain how services are delivered and emphasise priority areas such as gas servicing, anti-social behaviour and income management. Tenants are involved in explaining processes, so that tenants with similar circumstances or requirements can relate to the information. The use of a DVD enables tenants to visualise what is involved, and positively the information is available in sign language, subtitles and other languages to ensure it is accessible to all tenants regardless of communication needs. This is identified as positive practice.
- 48 There is a compliments, comments and complaints scheme and this is widely publicised in a freepost return leaflet, service standards and on the website. SLHD has a track record of not meeting targets for responding to complaints on time and a recent survey found high levels of dissatisfaction at 50 per cent for how complaints were dealt with. Only recently have complaints been responded to in writing to clearly inform tenants of action taken and explain stages for appeal if they remain dissatisfied with the response. Where written responses were given, apologies for justified complaints were not always made and details of complaint investigations and outcomes were not always clear.

- 49 SLHD is now meeting commitments for dealing with complaints to address service weaknesses and improve its reputation. Performance is improving, with 74 per cent replied to within seven days, against a target of 75 per cent, and 100 per cent replied to within 28 days, against a target of 90 per cent. Positively, SLHD records all complaints made by tenants, not just those presented through the complaints procedure. This provides important customer feedback on service delivery and a customer relations development group meets monthly to review customer complaints and identify potential service improvements. Customer complaints and response times are regularly reported to the Board of Management, giving this tenant feedback a high profile to ensure it informs the strategic direction of SLHD.

Diversity

- 50 In our previous inspection, we found some progress in training terms but evidence that the importance of diversity issues had not yet been embedded in the culture of the organisation.
- 51 In this inspection, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. SLHD is effectively addressing diversity issues with a strong corporate commitment and effective leadership. There is a comprehensive equality and diversity strategy and a dedicated diversity team links with the Council's diversity agenda. All staff and board members have received diversity training and customer profiling is taking place. Offices are either DDA compliant or there are resourced plans to move to DDA compliant accommodation, but there are no plans to make sheltered or multi-storey accommodation compliant. Vulnerable tenants are not consistently identified and there is no analysis of service take up by different community groups.
- 52 There is a strong corporate commitment supporting diversity and equal opportunities. Equality and diversity is reflected in the corporate aims and objectives of the organisation and leadership is provided by diversity champions. Robust diversity policies have been adopted and these include appropriate targets. Staff resources are in place to specifically drive forward the diversity agenda but it is also clear that diversity is considered the day to day responsibility of all staff. This helps to re-enforce a consistent approach to diversity at all levels of the organisation.
- 53 SLHD has responded effectively to government standards. SLHD has reached level two of the Equality Standard and there are resourced and ambitious plans to reach level four in partnership with the Council by 2009. SLHD is not fully meeting the recently revised Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Rented Housing for the diversity of tenant and resident associations, understanding levels of individual satisfaction of tenants from diverse backgrounds and setting recruitment targets for BME staff. SLHD is taking action to address this shortfall, demonstrating commitment to being a diverse organisation, meeting the needs of diverse tenants.

- 54 The Board prioritises equality and diversity. All members have received equality and diversity training and one member acts as a diversity champion. The Board has tried unsuccessfully to recruit a BME member but is continuing its efforts and is shortly to launch targeted recruitment.
- 55 There are regular performance reports to give the Board clarity about the strategic direction of equality and diversity developments and SLHD's progress in delivering these. SLHD's workforce does not however reflect the local community. Levels of disabled and BME staff are below that of the local population. Targets set for levels of disabled staff are not being met, although targets for the percentage of women and BME staff in the top 5 per cent of earners are generally achieved. There are no targets for levels of BME staff to ensure the workforce becomes representative of the locality in the future.
- 56 Staff demonstrate strong commitment and understanding of diversity. All staff are trained in equality and diversity and receive regular updates through an equality and diversity newsletter, a 'Valuing Difference' handbook and a 'Support Network' directory. They have access to translation facilities and specialist equipment such as portable induction loops. A survey of staff skills is being completed and 15 members of staff have been on British Sign Language training. Staff are therefore well equipped to meet the diverse needs of tenants.
- 57 Equality impact assessments are completed for high priority areas such as repairs and tenancy management, but a programme to include all service areas is still to be completed. Staff receive detailed guidance on how to complete assessments and a number of service weaknesses have been identified, such as the availability of same sex officers conducting interviews with victims of domestic violence. This is an effective means to identify gaps in service provision.
- 58 SLHD links effectively with the Council's diversity agenda. SLHD is supporting the Gypsies and Travellers strategy and is working closely with the Council's Gypsies and Travellers worker to develop this. It is also a key partner in delivering a Mayoral paper for older people services. This ensures that resources are combined to deliver effective and efficient services, which meet agreed shared priorities.
- 59 In response to a growing BME population an emphasis on improving links with the BME community has been developed. There is a well attended BME tenants and residents group, for which translators of several languages are available and cultural dietary requirements are met. Doncaster is a dispersal area for asylum seekers and it is clear that this 'new' community is being supported by SLHD to have a say about local priorities and services, including how to access services and the provision of property improvements.

- 60 SLHD is researching the diversity working practices of its contractors. Early indications show that contractors have appropriate diversity policies and procedures in place. The information is to be periodically updated, with progress, against key targets set for the proportion of women, BME and disabled employees monitored. SLHD is also involved in an employment and training group to ensure 50 per cent of trainees are recruited locally. This ensures diversity issues are adopted by key partners, who take steps to ensure they are representative of the local community.
- 61 SLHD has some understanding of tenant diversity and support needs. A profiling initiative is progressing with over 50 per cent of tenants profiled for age, ethnicity, disability and preferred means of communication. This has been used to inform how SLHD communicates with tenants to deliver services. This includes sending rent statements in large print and colour print combinations which aid those with reading impairments. However profiles for tenants complaining about racial harassment were absent. This is a missed opportunity to identify the diverse needs of tenants who are vulnerable and most in need of support to address unreasonable behaviour adversely affecting their quality of life.
- 62 SLHD's compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) is weak. Offices open to the public are DDA compliant or have resourced plans to relocate to ensure compliance. However, SLHD has not assessed compliance for sheltered accommodation and communal areas of multi-storey accommodation. It is waiting for the outcomes of studies into the sustainability of this accommodation. SLHD is therefore not always making premises fully accessible to people with disabilities.
- 63 Vulnerable people are supported to sustain their tenancy and maintain their homes in a reasonable condition. Staff are aware of tenants who are vulnerable, challenging or have particular needs through customer profiling and IT alerts staff to such information about individual tenants. The information is also transferred to repair orders so that operatives are aware of particular needs when arranging access. Support is offered to tenants through a variety of partner agencies including services for single parent families, young people, people with substance misuse problems and people with mental health disabilities. There are also schemes to assist older and disabled people with gardening and internal decoration services where no other support is available. There are clear arrangements to access support, enabling tenants to receive prompt assistance.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair work

- 64 In our previous inspection, we found that Doncaster had made progress and had a timetable to conclude its Decent Homes Standard (DHS) approach, but still faced a considerable challenge within a short time. It had to hold an informed debate with its tenants and agree a Decent Homes standard and all the options available to resource the agreed work. The work we saw at Doncaster had generally been carried out to a satisfactory standard, to tenants' satisfaction and with many works aimed at improving the sustainability of estates. Capital work programmes were agreed with tenants in a variety of forums, although there was some concern at the level of choice available at scheme level. We had concerns about the procurement methods employed in the interim Decent Homes arrangements.
- 65 In this inspection we found strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong understanding of stock condition and works are effectively planned to meet and maintain decency standards. Property improvements are appropriately prioritised and property improvement choices meet tenant aspirations. Tenants influence DHS programme decisions and are kept well informed about the delivery of the programme. Procurement initiatives test the market, ensuring value for money, but the property standard to deliver DHS is out of date and does not reflect component improvements available in the market place since it was agreed.
- 66 SLHD collects accurate information on stock condition and this is audited to ensure it is fit for purpose. Twenty six per cent of properties have been surveyed and this informs property improvement priorities required to comply with the DHS. Additional surveys take place for properties included in DHS programmes and this is improving SLHD's understanding of stock condition for an additional 15 per cent of the stock annually. The asset management database effectively assesses properties which are non-decent, currently at 67 per cent and those likely to become non-decent by the government deadline of 2010 due to aging components, estimated to be an additional 11 per cent. Works required beyond 2010 are also planned to ensure SLHD continues to invest in tenant homes to maintain decency standards.
- 67 There are effective IT arrangements to update the asset management database with stock condition surveys, and component replacements carried out through property improvement programmes and responsive repairs. This ensures data remains relevant to inform compliance with the DHS and property investment priorities in the future.
- 68 SLHD is carrying out the right maintenance and improvement work to the right homes at the right time. A sustainability index scores the viability of estates based on demand, investment requirements, income and costs and social conditions. The least viable estates are undergoing option appraisals to inform long term investment priorities. This ensures that SLHD does not invest in homes failing to meet the housing needs of the local community or where costs are too excessive for investment to deliver value for money.

