

Communities Scotland  
**Inspection report**

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**Aberdeen City Council**

November 2005

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# 1. Introduction

## About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by Communities Scotland under section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of housing service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of *Performance Standards*.

## How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

- How good are the services we have inspected?
- How well are these services being managed for improvement?

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to tenants, staff and elected members of the council;
- asked other partner organisations for their views;
- visited homes and local areas;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
- examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
- analysed published performance and financial information.

1.4 We have awarded grades for the housing management, property maintenance and homelessness services. This is what our grades mean:

A	Excellent	Major strengths.
B	Good	Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.
C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
D	Poor	Major areas where improvement is needed or where a number of very significant weaknesses are found.

## The inspection team

- 1.5 The Aberdeen City Council inspection was managed by Yvonne Summers (Inspection Manager). The inspection team included Robbie Fraser, Ian Kerr, David Love, Morag MacLeod and Joyce Stewart (Inspectors) and Claire Ramsay (Tenant Assessor). We were on site between 6 June 2005 and 1 July 2005. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff and tenants of Aberdeen City Council for their time and co-operation.

## Responding to this inspection

- 1.6 We expect all inspected bodies to make the summary of this report available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

## 2. Context

### Geography

- 2.1 Aberdeen City covers an area of just over 71 square miles (184 square kilometres) and is located in the north east of Scotland. Aberdeen is the largest centre of population north of the central belt. The city is a major seaport, has an international airport and is an important centre of education with two universities, a large college, and several research institutes of international standing within its boundaries.

### Population

- 2.2 The latest census figures show the city has a population of just over 212,000 people.
- 2.3 The number of people living in Aberdeen is reducing, with a drop of 1% between the 1991 and 2001 census. This trend is forecast to continue, with the population projected to decrease to just over 205,000 by 2016.
- 2.4 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population in Aberdeen City accounts for 2.9% of the population (2001 Census). This is higher than the Scottish average of 2% and an increase from the 1.5% level in the 1991 census.
- 2.5 The two biggest BME populations in Aberdeen are Chinese or from the Indian Sub-continent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Aberdeen has a higher proportion of Chinese people than any other area in Scotland.

### Economic Factors

- 2.6 Aberdeen has high levels of economic activity, low levels of unemployment, average levels of benefit dependency, and higher than average household incomes. Aberdeen's general unemployment rate was 2.7% in 2001 compared to a Scottish average of 3.9%. By April 2005 the level of unemployment had dropped to 2.2%. However these figures mask pockets of high unemployment in areas such as Woodside & Tillydrone where 8% of people are unemployed. Employment in Aberdeen relies heavily on the energy sector, although this has

been declining for a number of years and is expected to continue to decline. However, forecasts show that total employment should remain stable in the short term.

## Social Housing Supply

2.7 There has been a significant decrease in the supply of social housing in Aberdeen in the last twenty years. Since the introduction of the right to buy<sup>1</sup>, the proportion of council housing in the city has decreased by 40%, to 24,690 houses. Right to buy has also had a marked impact on the profile of social rented stock across the City, with 70% now consisting of flats and tenements. The Council provides housing for over 23% of Aberdeen's population; other social landlords in the city provide housing for 3% of the city's population which is lower than the Scottish average of 5%.

## Council Membership

2.8 Aberdeen City Council has 43 elected members made up of:

- 20 Scottish Liberal Democrats;
- 14 Scottish Labour;
- 6 Scottish Nationalists;
- Scottish Conservatives.

2.9 The Council's administration is a coalition of Liberal Democrat and Conservative members. Most housing and homelessness issues are considered by the Community Services Committee.

2.10 The Council supports 9 registered tenants' organisations (RTOs). Support is also provided to a further 30 groups comprising single issue groups, citywide issues groups and social groups.

## Organisation of the Council

2.11 The Council employs over 11,000 people. In a radical reshaping, Aberdeen City Council has replaced the former 11 departments with the following service groupings:

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<sup>1</sup> see glossary

- Neighbourhood Services;
- Strategic Services;
- Central Support Services;
- Office of Chief Executive.

2.12 The Council as a whole is continuing to undergo a major process of change, from a departmental structure to an area based model. For the purposes of service delivery, Aberdeen is now divided into three administrative areas (North, South and Central). The aim is to improve the quality of life of all residents by bringing Council services closer to their point of delivery and to continuously strive to maintain and improve the quality of these services for the benefit of residents and visitors.

### Homelessness in Aberdeen City Council

2.13 Homeless applications in Aberdeen have increased by 17.5% over the last four years to 1837 applications in 2004/05. However, the number of applications is still low when compared with the whole of Scotland. In 2003/04, 1.61% of Aberdeen's population made homeless applications compared with 2.29% for Scotland as a whole. The council decided to increase staffing levels within the homeless service in February 2005 with the appointment of two additional officers in May/June 2005.

## Key facts

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Houses owned	25,841	25,193	24,690
No. of applicants on housing list <sup>2</sup> as at 31 March		57.3%	62.4%
Employees (full time equivalents)	275	323	815(est.)
Housing Revenue Account Gross Capital Expenditure (£m)	£19.0	£20.3	£27.3 (est.)
Total possible rental income (000's)	52,240,	52,502,	54,844,
% of rental income from Housing Benefit	41.53%	51.35%	46.72%
% of tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit			
Current tenants' arrears as a % of net rent due	8.4%	8.7%	9.7%
Average weekly rent	£41.76	£43.22	£46.22
Average rent increase	5.03%	3.50%	6.94%
No. of houses re-let	2,783	2,905	2,650
No. of response repairs carried out	117,924	115,047	108,797
Maintenance spend per house	£805	£917	£961 (est.)
Supervision and management spend per house	£335	£258	£289
Right To Buy sales	683	643	490
No. of homeless applications	1,534	1,639	1,837*
No. of evictions	200	227	208

Sources: Aberdeen City Council's Inspection Submission<sup>3</sup> and Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins

<sup>2</sup> see glossary

<sup>3</sup> see glossary

### 3. Housing management

3.1 The grade awarded for housing management is:

C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

#### How good is the service?

##### Access

*Social landlords should provide open, fair and equal access to their housing lists and should work with partners to simplify and maximise access to housing.*

- 3.2 Aberdeen City Council operates an open housing list. Anyone over the age of 16 can apply at any time regardless of where they live and will be accepted on to the list.
- 3.3 Aberdeen City Council makes it easy for all sections of the community to find out about and apply for housing. It provides good information about its housing and how to apply through its website, through leaflets and posters, on buses and in other accessible locations. The Council can arrange for the translation of leaflets and other material into large print or community languages and provides access to interpreters. The Council is also part-funding a Disabled Persons' Housing Service which is due to start work in the near future.
- 3.4 The Council is working with others to improve access to social housing in Aberdeen through a common housing register<sup>4</sup> which it operates with five other social landlords. The register is managed and administered by Homechoice (Aberdeen) Limited and means that applicants can apply to join all the partners' housing lists by filling in one form. Homechoice has a shop in a convenient city centre location where applicants can get application forms as well as information and advice on housing. Applicants can also get application forms at all of the Council's housing offices.

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<sup>4</sup> see glossary

- 3.5 Neither Homechoice nor Council staff routinely advise applicants about the likelihood of their being housed by the Council, unless they specifically approach staff for this type of information.
- 3.6 Gaining physical access to the Homechoice shop and to some of the Council's offices is easy. However, a number of the Council's local offices are difficult for service users with disabilities to use. Gaining access for wheelchair users can be impossible and some offices do not have induction loops. This may impact on the Council's ability to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
- 3.7 The Council and its partners have agreed a target with Homechoice to process applications within 28 days and its performance is good; during 2004 85% of applications were processed within the target time. Many applications are completed well within this timescale with a third added to the list within a week and almost 60% done within 14 days. Owing to computer problems performance dipped during the early part of 2005 but we saw evidence of a steady improvement in performance by the time of our inspection. Homechoice does not always provide applicants with the information they need. When applicants receive a letter confirming the waiting list areas and house types they are being considered for but the letters do not give a breakdown of what the points have been awarded for, the likelihood of rehousing or details of the appeals process should they wish to challenge their points.
- 3.8 Aberdeen City Council actively manages its housing list with each application being reviewed on its anniversary, giving the Council an accurate and up to date picture of demand in its area. However, the main reasons people give for refusing offers are that their circumstances have changed or that they would prefer a different area. The Council is aware of this and applicants are asked to review their recorded preferences whenever they refuse a reasonable offer. We discuss this further later in this section of the report.
- 3.9 The Council is using suspensions appropriately and in line with its own policy. At the time of our inspection, around 750 applicants, (8% of those on the list) were suspended. Suspended applicants are advised of the period and reason for the

suspension and what action they should take to have the suspension lifted. However, they are not told in all cases that they have a right to appeal the suspension nor what to do if they want to make an appeal.

- 3.10 The proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) households applying to the Council for housing is in line with the numbers in the Aberdeen population. The Council records the ethnicity and any disabilities of those who apply and are housed. However, this information is not routinely analysed or used to confirm that fair outcomes are being achieved.
- 3.11 Overall, Aberdeen City Council provides good access to its housing list. Access is open to anyone over 16 and the common housing register and single application form simplify the process for applicants. Applications are processed within a reasonable timescale and the Council's approach to the management of its lists and suspension of applicants is also generally good.

#### **Meeting need and maximising choice**

*Social landlords should meet housing need through lettings and should maximise choice for applicants.*

- 3.12 Aberdeen City Council uses several different processes to allocate its housing depending on its type and location. The Council has, over time, identified a number of problems with areas of low demand and has introduced a range of specific initiatives or pilot schemes to try and resolve them such as local lettings initiatives, a choice based lettings pilot and the ACCess Aberdeen project.
- 3.13 We found that, through the main housing list, the Council prioritises its allocations based on a range of housing needs which clearly reflect the statutory reasonable preference categories<sup>5</sup>. All the allocations we reviewed were to people with one or more of the housing needs identified in the relevant legislation.
- 3.14 However, we also found aspects of the Council's selection and allocations processes which lack transparency or are not covered by any published rules. We saw a small number of cases where the applicants identified as next in line for a particular allocation had been bypassed with a comment on file that they were "not suitable for block" but with no further explanation. This is not sufficient

- evidence to demonstrate that these allocations have been made fairly or in line with legislation.
- 3.15 The Council has a statutory duty to publish the rules it uses for letting its houses. Aberdeen has introduced local lettings initiatives in the Logie and Sandilands areas of the city where there are high numbers of empty properties. However, these are not covered in the Council's published Scheme of Allocations and the Council has not developed any formal letting plans to set out what it is aiming to achieve through the initiative or how it will allocate the houses in these areas. Neither of the initiatives have been formally evaluated and outcomes have not been assessed.
- 3.16 The Council gives applicants an unlimited choice of the 61 letting areas within the city. Applicants can also choose their preferred house type and form of heating. The Council does not limit the number of offers an applicant can receive and does not penalise applicants for refusing offers. However, the Council recognises that it has a problem with the high number of offers being refused. In 2005 the Council made 8423 offers which resulted in 2650 properties being relet; equivalent to over three offers for every successful relet. As a result, it introduced in March 2002, a multiple offer scheme whereby an applicant can have their offer transferred to a similar vacant property or properties should they refuse the original offer. This has resulted in the acceptance rate of offers increasing from 35% to 70%.
- 3.17 In September 2002 the Council introduced the ACCess Aberdeen scheme to deal with low demand properties. Under this initiative, houses which meet specific criteria, such as having been empty for six months and been refused several times, are passed to the ACCess Aberdeen team. Properties are then advertised openly and allocated on a "first come, first served" basis without any assessment of need. The initiative has proved to be a success with around 700 properties let since its introduction. However, we saw evidence of some problems in the supply of appropriate houses to the team from area offices. At the time of the inspection ACCess Aberdeen had 219 applicants on its waiting list

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<sup>5</sup> see glossary

- and there were 72 appropriate properties available for immediate relet. However the ACCess Aberdeen team had the keys for only one property.
- 3.18 Over the last year or so, the Council has been participating in a choice based letting pilot, administered by Homechoice (Aberdeen ) Limited. At the time of the inspection, the pilot was being evaluated with a number of positive indications emerging. For the Council a higher proportion of offers were accepted. However, no information had been produced as yet dealing with some of the other objectives of the pilot such as the impact on the time taken to relet empty properties.
- 3.19 The Council nominates applicants to the two RSLs operating in Aberdeen which are not partners in the common housing register. This increases the range of housing options for applicants. In 2004/05, 75% of its nominations resulted in a successful let which compares favourably with the national figure for 2003/04 of 51.6%.
- 3.20 Aberdeen City Council is good at providing choice for applicants and is meeting a range of housing needs through the way it allocates its houses. Its selection process, however, is not always transparent and it is poor at monitoring and evaluating the impact of initiatives set up to deal with specific problems.

