

**Pathfinder Inspection Report  
Summary  
May 2004**

# Angus Council



## **The role of Communities Scotland**

- 1.1 Communities Scotland is responsible for the inspection of all Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the landlord, homelessness and factoring services of all local authorities. We inspected Angus Council between November 2003 and January 2004. This summary report sets out the main findings from our inspection.

## **Angus Council**

- 2.1 Angus is essentially a rural area covering some 2,200 square kilometres and bordered by Aberdeenshire in the North and Perth and Kinross and Dundee to the South and West. The population of 108,400 is largely concentrated in seven principal settlements of Montrose, Arbroath, Forfar, Kirriemuir, Brechin, Monifieth and Carnoustie.
- 2.2 After modest growth in the early 1990s the population of the area declined slightly between 1995 and 1998 and is projected to decrease slowly from the current level of 108,400 to 101,131 by 2014. This population change reflects the continued decline in employment in agriculture and the mixed fortunes of manufacturing and the oil industry in the area, as well as developing commuter pressures in the Sidlaws villages, and Carnoustie and Monifieth immediately north and east of Dundee.
- 2.3 Angus Council has sold 279 houses under Right To Buy during 2002/3. It currently owns and manages just fewer than 9,000 houses and 1,181 garages. Since 1980 the Council has sold over 6,200 properties, the vast majority of which have been houses, leaving the council with a relatively high proportion of flats.
- 2.4 This combination of factors has created a relatively fragile housing market with localised areas of low demand.
- 2.5 Angus Council is a Scottish National Party controlled council. Its 29 Councillors are made up of 17 SNP, one Scottish Labour, two Scottish Conservative, three Liberal Democrat and six Independent. The Council took a decision not to consider whole stock transfer and has not carried out a full option appraisal on the issue. The Council's preferred option is to retain its landlord function. However, a number of small scale transfers to other social landlords and partnership projects with the private sector to provide homes for low cost ownership have been undertaken. Further transfers are currently being considered where these would achieve local area regeneration objectives.

- 2.6 There are seven local tenants' and residents' associations (TRAs) in Angus. Three of these are Registered Tenants Organisations (RTOs). Most of the groups have been established in the last 18 months as a result of efforts on the part of the Council to promote tenant participation in line with its strategy. A number are longer running; these are mainly those associated with area regeneration projects.
- 2.7 The housing function is delivered from five ACCESS offices providing a one-stop shop approach to accessing council services, and two local housing offices. The Housing Department is responsible for most aspects of housing and estate management, including response repairs, rent setting, collection and arrears management, homelessness and services to Gypsies/Travellers. House sales are administered by the Department of Law and Administration. The Property Services Department manages the planned maintenance programme and capital projects.

## Inspection Grades

- 3.1 These are the inspection grades achieved by Angus Council.

<a href="#">Housing Management</a>	B	<p>The Council delivers a good housing management service with many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the Housing Management service are promising.</p>
<a href="#">Property Management</a>	B	<p>The Council delivers a good property management service with many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in Property Management are promising.</p>
<a href="#">Homelessness</a>	C	<p>The Council delivers a fair homelessness service with some strengths but with significant areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the Homelessness function are promising.</p>

## Key Themes Influencing Performance

4.1 This section describes some key management issues that affect how well the housing services we inspected are working overall. These themes are broadly connected to the Guiding Standards set out in “Performance Standards for Social Landlords and Homelessness Functions”.

4.2 Overall, these areas are working well:

- ✓ The service is well resourced to meet its objectives.
- ✓ Outcomes are generally good across all areas of service delivery.
- ✓ The tenant participation strategy and the use of a variety of consultation techniques is improving the level of tenant engagement with services.
- ✓ The local area regeneration initiatives are working well with tenants to address the issues they have raised.
- ✓ The Council works well with partners and other stakeholders.
- ✓ The procurement and management of construction works is effective in securing best value.
- ✓ The Council has developed a variety of ways for people to access its services.
- ✓ The Council has a good approach to promoting sustainability and is incorporating this in its service review process.