- 69 Properties identified for DHS works are effectively prioritised using an investment matrix. Estates are scored using an extensive range of indicators. These reflect the ALMO's commitments to tenants, such as improving the homes of older people, and also consider deprivation, the extent of works required and links with other regeneration initiatives in the area. Priorities are clearly set out in an investment strategy which lists all estates, component replacement requirements, cost implications and deadlines for completion. The investment strategy has been approved by the Board of Management and tenant representatives.
- 70 SLHD has responded positively to CLG's request to reconfigure its DHS programme beyond the government deadline for compliance of 2010, but tenants were not fully consulted and are largely unaware of the impact of the changes on their home. As a result SLHD faces problems over differing expectations and delivery of the programme. However, tenants are able to access information about how the current programme impacts on their area through SLHD's website. This is identified as positive practice.
- 71 SLHD carries out a consistent programme of maintenance under the Council's capital improvement programme to meet the DHS and this is customer focused. Tenant representatives have influenced property improvement choices available, which are comprehensive and reflect modern tastes. This will ensure that choices offered meet tenant aspirations. It is a weakness that the SLHD's property standard to deliver DHS has not been reviewed since the ALMO was established. It does not currently reflect improvements in components available on the market, for example to improve energy efficiency and set higher standards. Similarly, the DHS plus standard is ineffective, since it includes commitments already required under the government standards and limited additional improvements likely to deliver outcomes for tenants.
- 72 Information to tenants on property improvements is timely and of a high standard. The tenant choice events are particularly effective, with property improvement options displayed in a venue close to tenant homes affected by the programme. The contractor visits tenants to agree the layout of improvement works and Liaison Officers support tenants to prepare their home and belongings for property improvements. This includes a DVD which is excellent at explaining key issues in an accessible format. Positively, it clearly describes the disruption work will involve, but also includes tenants explaining the positive outcomes completed works have had on the quality of their home. This has helped the ALMO to achieve a high access rate of 97 per cent.
- 73 Tenants are kept informed of works planned and progress in delivering these on schedule. Tenants receive a diary explaining works taking place and daily visits from Liaison Officers as support for any queries that arise. There are also fortnightly customer care surgeries on site for queries about the programme generally and a 24 hour freephone number is available specifically for DHS works enquiries. A property is available for tenants who prefer not to be at home during the improvement works. This enables tenants to access respite from the disruption of improvement works should they prefer it.

- 74 SLHD demonstrates best practice in procurement with the capital programme being delivered under a partnering arrangement with a contractor. This uses a range of Egan initiatives to improve the range of services to tenants and reduce overall costs. The ALMO is in the process of procuring additional contractors to deliver future DHS programmes. Both procurement initiatives test the market in compliance with European Union procurement regulations, ensuring value for money. Tenants are involved in procurement decisions ensuring their priorities and expectations are considered during the process. The additional partnering arrangements and understanding of stock investment requirements indicate SLHD has the capacity to spend supported borrowing it now has access to as a result of meeting Government standards outlined in this inspection. Positively, SLHD has a track record of delivering property improvements on time.
- 75 The ALMO is compliant with the Control of Asbestos at Work act. An asbestos register is in place and this is accessible to all staff, who have received training on how to interpret information. The register includes data for 26 per cent of the domestic stock and all communal areas, and there is a programme to survey all remaining properties by 2009. The presence of asbestos is prioritised using a traffic light system according to the level of risk. All properties receiving DHS improvements are surveyed and responsive repairs orders clearly identify the presence of asbestos, where this is known. This ensures the health and safety of operatives carrying out works. There are prompt targets for dealing with asbestos queries and there is a dedicated budget to arrange the removal of asbestos safely and legally using a specialist contractor. A comprehensive asbestos policy is in place setting out management arrangements and legal responsibilities. A leaflet raises awareness of asbestos in the home and any risks to tenants. It is however a weakness that stock condition surveys are not used as an opportunity to identify the presence of asbestos.
- 76 SLHD is meeting statutory requirements for servicing electrical systems, communal heating, lifts and other plant and mechanical equipment. Contracts are in place and being monitored to ensure servicing is carried out in accordance with manufacturers' guidelines ensuring health and safety for tenants and SLHD staff.

Responsive repairs

- 77 In our previous inspection, we found that Doncaster had improved many basic elements of its responsive repairs service, although not all of them had had time to demonstrate improvements from a tenant's point of view. The majority of the tenants to whom we spoke recognised the positive changes. However, there was room for considerably more improvement.
- 78 In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Responsive repairs performance has improved as a result of changes in processes and management following a service review. Diagnostic information is available to aid the reporting of repairs, and appointments are allocated to carry out works. There are still inefficiencies in the service which need to be addressed. This includes high levels of emergency repairs, low levels of planned maintenance and an ineffective approach to canvassing tenant satisfaction.

- 79 Performance for responsive repairs has improved. SLHD is achieving 97.7 per cent for emergency repairs, 97 per cent for urgent repairs and 94 per cent for routine repairs. The average time to complete non-urgent repairs has reduced from 14 days in 2005/06 to nine days. Performance in dealing with enquiries through the repairs contact centre is also improving, but from a very low base. In December 2006 the average queue time for telephone calls was three minutes and 29 seconds, against a target of 25 seconds, leading to a high level of abandoned calls for the first half of 2006/07 of 26 per cent. Changes in service delivery following a review have resulted in targets now being met. This includes additional staff to deal with the volume of calls and relocation to premises with more appropriate facilities.
- 80 Software assists the diagnosis of repairs and prompts staff to identify where pre-inspections are required and where a repair may be rechargeable. A technical officer is available to the contact centre for advice on technical issues. Most operatives are multi-skilled and report repair orders to be accurate, ensuring they have the right information to identify materials and tools needed to carry out repairs in one visit. Operatives have the flexibility to complete additional works as required to complete repairs in one visit for the convenience of tenants, although it is a weakness that the ability to carry out repairs 'right first time' is not monitored and reported. Working relationships between contact centre staff and technical staff are positive. Regular meetings take place and contact centre staff have shadowed operatives to better understand work requests and improve communication between teams.
- 81 The tenants' handbook includes a repairs manual explaining how to report repairs, response times and illustrated examples of where repairs may be needed to their homes. This enables tenants to accurately identify and report repairs. Appointments are offered for non-emergency repairs, with three slots available during weekdays, in addition to Saturday mornings. This gives tenants a clear commitment for when repairs will take place, based on mutually convenient access times.
- 82 There is a high proportion of emergency repairs, with over 30 per cent of orders raised requiring attendance within 24 hours. While this provides a quick response to problems and is seen as customer friendly, it is not the most effective use of operative time, and can incur a cost uplift where external contractors are used.
- 83 Planned repairs are currently low at only 17 per cent, compared to 83 per cent responsive repairs. SLHD has recently developed an approach to batch repairs. A list of work suitable for batching has been agreed with tenants, based on an analysis of the most frequently requested items. This will ensure higher levels of planned maintenance, which will be cheaper to deliver through economies of scale. Customers have been engaged in other changes to the responsive repairs service. A customer advisory group was involved in decisions to expand the contact centre opening hours and introduce a freephone number, to ensure access arrangements are more suitable to the needs of tenants.

- 84 SLHD is not meeting its target of 10 per cent for both pre and post inspections, with performance currently low at around 3 per cent for both categories. This is positive for pre-inspections since tenants do not experience delays while repairs are being inspected before they are ordered, but for post inspections SLHD is missing the opportunity to assess the quality of work and tenant experience.
- 85 Tenant satisfaction with responsive repairs is monitored through telephone surveys and interviews carried out during post inspections. This demonstrates mixed results, with satisfaction levels ranging from 86-96 per cent in recent months. It is a weakness that this valuable feedback is not effectively analysed to identify best practice or weaknesses in service to drive improvements. Surveys also focus on non-urgent repairs with emergency and urgent repairs making up less than 7 per cent of the sample. SLHD is therefore not canvassing feedback on all aspects of the responsive repairs service.
- 86 SLHD is learning from performance monitoring to improve processes and management of the service. By analysing the top ten variations raised, the need to amend a number of schedule of rates items has been identified. Schedule items better reflect the work being carried out and reduce the administration involved in raising and amending orders.

