

Scoring the service

We have assessed South Derbyshire District Council as providing a 'fair' one star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1

Scoring chart¹:
Prospects for improvement?

Excellent				
Promising		*		
Uncertain				
Poor				
	Poor	Fair *	Good **	Excellent ***

'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement'

A good service?

Audit Commission

10 The repairs and maintenance service provided by South Derbyshire District Council is **fair**. There are some positive aspects to the service delivered. These include:

- high levels of customer satisfaction reported in many service areas;
- a Customer Care Charter is in place and a Repairs Policy has been produced in conjunction with Tenant Advisory and Consultative Team (TACT);
- a new repairs guide and a number of leaflets for planned works have been produced detailing service standards for most aspects of the repairs and maintenance service;

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 services 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.

- all staff have had dedicated customer care and diversity training;
 - the Council has undertaken considerable research into hard to reach groups in the district and therefore has a high awareness of community housing needs;
 - for many years there have been ongoing cyclical and planned maintenance programmes, and a stock condition survey undertaken in 2002 revealed that the stock is in a generally good condition;
 - clear approach towards addressing the Decent Homes Standard, the five-year programme was developed in conjunction with tenants, and the Council is confident that it will meet DHS by 2008/9;
 - recent figures, beginning earlier this year, show that there has been an improvement in response times for emergency and urgent repairs, to a high level of performance;
 - a new IT system has been implemented resulting in some improvements, for example, the introduction of appointments;
 - property lettings have improved with two unpopular sheltered housing schemes decommissioned and disposed of on the open market, 126 sheltered housing units declassified to enable reduction in numbers of voids, and the re-letting of a number of general needs properties that have been empty for a long time;
 - voids standards established with TACT;
 - the voids and lettings processes enable adapted properties to be identified and re-let appropriately;
 - new procedures for gas servicing adopted in 2004 and a new contractor appointed, Saturday and evening appointments for gas servicing introduced and only nine properties out of time awaiting gas servicing, which is a good service;
 - the responsive repairs service is generally low cost;
 - there is one joint team to deal with DFGs (disabled facilities grants) and the aids and adaptations £500,000 budget, working with the County Council to filter and prioritise applications, with 96 per cent satisfaction being reported; and
 - the Council produces regular newsletters 'Tenants' Xtra' and SHINE which provide key information about the housing service including performance in key areas of the repairs and maintenance service.
- 11 There are a number of the repairs and maintenance service areas that need improving. These are:
- access to the service is confusing as the Council uses three different telephone numbers for day time repairs reporting and out-of-hours and non are free phone;

- opening hours not determined by tenants and are not convenient to all tenants. This issue is compounded as a number of leaflets are out-of-date, displaying out of date opening hours information and do not display language strap-lines or availability in different formats;
- there is no tenants handbook and although leaflets are being reviewed and revised there are still many older, poorly designed leaflets, and there are no diagnostic aids to help tenants and staff to correctly identify repairs. Many of the leaflets are not available in different formats and are in small print;
- there is limited tenant representation in decision-making with no recognised tenants and residents groups active in the district, there has also been limited TACT involvement in service development;
- tenants have not been engaged in procurement decisions or in the monitoring of performance, little tenant involvement in the management of planned works for example set up meetings, surveys and evaluation, and tenants are offered a limited choice for front and back doors, bathrooms and kitchens;
- the Council presently offers very limited application of repairs appointments;
- many non-urgent repairs are being completed outside their prescribed timescales;
- tenants are not being notified about repairs orders that go beyond their expected completion date;
- high percentage of emergency repairs being undertaken: 43.2 per cent of responsive repairs are emergency repairs, many works orders are incorrectly diagnosed and categorised leading to many variation orders;
- rechargeable repairs collection is poor and in the last year only one invoice was issued and this was not collected;
- the service is not totally embracing VFM principles, for example planned: responsive ratio is not in accordance with good practice, no discounts for voids and there is no use being made of batched repairs;
- there are no leaflets to inform tenants about the presence of asbestos to their homes;
- stock condition sample has not been added to and the interface of responsive and planned repairs into the stock database has not yet been developed;
- pre and post-inspection procedures are not robust and there is no evidence that this is being effectively monitored;
- lettings standard is given to tenants but only when they have signed up for the property and not before, satisfaction is not being monitored and post-allocation visits are taking place ten months after the letting; and