#### **Sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness**

*Social landlords should maximise security of tenure for all residents of their accommodation, and should work to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness through their delivery of housing management services.*

- 3.21 Aberdeen City Council has signed up just over 76% of its tenants to the Scottish Secure Tenancy (SST) agreement. Although the Council has tried to contact the remaining tenants on a number of occasions, there are no firm plans to ensure the other quarter of Council tenants sign up to their new tenancy agreements.
- 3.22 The provision of good information and access to appropriate support are important ways in which landlords can help sustain tenancies. The Council gives new tenants a comprehensive, user-friendly handbook as well as a summary of their SST agreement. Staff have a checklist to use at sign up interviews to make sure they give tenants all the information they need, but we found that they do

- not always talk through the SST summary agreement to inform tenants about their rights and responsibilities. The Council aims to carry out settling in visits within four to six weeks of tenants moving into their property but there is no appointments system for these visits and no monitoring of completed visits so the Council does not know how many visits are actually carried out.
- 3.23 The Council has given two tenants short SSTs and where these have been used, we found that the Council is putting the necessary support, monitoring and follow up arrangements in place. Staff maintain comprehensive records for each short SST and any complaints are well documented. However, the Council has no mechanism in place for identifying and providing support for other tenants. The only formal referral arrangements in place are with the SCARF<sup>6</sup> energy advice project and to the Instant Neighbour project, which provides furniture and household goods. The Council has recently secured funding for a Tenancy Support Worker to work with arrears and estate management staff to identify whether new or existing tenants need more formal support to maintain their tenancy and to help link up with support providers.
- 3.24 Around ten percent of Council tenancies are terminated each year. Just under one in six (16%) of the tenancies terminated in 2004 was due to tenants abandoning their properties, a slight increase on the previous year. The Council does not monitor abandonments so it does not have a good picture of patterns or trends which might help to explain the level of abandonments.
- 3.25 In 2004/05 the Council issued 6,797 Notices of Proceedings (NOPs) and initiated court action against just over 1,000 of these tenants, all for rent arrears. The number of NOPs issued has fallen by over 20% in the last two years and the number of cases going to court has fallen by a third over the same period. This suggests that the Council is taking a more targeted approach to legal proceedings.
- 3.26 Just over 200 tenants abandoned their homes in 2004/05 after the Council was granted a decree for repossession, and a further seven were evicted. Taking these two figures together, the Council's overall eviction rate for 2004/05 was

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<sup>6</sup> see glossary

- 0.84%. This is a slight drop from the previous year but it is still significantly above the 2003/04 Scottish figure of 0.59%.
- 3.27 Aberdeen City Council takes eviction action as a last resort, whether for rent arrears or anti social behaviour. Council staff are clear that they need to ensure all other remedies have been exhausted prior to eviction, such as checking the status of housing benefit claims, applying for Arrears Direct where appropriate, and making arrangements with tenants for repayment of arrears. In cases where a decision is taken to evict, we found that Council staff follow appropriate procedures.
- 3.28 The letters the Council issues to tenants in arrears are good, emphasising the seriousness of the issue and signposting tenants to benefits and debt advice. The Council's Visiting Officers (recently increased to eight posts) make personal contact with tenants in arrears at NOP<sup>7</sup> stage and beyond. The Council also includes a leaflet about sources of debt advice with all letters to tenants from NOP stage onwards. However, arrears staff do not carry out an income and expenditure calculation to check the affordability of any repayment arrangements. We also found that the Council does not write to tenants confirming arrangement details, although it is considering doing so in the future.
- 3.29 The Council is responsive to personal circumstances affecting tenants, for example by cancelling planned evictions. However, until the Tenancy Support Worker is in post, the Council does not have a systematic way of identifying vulnerable tenants, either at the beginning of their tenancy or on an ongoing basis, such as following the recall of a decree. Arrears staff recognise that their capacity to identify and help tenants with support needs is still developing.
- 3.30 The partnership working between the arrears and homeless staff to prevent homelessness is also underdeveloped. Of the seven tenants evicted for rent arrears during 2004/05, three subsequently presented to the homeless team and were found to be in priority need. Despite having been evicted by the Council, two of these applicants were found unintentionally homeless and have since

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<sup>7</sup> see glossary

being rehoused by the Council. This underlines the impact that lack of support resources is having on vulnerable tenants.

- 3.31 The Council's approach to sustaining tenancies is fair. The Council provides good information to new tenants, uses short SSTs appropriately and is making efforts to minimise evictions. However there are a number of important weaknesses that impact directly on service users including the Council's minimal provision of support, the high level of tenancies being abandoned and the poor links between housing management and homelessness staff.

#### Quality of neighbourhoods

*Social landlords should deliver services to ensure that neighbourhoods are attractive, well-maintained and safe places to live. They should deal appropriately with antisocial behaviour.*

- 3.32 Aberdeen City Council's estates are a mixture of high demand mixed tenure housing and more difficult to let areas. We found that the majority are maintained to a good standard although there are one or two specific areas which have problems with graffiti, vandalism and litter. Estate Caretakers have been placed in a number of areas to deal with problems or highlight them to other area based staff. The Council is aware of the issues in particular estates and generally responds effectively.
- 3.33 The Council provides resources to maintain its estates and uses a wide range of different initiatives to deal with any problems. In addition to the Estate Caretakers, the Council also employs cleaning services for the communal areas of some blocks and all multi storey blocks have a caretaking service and five in Tillydrone have a concierge scheme in operation.
- 3.34 There are Community and Neighbourhood Wardens, selected and managed by Grampian police who cover the areas identified in the Community Regeneration Strategy as a priority, or 'at risk'. The Wardens are working well with staff and tenants. Feedback from tenants confirmed that the Community and Neighbourhood Wardens are making a positive contribution to reducing vandalism and graffiti.

- 3.35 Other initiatives contributing to well managed estates include the Goodapple Tenants' Scheme which offers a number of benefits for tenants who meet certain criteria related to meeting the responsibilities of their tenancies, and the provision of community flats in a number of the Council's estates. These flats provide a contact point for the Community Wardens, a resource and information source for local tenants and are used by local tenant groups.
- 3.36 At the moment, the Council does not formally record complaints from service users regarding the condition of their estates but it does have plans in place to develop reporting and monitoring systems.
- 3.37 Throughout the Council's area there are a number of sites covered by CCTV systems and there is also a portable system. The CCTV system is not proactively managed and there are no procedures in place to ensure that the systems are used effectively by staff.
- 3.38 The Council is responding well to the issue of anti social behaviour and it has developed a range of activities to effectively deal with reported incidents. It has a good strategy in place and a committed team and progress is being made against stated targets and objectives.
- 3.39 The Council has a good track record of using available funding effectively to introduce initiatives to address anti social behaviour including:
- Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs)<sup>8</sup>;
  - interim ASBOs;
  - mediation;
  - management transfers;
  - acceptable behaviour contracts;
  - effective use, monitoring and management of Short Scottish Secure Tenancies;
  - dispersal powers;
  - the new Tenancy Support Worker post; and
  - the recently introduced Aberdeen Families Project.

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<sup>8</sup> see glossary

- 3.40 Anti social behaviour cases not resolved by the area team officers are referred to the Council's Neighbour Complaints Unit (NCU). In the cases we looked at it was not always clear that the area team officers had exhausted all means of resolving the anti social behaviour complaints before passing them to the NCU. There was also a lack of evidence in some cases that complainants had been kept informed by area team officers about action being taken or that timescales were being met. However the NCU collects good information on individual cases referred to it, keeps complainants informed and provides reassurance that problems are being dealt with. The NCU has access to a number of different approaches, including mediation services, and makes good use of these prior to taking legal action.
- 3.41 While we were on site, the Council launched a new Noise Management Team to enforce the recently introduced Noise Management legislation. The new service has been widely advertised and will work closely with the NCU. The Council plans to review the impact and effectiveness of these new arrangements after a year.
- 3.42 The Council is taking positive steps to maintain and improve the quality of its neighbourhoods. The physical quality of estates is generally good and the Council is giving high priority to dealing with the issue of anti social behaviour in the city. There is a comprehensive Anti Social Behaviour Strategy in place with clear objectives and timescales that are monitored and reported on and it has introduced a wide range of initiatives to deal with reported incidents.

#### **Responsiveness to tenants**

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 3.43 The Council has put in place a range of formal structures to encourage tenants to participate in and influence housing management and other housing services. At a local level there are a number of Community Forums which are focused on local issues around service delivery, while the Community Regeneration Networks are more concerned with looking at issues around the longer term future for specific areas of the city. At a city wide level, two groups have recently been merged to create the Tenant Participation and Housing Planning Group,

- which has a high level of involvement with strategic housing issues. However, the level of regular tenant involvement in this group is relatively limited.
- 3.44 Despite the Council devoting significant time and other resources to supporting these structures and other forms of tenant involvement, including six full time Tenant Participation Officers, we received feedback from tenants living in a range of areas across the city, as well as from staff and elected members, that the current arrangements do not work well and that the Council is not responding effectively to tenants concerns. A consultancy project carried out in 2000 highlighted similar problems and we found that a number of the problems identified by that project had not yet been resolved.
- 3.45 The Council uses a variety of publications to communicate with its tenants including a quarterly newsletter, leaflets on specific subjects, the citizen's panel and its website. Feedback from new tenants about the letting and sign up process is collected regularly and a full tenants survey is planned. However, its approach to gathering routine feedback in other key areas of its housing management services is underdeveloped.
- 3.46 Service users can report complaints in a variety of ways and the Council uses the corporate "Absolute Customer Commitment" scheme as its main complaints process. The Council maintains a register of complaints and ensures that all complainants receive a response. However, the Council does not monitor the outcome for complainants or analyse the type of complaints or the areas of service that they arise in, nor does it use this information to inform service improvements.
- 3.47 The Council does not have service standards in place for the housing management services that it provides to tenants and applicants. It intends to involve tenants in setting comprehensive service standards as part of the Council's review of its performance management framework.
- 3.48 The Council has a good approach to the provision of interpreting services and the translation of leaflets and other material into community languages. However, some officers did not know that written information is available in Braille or audio formats.