Empty property (void) repairs

- 87 In our previous inspection, we found that the Council had introduced a lettable standard in consultation with customers, carried out 100 per cent accompanied viewings and had made significant improvements in how quickly it relet empty homes. There were still a number of customer-focused issues in the lettings process that needed addressing with more thought and consistency.
- 88 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Relet times continue to improve as changes in service delivery following a comprehensive review have become embedded. Challenging targets have been set and the lettable standard is being delivered.
- 89 SLHD has made significant improvements to the way it relets empty properties. Relet times have improved from 69 days in 2005/06 to 26 days in 2006/07. SLHD demonstrates it has robustly reviewed this service with tenants to identify and deliver recommendations for improvements. This includes introducing multi-skilled maintenance teams specifically for relet works and weekly meetings between maintenance and lettings staff. SLHD prioritises the need to identify adaptations, asbestos and recharges. There are challenging targets for each stage of the process so that staff are clear about expected performance, which is monitored.
- 90 The performance of maintenance teams in turning around properties ready to let has notably improved to 12 days against a target of 24 days. SLHD accepts it now needs to develop its allocations and lettings service to further improve performance and provide homes for people who need them. Positively, properties which have been empty for long periods of time due to low demand are now being relet following DHS works and marketing to improve letability, making more homes available to people in housing need.

- 91 A comprehensive relet standard has been agreed with tenants and a leaflet gives clear written and pictorial information on what standards customers should expect. However, this information is not issued to prospective tenants prior to accompanied viewings of properties, so they can assess whether these commitments are being met.
- 92 Properties available to let meet the relet standard and there are no outstanding repairs. Gas and electrical safety checks take place and servicing certificates are issued to tenants. A welcome pack provides shopping essentials for new tenants and there are appropriate arrangements to provide decoration materials from a wide range of local suppliers to assist tenants to improve the property. SLHD has negotiated discounts with suppliers based on its high purchasing levels to achieve value for money.
- 93 Accompanied viewings are effective. Prospective tenants are offered the opportunity to view the property while remedial works are being undertaken, if health and safety permits, and a further viewing when the property is ready to let. This enables the applicants to make an early decision as to whether the property meets their housing needs, improving letability. It also gives them the chance to influence planned repair works.

Gas servicing

- 94 In our previous inspection, we found that the Council was running a much more efficient gas servicing operation, with appointments and clear commitment to their obligations as a landlord being particular strengths. We were concerned about safety certificates.
- 95 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. SLHD complies with gas safety regulations and tenant satisfaction is high. Monitoring and reporting of the programme is effective and gas certificates are appropriately recorded. Weekend and evening appointments are available and outstanding services are being pursued including through legal action.
- 96 SLHD complies with gas safety regulations. Performance is effective with 99.8 per cent of all homes receiving gas servicing on time and tenant satisfaction currently stands at 100 per cent.
- 97 Gas servicing administration and procedures are adequate, based on statutory guidelines and good practice. Gas certificates are appropriately recorded and monitoring information is accurate. This is linked to responsive repairs reporting so that tenants contacting SLHD on other matters can be prompted to make an appointment for gas servicing to resolve no access issues. Effective record keeping is vital to ensure all homes are regularly serviced and to safeguard SLHD against litigation. Positively, gas safety certificates are available in the four most commonly used languages, ensuring information on health and safety is accessible. This is identified as positive practice.

- 98 Servicing is arranged in an efficient manner over a nine month period, avoiding winter months when gas engineers are needed for repairs. Engineers are equipped with hand held computers and details of servicing and any remedial works are passed electronically to SLHD, with an appointment arranged with the tenant at the time of reporting for a responsive service. Additional checks of the quality of servicing are made through a third party and SLHD has applied for CORGI certification. There are no arrangements for servicing where there is solid fuel in use, as is recommended as best practice. Servicing would be at the discretion of tenants, who as well as incurring charges may be unclear as to how and when this should take place to ensure chimneys, flueways and appliances are operating safely.
- 99 It is a weakness that gas servicing is not used as an opportunity to promote fire prevention initiatives such as the installation and testing of smoke detectors. SLHD also fails to work with partners such as the fire service to install smoke detectors on tenanted properties or include them as part of empty property maintenance. This would improve the health and safety of tenants and limit potential damage to properties through the early detection of fire.
- 100 There are clear service standards and the importance of annual gas servicing is emphasised in publicity to tenants. SLHD offers weekend and evening appointments to make the service accessible to tenants. All possible measures are taken to gain access and should these fail injunctions and warrants of access are sought. The oldest outstanding certificate dates back to January 2006 and this with 23 other outstanding services is being pursued through a variety of channels including legal action.
- 101 Gas interruption devices are used in a generally responsible manner. If a tenant has consistently refused access until forced to by law a gas interruption device (landlord's programmer) is fitted. Should the tenant again refuse access when the service is due in 12 months time the device limits the use of the boiler to 15 minutes in every hour. SLHD has taken advice on the fitting of such devices to ensure it is operating within the law. This device has only been used on one occasion, but it is a weakness that records have not been updated to reflect this, to ensure effective monitoring and review in the future.
- 102 The Board receives quarterly reports on gas servicing which detail the number of services completed, the number outstanding and the percentage where legal action to gain access has commenced. The Board are aware of its responsibilities in this area and have driven improvements in performance.

Income management

- 103** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Rent collection performance is effective with early intervention for arrears through personal contact and signposting to welfare benefits and debt advice services. Evictions only take place as a last resort. Initiatives to improve the collection of former tenancy arrears have improved performance which exceeds targets. There are a range of convenient payment options, but no evening or weekend initiatives to contact tenants regarding income management matters. Information to tenants on rent and service charge setting is not comprehensive and the IT system does not prompt action in line with procedure. Significantly housing benefit assessments are not calculated at sign up.
- 104** SLDH is a high performer for rent collection when compared to organisations providing similar services. Performance has been consistently above 98 per cent for the last three years and is currently 99 per cent. Current arrears are low at 1.89 per cent. SLHD takes prompt action to recover current rent arrears in compliance with robust procedures, prioritising early intervention through personal contact and signposting to debt advice services. The arrears process is well managed, ensuring tenancy support issues are identified and home visits take place. This ensures tenants, and particularly vulnerable people, are supported to address debt problems.
- 105** Tenants are appropriately advised on remedies to address non-payment of rent so that evictions only take place as a last resort. This approach has been successful with the number of households evicted as a result of rent arrears reducing from 103 in 2005/06 to 80 2006/07. SLHD has pre-booked court dates, ensuring prompt legal action when required. The Council's homelessness service and Social Services are informed of possession orders so that households are advised on housing options pending eviction. SLHD has not investigated reasons why tenants do not pay rent to inform service delivery. This is a missed opportunity to identify arrears prevention initiatives and target resources accordingly.
- 106** The IT system does not effectively manage arrears cases by prompting action in line with procedure to ensure cases are managed consistently. Staff are unable to search for certain types of cases, such as tenants who have broken court orders, to target recovery action where it is needed most. Accounting systems are not well integrated with housing management and benefit systems. There are separate accounts for rent arrears, court costs, rechargeable repairs and other debts, but these are not effectively signposted from the main account or identified separately in rent statements and letters to tenants. Staff and tenants do not therefore understand how debts have accrued to inform rent recovery action. Arrears due to housing benefit are also not identified or monitored, making the management of housing benefit issues difficult.
- 107** There is clear information to tenants on how rent is collected and there are a range of payment options including direct debit, PayZone and the Internet. This enables tenants to pay at any time and in ways which are convenient, improving the likelihood of payment.

- 108** SLHD has analysed transaction costs of payment methods and is promoting direct debit as the most economic method at sign up and in tenant newsletters. Targets for the proportion of customers using direct debit have been exceeded. This reduces administration charges to SLHD and maximises rental income for investment in services.
- 109** There are some incentives for tenants to pay rent, such as prize draws for clear rent accounts and seasonal targeting of publicity around Christmas. There are no discounts for advance payments or for clearing debts to offer additional incentives for payment. There are no evening or weekend initiatives to contact tenants unavailable during office hours regarding income management issues.
- 110** Information to tenants on rent and service charge setting is not comprehensive. A rent restructuring leaflet details government policy but tenants are not informed about how the rent for their own home is set. There is accurate and timely information about rent through quarterly statements, but charges for different services, such as communal cleaning, are not fully itemised. Tenants are therefore not informed about how charges are made up to enable them to assess whether this represents value for money. Charges have been identified and set for services in place for each housing scheme. This ensures tenants only pay for services they receive.
- 111** SLHD actively pursues former tenancy arrears. Specialist staff identify new cases weekly to arrange home visits where contact details make this viable. There are challenging targets to reduce former tenancy arrears and the number of cases. Performance of £207,000 exceeds a challenging target of £200,000 for 2006/07 and this significantly outweighs the cost of internal resources.
- 112** Initiatives to improve the collection of former tenancy arrears are evident. Following a review of the former tenancy arrears service arrears deemed irrecoverable or uneconomic to pursue were written off. This enables staff to focus time and resources on cases where recovery is still feasible. Former tenant tracing processes have introduced disclosure of information forms giving tenant permission for SLHD and housing benefit departments to exchange information. Debts written off are still actively pursued when new or updated tracing sources become available, such as the electoral register. This indicates a positive approach to the pursuit of outstanding monies.
- 113** A debt collection agent has been engaged on a 20 per cent commission basis. This ensures SLHD is not incurring costs where no debts are recovered. This facility is not however fully effective, concentrating on arrears cases over a certain value rather than long standing cases, and cases are not referred where there is no forwarding address. Internal resources are therefore not being freed up to concentrate on tackling more recent cases.

