
REPORT TO:	COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM:	8
DATE OF MEETING:	31 JULY 2006	CATEGORY:	
REPORT FROM:	DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE	OPEN	
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT	SALLY KNIGHT (EXT. 5728)		
SUBJECT:	HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE INSPECTION		
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE:	

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide background information about the Audit Commission's inspection of the Council's housing repairs and maintenance service.

2.0 THE INSPECTION

2.1 The inspection was carried out in June 2005. The areas covered included:

- access, customer care and user focus
- diversity
- capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, and, major repairs to the Council's 3,235 homes
- responsive and void repairs
- gas servicing
- aids and adaptations for people with disabilities
- resident involvement and value for money

2.2 A Report on the Inspection was published in October 2005.

3.0 INSPECTION FINDINGS

3.1 The Audit Commission's overall judgement was that the Council provided a 'fair', one star service with 'promising' prospects for improvement.

Service Quality

3.2 The Inspectors identified a number of positive aspects about the service including:

- high levels of customer satisfaction

- a Customer Care Charter is in place and a repairs policy has been produced in conjunction with the Tenant Advisory and Consultation Team (TACT)
- all staff have received dedicated customer care and diversity training
- costs are low for responsive repairs and generally the stock is in good condition
- response times for emergency and urgent repairs have improved
- there is one team dealing with disabled facilities grants which works with the County Council to prioritise applications; customer satisfaction levels are high
- the Council produces regular newsletters for tenants, which provide information about the housing service, including the performance of the repairs and maintenance service

3.3 However, the Inspectors also found a number of service areas that need improving. For example,

- tenants found access to the service confusing, with different telephone numbers, inconvenient opening hours and out of date leaflets
- many non-urgent repairs were being completed outside their prescribed timescales
- the ratio of planned to responsive maintenance was below good practice levels
- tenants have not been engaged in procurement decisions or in the monitoring of performance; there was little tenant involvement in the management of planned works and they were offered a limited choice of external doors, bathrooms and kitchens

Prospects for Improvement

3.4 The Inspectors assessed the Council's prospects for improvement as 'promising' because amongst other things:

- there is an on-going repairs improvement plan which has led to positive changes
- vacant properties have reduced in number and properties are now being let more promptly
- the establishment of a new IT system has enabled the introduction of appointments, providing a more customer focused approach
- the Council has undertaken heating, kitchen and bathroom improvements to 896 properties over a two year period and is making steady progress towards tackling non decent homes
- 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 the sheltered housing service
- the numerous housing related plans have been brought under a composite housing services action plan and a new, more robust performance monitoring and reporting system has been introduced
- the Council has agreed to tender the responsive repairs and maintenance service in 2006 to ensure that it receives value for money

3.5 However, the Inspectors also identified a number of 'barriers' to our prospects for improvement. These included:

- some actions identified in previous inspections have not been implemented and progress has been slow on some issues
- Best Value principles have not been effectively and comprehensively applied to the service
- IT systems are not yet sufficiently developed

4.0 AUDIT COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The Inspectors went on to make a number of recommendations designed to help the service continue to improve.

4.2 These are set out below along with a brief note on progress to date (as reported in the Best Value Performance Plan which was published at the end of June).

AUDIT COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS – HOUSING REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE		
Ref No.	Recommendation	Progress to date
Within 3 months		
R1	Report the findings and recommendations of this report to the Council, staff, tenants, leaseholders and stakeholders.	<p>We have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reported the findings and recommendations to Members through the Housing and Community Services Committee (November 2005) • made the report available on our web site • advised all staff through a special staff meeting and through team briefs • placed an item in the autumn/winter edition of the 'Tenants Extra' newsletter
R2	Prepare a SMART action plan to address all weaknesses identified in this report and ensure that progress is regularly monitored and reported.	<p>An Improvement Action Plan has been prepared based on 6 key themes – diversity; access, customer care and user focus; gas servicing; responsive repairs; stock investment; and, void repairs.</p> <p>Improvements are monitored through monthly management meetings with the Director of Community Services and by members on a quarterly basis. Progress is also discussed with staff and TACT (Tenants Advisory Consultation Team). Significant improvements have already been seen in our voids performance, average re let time is down by 6 days per property, equating to an initial saving of £14,000.</p>
R3	Undertake a comprehensive review of 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.	A new Tenants Handbook is being produced which will be distributed to tenants during the summer. The handbook will include information about looking after your home, such as diagnosing and reporting repairs.

Ref No.	Recommendation	Progress to date
R4	Review progress against all outstanding diversity actions within the key action plans. Ensure that action is taken on all outstanding items.	Progress on outstanding actions has been reviewed. Achievements include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completion of race equality impact assessments, which are now being built into operational plans • review/update of tenant details • preparation of an action plan to secure compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for social housing • commencement of works at sheltered housing schemes to secure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act • improved monitoring through the Housing Services management team • use of 'Language Line' by Housing services has now been adopted corporately.
Within 6 months		
R5	In conjunction with stakeholders undertake a detailed analysis of the responsive service to address the high incidence of variation orders and the reasons for the high levels of jobs being diagnosed and ordered as emergencies.	A 'Challenge Day' has been arranged for tenants and other stakeholder on 21 July. This will explore: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diagnosis of repairs • variation orders • performance in reletting vacant properties • emergency repairs • ways of making the service more customer focused
R6	Undertake a review in conjunction with stakeholders of contract administration, management and evaluation procedures to enable the delivery of a more customer focused service.	Ditto
R7	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.	A review of the procedures for aids and adaptations has been undertaken and changes have been made to ensure full monitoring from initial enquiry to completion. Performance is also reported monthly to the Director of Community Services and quarterly to committee. Properties are currently re-let taking into account existing adaptations. The formal recording of attributes (which is due to be introduced later this year once a review of the repairs reporting tool has been undertaken by Orchard) will support and strengthen this approach.

Ref No.	Recommendation	Progress to date
R8	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.	Quarterly reports are provided for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing and Community Services Committee • Housing Services Management Team • Director of Community Services • Staff briefings • Tenants Extra newsletter • South Derbyshire Tenants Forum • Improvement Panel (corporate issues)
R9	Increase resident involvement and influence in all aspects of this service.	An action plan has been developed that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 'challenge event' for repairs and maintenance (mentioned earlier) • A tenant 'challenge' on vacant properties • Use of 'mystery shoppers' for repairs issues • A 'challenge event' on Equality and Diversity <p>We are also working on a feasibility study to bring more of the repairs and maintenance service within the ambit of 'Customer First' contact centre/main reception service.</p>
Within 12 months		
R10	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.	An appointment system is now in place. We are now doing in excess 85% of all jobs on appointment.
R11	Ensure that all elements of the repairs and maintenance service deliver value for money.	A suitable approach is currently being explored with key stakeholders.
R12	In conjunction with contractors and tenants actively develop a strategy that will enable a move from a responsive to a planned maintenance service.	No formal progress at this stage.