3.49 The Council is currently devoting a significant amount of time, money and effort into supporting ways of communicating with tenants and obtaining their views. This has resulted in a good range of written material in leaflets and newsletters. However, the tenants we spoke to about consultation mechanisms almost universally felt that the Council was not acting on the views they received. This is having an impact on tenants' willingness to continue to work with the Council and the feedback we received from all sources was that the existing arrangements are not working well. This is a significant weakness.

### Is the service managed for improvement?

#### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should maximise their income, in a way that is fair to service users, and manage costs effectively.*

3.50 Aberdeen City Council offers its tenants a wide range of ways to pay their rent:

- in person at any of its neighbourhood offices;
- a mobile collection unit;
- by direct debit, standing orders and outdoor collectors;
- by debit or credit card at the Point or Crown House; and
- by bank standing order or direct deductions from salary.

The Council plans to carry out a best value review of its rent collection facilities in October 2005.

3.51 The Council publicises the various payment methods through a range of posters and leaflets but they were not widely available in local Council offices during our inspection.

The table below summarises Aberdeen City Council's performance in collecting rent.

	At March 2003		At March 2004		At March 2005*
	Aberdeen	National	Aberdeen	National	Aberdeen
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	8.4%	7.4%	8.7%	7.9%	9.7%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	6.0%	4.8%	5.0%	4.9%	6.2%
Total former tenant arrears (£)	£2,752,106	n/a	£3,057,000	n/a	£3,531,322
Rent arrears written off (£)	£297,782	n/a	£254,703	n/a	£234,919

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators<sup>9</sup> & Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission  
 \* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

- 3.52 The level of rent arrears owed by Aberdeen City's tenants has increased by 1% since March 2004, with the most recent figure of 9.7% well above the national figure for the previous year of 7.9% and the target of 7% set by the Accounts Commission for city and urban councils. The proportion of tenants with serious arrears has also gone up to 6.2% in March 2005 from 5% in March 2004. As with the overall arrears figure, this is above the national figure for the previous year of 4.9%.
- 3.53 The Council's former tenant arrears have also increased by £474,000, to just over £3.5 million in March 2005. In contrast the level of rent arrears written off has been declining over the same period. Whilst the Council has clear procedures for pursuing and writing off former tenant arrears, this is not currently being given a high priority across the neighbourhood offices, mainly due to pressure of other work.
- 3.54 The Council has a good appreciation of the need to reduce its rent arrears and has taken a positive attitude to trying new initiatives to improve the situation. These include doubling the number of Visiting Officers, sending text messages to tenants in arrears and carrying out benefits health checks at the point of issuing Notices of Proceedings (NOPs). Other positive aspects of the Council's rent management procedures include:
- useful information on rents in the tenant handbook;

<sup>9</sup> see glossary

- good monitoring of arrears by staff and good quality control by team coordinators;
  - the personal contact made by Visiting Officers;
  - strong links between neighbourhood staff and revenues staff; and
  - a flexible approach to re-issuing NOPs when they expire.
- 3.55 We saw a small number of minor inconsistencies in the Council's practice which could have an effect on arrears including staff not always talking through the tenant's responsibilities regarding rent payment at sign up interviews. However, the most significant gap in the Council's services in this area is the lack of tenancy support for vulnerable tenants. In addition, information about any identified support needs of homeless applicants is not well communicated between homelessness and estate management staff. The Council does not have formal referral arrangements with advice and support agencies and does not monitor the outcomes of informal referrals so it does not have good information about how well they work.
- 3.56 The Council is in the process of rolling out a new framework for target setting and performance management. However in the management of arrears, we saw targets being set that took no account of actual levels of performance. The performance information currently produced on arrears is not structured to allow staff to identify problems and target their resources effectively.
- 3.57 The Council has an arrears action plan in place which identifies SMART<sup>10</sup> objectives to drive improvement. There are also detailed procedures for staff which lay out the processes to be followed but they do not provide staff with clear guidance on the issues to be considered before particular steps are taken. However, the Council complements these procedures with weekly training sessions where staff can discuss their approach to specific issues. We saw clear and comprehensive records for all arrears cases we examined with all actions and communications clearly documented.
- 3.58 Aberdeen City Council's management of its empty houses is poor. In 2004/05 only 2% of its houses were let within four weeks, compared with the national average of over 40%. This is equivalent to around 50 houses out of more than

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<sup>10</sup> see glossary

2,500 re-let during 2004/05. This is the poorest performance of any local authority in Scotland.

The table below summarises Aberdeen City Council's reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05*
	Aberdeen City	National	Aberdeen City	National	Aberdeen City
Turnover (no. of new vacancies as % of total dwellings)	10.8%	10.8%	11.5%	11.5%	10.4%
Total no. of re-lets <sup>11</sup>	2783	-	2905	-	2570
% re-let in <2 weeks	3.0%	14.5%	2.8%	16.4%	0.97%
% re-let in 2-4 weeks	1.9%	20.3%	1.2%	24.9%	0.72%
% re-let in >4 weeks	95.0%	65.2%	96.0%	58.7%	98.3%
Average time to re-let	147	76 days	168	73 days	174
% of total annual rent lost due to empty houses	5.2%	2.8%	5.5%	2.7%	5.9%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission

\* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

- 3.59 In 2003/04 Aberdeen City Council lost 5.5% of its rental income because of houses lying empty. This is more than double the national figure for that year of 2.7%; only 3 local authorities in Scotland had a poorer performance. In 2004/05, the performance deteriorated even further with 5.9% of rental income lost. Average time to relet has also increased over the past three years. The 2003/04 figure of 168 days was more than double the national figure and again performance got worse in 2004/05. The most recent figure of 174 days is equivalent to all properties lying empty for over five and a half months.
- 3.60 The Council is aware of the problem of empty houses and is taking steps to improve its understanding of the causes. It has recently created a Voids Sub-Group involving councillors and senior staff to identify where the problems lie and explore how to improve performance. Staff from the Change Unit – a team based in the Chief Executive's Office - are helping to map all the key stages of the overall process to see where major changes may need to be made. In the meantime, the Council is piloting a number of initiatives to minimise unnecessary delays including pre-termination viewings, the introduction of key safes to make it

<sup>11</sup> see glossary

- easier for repairs staff to gain access and restricting repairs on void<sup>12</sup> properties to a minimum with remaining repairs being completed after the new tenant moves in. Despite the long standing nature of this problem, all of these initiatives are too recent to see any impact on performance figures.
- 3.61 As discussed in the *Property maintenance* section of this report, there is no clear re-let standard in operation for empty properties.
- 3.62 Aberdeen City Council's costs for the supervision and management of its houses were £252 per unit in 2003/04, down from £311 the previous year. This is considerably lower than the national figure of £455 for 2003/04.
- 3.63 The Council's resource management is poor. Although there are a number of strengths in the Council's approach to rent management, rent arrears levels are high and continuing to rise, compared to national figures. The Council's performance in reletting empty houses is the worst of any local authority in Scotland and none of the initiatives currently being implemented by the Council has yet managed to improve the Council's position.

#### **Performance management**

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for housing management services, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 3.64 The strategic direction and priorities for housing in Aberdeen are clearly set out in a range of strategic planning documents including the Council's corporate plan and the Community Plan '*aberdeen futures*'. The Council's strategic planning framework was praised in a recent transitional Best Value Review carried out by Audit Scotland.
- 3.65 The latest Housing Service Plan for 2005/06 clearly situates the housing service within the Council's wider corporate and strategic context. It also brings together the strategic and operational objectives that apply to the housing service and contains a number of specific targets for key aspects of the service. However, it is less clear how these are translated into individual or team responsibilities.

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<sup>12</sup> see glossary

- 3.66 The Council's approach to performance management is underdeveloped across the housing service. Until recently, the emphasis has been on collecting statutory performance information to report to elected members and external bodies rather than on the information staff need to understand and manage their services. This lack of good, reliable service-related performance information is a significant handicap for staff trying to deal with identified weaknesses in service delivery such as rent arrears and reletting empty houses. However, we saw early indications that this is starting to change, with a greater focus being put on local information and input from frontline staff. The Council has recently approved a new Performance Management Framework incorporating these principles but is still in the early stages of putting this into practice.
- 3.67 At present the Council has a limited range of targets based on the statutory Key Performance Indicators. In general, it monitors and reports performance against these well but the targets that have been set for this year, in key parts of the service, are unrealistic and underline the weaknesses in the Council's current approach to performance management. For example, the current target for the proportion of rent lost through houses lying empty is 3.5% when the actual figure for last year was 5.9%. Similarly, the Council has a target for this year to relet 16% of empty houses within two weeks but last year it managed to let only 1.2% within this timescale.
- 3.68 The Council has a good range of policies and procedures in place to provide guidance for its housing management staff. It also has a network of Service Working Groups to enable staff to keep the operation of these policies under review. However, these groups are not currently part of a structured process for monitoring and reviewing the overall effectiveness of policies and there are a number of key areas where the effectiveness of this approach has been limited.
- 3.69 The Council has a good planning framework for the delivery of its housing service but its ability to control and manage the implementation of these plans is significantly impeded by the major weaknesses in the way it collects and uses performance information. Regular reports on key aspects of the service are provided to elected members in a way that gives a reasonable overview of

performance across the department but these weaknesses also limit the ability of staff to respond effectively to councillors concerns about service delivery.

### Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.*

3.70 The Council is required by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 to make service performance information available to the public. Aberdeen City Council meets this requirement by publishing an annual report on its performance in key areas like rent arrears, reletting empty houses and anti social behaviour, compared with the previous year and with national figures. This report also has information on tenant satisfaction with services. Some performance information is also available on its website but this is limited to Statutory Performance Indicators and does not include national comparisons. The Council is not making best use of other opportunities to publicise its performance in places it can easily be accessed such as office reception areas, libraries or its website.

## Grade and overall assessment of housing management

3.71 Our overall assessment is that Aberdeen City Council's housing management service is fair. It has some strengths, but it also has a number of areas for improvement, a small number of which are significant weaknesses. We set out below the key factors we have taken into account in coming to our overall assessment.

3.72 The Council has strengths in a number of key areas which impact on the quality of services for applicants and existing tenants. The Council:

- provides good access to its housing list;
- offers unlimited offers and choice of areas for applicants;
- manages its housing list well;
- meets a range of housing needs in the way it allocates its housing;
- follows good procedures in dealing with rent arrears; and
- takes a proactive approach to managing anti social behaviour.

3.73 The Council has a number of weaknesses in housing management, a small number of which are significant. Rent arrears are high and continuing to rise.

Not all allocations are transparent and the Council does not ensure that vulnerable tenants receive support to sustain their tenancies. A high number of Council tenants are evicted or abandon their tenancies post-decree and there are weaknesses in communication between housing management and homelessness staff. A high proportion of offers of housing are refused and the Council takes a long time to relet houses that become empty.