- 114 SLHD provides advice to tenants on welfare benefits and actively signposts tenants to the Citizen's Advice Bureau for more detailed benefit and money management advice. Working relationships with the Citizen's Advice Bureau are positive, assisted by a protocol and target times for arranging appointments with tenants referred. SLHD recognises the importance of financial inclusion and is actively involved in the Doncaster financial inclusion working group alongside the Council and the credit union, which it publicises. The credit union is a financial co-operative owned and controlled by its members to offer savings and good value and ethical loans to the local community.
- 115 SLHD has a positive relationship with Council housing benefit sections. A service level agreement sets out working arrangements, including training, and regular meetings occur to deal with issues that arise. Housing benefit surgeries take place in estates and rural areas making advice accessible to tenants and SLHD completes housing benefit verifications to assist claims to be assessed as soon as possible. Payment of rent and welfare benefits are actively promoted at sign up, however it is a significant weakness that housing benefit assessments are not calculated to identify if a property is affordable to the tenant and to maximise benefit entitlement.
- 116 There are no customer satisfaction results for income management, since phone surveys have only recently been introduced. Tenants have limited involvement in service improvement and development, having only been consulted on the frequency of rent statements. These are missed opportunities to identify best practice and service improvements to meet tenant expectations.

Resident involvement

- 117 In our previous inspection, we found tenants closely involved in a wide range of service delivery decisions and monitoring groups. A Tenant Compact was in place, but there was no formal tenant participation strategy.
- 118 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Tenant satisfaction with opportunities to be involved has improved and there are resources to deliver resident involvement commitments. Service standards are in place and performance is monitored and reported to tenants. SLHD offers a range of ways for tenants to get involved in the activities of SLHD, individually and in groups, and has successfully engaged with hard to reach tenants.
- 119 SLHD demonstrates commitment to involving tenants and tenant satisfaction with opportunities to be involved has improved from 45 per cent in 2004 to 61 per cent in 2006. The tenant compact sets out clear aims and service standards, and offers a range of ways for tenants to get involved, offering choice according to levels of interest and time availability.

- 120** A menu of involvement summarises involvement options, and this has been sent to all tenants and is issued at tenancy sign up. This enables tenants to register how they would like to be involved in services being reviewed or introduced. This approach has been highly successful for involving tenants' individually through surveys and focus groups and through traditional methods such as tenant and resident groups. There are over 1,400 (6 per cent) tenants registered for involvement, and expressions of interest have recently increased as SLHD promotes the menu through other initiatives such as the STATUS survey and customer profiling. It is a weakness that the menu is not included in the tenant compact. This would explain how tenants can access involvement commitments.
- 121** A Tenant Participation Strategy gives more detail on SLHD's approach to resident involvement, and engaging with hard to reach groups is prioritised. SLHD demonstrates success with the recently established BME tenant and resident association and disability special interest group. It is now working to establish a mental health group, in response to customer profiling indicators. This ensures tenants who do not traditionally get involved have a say and identifies barriers to accessing involvement opportunities.
- 122** Comprehensive information is available to tenants on resident involvement. The compact and strategy are publicised, along with action plans agreed to deliver objectives and SLHD's performance against these. Tenants therefore have a clear understanding of whether resident involvement commitments have been achieved and new developments planned. Positively, SLHD promotes resident involvement in rural areas, using a mobile display vehicle to publicise involvement options and outcomes to tenants. This is identified as positive practice. This has led to the development of a rural focus group which assesses whether services are meeting their needs and informs service improvements.
- 123** There are adequate resources for resident involvement, with the budget trebling in the last year to £95,072. This reflects SLHD's commitment to further develop resident involvement, predominantly through its first tenants' conference, led by the tenants' federation. This was a highly effective event, with good attendance. The conference promoted SLHD initiatives, such as the DHS programme, the Respect Standard, and choice based lettings developments, but also that of partners including the Police, the credit union and local colleges. There were a range of activities to involve young people and to raise awareness of diverse cultures.
- 124** The event promoted the tenants federation, which is well established and highly involved in the activities of SLHD. The federation represents the 47 tenant and resident groups in the area and a standing joint committee of elected representatives acts as its consultation group. This meets with SLHD weekly and is developing to include leaseholders, housing association tenants and private sector residents. This will give people with local interests a more prominent voice and identify shared priorities to be pursued. Tenants are involved in the governance of SLHD through the Board of Management and area boards. Tenants are elected democratically through a postal ballot open to all tenants and tenant board members receive adequate training and effectively participate in meetings.

- 125 Tenant and resident groups have access to staff specialising in resident involvement capacity building, and this support is valued. This includes training on how to access funding for community projects, producing newsletters and facilitating effective meetings. A training programme is effectively publicised through newsletters and the website. This assists tenants in attaining skills required to operate tenant and resident groups appropriately and equitably and to be fully involved in the activities of the ALMO. Tenant and resident groups have access to start up and running cost grants, and there are resource rooms for more established groups, although there is no central fund for groups to access to support capacity building initiatives.
- 126 The requests of individual tenants to be involved in the activities of the ALMO have been effectively responded to. The menu of involvement has been used to identify tenants for focus groups or email surveys on specific services, and a readers' panel is in place to approve information available to tenants. All tenants have been contacted for suggestions for environmental improvements and this is identified as positive practice. Satisfaction surveys take place for individual services but these are not effectively analysed to identify best practice and inform service improvements. SLHD can demonstrate links between resident involvement and community development to promote sustainable communities, with tenant representatives being involved in steering groups for local regeneration initiatives. This ensures tenant priorities are identified for consideration.

Tenancy and estate management

- 127 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Policies and procedures comply with legislation and best practice and SLHD services broadly meet the 'Respect' standard. A range of remedies are used to investigate and respond to complaints of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and harassment and outcomes are evident from effective joint working with partners. Challenging service standards are delivered and perpetrators are supported to change their behaviour. Regular 'estate walkabouts' take place and tenants influence environmental improvements. Customer satisfaction levels with how ASB is dealt with are relatively low and some information to tenants is not easy to understand.
- 128 There are effective policies and procedures to deal with ASB, and other forms of nuisance and harassment such as domestic violence and racial harassment. These are regularly reviewed and comply with legislation and best practice, such as the McPherson definition of racial harassment and a victim orientated approach to domestic violence. Strong policies and procedures assist staff to deal with ASB effectively and consistently.

- 129** Policies and procedures reflect almost all of the Respect Standard's 'building blocks'. Doncaster has recently been declared a 'Respect' action area and SLHD broadly meets the standard. The declaration brings increased funding for a multi-agency approach. The Council views SLHD as a key partner and there are outcomes of effective joint working. This includes working with families showing signs of instability and a project to fast track domestic violence complaints through the courts. It is a weakness that area offices are not designated hate crime reporting centres to encourage more victims to come forward to receive advice and support.
- 130** The tenancy agreement and other publicity contain clear and comprehensive conditions relating to ASB and harassment and the sanctions available where these are breached. Tenant responsibilities to comply with these conditions are emphasised at detailed lettings interviews. This high profile stance gives tenants confidence that their reports of ASB and harassment will be taken seriously and acted upon.
- 131** A range of remedies is used to address ASB and harassment, which is a significant problem in the area. SLHD effectively completes initial investigations of low level ASB cases, with more serious cases handled by DMBC's community safety team, which considers referrals from SLHD to be appropriate. Cases demonstrate a victim orientated approach, with appropriate action plans setting out how complaints will be dealt with. Options include Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs), mediation and legal remedies such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and evictions. Action plans are agreed with complainants to ensure they fully understand and accept resolution solutions identified, and can challenge SLHD if these are not delivered.
- 132** SLHD uses a range of methods to gather evidence. Resources have been invested in independent witnesses and video surveillance equipment, and a 24 hour concierge service provides security for multi storey blocks. This is used to verify allegations and support any action being taken against perpetrators. It is a weakness that resolved cases are not formally closed. Parties are therefore not being effectively informed about the progress of cases, or that concerns raised are no longer being dealt with.
- 133** SLHD ensures that tenants can easily report ASB and breaches of tenancy conditions at area offices, over the phone 24 hours a day or via the Internet. There are challenging service standards to set out commitments for service delivery and these are generally being complied with, although some letters are not easy to understand. This can result in complainants and/or perpetrators being unclear about action being taken by SLHD or how they themselves can assist the resolution of complaints.
- 134** Legal action is seen as a last resort and perpetrators are supported in their attempts to change their behaviour. SLHD attends case conferences with other agencies to discuss perpetrators and support required to assist them to improve their behaviour and sustain their tenancy, such as life skills and support for substance misuse. This diverts potential social exclusion and prevents perpetrators being relocated to re-offend elsewhere.