- tenant information when applying for aids and adaptations, and staff procedures for dealing with these requests and progressing works are poor, with no clear targets. There is no recycling of aids and adaptations once removed from vacant properties.
- 12 The prospect for improvement in the repairs and maintenance service are judged as **promising**. The strengths are:
- there have been some discernible service improvement benefits to tenants over the last two years;
 - there is a repairs improvement plan which is being worked through, that has led to positive change;
 - the Council has reviewed and revised some leaflets, it has a schedule for completing this task, and is now adopting a clearer corporate style;
 - vacant properties have reduced in number and properties are now being let more promptly;
 - establishment of a new IT system has enabled the introduction of appointments, providing a more customer-focused approach. It will enable more efficient collection and collation of information and management of processes across the services;
 - the Council has undertaken heating, kitchen and bathroom improvements to 896 properties in the last two years. In addition, many external works have also been completed to properties including double glazing, installation of new front and back doors with high security and low maintenance, plus repairs to paths, roofs, fencing and damp proofing works;
 - the Council is making steady progress towards tackling non-decent homes and the latest un-audited figures provided by the Council show that the number of non-decent homes has fallen to 13.8 per cent or 447 properties that do not meet the standard;
 - new gas safety procedures have been established and a new contractor appointed resulting in much improved performance;
 - improvement plans have been established following reviews and inspections including the development of a vision and standards for sheltered housing. The numerous housing related plans have been brought together under a composite housing services action plan;
 - the Council has agreed to tender the responsive repairs and maintenance service in 2006 to ensure it receives value for money;
 - there has been investment in performance management and a new, more robust performance monitoring and reporting system has recently been introduced; and
 - corporate call centre established which will absorb housing frontline in the third quarter of 2005.

13 There are barriers to the Council's prospects for improvement which are:

- some actions identified in previous inspections have not been implemented, progress has been slow on some issues and performance in some service areas has been variable;
- many action plans have been prepared, but some are not SMART and have not been effectively progressed;
- best value principles have not been effectively and comprehensively applied to the repairs and maintenance service;
- the service cannot demonstrate that it is totally embracing value for money principles; and
- IT systems are not yet sufficiently developed and have previously been a barrier to the implementation of service improvements.

Recommendations

14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. The Council has in place a number of action plans which if implemented will address some of the weaknesses identified above and in the body of the report. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations	
Within three months	
R1	<i>Report the findings and recommendations of this report to the Council, staff, tenants and leaseholders and stakeholders.</i>
R2	<i>Prepare a SMART action plan to address all weaknesses identified in this report and ensure that progress is regularly monitored and reported.</i>
R3	<i>Undertake a comprehensive review the provision of repairs and maintenance leaflets to tenants to ensure that information is provided in a consistent and co-ordinated manner and that all tenants are supplied with information to help in the diagnosis of repairs.</i>
R4	<i>Review progress against all outstanding diversity actions within the key action plans. Ensure that action is taken on outstanding items.</i>

Recommendations

Within six months

R5	<i>In conjunction with all stakeholders undertake a detailed analysis of the responsive repairs service to address the high incidence of variation orders and reasons for the high levels of jobs being diagnosed and ordered as emergencies.</i>
R6	<i>Undertake a review in conjunction with stakeholders of contract administration, management and evaluation procedures to enable the delivery of a more customer-focused service.</i>
R7	<i>Review the procedures for aids and adaptations to ensure that initial requests for aids and adaptations are recorded, works are captured on property attributes and the service is monitored to ensure that it is meeting its stated objective of achieving independent living.</i>
R8	<i>Continue to develop the provision of performance information so that it includes all service areas and corresponding commentary and actions to manage under performance and deliver service improvements.</i>
R9	<i>Increase resident involvement and influence in all aspects of this service.</i>

Within twelve months

R10	<i>Implement appointments across all trades to enable all tenants to be offered them in accordance with prescribed timescales and to improve ease of access for tenants.</i>
R11	<i>Ensure that all elements of the repairs and maintenance service deliver value for money.</i>
R12	<i>In conjunction with contractors and tenants actively develop a strategy that will enable a move from a responsive to a planned repairs and maintenance service.</i>