4.3 Overall, these areas could be working better:

- The Council’s performance monitoring and management are inconsistently developed across the service.
- The Council’s current approach to performance reporting does not provide managers, members, tenants or other stakeholders with a full picture of performance.
- Some of the Council’s policies and procedures are not operating consistently across the local offices.
- The Council is not always identifying areas where it should or could consult with tenants.
- The Council’s approach to equalities and diversity is underdeveloped; diversity issues are not being taken account of across all areas of service development or delivery.
- The Council’s approach to operational and strategic risk management is underdeveloped.

4.4 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should widen the involvement of tenants; staff and other stakeholders in developing its service plan and ensure that all its

objectives and targets comply with SMART<sup>1</sup> principles. It should ensure its service management is performance based and focused on meeting service plan objectives and clearly specified performance targets.

- ❖ The Council should agree an action plan including SMART targets and milestones for the implementation of its Tenant Participation Strategy as an early priority.
- ❖ The Council should forward plan its tenant consultation work to ensure that it consults on all appropriate areas of service development; avoids overburdening tenants groups and activists and focuses on the issues tenants and residents wish to discuss.
- ❖ The Council should review its work in respect of compliance with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 to ensure that it is fully meeting its duties in respect of race equality. It should reinforce the impact of recent training by issuing clear guidance on the importance of properly reporting and responding to racially motivated incidents.
- ❖ The Council should review its approach to equalities issues with a view to improving the information it has on the housing needs of equalities groups and developing a more sophisticated approach to diversity and mainstreaming this within service development and delivery.
- ❖ The Council should publicly report on a comprehensive set of performance measures to ensure that it presents a full picture to service users and other stakeholders.
- ❖ The Council should put in place comprehensive set of performance monitoring and outcome measures to support the day-to-day and strategic management of the service.
- ❖ The Council should review the operation of its complaints procedure to ensure that all relevant complaints are recorded, monitored and reported and reviewed consistently.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that its “Housefacts” leaflet series are reviewed and updated regularly and are available in locations where service users may look for information about the housing service.

## Housing Management

- 5.1 This section summarises how well the Council manages access to its houses, set rents, and deals with empty houses and rent arrears. It also describes how the Council manages its estates and deals with antisocial behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timed

5.2 These areas of the housing management service are working well:

- ✓ Tenants consider the service to be good value for money.
- ✓ The allocation policy gives good consideration to well defined housing need.
- ✓ The Council is effectively and efficiently managing empty houses.
- ✓ The Council processes housing applications quickly.
- ✓ The Council's community based lettings plans act as a good tool for understanding the management of allocations at a local level.
- ✓ The Council effectively administers the house waiting lists.
- ✓ The Council has made good progress in signing up tenants to the single social tenancy.
- ✓ The Council provides tenants with appropriate written and verbal information at the start of their tenancy.
- ✓ Enquiries and applications are dealt with quickly.
- ✓ The Council is developing good partnership working in the assessment of care and support needs.
- ✓ The budget and rent setting process is good.
- ✓ Staff consistently use the rent arrears escalation policy.
- ✓ The Council has an appropriate initial response to anti-social behaviour complaints.
- ✓ In one office, the Council has an early intervention partnership for antisocial behaviour with Tayside Police.
- ✓ The Council's estates are generally well maintained and managed.
- ✓ The Council's housing regeneration programme and processes are working well.

5.3 These are the areas of the housing management service that could work better:

- The Council is restricting access to housing for applicants from outside its area and suspending some applicants from the waiting list inappropriately.
- The Council has not consulted tenants on the community based lettings plans, these plans are not fully understood by all front-line staff.
- The Council does not publish the rules it uses for allocations made between priority waiting lists.
- The use of discretion within the allocations policy are not sufficiently transparent or accountable.
- The Council's performance management systems are not well developed.
- The information the Council provides on central support charges lacks transparency.
- Rent arrears performance is deteriorating year on year.
- The Council does not have an overall strategy on rent arrears management.