- 135 SLHD demonstrates strong partnership working. ASB is dealt with as part of the borough's crime and disorder framework. SLHD is involved in several community safety initiatives and partners such as the Police and the Council's community safety team are positive about SLHD's contribution. Successes include a multiple crack house closure order, several dispersal orders and the resolution of several racial harassment complaints. This approach is effective for combining resources and intelligence to secure legal remedies to address ASB and harassment.
- 136 SLHD actively publicises to the wider community successful outcomes of work to prevent ASB through tenant newsletters and local newspapers. This demonstrates complaints are taken seriously, with action taken against perpetrators.
- 137 SLHD takes a proactive and innovative approach to work with young people to divert them from ASB. There are effective links with a range of community agencies, and events have been held to integrate young people within their community. This includes sponsoring a local junior football team, facilitating work experience with the fire service for young people who are excluded from school and setting up a youth club. This approach develops community cohesion and challenges the perception that young people are the main perpetrators of ASB.
- 138 SLHD has a good understanding of the types and levels of ASB. Its monitoring system is comprehensive, recording complaints for ASB and estate management and action taken. This assesses whether service standards are being met. The system can be interrogated to identify the most common issues and 'hot spot' areas are identified, with action plans put in place. This is an effective tool to guide the allocation of resources into areas which need them most.
- 139 Customer satisfaction levels with the service have only recently been recorded and researched, and only 67 per cent of complainants were satisfied with the service received. Information is not being effectively analysed to identify improvements for service delivery, which is a missed opportunity.
- 140 A local and intensive approach to estate management is adopted. Area offices provide a local estate management service, including regular 'estate walkabouts' with staff, tenants and other agencies to identify and act up on issues of concern, such as security and grounds maintenance. Bi-annual tenancy checks ensure that the legal tenant is in occupation and that the property is maintained in a reasonable condition. Senior and technical staff visit offices to discuss local issues with front line staff to ensure they are considered in improvement programmes and future policies. This intensive approach drives improvements to the appearance and management of estates.

- 141** There is a holistic approach to estate management. Estates indicating signs of instability, such as high levels of tenancy turnover, have multi agency action plans. These are agreed with partners, such as the police and health, in a co-ordinated attempt to address estate problems and improve sustainability. This has included diverse actions from cleaning up garage areas to working with vulnerable tenants and families. Local rehousing policies are adopted and agreed with tenants and links are made with overarching policies such as the options appraisal of sheltered accommodation. A co-ordinated approach such as this identifies shared priorities for joint investment and commitment for delivery.
- 142** The condition of estates is of a variable standard. Some estates are attractive, clean and well kept, whilst other areas are littered, suffer from illegal parking and have a generally unkempt appearance. Service level agreements cover services delivered by external agencies such as grounds maintenance and the introduction of a reactive caretaking service for all estates has helped improve appearances overall. Poor environment is seen a major contributor to anti-social behaviour and low demand for properties.
- 143** Empty properties are uncommon and generally secured using non-barrier means of security. The SmartWater security system is used to deter break-ins and identify perpetrators. A low pressure spray system triggered when a break-in is detected sprays the criminal in a controlled manner with a harmless water-based solution containing a unique DNA-style chemical code. If a criminal is caught with SmartWater on them, the code provides the Police with an irrefutable link back to the scene of the crime. There have been successful prosecutions of criminals accessing SLHD properties using this system. This is identified as positive practice.
- 144** Tenants have access to resources for environmental improvements on their estates. Suggestions are approved by area boards and include parking solutions and security improvements. This approach ensures investment is spent on issues important to tenants. There are annual gardening and good neighbour awards to recognise tenants who have had a positive impact on their neighbourhood.

Allocations and lettings

- 145** This is an area of weakness, with few strengths. Current arrangements to manage the waiting list are not clearly set out in a procedure and there is ineffective publicity for how applicants are prioritised. The IT system is ineffective, allowing staff to operate outside of the allocations policy without authorisation being required and nomination targets are not being met. The housing register is regularly reviewed and there are effective arrangements to match adapted properties with applicants with mobility restrictions. SLHD works effectively with the Council to meet the needs of homeless households and is aiming to maximise choice using a choice-based letting scheme in the near future.
- 146** There is no procedure outlining current arrangements to allocate empty properties to people who need them and this is a significant weakness. Staff do not therefore have clear instructions to ensure this service is being delivered in compliance with regulatory requirements.

- 147 SLHD provides useful publicity to tenants on housing options, such as housing association and private sector tenancies, and service standards for processing and updating waiting list applications. However, this does not include details about how applicants are prioritised, another serious weakness. This is included in a separate leaflet produced jointly with the Council, but applicants may not link up this separate guidance to understand how their circumstances are used to determine their place on the waiting list, and influence how long they have to wait for housing.
- 148 Waiting list applications are not always processed efficiently and effectively. The IT system does not appropriately record revisions to priority points or circumstances, and staff can override computer generated points assessments without authorisation. Measures are not sufficient to ensure changes are equitable and comply with policy. Supporting documentation required for registration is not proactively sought from applicants to validate circumstances informing their priority. Positively, the housing register is regularly reviewed, ensuring that properties are only offered to people still in housing need, reducing relet times and refusals.
- 149 The points system incorporates some flexibility with additional points available in exceptional circumstances. SLHD is however restricting movement of households in rent arrears, who are not offered accommodation until all debts are cleared. This does not take account of individual circumstances, such as vulnerability, or act as an incentive for applicants to make and keep to repayment arrangements. Exclusion reasons are not effectively publicised, leaving SLHD open to accusations of inconsistency and disadvantaging certain groups. There is a formal appeals process that is widely publicised to applicants. This enables applicants to challenge decisions they disagree with regarding their housing priority and any offers made.
- 150 The IT system does not effectively record allocation decisions. Staff can bypass applicants at the top of the waiting list on the IT system without noting the reasons for this. Systems are therefore not in place to ensure properties are being offered to applicants most in need as determined by the points system. As a consequence SLHD cannot show that homes are allocated fairly.
- 151 Applicants are informed of potential waiting times for offers of accommodation. Information on the number of vacancies in an area and the number of points of applicants recently made offers are publicised in reception areas. Applicants can therefore compare their own priority with this information to assess whether they are likely to get an offer in the near future. A leaflet explaining stock availability also assists applicants to identify whether accommodation is likely to be available in their preferred areas, although this information is not further accessible through SLHD's website.
- 152 There are formal nomination agreements in place with other housing partners, but monitoring information indicates that the majority of partners do not meet targets. SLHD is meeting with partners to emphasise targets and discuss performance, but this weak performance is preventing potential properties being made available to people on the waiting list. This is a particular issue since there is a large waiting list of 11,700.

- 153** SLHD works effectively to assist the Council to fulfil responsibilities for homeless households. Additional priority points are allocated to applicants who are homeless or in danger of homelessness in response to confirmation from the Council. This will priority homeless households for offers of accommodation. Positive relationships have been developed with the Council which provides training opportunities to SLHD on homelessness and the secondment of a member of staff from the homelessness section to SLHD assists staff to develop a greater understanding of homelessness work. This has reduced the number of inappropriate referrals for homelessness assessments.
- 154** SLHD takes account of applicant support requirements in matching their needs with appropriate housing. SLHD is involved in the Council's accessible housing register. This enables tenants requiring adaptations to be matched to available properties. The scheme has registered 900 applicants and an average of six properties a week are allocated through this route using an Occupational Therapist. This helps to ensure adapted properties are appropriately allocated, and provides cost savings as households are rehoused in accommodation, which is already appropriately adapted.
- 155** Allocations staff seek to identify any support needs at an early stage in the lettings process. Home visits are carried out to each household where an allocation is made. Visits are used to ensure circumstances have not changed since application, and to discuss any issues applicants may have. If at this stage support needs are identified allocations staff refer applicants to relevant agencies. This proactive approach should support tenancy sustainability in the longer term.
- 156** SLHD does not make effective use of local lettings policies to promote balanced communities. This is of particular relevance as analysis of reasons for tenancy terminations shows a significant proportion of tenants give their reason for leaving as concerns about the area or ASB in the area.
- 157** SLHD is aiming to maximise choice for applicants by using a choice-based letting scheme later in the year. Staff have been briefed on the introduction of choice based lettings and are sufficiently confident to provide general advice to tenants and applicants about the potential impact. Key stakeholders, such as tenants, staff, support agencies and the Council have been engaged in the process from its conception. This will ensure the initiative is supported and improve the likelihood of it meeting the aspirations of those involved and affected.
- 158** SLHD carries out satisfaction surveys of the lettings service at post letting visits. This found 90 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the service. It is a weakness that feedback is not being systematically used to identify reasons for dissatisfaction and service improvements, or that applicants still waiting for offers of accommodation are not surveyed to get comprehensive feedback on all aspects of the service.