- 3.74 Other areas for improvement in the housing management service include:
- performance information is not being accurately recorded or used to improve service delivery;
  - the Council is not monitoring the impact of initiatives to improve service delivery;
  - consultation and participation processes are not delivering the changes tenants want to see; and
  - there are gaps in the public reporting of the Council's performance.

## 4. Property maintenance

4.1 The grade awarded for property maintenance is:

C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to the repairs service

*Social landlords should have arrangements in place that make it easy for tenants to report repairs and to have them carried out.*

- 4.2 Aberdeen City Council's responsive repairs service is generally accessible. Tenants can report repairs in a variety of ways including by phone, in writing, in person at Council offices and through its website. Tenants are given good information on how to report repairs. The Council gives a "repair-finder" booklet to all new tenants, and from time to time to other tenants. The same information in the repair finder booklet is also on the Council's website, and this helps tenants to identify the repair they need. However the Council does not explain to tenants how it determines the category or priority given to individual repairs, other than those defined as emergencies.
- 4.3 Most repairs are reported by phone through the repairs helpdesk, which receives around 600 calls per day. The Council installed a new telephone system for the helpdesk during the on-site phase of the inspection. It experienced significant problems with the new system, affecting tenants ability to contact the repairs helpdesk. Whilst the telephone problems were rectified before the end of our time on-site at the Council, it did not tell tenants what was happening or put any arrangements in place during this week long period to provide tenants with other ways of contacting the repairs service.
- 4.4 The Council aims to provide tenants with a written receipt for all repairs in the Urgent and Routine categories, telling them the target timescale for carrying out

- their repair. However, we found that no receipts had been issued for repairs since the end of January, due to problems with the computer system. No alternative arrangements had been put in place, meaning that tenants were getting no information on how their repairs had been categorised or when to expect the work to be done.
- 4.5 The Council operates an accessible out of hours emergency repairs service. This is based at the main works depot of its in-house repairs contractor, known as the Building Services (BS). Tenants we spoke to who had contacted either the out of hours service or the daytime service were generally happy with the reporting arrangements.
- 4.6 Although the Council does not operate a formal repairs appointment system, tenants can request a morning or afternoon call when a pre inspection<sup>13</sup> is required, and can arrange a repairs appointment when access proves difficult. However the Council does not actively offer specific repairs appointments, and it does not monitor inspectors' or its contractors' performance in keeping appointments.
- 4.7 Access to Aberdeen City Council's repairs service is usually good and tenants are generally satisfied with the accessibility of the service. At the time of inspection there were significant ICT<sup>14</sup> problems which prevented easy access to the repairs helpdesk, and the Council did not put appropriate arrangements in place quickly enough to reduce the effect the problems had on service users. Tenants get some useful information on the repairs service, although not on all category definitions. The Council's website provides a user-friendly way to identify and report repairs online.

#### **Speed and quality of response repairs service**

*Social landlords should set challenging targets for completing repairs, strive to achieve them and ensure repairs are completed to a high quality.*

- 4.8 Aberdeen City Council has a challenging internal target timescale of four hours for emergency repairs, but it does not formally measure performance against this

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<sup>13</sup> see glossary

<sup>14</sup> see glossary

target. The Council's official targets are 24 hours for emergencies, 3 working days for high priority repairs (Priority 1/2), 10 working days for urgent repairs (Priority 2), and 24 working days for routine repairs (Priority 3). The table below summarises the Council's performance against these targets over the last three years.

	Aberdeen City's target response time	Aberdeen City			National median 2003/04
		2002/03	2003/04	2004/05*	
<b>Emergency</b>	24 hours	96.2%	97.6%	95.2%	
<b>High (Priority 1/2)</b>	3 days	81.7%	84.4%	74.6%	
<b>Urgent (Priority 2)</b>	10 days	62.9%	54.4%	45.0%	
<b>Routine (Priority 3)</b>	24 days	75.8%	64.8%	54.4%	
<b>% of repairs due to be completed within 24 hours completed within target</b>		95.9%	98.9%	97.1%	95.1%
<b>% of all repairs completed in target</b>		88.4%	81.4%	78.3%	85.9%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission

\* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

- 4.9 The Council's reported performance in completing emergency repairs within target timescales is good. In 2003/04 the Council reported completing 98.9% of emergency repairs within 24 hours, which was better than the national median of 95.1% for all Scottish local authorities. The Council's performance in the last year dipped but it still performed well in this area.
- 4.10 However, the Council's performance in completing other categories of repair is poor and getting worse. Only around half of urgent and routine repairs are being completed within target timescales. The Council's in-house contractor has experienced continuing problems over recent years in recruiting and retaining trades staff, and this is having a direct effect on repairs performance. There are also problems with the quality and accuracy of performance information the Council collects, and this has a number of implications for the repairs service.
- 4.11 The Council's internal target response time of four hours for emergency repairs is not applied in practice, because of difficulties of recording times. Instead, the

- Council measures performance against a 24 hour target. But because staff do not record the time of day when repairs are reported or completed, even this performance figure cannot be verified. The Council recognised this weakness and began to take steps to address it during our inspection.
- 4.12 Performance on non emergency repairs is monitored from the day the repairs contractor receives the job order. The time between tenants reporting a repair and the instruction being passed to the contractor is not monitored, or included in the Council's performance figures. We analysed a sample of 850 pre inspected repairs, which showed an average of 3.5 working days between a tenant reporting a repair and the work being issued to the contractor. Given that the Council inspects one in four of all repairs, the official figures reported by the Council do not provide an accurate picture of tenants' experience of the repairs service, nor do they allow meaningful comparisons with other landlords.
- 4.13 The way the Council records repairs further undermines the accuracy of its reported and internal performance information. Because of the different computer systems used by the Council and its in-house repairs contractor, repairs recorded by the Council often result in a separate job ticket for each individual element of the repair being issued to the contractor. For example, the renewal of a bath can result in separate job tickets for a plumber, joiner, electrician and plasterer. This results in inflated numbers of response repairs being used by the Council in its performance information.
- 4.14 Aberdeen City's approach to carrying out repairs on its empty houses does not enable it to target this work effectively. Repairs staff work well with housing allocations staff to prioritise houses for which potential new tenants have been identified. However, there is a single target timescale of four weeks to complete void repairs for most of its empty properties, regardless of the extent of the work required. We looked at a sample of recently completed void repairs and found that, on average, the Council is taking five weeks to complete them. This has a significant impact on the Council's ability to relet empty houses quickly. The Council is not using monitoring information to identify whether it would be feasible to prioritise and set shorter target timescales for those empty houses requiring less work.

- 4.15 Pre and post inspections<sup>15</sup> are important tools for ensuring repairs are targeted accurately and carried out to a high standard. Pre inspections are arranged by appointment with inspectors in Aberdeen City, and tenants we spoke to generally found this system convenient. However some tenants highlighted that repairs they reported had been pre inspected a number of times. We found that this happens where a repair has been cancelled, for example due to failed access. When the tenant gets back in touch to make another arrangement to have the repair carried out, the computer system requires it to be re-inspected. This means inspection resources are not always being used efficiently, and results in additional inconvenience to tenants.
- 4.16 The Council's own figures for the year 2004/05 show that it pre inspected 26% of the repairs reported, along with 100% of empty properties. The Council does not set a target for pre inspections, but identifies those requiring pre-inspection depending on complexity.
- 4.17 Aberdeen City Council recognises that it does not use post inspections effectively in controlling the quality of response repairs, and it intends to review this activity. It has recently set a target of 10% of repairs to be post inspected, but it is not consistently applying this and is not formally monitoring performance against the target. It provides only limited guidance on identifying repairs for post inspection and in practice this is not always used. Rather, post inspections are selected at Senior Inspectors' discretion in each neighbourhood. While the Council follows up on post inspections on an individual basis where work is unsatisfactory, it does not always record this information in a consistent way, or analyse the outcomes of post inspections. This weakens the Council's understanding of the quality of service it provides, and prevents accurate analysis of repairs quality to help improve the service.
- 4.18 The Council's most recent tenant satisfaction survey information, covering January & February 2005, showed that 97% of tenants were satisfied with the standard of the repairs carried out. The remaining 3% recorded dissatisfaction with the standard of repair. However 9.5% of tenants did not think that their repairs were carried out within a reasonable time, and dissatisfaction with the

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<sup>15</sup> see glossary

length of time the Council took to carry out repairs was also highlighted by a number of the tenants we spoke to.

- 4.19 Aberdeen City Council operates a Right to Repair<sup>16</sup> scheme but it does not fully meet statutory requirements. The Council sends all tenants a leaflet about the scheme each year, providing information on the types of repairs that qualify. But it does not always identify qualifying repairs appropriately or advise tenants about their rights under the scheme when they report repairs. The Council's own performance figures show that very few repairs are identified as qualifying repairs under the scheme, and few result in a claim for compensation. We found that the majority of repairs that would qualify are issued as emergency repairs so that they are done quickly, and so tenants are receiving a good service. However this contributes to a high level of emergency repairs, with cost implications for the Council and its tenants.
- 4.20 Aberdeen City Council provides a fair response repairs service with many areas where improvement is needed. Its performance in carrying out repairs on time varies significantly between emergency and non-emergency repairs, with significantly better performance reported for emergency repairs work. But its published figures on the speed of its repairs are inaccurate and do not provide it or its stakeholders with a reliable picture of how the service performs. The Council is not using information from post inspections effectively to monitor and improve the quality of the service. Its own tenant satisfaction information, and feedback we obtained directly from tenants we spoke to, show that a high proportion of tenants are satisfied with the overall quality of the repairs service, but a significant number are dissatisfied with the time taken to complete repairs.

### Physical quality of houses

*Social landlords should have good information about the condition of their houses and should deliver effective maintenance programmes that take account of housing quality and home safety needs.*

- 4.21 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)<sup>17</sup> by 2015. Landlords are required to prepare a plan showing how they will achieve this, by April 2005. The

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<sup>16</sup> see glossary

Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland will assess each local authority's plan. At the time of our inspection Aberdeen City Council had submitted an interim delivery plan, by agreement with Communities Scotland.

- 4.22 The Council is currently carrying out an Asset Management Study, the results of which will be used to help the Council make decisions regarding the future of the stock. These decisions will then be reflected in the final delivery plan to be submitted by April 2006. The Council is confident that, through the programme of rent increases agreed with its tenants, all its housing stock will meet the SHQS by 2015. However, it does not yet have detailed plans on how this will be achieved.
- 4.23 The interim delivery plan is based on a survey of 10% of the Council's houses completed in 2004. The Council is carrying out further ongoing surveys which will cover all of the Council's houses by 2009. This information is being fed into a database to give a picture of the overall quality of the Council's housing to enable maintenance, capital improvement and planned maintenance work to be targeted more effectively. The surveys are being done by the Council's own staff but the results are not currently accessible to staff in other sections of the Council. The Council is not feeding information from routine planned maintenance<sup>18</sup> work or from other sources such as asbestos surveys into this database, which could result in the information becoming out of date very quickly.
- 4.24 The Council has substantially increased its capital improvement and planned maintenance programme in the last few years. It successfully achieved a programme costing over £28 million last year, up by £6.6m on the year before, an increase of 30%. The programme for 2005/06 has gone up again to £34.6m which is another 20% increase. A substantial part of the budget to date has been spent on improving heating systems and energy efficiency throughout its stock but a range of other work is also being carried out including kitchen, bathroom, window and door replacement.