Leasehold management

- 159** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The service is well resourced, a useful leaseholder manual and service standards are in place. Leaseholders are given clear notice of charges for the coming year and these can be paid in a variety of convenient ways. There is however little consultation with leaseholders on the cost of maintenance and other services. Schedules of planned maintenance have not been provided and there are no arrangements for leaseholders who may have difficulties in meeting property improvement costs. Service charges have not been comprehensively apportioned between rent and service charge payers.
- 160** SLHD has prioritised leasehold management for improvement. A service improvement plan has been agreed based on a self-assessment against the leaseholder Key Line of Enquiry and weaknesses identified through a mock inspection. Changes in service delivery already include a well trained officer specifically for this service, production of a leaseholder handbook and summary lease, easy payment options, resulting in high collection rates of service charges at 100 per cent, and a leaseholder forum which meets regularly. This should address the concerns previously raised and improve services for the 242 leaseholders.
- 161** SLHD is attempting to learn from best practice elsewhere. It attends the South Yorkshire Leaseholder Benchmarking Forum and uses current best practice from other authorities to improve services. A protocol to consult leaseholders on major works has been agreed at the leaseholder forum along with service standards and satisfaction surveys for services such as cleaning of communal areas. There is also an annual satisfaction survey issued with annual service charge statements. This is effective for gathering feedback, as leaseholders read this information to make informed decisions on the cost and quality of the service.
- 162** There are effective arrangements to access the service and obtain appropriate advice. A comprehensive welcome pack and leaseholder handbook are in place which cover rights and responsibilities and signpost leaseholders to other advice agencies. A dedicated phone line and answer phone service is well publicised and leaseholders report no difficulties in contacting the relevant officer. Staff receive relevant training and demonstrate an awareness of current issues and legislation. Information is available on the website and the tenants' newsletter has a leaseholders section to ensure regular updates on leasehold management.
- 163** There is in no formal protocol between SLHD and DMBC. This is an important issue as the Council is still the landlord and is ultimately responsible for any maladministration of leaseholder services. Officers use an informal process map to outline functional responsibilities for completing applications for the Right to Buy, however there are no protocols for service charges and other landlord duties. A formal protocol would avoid any misunderstanding around responsibilities to reduce the risk of litigation due to legal requirements not being met.

- 164** Satisfaction levels amongst leaseholders are low. A satisfaction survey in August 2006 showed that 44 per cent of leaseholders were dissatisfied with services and 31 per cent with information provided. Another survey is not due until July 2007 and SLHD is presently unsure if initiatives introduced to improve the service are meeting leaseholder aspirations.
- 165** Leaseholders are not accurately charged for all services and sinking funds have not been developed. Systems are in place to ensure accurate recharging of most services, but the lack of comprehensive de-pooling means leaseholders are still not being appropriately charged for caretaking and concierge services. Tenants are therefore subsidising the costs of these services used by leaseholders.
- 166** Access to other services provided by SLHD is inconsistent. Leaseholders can use some SLHD services such as caretaking and concierge but can not access gas servicing and internal repairs for a charge. Presently there is no provision for leaseholders to access the same improvements tenants are to receive as part of the decent homes programme. Giving leaseholders access to property improvement options and gas servicing improves the safety and property standards for all people living near leaseholders.
- 167** Consultation arrangements with leaseholders are presently outside of the requirements of Section 20 of the Leasehold and Commonhold Reform Act 2002. Leaseholders have not been consulted on the quality and cost of any major works or other services such as insurance and caretaking.
- 168** SLHD is unprepared for the potential difficulties associated with completing major works to leasehold properties. A consultation programme has been agreed with leaseholders and the potential high costs associated with improvements has been clearly stated to leaseholders and particularly those living in multi storey flats. However, the planned maintenance programme has yet to be published and leaseholders are currently unsure of the exact works to their homes and associated costs. The Right to Buy 'buy back' programme has been suspended without informing leaseholders and there is no policy or sinking fund for dealing with leaseholders who cannot meet their contribution to programmed repairs.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 169** In our previous inspection, we considered this a weak area of the service. Neighbourhood Services had not developed its own procurement strategy. There were no parts of the service where the Council could show it provided demonstrable value for money (a requirement of the Council's corporate procurement strategy) and there was evidence that the in-house contractor had been sheltered from true competition. There was no evidence that the Council was developing a new procurement approach for response repairs. There were signs that this approach was changing, but we had raised these issues in two previous inspection reports and the pace of change had been slow in this area.

- 170 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Costs have been identified and benchmarked and compare favourably for most services. Action has been taken to review under-performing services and there is learning from others. VFM is embedded and a range of strategies set out investment priorities and options for procurement. Modern procurement methods are in use, influenced by tenants. Efficiency targets are being exceeded and inward investment is evident. SLHD does not fully understand costs for the internal maintenance service, whose competitiveness has not been tested.

How do costs compare?

- 171 Costs have been identified and benchmarked using a national benchmarking agency and compare favourably with organisations delivering similar services for income management, leasehold management, tenancy management and allocations. Costs have also been identified through service level agreement reviews. SLHD has 42 such agreements, which set out how the Council will provide services on behalf of SLHD. Reviews have effectively reduced costs to SLHD by £1 million and in some instances, such as human resources, services have been transferred to SLHD to ensure they better meet the requirements of the organisation and deliver better value for money.
- 172 SLHD is aware of under-performing services and takes action to review services, often learning from other organisations and using consultants to address skills gaps. This identifies priorities for improvement, which are resourced to improve capacity. This includes improving IT and supporting staff to specifically lead on services such as former tenancy arrears, diversity and procurement.

How is value for money managed?

- 173 The procurement strategy follows best practice for cost and quality indicators and includes a range of targets to develop procurement opportunities and improve value for money. The strategy does not however, effectively set out the importance of customer outcomes in decisions, and the benefits of partnering are undeveloped. This does not fully identify procurement options available to SLHD.
- 174 SLHD uses modern procurement methods for its capital and DHS programmes. Contracts have been awarded following competitive tendering in compliance with European Union tendering requirements. Partnering contracts are in place and this results in mutually beneficial working arrangements to ensure programmes are delivered on time, within budget and to set standards. Tenants are fully involved in contractor appointments to ensure their priorities and aspirations are met.
- 175 SLHD is working with partners to identify and apply best practice in procurement. It is actively involved in the South Yorkshire Decent Homes Trailblazer consortium, and has used these contacts to learn from high performers about delivering decent homes. The consortium has carried out an e-auction to secure competitive rates for delivering property improvements, and SLHD is using these prices to improve its bargaining power with contractors it is already working with to achieve similar discounts in its forthcoming DHS programme.