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<sup>17</sup> see glossary

<sup>18</sup> see glossary

- 4.25 The Council agrees the planned maintenance programme annually, with only a limited amount of work included in response to specific problems identified by staff. Specific houses are selected for inclusion in the programme based purely on their age or when particular components were last replaced. The Council regularly monitors the progress of the programme and the amount spent. It carries out tenant surveys on completion of most work and the results indicate that most tenants are satisfied with the completed work.
- 4.26 The Council has fitted mains or battery operated smoke detectors in all its houses and there are plans to replace those with batteries with hard wired versions by 2009/10. The Council does not have accurate information on the type of smoke detector in its properties although there are plans for this information to be collected through the rolling surveys. Carbon Monoxide detectors are not routinely fitted. The Council has installed door entry systems in all buildings with a communal entrance where the Council is the majority owner.
- 4.27 The Council estimates from the survey work done to date that there are 122 properties with some remaining lead piping. The Council intends to confirm the actual properties affected as soon as possible and the work to replace this piping is programmed for next financial year.
- 4.28 Aberdeen City Council is required to carry out safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues which it provides for its tenants' use. The Council is not meeting this duty for a significant number of its houses. At the time of our inspection more than 2000 properties with gas appliances had no certificate in place. Where safety checks are carried out the Council does not always check houses within the 12 month period required by the legislation. There was a gap between safety checks in almost half of the affected houses; the gap was more than one month in 14% of houses. This is a significant weakness. The table below summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks.

	At May 2005	
	Number of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances and flues	17788	100
Houses with current gas safety certificates	15726	88.4%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	9200	51.7%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	4044	22.7%
Houses where safety check was carried out one to three months after the due date	1136	6.4%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date	1346	7.6%

Source: Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission

- 4.29 The file checks we carried out confirmed this poor level of performance with some appliances not serviced for over four years. The Council does not have any written policies for ensuring gas safety. There is no procedure for staff to follow when the contractor fails to gain access to houses to carry out inspections and the completion of gas safety checks is not monitored or reported. The Council was not aware of its poor performance prior to completing its inspection submission.
- 4.30 From May 2004 social landlords have had a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties. The Council has not met the statutory timescale to prepare a written asbestos management plan, nor has it yet identified for common areas in its housing stock whether asbestos is present. However, it has in place procedures for contractors to follow when they are working in areas where the Council believes asbestos may be present.
- 4.31 In February 2005, the Council agreed a formal standard on the condition it expects its houses to be in at the start of a new tenancy. This formal standard is not always applied. However, we saw a number of empty properties during the inspection which were ready for relet, and all were of a good standard. The Council's own recent figures on the response to offers of housing indicate that the condition of its houses does not have a significant impact on applicants' reasons for refusing offers.

4.32 The Council has a fair approach to physical quality. It is investing a significant and growing level of resources to maintain and improve its housing. It is also taking action to improve its knowledge of the condition of its housing so that it can target this investment more effectively although it is not currently making best use of all the information it has. The Council has not yet fully met its legal duties on the management of asbestos and its management of gas safety is a significant weakness.

#### **Responsiveness to tenants**

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

4.33 The Council's general approach to tenant participation is assessed at the *Responsiveness to tenants* section in housing management. It is investing a lot of time and money in supporting a range of formal structures but the feedback from all sources is that these are not working well.

4.34 The Council collects feedback on the quality of the repairs service through its Tenant Response Scheme questionnaire, which should be provided to all affected tenants by the repairs contractor on completing each repair. Tenants told us that they do not always receive these questionnaires. The Council does not record how many tenant response questionnaires are actually issued, and so does not know how many tenants receive them.

4.35 The Council's own figures show that around 5% of Tenant Response Scheme questionnaires are returned which is enough to give a useful picture of tenant satisfaction with the overall service. However, the questions asked do not give the Council enough detail to help it improve the service. Asking tenants if they feel the repair has been carried out in a "reasonable time" is of limited use, especially if the tenants are not being told what the expected timescale should be. The Council has identified the need to review the way it collects tenant satisfaction information as part of its Repairs Service Review which is due to be completed later in 2005.

4.36 The Council does not always keep tenants adequately informed about planned maintenance work to their houses and does not consistently collect feedback on tenant satisfaction with completed projects. In one project we looked at there

was no record kept of any information provided to tenants, no copies of newsletters, no record of individual complaints or requests for further information and no record of regular meetings between staff and tenants during the works. The tenants we spoke to expressed strong dissatisfaction with the level of information and consultation carried out by the Council regarding planned maintenance or improvement work.

- 4.37 The Council responds well to individual instances of dissatisfaction highlighted through tenant feedback and its complaints process, but the actions taken and the outcomes of these cases are not systematically recorded or analysed. Levels of overall tenant satisfaction are broken down across repairs contractors' geographical areas, but the Council is not able to demonstrate it is using tenant feedback to improve the service. The Council does not regularly publicise levels of tenant satisfaction with the repairs service, nor include them in its key repairs performance reports to Committee.
- 4.38 Aberdeen City provides opportunities for tenants to provide feedback about the repairs service, but there are many weaknesses in the way it collects, analyses and uses this feedback. The Council recognises this and intends to carry out a review. Whilst it deals well with individual complaints, it does not use information from tenant feedback and complaints effectively to improve the service. The Council's approach to informing and involving tenants in planned maintenance projects is poor.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource Management and Efficiency

*Social landlords should manage the cost of their services effectively and procure repairs and maintenance services in a way that takes account of quality and cost.*

- 4.39 Aberdeen City spent an estimated £961 per house on repairs and maintenance in 2004/05, the 9th highest spend out of 29 local authorities managing council houses in Scotland. This figure represents an increase on both of the previous two years.
- 4.40 The Council organises its repairs service through its in-house direct labour organisation (BS). The contractor was appointed in 1997 through the

- Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime. The Council carried out a Best Value Review of the service in 2002. As part of that review, it compared the contractors' costs with other similar local authorities and the comparison was favourable.
- 4.41 The Council uses a competitive tendering process to appoint contractors to carry out planned maintenance contracts and we found that it follows corporate procedures. The performance of contractors on previous contracts is assessed by the Contract Administrator, taking account of feedback from staff, and poorly performing contractors are not included on tender lists.
- 4.42 Aberdeen City does not have effective arrangements in place to monitor and control the cost of its repairs service. It does not identify, quantify or monitor variations – where the final cost of the job is different from the original price - although the computer system is able to produce this type of information, and the Council is looking at ways to improve its use of this facility. Where variations occur, these are issued as separate repairs, which are not identifiably linked to the work that was originally ordered. This weakens the ability of the Council to accurately monitor its repairs costs against expectations and reduces its ability to monitor whether repairs are being identified effectively.
- 4.43 In addition, the Council does not monitor the number of instances where contractors fail to gain access to houses to carry out repairs so it does not have information on how many of its repairs result in repeat visits by contractors. The absence of information on variations and no access calls, alongside the weaknesses we have highlighted in the use of post inspections, means that the Council is not able to effectively assess whether it is getting value for money from its repairs service.
- 4.44 The Council was owed £551,789 for rechargeable repairs<sup>19</sup> at the time of inspection, and shows declining performance over the last three years in recovering payments. In 2004/05 only 16.2% of the amount owed was received. The Council does not always issue invoices when it identifies rechargeable

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<sup>19</sup> see glossary

repairs, for example, repairs costing less than £50 are not pursued, and this means that the figures reported do not show the actual level of recharges due.

- 4.45 The Council is generally following the right processes to ensure that it makes best use of the resources it spends on maintaining its houses. However, the weaknesses discussed elsewhere with regard to quality control, performance information and tenant feedback on repairs and maintenance mean that the Council does not have access to all the information it needs to assess value for money.

#### Performance management

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for property maintenance services, should monitor the achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve service.*

- 4.46 The Council's overall approach to strategic service planning is assessed at the *Performance management* section in housing management. That assessment is also relevant to property maintenance. Beyond the use of statutory performance indicators, the Council has not developed its high level objectives into more detailed operational objectives and targets to guide staff.
- 4.47 The Council recognises that its performance management framework as a whole is not sufficiently robust or comprehensive. In relation to the response repairs service, the weaknesses we highlighted earlier over the accuracy of the Council's performance information limit the Council's ability to effectively manage or control the quality of that service. However, the Council is taking action to improve the quality and accuracy of its performance information on repairs, as part of its broader review of the service.
- 4.48 The Council has a range of policies and procedures available to guide staff delivering property maintenance services. However there are some important gaps, for example in relation to gas safety.
- 4.49 Our assessment of the Council's use of service standards in housing management also applies here. The Council has set standards for the condition of houses that it relets but is not consistently applying them. The pilot approach of carrying out minimal repairs to some empty properties also means that this

standard will not be applied in these cases. Even where the Council has agreed standards, such as the target timescales for response repairs, it is not consistently communicating them to tenants.

- 4.50 The Council's performance management in the property maintenance service is poor. It has a good strategic framework for the delivery of its property maintenance services but it this is not translated into clear operational priorities or targets. There are significant weaknesses in the Council's performance information and the Council is not making good use of the limited feedback information it collects from tenants. However, the Council has recognised many of these weaknesses and is making efforts to improve the situation.

### Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, service and performance.*

- 4.51 The Council provides some performance information on its property maintenance service to tenants in its annual report, but this only covers the statutory performance indicators around the completion of different categories of repairs. The questions we have raised over the accuracy of repairs performance information also apply to the information provided to service users about repairs performance. The Council does not make good use of other opportunities to publicise how the service is performing, for example through its office reception areas, libraries or its website.

### Grade and overall assessment of property maintenance

- 4.52 Our overall assessment is that Aberdeen City Council's property maintenance service is fair. We found a number of areas of strength, and some significant weaknesses that impact on the quality of service tenants experience and the Council's ability to improve. We set out below the key factors we have taken into account in coming to our overall assessment.
- 4.53 The Council's approach to property maintenance has a number of strengths that impact on its tenants, particularly: the accessibility of the repairs service; the quick response to emergency repairs; the increasing levels of investment in improving the housing; and the Council's approach to maintaining the quality of

its neighbourhoods. A high proportion of tenants using the repairs service are satisfied with the work carried out and we found that empty properties are generally repaired to a good standard.

4.54 We also found several areas of weakness in the property maintenance service, a small number of which are significant:

- the Council's is poor at completing urgent and routine repairs on time;
- there are significant weaknesses in the Council's approach to gas safety;
- the Council is not meeting its statutory obligations on Right to Repair and the management of asbestos;
- the Council is not making effective use of the outcomes of pre and post inspections; and
- tenants are not kept informed or properly consulted about major work being done to their houses.

4.55 The Council has recognised some of the weaknesses we identified in our inspection and has put in place a number of initiatives to try and improve aspects of the service. However, the gaps we found in the collection and use of performance information and the lack of information on the impact of changes in current practice undermine the Council's commitment to improve the quality of the service.

## 5. Homelessness services

5.1 The grade awarded for homelessness services is:

D	Poor	Major areas where improvement is needed or where a number of very significant weaknesses are found.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments and judgements we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to homelessness services

*Local authorities should provide open, fair and equal access to their homelessness services and should provide a 24-hour crisis response service for roofless households.*

- 5.2 Aberdeen City Council received 1,837 applications for assistance in 2004/05, an increase of 20% since 2002/03. This equates to 1.48% of all households in the city, compared to the national figure for the previous year of 2.3%.
- 5.3 The Podium, an office in the city centre, is the main access point for applicants using Aberdeen's homeless service. The reception area is open and lacks privacy; despite the efforts of staff to limit the content of initial contact, private information is discussed within earshot of other service users.
- 5.4 The Council publicises its homeless service on its website and on posters in a range of places where homeless people are likely to see them, although the posters have only been produced since March 2005. We found that posters were widely available. The posters and website do not advise that a translation or interpreting service and information in large print or Braille is available despite the Council having a good overall approach to providing this service.
- 5.5 The Council gets informal referrals from a range of organisations, and we saw examples of this working in practice. It has formal referral agreements with a small number of partner agencies. Although the Council records referrals from other agencies on its homeless enquiry form, it is not analysing this information and it is not recording how other applicants found out about the service, and so is unable to monitor the effectiveness of these access arrangements.

- 5.6 The Council does not provide written information explaining the full range of services it can offer, who is eligible, how to apply and how applications are treated. This means that people who have previously applied, and who could now receive more help due to recent changes in legislation, are not aware of the advantages in applying again.
- 5.7 Aberdeen operates an out of hours service with the main point of contact being their city centre accommodation unit which is staffed 24 hours a day. A 24 hour phone service also refers callers to this unit. This system works well for people who know about it. However, the Council's own figures from questionnaires to people using the homeless service show that around 70% of respondents were not aware of the out of hours service.
- 5.8 Aberdeen sees homeless applicants quickly, generally on the day of presentation or the day after an out of hours approach and we found no barriers to people accessing the homeless service. However, the interview process has two stages with applicants asked to return on another day for a second interview. A high proportion of applicants never return for the second interview meaning that, at best, many applicants do not receive the advice or assistance which could help them resolve their situation. This is discussed in more detail in the section on *Assessing homeless applications*.
- 5.9 The Council collects good information on the ethnicity of all applicants to the homeless service and was able to identify an almost 90% increase in presentations from ethnic minority households in the year to March 2005. However the Council has not analysed this information or used it to assess whether outcomes for these households are fair.
- 5.10 Access to the Podium for disabled people is poor. There are three sets of manually operated double doors on the way into the homeless section and two of the emergency exits have steps with no ramp facilities. An applicant using a wheelchair informed us that without the assistance of her partner she would have found access very difficult.
- 5.11 Aberdeen provides fair access to its homeless service. Both the main homeless office and the out of hours service are located in the city centre and the Council

has recently introduced better publicity materials telling people about the service, although physical access for disabled people is difficult. The two-stage interview process is preventing some people from accessing services that could help improve their situation.

### **Assessing homeless applications**

*Local authorities should treat homeless people fairly and consistently and be responsive to their individual needs when assessing their application for help.*

- 5.12 In Aberdeen, almost half of all applications assessed in 2004/05 were closed as lost contact/ withdrew before assessment, which is more than five times the national figure of 9% for 2003/04. This outcome distorts the proportions of people falling into all other categories with almost every other category in Aberdeen falling below the national figure.
- 5.13 The number of cases closed as lost contact is being inflated by the computer system which will not allow people assessed as unintentionally homeless in priority need who withdraw after assessment to be recorded in this way. The two stage interview system described above also has an impact. Of the 25 lost contact cases we looked at, 13 of the applicants had either been given a verbal indication of a different assessment or there was enough information on file to make at least an initial assessment at that stage. These cases were all closed as lost contacts when the applicant subsequently did not attend for their second interview.
- 5.14 An overview of the decision outcomes for homeless applicants is set out in the table below:

	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05 *
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council
Total number of applications assessed in period	1543	47,740	1835	49,937	1666
Priority unintentional	35.13%	54%	28.01%	54%	29.29%
Priority Intentional	1.88%	3%	2.40%	2%	1.86%
Non-priority	19.70%	21%	15.15%	21%	12.97%
Not homeless	3.89%	9%	4.41%	8%	3.48%
Lost contact/withdrew before assessment	33.64%	9%	44.90%	9%	49.76%
Resolved prior to assessment	5.77%	4%	5.12%	6%	2.64%
% of applications assessed in period	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

\* Include most up to date figure available and advise us of the relevant date of this information  
Source: SE Bulletins

- 5.15 The Council does not have a detailed picture of the outcomes for the majority of people applying to it as homeless. Aberdeen has some information on outcomes for applicants for whom it has a duty to provide permanent accommodation, and Advice and Resettlement workers keep some records for applicants receiving non priority decisions.
- 5.16 We saw a number of homeless applicants interviewed in a sympathetic and sensitive manner. The service users we spoke to were pleased with the quality of the homeless interview and felt they had been treated with respect and courtesy. Applicants attending a second assessment interview are given a written record of the discussion.
- 5.17 We found that the Council does not effectively manage and monitor the quality of its decision-making through the assessment process. The Council has a mechanism for checking all case files for people assessed as not in priority need, not homeless or intentionally homeless. However in some of the cases we looked at, this amounted to a summary of the reasons for the decision rather than a check on the quality of the casework undertaken to reach a decision. The Council responded quickly when we pointed this out and agreed to ensure a more in depth representation of casework was provided in future.
- 5.18 The Council's target for monitoring the standard of casework in cases assessed as homeless and in priority need is only one case per month and even this had not been done during the three months prior to our inspection. The Council has

- no mechanism to check the assessments carried out if the case is subsequently closed as a lost contact. The Council does not use the information it gathers from these checks in any structured way to help improve casework although we saw evidence of individual cases being returned to officers where the senior officer felt more investigation was required.
- 5.19 The Council has a duty to make all necessary enquiries to satisfy itself as to whether people who apply for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation, are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. We reviewed 67 homeless applications and found that the Council generally follows the correct sequence of enquiries, although the recording of information is poor in some cases. Our case reviews showed that, generally, the Council arrived at reasonable decisions. However, we found four cases where Aberdeen did not follow the Code of Guidance advice on the evidence requirements for applicants fleeing external violence and we were told this was council policy. In another example an applicant assessed as intentionally homeless was given an arbitrary time limit on this assessment.
- 5.20 The Code of Guidance recommends that councils should notify people of the outcome of their application as quickly as possible and suggests a target of 28 days. The Council's reported performance in making decisions on applications within 28 days is poor, declining from 60.6% in 2002/03 to 36.3% in 2004/05. The average time taken to reach a decision in 2004/05 was 52 days. The high level of lost contacts again contributes to this poor performance with these decisions taking an average of 68 days.
- 5.21 Aberdeen has good decision letters which clearly set out the decision reached, the reasons for the decision, the matters taken into account where relevant, and how to appeal the decision. In our sample, it took on average just over seven days from decision date to the issue of a decision letter.
- 5.22 Aberdeen's assessment process is poor. Although the Council does make appropriate decisions on most cases, checks some casework and provides good quality decision letters, its failure to address the level of lost contacts means that

a significant number of homeless applicants do not receive the services to which they are entitled. In addition, the Council does not know the outcomes for homeless people in a high proportion of cases, does not use information to support improvements in casework and does not always follow the Code of Guidance in reaching assessments.

### Temporary accommodation

*Local authorities should make available an adequate supply of good quality temporary accommodation to meet the needs of homeless people.*

- 5.23 Aberdeen City Council failed to provide temporary accommodation for 372 applicants to whom it had a duty, during the period May 2004 March 2005. This failing breaches legislation and is a major weakness in the Council's service. The Council has been recording figures showing the level of non-compliance with this statutory duty since April 2004, following an internal audit report that formally identified the weakness, and has reported these figures to the Community Services Committee. Homeless staff have been highlighting shortages of temporary accommodation since 2002 and the need to increase the supply of temporary accommodation is recognised in the homelessness strategy, adopted in 2003. However, action taken to date has proved inadequate to resolve this significant failure.
- 5.24 Aberdeen City Council currently has three temporary accommodation units (hostels) with 47 rooms of various sizes and regularly places people in 7 bed and breakfast establishments in the city. The Council's use of its own mainstream housing for temporary accommodation is limited to 12 furnished flats, only four of which are a suitable size for families. This number represents a doubling of the flats available for this purpose two years ago and meets the target in the homelessness strategy to increase the use of the Council's own housing. However, it is unclear how the Council identified this as a suitable target given the remaining level of unmet demand. Aberdeen complies with the Code of Guidance by not placing people in accommodation outwith the city. The table below sets out key figures on Aberdeen's temporary accommodation.

	2002-03		2003-04	2004-05
	National	Council	Council	Council
Number accommodated in temporary hostel accommodation	8,154	458	363	247
As % of total	32.4%	76.2%	49.5%	38.5%
Average length of stay (days)	53 days	23 days	27.5 days	30 days
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	9240	137	360	383
As % of total	36.7%	22.8%	49%	59.66%
Average length of stay (days)	26 days	31 days	40 days	43 days
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	6,446	6	11	12
As % of total	25.6%	1.0%	1.5%	1.87%
Average length of stay (days)	142 days	157 days	84 days	101 days

Source: Scottish Executive Housing Bulletins and Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission

- 5.25 The number of people the Council placed in temporary accommodation in Aberdeen fell from 734 in 2003/04 to 642 in 2004/05, a fall of almost 13%. Almost 60% of households provided with temporary accommodation last year were placed in bed & breakfasts while less than 2% got access to the Council's own furnished accommodation. The Council has no temporary accommodation suitable for wheelchair users.
- 5.26 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable temporary accommodation – which includes most bed and breakfasts – for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days unless exceptional circumstances apply. Aberdeen does not usually place families in bed and breakfast accommodation. However, in the last year the Council has placed five families in its hostels, where they have to share toilet facilities with people outwith their household.
- 5.27 The Council advises people they are only entitled to 28 days temporary accommodation if they are assessed as non priority. However, the Council is aware that a reasonable period in temporary accommodation should be given and that the Code of Guidance suggests that the time limit should be based on an assessment of each case on its merits. The Council is in most cases flexible and does not place a rigid limit on the time applicants spend in temporary accommodation.