- 176** SLHD has not assessed whether the in house responsive repairs team demonstrates value for money, even though this has been identified in previous inspections. Arrangements are underway to test the market, and it is positive that this decision has received the full support of the Board and Council, however, progress has been slow. Initial findings have identified that SLHD does not fully understand its costs for delivering the service, and it is recommended that this needs to be addressed before market testing and benchmarking can commence. This is to ensure that SLHD pays appropriate rates for services delivered. Positively, there is a clear schedule to market test the service in 12 phases, and two are already underway. This demonstrates SLHD's recent commitment to delivering this objective.
- 177** A separate trading account has been set up for building services incorporating costs and income, broken down by types of maintenance, and this will assist SLHD to better understand its costs. Efficiencies are being identified through the monitoring of unproductive time and a bonus schemes for operatives has been replaced by salaries. This will improve the capacity of the direct labour organisation to compete in future market testing.
- 178** There are clear and robust proposals for meeting efficiency targets and achieving value for money. SLHD achieved efficiency savings of £2.4 million in 2006/07, significantly exceeding the efficiency target of 2.5 per cent, £753,125 set by the Council. In addition to savings made through service level agreement reviews, £650,000 was achieved by carrying out decent homes surveys in house and £740,000 was saved through a staff changes. Positively, SLHD performance against efficiency targets are regularly reported to the Board, and these are broken down into cashable and non-cashable gains, so that opportunities for achieving value for money are clearly understood and extend beyond financial efficiencies.
- 179** Value for money is embedded at SLHD. A value for money strategy is in place, and this sets clear targets for delivering against an annual efficiency statement. Other strategies set out arrangements to deliver high levels of investment efficiently, such as the decent homes programme and information gained on SLHD's assets is informing an asset management strategy. These strategies are effectively identifying priorities for investment for the lifetime of the management agreement, and in the case of stock investment future years to maintain decency standards once these have been met.
- 180** SLHD has been successful in attracting inward investment. This includes accessing regeneration investment of £500,000 available through pathfinder, neighbourhood renewal and green corridor initiatives. Other inward investment includes energy efficiency grants and security improvements through New Deal for Communities investment. This improves the financial capacity of SLHD to improve and deliver services with positive outcomes for tenants and neighbourhoods.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 181 In our previous inspection, we found that the Council did not react quickly to the initial presentation of previous inspection findings and took some time to gather the pace of change. Nevertheless, despite its slow start, the Council had made considerable progress during 2003. Recommendations specific to addressing diversity issues were the ones where Doncaster appeared to have made no progress.
- 182 In this inspection, we found that drivers outweigh barriers. Tenant satisfaction is improving, and change is being implemented to improve services. Value for money over time is being achieved with efficiency targets being exceeded. Investment priorities have been robustly assessed. In some areas however, SLHD has again been slow to implement previous inspection recommendations.
- 183 The direction of travel for key performance indicators over the last three years is positive. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service has improved from 64 per cent in 2004 to 73 per cent in 2006. Satisfaction with opportunities to get involved in the activities of SLHD has also increased from 45 per cent to 61 per cent. Improvements are also evident for how easy customers thought it was to get hold of the right person and with how repairs and maintenance are dealt with, but these still suggest improvement is needed, with results of only 60 per cent and 68 per cent respectively.
- 184 SLHD has implemented changes, which have delivered clear benefits for tenants. Recommendations to improve services and performance have been derived from mock inspections, self-assessment, business process engineering and internal audit. SLHD has delivered against most of these or has plans in place to do so in the future. Improvements include efficient arrangements to turn around empty properties for letting, more responsive phone answering at the repairs contact centre and greater opportunities for leaseholders to have a say in service delivery and information availability.
- 185 SLHD has introduced a range of initiatives to improve the responsive repairs service and deliver against most recommendations identified through a previous inspection. This has improved information to tenants and opportunities to access the service. Performance has also improved, so that most repairs are delivered on time, through appointments arranged at convenient times for tenants. The following table sets out SLHD delivery against recommendations from a previous housing repairs, maintenance and empty properties inspection. This shows that most of the recommendations have been delivered, however for some key areas this has been slow, sometimes over several years, which is a weakness.

Table 1 Recommendations of previous inspection

Housing repairs, maintenance and empty properties

Audit Commission recommendation	Progress
Resource the Repairs Centre to enable it to answer callers quickly.	Slow, but recently completed.
Effectively manage how the council provides information in reception areas, in consultation with tenants.	Comprehensive information available.
Agree with tenants whether to introduce extended hours of working for the repairs service.	Introduced.
Monitor and manage the availability of repairs appointments to improve the service to tenants.	Three appointment times now available.
Develop clear procedures for informing tenants when repairs are moved from responsive to planned maintenance programmes.	Recently completed in consultation with tenants.
<p>Review tenant satisfaction monitoring comprehensively to improve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how easily all tenants can read the satisfaction form; • the relevance of the information gathered; • how the service will use information to develop; and • how easily people can return the information to the council. 	This still requires development, surveys are currently over the phone or through interview.
Ensure tenants and councillors receive accurate and impartial information to help them make informed decisions during the stock options appraisal debate.	This has been achieved resulting in the establishment of the ALMO.
Complete the evaluation of choice-based lettings (CBL) pilots and discuss the viability of a Doncaster scheme with stakeholders.	CBL due to go live late this year.
Ensure that all tenants receive copies of the gas servicing certificates for their homes.	Certificates are issued to tenants and also left in empty properties being relet

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Audit Commission recommendation	Progress
Involve tenants and their Tenants' Federation in setting and determining priorities for the spending of tenant participation budgets.	The tenants federation is involved in influencing participation resources and opportunities.
Ensure all the Homes and Housing workforce receive equalities and diversity training by April 2004.	Training has taken place.
Develop a clear action plan to implement all the recommendations in the Commission for Racial Equality's (CRE) Rented Housing Code of Practice.	Slow, but nearing completion.
Carry out a robust benchmarking exercise to test the value for money of all contractors delivering the Decent Homes work.	This process has commenced, but is still in early stages.
Ensure all housing repair and improvement procurement decisions comply with Doncaster's Corporate Procurement Strategy.	Procurement arrangements are compliant with that of the Council.

Source: Audit Commission 2003

- 186** SLHD demonstrates improving performance for key services. It is a high performer when compared to organisations providing similar services. Rent collection rates at 99 per cent are high, and this maximises rental income for investment in services. The percentage of repairs appointments made and kept has increased from 83 per cent in 2004/05 to 97 per cent in 2006/07. This ensures tenants have a firm commitment for when repairs will take place, reducing the amount of time they have to be available to provide access. The average time taken to carry out non-urgent repairs has fallen from 14 days in 2005/06 to 9.5 days in 2006/07. The amount of urgent repairs completed on time has increased from 93 per cent to 98 per cent in the same period. Tenants therefore have repairs resolved more quickly. Performance for time taken to relet empty properties has significantly improved from 69 days to 26 days. SLHD is therefore meeting the housing needs of people on the waiting list more efficiently.
- 187** SLHD demonstrates improving value for money over time. Efficiency targets are being exceeded and opportunities to attract inward investment are being accessed. Information on stock condition and other assets has been used to inform investment priorities and plans are in place to deliver these using modern procurement methods. SLHD is unaware of whether the internal maintenance service delivers value for money. It has been slow to implement this previous inspection recommendation, but there are firm plans to put the service out to competition to address this.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 188** In our previous inspection, we found that the frameworks for good performance management were in place, and much of the information tenants, managers and councillors received was of high quality. We, nevertheless, considered that not everyone involved really understood the purpose behind performance monitoring and how it should be used to drive improvement.
- 189** In this inspection, we found that drivers outweigh barriers. There are clear aims and plans setting out responsibilities for delivery, which are generally SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound). Arrangements are in place to monitor progress at Board and Council level. Strategies are agreed to deliver key services and tenants have influence in setting standards for service delivery. There is effective leadership and learning from others. The implementation plan for the procurement strategy is not robust, and whether performance is meeting targets is not always clear in monitoring information. Satisfaction surveys are not systematically analysed.
- 190** SLHD has a clear vision for the service which sets out what the organisation wants to achieve for the term of the management contract. It has translated its vision into tangible aims and objectives for the future of the service. Predominantly this is to meet decency standards, but also aims to address gaps in service provision as set out in Key Lines of Enquiry, national and corporate priorities and recommendations identified through service improvement assessments. This will set clear ambitions to meet best practice and improve performance.
- 191** There are plans in place which set out how aims and objectives will be delivered. The business plan demonstrates a sound knowledge of challenges and opportunities faced within the service, and gives due regard to Council ambitions, to ensure SLHD as a key stakeholder in the area makes a contribution. Directorate and team plans set out responsibilities for delivering objectives and the role of individual staff members in delivering these is set out in personal development plans. This ensures there is clear accountability for delivering objectives. There are established arrangements to monitor progress through the Board, team meetings, one to ones and staff appraisals. The Council monitors whether SLHD meets its expectations for service delivery through monthly liaison meetings and SLHD's involvement in Council executive meetings. This also ensures that there is joined up working to deliver appropriate services effectively and efficiently.
- 192** Plans are generally SMART although resourcing of aims and objectives is not always clear. Strategies are in place to deliver key services such as decent homes, ensuring equality and diversity and improving how properties are allocated to people on the waiting list. These set clear goals for delivery, within set timescales so that progress can be monitored and reported. It is a weakness that the implementation plan for the procurement strategy is not robust. SLHD will be less able to evaluate whether best practice is being achieved in procurement and that services are being procured in ways that maximise value for money.