- 5.28 The Council manages its temporary accommodation well and all accommodation is of high quality. Service users we spoke to were happy with the quality of accommodation. Most of the council's temporary accommodation is located in the centre and west end of the city so the Council has limited options for people who require accommodation that is close to their children's schools or social networks in other parts of the city, although transport can be provided to allow attendance at schools. The Council does have a good relationship with schools close to the accommodation units.
- 5.29 The Council is required to protect and arrange for the storage of applicants' moveable property where necessary. We found that the Council does not always place homeless applicants' furniture in storage at the time it is requested, despite recognising the requirement to do so.
- 5.30 The Council's Advice and Resettlement Officers offer good, practical assistance and housing options advice to people in its accommodation units. This service is also available at the Podium for other applicants. The applicants we spoke to who had used this service were very happy with the quality of advice and assistance they received. The accommodation units receive weekly visits from a Community Psychiatric Nurse. A community nurse also visited until last February, this service is to restart in the near future following the appointment of new health staff.
- 5.31 The Council is unable to provide or refer people for further support to help prepare them to maintain tenancies while they are in temporary accommodation. Only those people with pre-existing support, through Social Services or Health agencies, receive further help while in temporary accommodation. This is discussed further in the section on Permanent Accommodation.
- 5.32 Aberdeen provides support to 16-17 year old homeless applicants through its Young Single Persons Homeless Project (YSPHP). This is an excellent project and delivers significant advantages to those it supports. We provide more detail in the *positive practice* appendix at the end of this report.
- 5.33 Overall the provision of temporary accommodation in Aberdeen is poor. The Council is not making temporary accommodation available for all those who need

it; this is a major weakness. The high level of bed and breakfast use and very limited use made of the Council's own housing are further significant weaknesses. Aberdeen provides good practical assistance and housing options advice to some applicants through its Advice and Resettlement Officers but homeless people do not get good access to other support networks. The quality of the temporary accommodation is good and outcomes for homeless people through the YSPHP is a major strength.

#### Permanent accommodation

*Councils should, so far as possible, make offers of permanent accommodation quickly and should offer the same level of choice and quality of houses as to other applicants.*

- 5.34 In 2003/04, the Council offered permanent accommodation to 84% of the people it assessed as having a priority need and housed 58%, which is just above the national figure of 56%. The Council's own figures show that only one in ten of its allocations in 2004/05 went to homeless people in priority need. Almost all allocations to homeless people in Aberdeen are flats and the Council describes as low demand 39% of the properties allocated to homeless people between January 2005 and June 2005.
- 5.35 At the time of our inspection, the Council gave homeless applicants one offer of accommodation with no choice of area allowed. While we were on site, a decision was taken to give two simultaneous offers with an ability to choose to receive offers in one or more of the three city neighbourhoods. Even this revised approach is very different to the approach taken to waiting list and transfer applicants who get unlimited offers and choice of areas. The Council places further restrictions on choice for many homeless families and single homeless applicants in arrears. Homeless families with arrears are only offered houses in designated Housing Initiative Areas while single homeless applicants in arrears are limited to bed-sit accommodation.
- 5.36 The Council makes offers of permanent accommodation to homeless applicants quickly; the average time for 2004/05 was 20 days. However, we found that this is partly a result of the Council's limited approach to considering the needs of applicants when allocating permanent housing.

- 5.37 The Code of Guidance states that Councils should take into account the sustainability of the accommodation for particular applicants but the Council does not always record the information it would need to be able to take into account the children's schooling or accessibility of work or social networks in assessing where homeless people should be housed. We found that almost 30% of homeless people housed in 2003/04 were no longer in their tenancy 12 months later.
- 5.38 The Council has an arrangement with one of its voluntary sector partners to provide ongoing support to homeless people taking up new tenancies. However, this arrangement is no longer working effectively, due to a dispute between the agencies regarding referral mechanisms, resulting in vulnerable service users not receiving the support they need to sustain their tenancies.
- 5.39 The Council does not make use of its powers under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to secure accommodation for homeless people. It prefers to use its nomination arrangements, which it feels are more responsive to the effective delivery of the service for homeless people than the statutory referral process. However, the Council has not assessed the comparative merits of using the nominations agreement against Section 5 referrals.
- 5.40 The Council's performance in allocating permanent accommodation to homeless people is poor. Homeless people do not get the same access to offers or choice of areas as those applying for housing through other routes. The Council allocates very few of its own houses to homeless people and it does not always take full account of the particular needs of applicants when making offers.

### **Preventing homelessness**

*Local Authorities should work to prevent people from becoming homeless and to reduce the incidence of repeat homelessness.*

- 5.41 Aberdeen provides good advice and assistance to applicants through its Advice and Resettlement Officers and through the support workers engaged with 16-17 year old applicants at the YSPHP. The two Advice and Resettlement Officers provide clear advice and practical support including benefits advice and arranging furniture packages for people taking up new tenancies. Service users we spoke to, who had used the service, were positive about the quality of service

- and the assistance offered. The Council is currently in the process of assessing bids for the provision of a comprehensive housing information and advice service in Aberdeen.
- 5.42 Aberdeen has a high and increasing level of repeat presentations – 19% or almost 1 in 5 of homeless applicants in 2004/05 had made another application within the previous 12 months. This is an increase on the figure of 12.89% for the previous year which is itself 50% higher than the Scottish figure of 8.45% for that year. The Council has not analysed the reasons for the high number of repeat applications. This indicates a failure to resolve individual cases of homelessness resulting in ‘revolving door’ homelessness for some people using the service.
- 5.43 We discussed in the *Housing management* section the Council’s efforts to prevent existing tenants becoming homeless: early intervention in rent arrears cases, supporting families displaying anti social behaviour and early settling in visits for those taking up new tenancies. However, we also highlighted gaps in areas like the identification of support needs and provision of support to help existing tenants sustain their tenancies. The results of communication difficulties between the housing management service and the homeless service in relation to tenants being evicted by the Council is clearly set out in paragraph 3.30.
- 5.44 The Council has a protocol in place with the Royal Cornhill Hospital to assist people leaving hospital to find accommodation and it receives informal referrals from other agencies and organisations; we saw evidence of this type of referral from St Fitticks House and Cranstoun Drug Services. However, there is no monitoring of the referral processes operating in Aberdeen so the Council does not know how effective these referrals are in preventing homelessness.
- 5.45 Aberdeen’s approach to preventing homelessness and reducing repeat presentations is poor. The Council has made recent progress in some aspects of the way it manages existing tenancies and gives good practical advice to those applying as homeless. However, the Council is not identifying or providing adequate support for new or existing tenants to help them sustain their

tenancies, there is no comprehensive housing information and advice service in place and the high level of repeat presentations is continuing to rise.

#### **Responsiveness to homeless people**

*Local authorities should place homeless people and those threatened with homelessness at the heart of their work to prevent and alleviate homelessness. They should treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 5.46 The Council has eight specific service standards relating to its homeless service which are on display in interview rooms and in the reception area at the Podium. This is a good way of ensuring users are aware of what to expect of the services. However, monitoring of the service standards has not taken place and we found that the Council is not achieving the service standards relating to the provision of temporary accommodation and storage of moveable property.
- 5.47 The Council has a good approach to appeals on decisions, providing clear advice in decision letters and in a leaflet enclosed with decision letters. This leaflet entitled "Your Decision Letter " provides practical help on the appeal process including a sample appeals letter and a list of agencies which may assist with the process. The Council received 8 appeals against decisions in 2004/05, none of which were successful. The appeals we saw as part of our case reviews had reached reasonable conclusions.
- 5.48 The Council receives a higher number of appeals against offers of accommodation: 43 in 2004/05, of which 19 were upheld. These outcomes resulted in the planned changes to allocations for homeless people mentioned above. The Council has a good approach to appeals with every appeal heard face to face by a senior officer unconnected with the original decision or allocation. The Council also hears informal and verbal appeals but does not keep records of these.
- 5.49 The Council issues questionnaires to people who receive a decision letter, and has collated and used this information to good effect to inform plans to improve access to the service and offers of permanent accommodation. However, not all of the information gathered has resulted in an appropriate response from the Council. For example the Council found that 110 people who returned the questionnaire (17% of the 663 responses received) were not satisfied that a full

explanation of their decision had been given and yet no follow up action was initiated on this. The Council is not obtaining any feedback from service users who lose contact with the service before reaching decision stage.

- 5.50 Aberdeen is good at ensuring people receiving decisions or offers are aware of their right to appeal and it has a customer-focused system for hearing appeals. The Council has agreed and publicised service standards for the homeless service but it is failing to achieve two of these. It has a fair approach to obtaining and using the views of homeless applicants. These views are analysed and some have been used to improve the service.

### **Working with partners**

*Local authorities should work corporately and co-operate with other organisations, to ensure that the needs of homeless people are met quickly and appropriately.*

- 5.51 The Council has worked constructively with a range of local agencies in developing its key strategic planning tools. It:
- developed the homelessness strategy in co-operation with a number of internal and external partners; and
  - worked with NHS Grampian on the development and implementation of the health and homelessness strategy.
- 5.52 Aberdeen also works with a range of agencies to deliver the homeless service. The Council has had some success in working with partners to provide services including:
- Instant Neighbour in providing furniture and storage;
  - Grampian NHS Trust in organising joint training; and
  - Somebody Cares providing starter packs for homeless people.
- 5.53 The homelessness strategy action plan identifies partnership working as a key driver in improving the service to homeless people and contains numerous objectives and targets designed to benchmark progress in making the changes needed to achieve these improvements. However, the Council's approach to partnership working has not proved effective in implementing the action plan.
- 5.54 The multi-agency group set up to steer the implementation of the action plan has met once since the action plan was adopted. We saw a number of key areas

where little or no progress had been made in taking forward the partnership initiatives set out in the action plan including:

- development of information on housing options;
- development of standards for information and advice and provision of a comprehensive network of providers;
- provision of additional support for all those in temporary accommodation;
- development of a common training pack for staff;
- agreement of formal protocols with partner organisations and other institutions; and
- negotiation with the private sector to increase the supply of temporary accommodation.

5.55 Many of these initiatives have already exceeded their target timescales for implementation and a number of different sources confirmed the difficulties being experienced in this area. This is discussed further in the *Performance management* section of this report.

5.56 The Council's approach to working with partners is poor. The Council has taken an inclusive approach to developing the strategic framework for its homeless service and is working effectively with some partners in delivering the service. But the Council has not worked effectively with its partners to put this framework into practice and the Council has failed to resolve difficulties with some partners which are impacting directly on the services available to homeless people.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource Management and Efficiency

*Social landlords should procure homelessness services in a way that takes account of quality and should manage the cost of their services effectively.*

5.57 Aberdeen City Council's expenditure on the delivery of the homeless service decreased from the previous year's total of £2.6 million to £2.3 million and over the same period its income, mainly from temporary accommodation charges, has increased by 3%. The Council's spending on bed and breakfast accommodation has risen steadily over the last three years.

- 5.58 The Council carried out an internal audit of elements of its homeless service in April 2004. The audit report identified some areas where improvements could be made including: the introduction of inventories for furnishings in homeless accommodation; introducing accurate budgetary reporting to allow predictive budgets; and improved procedures around arrears management in homeless accommodation. The Council has already carried out some of the recommendations and is making progress with others. However, the audit did not involve rigorous benchmarking or comparisons with other local authorities.
- 5.59 Aberdeen City Council has a fair approach to resource management and efficiency but has not fully assessed whether it is achieving value for money from its homelessness service.

#### Performance management

*Local Authorities should have clear objectives, standards and targets for their homelessness service, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 5.60 The Council adopted its homeless strategy in 2003 with the stated aim of ending homelessness by 2011. The practical steps considered necessary to achieve this aim were set out in an action plan. The action plan contains almost 150 actions. Many of the indicators attached to these actions focus on processes rather than outcomes, making it difficult for the Council to see if the action being taken is moving it towards its strategic aim. Those indicators which do identify outcomes do not fully meet SMART criteria and in any case are not being effectively monitored. We saw a number of key areas where the desired outcomes had not been achieved in the target timescales, many of which reflect the weaknesses in the homeless service identified in this report.
- 5.61 The Council's view is that delays in achieving the desired outcomes are a result of adopting an inclusive model for implementation. However, we received feedback from a number of third parties and staff indicating that the Council is not giving sufficient priority to the action plan and not keeping them informed of progress on the plan. This is a significant weakness, impacting on the Council's ability to deliver improvements in the homelessness service.

- 5.62 The Council collects performance information on homelessness based largely on the statutory performance indicators, the required returns to the Scottish Executive and relevant information identified following an audit of the homeless service in 2004. The homeless service also collects some operational management information such as occupancy rates for its accommodation units. The Council is now beginning to add to this and is able to produce information on areas such as repeat presentations and lost contacts. However, this information is not currently being analysed or used to assess the quality of the service the Council is providing to homeless people, or to measure its effectiveness.
- 5.63 The homeless section encourages training amongst homeless staff through a weekly training session and makes good use of national training courses to ensure staff stay up to date with developments in the sector. The Council's has a range of procedures in place to assist staff and to emphasise the requirements of the service, but still has some work to do to cover the whole service.
- 5.64 The Council's approach to performance management is poor. Staff are committed to the improvement of the service and the process of improving performance management information has begun. However, the Council does not have a good basis for monitoring progress against its strategic objectives in this area and is so far failing to achieve the desired outcomes in a number of key areas across the service. This is a significant weakness.

#### Public reporting

*Local authorities should give stakeholders and service users the information they need about the homelessness service, its plans and performance.*

- 5.65 Aberdeen City Council's approach to public reporting of homelessness information is poor. The homeless strategy is available on the Council's website and some statistical information is published in the Council's Housing Service Annual Report. However, the Council does not publish comprehensive information on the quality of its service, the achievement of its agreed service standards or on the progress of its homeless strategy.

## Grade and overall assessment of homelessness services

- 5.66 Our overall assessment is that Aberdeen City Council's homelessness service is poor. The Council has some strengths in its homelessness service, but it also has major areas where improvement is needed which impact directly on the quality of services to people who may be in housing crisis. We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.
- 5.67 The Council provides good access to its homeless service. Completed assessments are generally correct, appeals are well handled and the quality of temporary accommodation is good. The Council has a positive approach to interviewing customers and to seeking and using the views of service users and provides an excellent service to young homeless people through the Young Persons' Single Housing Project. However, there are also major areas where the service needs to be improved, which undermine how service users experience the service:
- a high number of people requiring temporary accommodation are not receiving it;
  - the Council loses contact with half of the people who come to it for assistance;
  - homeless people are treated worse than other applicants in relation to number of offers or choice of areas;
  - the Council is not providing adequate support for vulnerable tenants;
  - a rising proportion of homeless applicants have approached the service for help before; and
  - the Council is not making effective use of its own houses to provide temporary or permanent accommodation for homeless people.
- 5.68 There are also weaknesses in the Council's planning and performance management framework for the homeless service. The homelessness strategy provides a clear strategic framework for the work needed to deal with some of the weaknesses identified above, but the Council is not effectively monitoring its progress and has had limited success in achieving its objectives. The Council has recognised some of the weaknesses we identified during our inspection but

its ability to resolve them has been hampered by the weaknesses we saw in the Council's use of performance information and partnership working.

## 6. Recommendations for improvement action

These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority within each of the key service areas:

Across all of its landlord and homelessness activities Aberdeen City Council should:

- fully implement its new performance management framework, to help it to make structured improvements in the delivery of services and to establish an effective performance management culture;
- monitor the implementation and impact of new initiatives and assess and report on the outcomes;
- improve the effectiveness of its tenant participation structures to ensure all tenants can influence the shape of services and priorities and to ensure that tenants' concerns are effectively addressed;
- gather feedback from service users consistently and use this to inform service improvements; and
- improve public reporting to ensure that it provides tenants, service users and stakeholders with an accurate picture of performance in each service area and across the service as a whole.

In housing management, Aberdeen City Council should:

- improve its performance in managing rent arrears;
- reduce the time taken to relet empty houses;
- review the operation of its current selection processes in relation to the high level of refusals and to ensure that all allocation decisions are clear and transparent;
- take action to reduce the level of evictions and abandoned tenancies; and
- put in place arrangements for identifying vulnerable tenants and providing them with support to help them sustain their tenancies.

In property maintenance, Aberdeen City Council should:

- ensure that it complies with its legislative duties relating to gas safety, the management of asbestos and Right to Repair;
- improve its performance in completing non emergency repairs on time;

- review its response repairs target timescales, and the monitoring of performance against them, to ensure that they give an accurate picture of the speed and quality of the service;
- improve the targeting of resources in carrying out repairs to empty houses; and
- ensure that all available information on the condition of its houses is used to inform decisions about maintenance programmes, and keep tenants better informed about work to be done to their houses.

In homelessness, the Council should;

- ensure that it provides suitable temporary accommodation for all those to whom it has its duty;
- reduce its use of bed and breakfast accommodation;
- take action to reduce the high level of cases closed as lost contacts;
- explore and tackle the reasons for the high and increasing levels of repeat homeless presentations;
- make more effective use of its own stock and all other suitable options to provide permanent accommodation for homeless people;
- provide support for homeless people in temporary and permanent accommodation to prevent their homelessness recurring;
- improve progress in implementing the outcome focused elements of the homeless strategy action plan and monitor and publish the results.

## 7. Next Steps

- 7.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes. We ask organisations that receive fair or poor assessments overall in their housing management, property maintenance or homelessness services, to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report.
- 7.2 Aberdeen's plan should show how the organisation intends to respond to our findings in housing management, property maintenance and homelessness. The plan will be agreed with us. We inspect once every five years and follow up improvement plans at regular intervals.
- 7.3 If you would like to see Aberdeen City Council's improvement plans you should contact:

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## Sources of Evidence

### Groups and third parties consulted

- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- HomePoint<sup>20</sup>
- Communities Scotland Area Investment Team
- Communities Scotland Investment and Performance Team
- Scottish Executive Antisocial Behaviour Unit
- Homechoice (Scotland) Limited
- Grampian Housing Association
- Tenants' and residents' groups
- CAB Aberdeen
- Aberdeen Foyer
- Aberdeen Cyrenians

### Interviews/meetings with Councillors and Council staff

- Councillor Cormack
- Councillor Fletcher
- Councillor Graham
- Councillor Malone
- Councillor Milne
- Corporate Director of Community Services
- Project Manager BPR, Office of the Chief Executive
- Strategic Development Manager
- Housing Investment Team Leader
- Area Housing Managers
- Area Property Managers
- Property Support (Housing) Officers
- Relet Inspectors
- Repairs Inspectors
- Contract Services Supervisors
- Repairs Helpdesk staff
- Housing Investment Team Leader
- Safety Plan Manager
- Strategic Improvement and Development Officer
- Technical Officer
- Voids Project Manager
- Strategic Stock Conditions Officer
- Homeless strategy officer
- Senior Homeless Officer
- Homeless co ordinator
- Accommodation Manager
- YSPHP Coordinator
- Advice and Resettlement officers
- Homelessness staff
- Selections Unit staff
- ACCess Aberdeen staff
- Senior Housing Assistant

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<sup>20</sup> see glossary

# Appendix 1

## Key Reality checks

- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of complaints
- Review of reported repairs
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of empty house management records
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Shadowing arrears interview
- Estate visits
- Empty property visits
- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of Voids Sub Group meeting
- Observation of Repairs Service Redesign workshop
- Observation of Printfield Forum meeting
- Observation of Tenant Participation Housing Planning Group meeting
- Review of allocations, including cancelled applications
- Observation of homeless staff interviewing homeless applicants
- Observation of Advice interviews
- Discussions with Homeless applicants
- Review of homeless applications
- Visits to temporary accommodation
- Attendance at a case conference

## Key documents reviewed

- Aberdeen City Council's inspection submission
- Corporate plans, including Community Plan and Service Plan
- Community Services' plans and performance reports
- Local Housing Strategy
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard Delivery Plan
- Antisocial behaviour strategy and policy documents
- Rent arrears policy and procedures
- Void policy
- Maintenance policy and procedural documents
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Annual performance report 2003-04
- Scheme of Allocations, application form and guide to Scheme of Allocations
- Tenant newsletters
- Council's web site
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Homelessness strategy 2003 and updates
- Health and homelessness strategy and action plan
- Homelessness procedures

### Examples of Positive Practice

These are areas we would highlight as working particularly well, taking account of the organisation's operating context:

#### Property maintenance

"Repair Finder" booklet/Website "Interfinder"

The Council has developed a user-friendly handbook which clearly details respective repairs responsibilities for tenants and their landlord, and provides helpful illustrations of key property features such as doors, windows, plumbing and electrical fittings to assist tenants to quickly identify and report the repairs they require.

This information is also available through the repairs section of the Council's website, which allows tenants to select and report repairs online, by "pointing & clicking" on the appropriate illustration.

#### Homelessness

The Council's Young Persons' Single Housing Project provides support and accommodation for 16 to 17 year old homeless people. Applicants can choose to proceed with a traditional homeless application or use the project. Young people opting in to the project are provided with accommodation and planned support designed to address their ability to sustain a full tenancy. Aberdeen has increased the provision of temporary accommodation to 60 bed-sit flats. The project is highly regarded by the service users we spoke to. The outcomes from the project are positive for the people using the project and include mainstream tenancies, private lets and returns to previous accommodation. The project has good recording mechanisms and management processes including performance monitoring and recording.

## Glossary

<b>Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)</b>	ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further anti-social behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.
<b>HomePoint</b>	<p>A department of Communities Scotland that supports providers of housing information and advice services.</p> <p>HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Type I active information, sign-posting.</li><li>• Type II casework.</li><li>• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.</li></ul>
<b>Housing list</b>	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the RSL to allocate its housing stock.
<b>ICT system</b>	Information and communication system.
<b>Inspection submission</b>	Documents submitted by the landlord at the start of the inspection to provide information to on its performance, context and how it is structured.
<b>Notice of Proceedings (NOP)</b>	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
<b>Performance indicator</b>	A measure of how a RSL is achieving its objectives. Performance Indicators can be compared with a pre-set standard (a benchmark) or with other organisations.
<b>Planned maintenance</b>	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
<b>Pre inspections</b>	Inspections undertaken to ascertain the nature of the repair required.
<b>Post inspections</b>	Inspections undertaken following work to check the suitability and quality of repairs.
<b>Rechargeable repairs</b>	Work that is the responsibility of the tenant but has been done by the landlord.
<b>Re-lets</b>	Lets made to the second or subsequent tenant. Distinguished from new lets that are made when the property is first built or modernised.

<b>Right to Buy</b>	Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy.
<b>Right to Repair</b>	A scheme which gives tenants legal rights to have certain repairs in defined times.
<b>SCARF</b>	Scottish Community Action Research Fund administered by Communities Scotland. This provides funding, training and mentoring for communities who wish to carry out their own research into issues of concern to them.
<b>Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)</b>	All property managed by registered social landlords must be brought up to a certain standard by 2015.
<b>SMART criteria</b>	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Bound.
<b>Statutory reasonable preference categories</b>	People who have one of these housing needs: homelessness, overcrowding, large families, living in below tolerable standard housing or unsatisfactory living conditions.
<b>Void</b>	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

## Regulation & Inspection

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