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- 193** SLHD engages with tenants to ensure they influence service design to meet their needs and aspirations. Tenants can have a say in the activities of SLHD through a variety of ways depending on their level of interest and availability. Tenants register how they want to be involved and SLHD responds to this when services are reviewed. The tenants' federation is well established and regularly meets with SLHD to discuss service developments. There are opportunities for tenants to be involved in governance arrangements to ensure the strategic direction of SLHD meets their requirements.
- 194** There are ambitious targets to improve efficiency and value for money. The efficiency strategy sets out gains already achieved and plans for the future to achieve additional efficiencies. Targets reflect the potential for improvement and these have been exceeded in 2006/07. Savings are re-invested back into service delivery.
- 195** Performance management arrangements are in place, but these are not comprehensive. Positively, SLHD has identified 144 relevant performance indicators, which it monitors and reports to staff, tenants and the Board. A spreadsheet indicates performance for recent months, but this is not always completed for previous quartiles or years. This makes it difficult to assess whether performance has improved over time. It is often difficult to assess whether targets have been met, since performance is sometimes given for each individual month, rather than the accumulative total for the year so far. This makes it difficult for SLHD to identify whether remedial action is needed to ensure targets are met.
- 196** Performance for key services, such as maintenance and income management are clearly displayed in reception areas and staff notice boards, but these do not always indicate what action needs to be taken to address weak performance. Service standards have been agreed with tenants and arrangements to monitor delivery are clearly set out, including through the use of mystery shopping and tenant feedback. However, these have been introduced relatively recently and no performance information is currently available.
- 197** SLHD is ensuring fair access to services, actively working to eliminate discrimination and promoting sustainable communities. There is a strong corporate commitment through a comprehensive equality and diversity strategy which links to the Council's diversity agenda. Staff and board members have received diversity training and customer profiling is taking place to inform service design and ensure communication needs are met. Positively, SLHD has achieved level two of the equality standard in a relatively short time and has ambitious targets to improve on this in the future. The workforce is not however representative of the local community and targets have not been set for levels of some minority groups to ensure this is improved.

- 198 SLHD takes action to identify and learn from high performing organisations, as a matter of course when reviewing services or introducing new initiatives. This includes consulting consortium members on the delivery of decent homes and income management, and considering how others provide information to tenants. SLHD also learns from feedback from its own tenants by considering customer complaints. It is a weakness that satisfaction surveys are not systematically analysed to identify themes of best practice and areas for improvement to further drive service developments. A suggestion scheme is in operation to encourage feedback from staff on potential service improvements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 199 In our previous inspection, we had concerns about the management capacity to take the service forward after the support of consultants, and indeed, their ability to assess the quality of some of the advice given to Doncaster.
- 200 In this inspection, we found that drivers outweigh barriers. SLHD takes action to address skills gaps in staffing arrangements and new technology is procured to meet emerging priorities, plus there is a robust improvement plan to develop IT capacity. There are clear targets to achieve efficiencies and financial planning is effective. SLHD attracts competitive rates for procurement through a consortium and uses partnering arrangements to achieve further efficiencies. There are clear targets for testing the competitiveness of the direct labour organisation.
- 201 The service has access to the appropriate skills to deliver improvement. SLHD recruits staff from outside of the organisation and commissions consultants to deliver initiatives if required to address skills gaps or increase its capacity to deliver projects on schedule.
- 202 There is effective leadership. The senior executive team is visible to staff, often visiting area offices and the direct labour organisation to set a clear direction for SLHD and receive feedback from staff members on any relevant issues. This makes frontline staff feel valued and ensures they support changes being introduced.
- 203 Board meetings are effectively chaired and consider relevant priorities for SLHD presented through concise reporting and/or representations from managers. Board members are aware of housing issues and participate in discussions. Recommendations can be challenged and areas are delegated for follow up work to managers, sub committees and tenant representatives, as required. Area boards are in place to lead on local priorities and these are supported at director level to ensure they have sufficient influence. Tenant representatives have a high profile on the main and area boards. Board members understood their responsibilities to influence the strategic direction of SLHD and have an appropriate range of skills to deliver this effectively. Managers and the Board demonstrate a willingness to tackle difficult problems such as the market testing initiative for responsive repairs, however it has unnecessarily delayed steering this initiative.

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- 204** There is extensive training for staff, tenants and board members to ensure they understand the key issues facing SLHD and have the skills to deliver aims and objectives. There has been recent investment in management training to ensure that leadership and performance management is effective. It is a concern that a recent staff survey found that only 63 per cent of employees are satisfied with SLHD as an employer, which may affect SLHD's capacity to retain staff.
- 205** The quality of ICT provision is mixed. IT is fit for purpose for some services, such as stock condition, and SLHD ensures it procures new technology to meet emerging priorities, such as project management of the decent homes programme. For other services, such as income management, responsive repairs, and letting, the IT system does not ensure that services are delivered in line with procedures, or that records are kept and maintained appropriately. SLHD does however have a clear plan to improve IT and address these weaknesses so that services can be delivered equitably and efficiently.
- 206** SLHD has access to appropriate resources to deliver improvement. It has achieved efficiency savings of over £2 million in 2006/07 and has set clear targets to achieve further efficiencies in the future. Financial planning has recently been revised to set budgets from a zero base and there is effective guidance to managers on setting budgets and finance staff provide support to ensure budgets are effectively managed.
- 207** SLHD follows best practice in procurement to achieve value for money. Its membership of a consortium gives access to competitive rates for property improvements and it is using partnering arrangements to deliver decency works in ways which are mutually beneficial to SLHD and contractors to achieve efficiencies and responsive services to tenants. SLHD is aware of inward investment opportunities, and can demonstrate success in leveraging in such funding, particularly to regenerate neighbourhood.
- 208** SLHD is currently unaware of whether its in house maintenance service is operating efficiently. However, there is a clear timetable for putting the service out to tender. This will test the competitiveness of the service in the market place and identify the most appropriate procurement option available to maximise value for money.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Performance 2003/04 to 2005/06

Performance indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	Mets top quartile 2005/06
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	58	62	62	66
BVPI 66a Percentage rent collected	97.99	98.52	98.23	97.82
BVPI 74 Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	-	64	-	78.75
BVPI 75 Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	45	73	63.75
BV184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	33	29	60	35
BV184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	15.4	17.4	9.8	29
BV185 Percentage repairs appointments made and kept	44*	83.4	-	-
BVPI 212 Average relet time (days)	-	26	69	41

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks included:
 - visits to public reception areas, empty properties and neighbourhoods;
 - interviews with managers, staff and Board members;
 - interviews with tenants and their representatives;
 - interviews with partners SLHD works with to deliver services;
 - interviews with Council representatives for strategic housing;
 - observation of a board meeting;
 - assessment of policies, procedures and strategies;
 - file checks of current and closed tenant enquiries; and
 - shadowing services being delivered such as tenancy sign ups and accompanied viewings.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

Informing tenants about property improvements

- 1 Tenants can access information about property improvements scheduled for their area, and progress in delivering these on time through a search facility on SLHD's website.

Providing services to tenants in rural areas

- 2 SLHD carries out an annual MOT of its rural properties. Multi-trade operatives visit rural properties to identify and complete minor repairs, and service gas appliances. They also identify and report any additional works or queries for other staff to follow up. As well as providing an accessible and convenient service to tenants, this approach reduces the need for operatives to travel long distances to complete individual repairs.

Accessible visual information to tenants

- 3 There is a range of highly effective DVDs providing visual information to tenants on key services. These clearly explain how services are delivered and priority areas such as gas servicing, anti-social behaviour and income management. Tenants are involved in the production, so that tenants can relate to the messages if they have similar circumstances. DVDs enable tenants to visualise what is involved. The information is available in sign language, subtitles and other languages.

Involving hard to reach groups

- 4 SLHD has successfully set up a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) tenants and residents group. This has been through intensive publicity to promote public meetings, which are supported by translation and cultural dietary requirements being met. Meetings are well attended by tenants of many different ethnic minority communities and its popularity is a testament to the focus on priorities for these tenants, such as access to housing and support services.

Use of DNA coding to secure empty properties

- 5 A low pressure spray system is triggered when there is a break-in and this sprays the intruder with a harmless water-based solution containing a unique DNA-style chemical code. The intruder will be covered with traces of the code for sometime and if caught will ensure an irrefutable link back to the scene of the crime. There have been successful prosecutions of criminals accessing SLHD properties using this system.

Translation of gas certificates

- 6 Gas safety certificates are available in the most commonly used languages. This ensures tenants whose first language is not English have access to this important health and safety information.

Promoting resident involvement in rural areas

- 7 A mobile display vehicle is used to publicise resident involvement opportunities and outcomes to tenants on estates, including rural areas.

Involving tenants in determining environmental improvements

- 8 SLHD has written to all tenants inviting suggestions for environmental works to improve estates. Proposals are then considered by area boards, which include tenant representatives.