- Better communication with the Housing Benefit Service could assist the management of tenancies and arrears.
- The Council's management of antisocial behaviour does not allow it to monitor trends and priorities.
- The Council does not keep tenants fully informed of the progress of anti-social behaviour complaints.
- The Council does not have an overall strategy or service standards for estate management.

5.4 We consider that the housing management service is likely to continue to improve because:

- The Council is committed to, and has a track record of, improving housing management service.
- The quality assurance framework being introduced will provide a strong impetus to developing a culture of continuous improvement.
- The Council has demonstrated its ability to identify areas of weakness and develop and implement new policies and initiatives. For example the allocations policy and regeneration initiatives.
- The Council recognises the value of tenant and service user consultation in determining major policy development. It is also seen as a key factor in the quality assurance framework.
- Staff have demonstrated their ability to adapt and change over the last several years as new policies and computer systems for a range of services, including allocations and rent arrears, have been implemented.

5.5 The other factors which may restrict the Council's ability to improve the housing management service include:

- The relatively weak performance management system and limited use of performance targets and service standards.
- The lack of a consistent approach to gathering and using service user feedback.

5.6 On balance, however, the Council has a clear commitment to improvement and progress is being made, we have taken this into account in awarding the B grade. Overall we consider that the prospects for improvement in housing management are promising.

5.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should develop its performance management framework and put in place a robust set of service standards, performance indicators and targets. These should act as a framework for managing

the service to achieve consistent standards of performance and to monitor the progress of service developments.

- ❖ The Council should develop and implement a rent arrears strategy, that sets out clear objectives and has specified targets on rent arrears performance that take account of local circumstances.
- ❖ The Council should review its rent arrears manual to take account of good practice and ensure early face-to-face contact with tenants in rent arrears. It should ensure that support for tenants facing debt problems is available across all local offices and establish a referral system for identifying vulnerable tenants facing problems paying their rent.
- ❖ The Council should revise the Service Level Agreement between the Housing and Housing Benefit Services to meet the operational needs of both services.
- ❖ The Council should update its antisocial behaviour manual, including agreeing performance standards, in line with current legislation and good practice. It should provide further training to staff on how the manual should be used.
- ❖ The Council should roll out the antisocial behaviour early intervention scheme to all offices.
- ❖ The Council should put in place a comprehensive policy for making and monitoring suspensions from the housing list.
- ❖ The Council should review its approach to nominations to ensure that it makes best use of all the re-housing opportunities that are available to it.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that settling in visits are being undertaken in all offices in order to reinforce tenants' rights and responsibilities, and provide other relevant information in relation to their tenancy. The outcomes of these visits should be properly recorded.

## Property Management

6.1 This section summarises how well the Council maintains the fabric of its houses. It describes the quality of repairs that are done when they are needed, (response repairs) as well as maintenance and improvements planned in advance. It also looks at how the Council adapts houses so that tenants can stay in their homes when their needs change.

6.2 These are the areas of property management that are working well:

- ✓ The Council's houses are well maintained and in sound condition.
- ✓ The Council has good up to date records of the condition of its housing stock.
- ✓ The majority of tenants we contacted were broadly satisfied with the repairs service.
- ✓ The response repairs service is well staffed and responds promptly and efficiently to repair requests.

- ✓ The Council collects regular feedback from service users and uses this information to monitor performance and develop services.
- ✓ The Council's performance against targets for response repairs is good and improving.
- ✓ The Council manages its response repairs contractors in an efficient and co-ordinated way.
- ✓ The Council provides an effective adaptation service to its tenants.
- ✓ The Council allocates sufficient money to maintain its stock.

6.3 These are the areas of property maintenance that could work better:

- The Council does not have an overall strategic plan for the development of its repairs service.
- The Council does not inform tenants of their rights under the right to repair legislation.
- The Council has not involved service users in the development of its maintenance policies and plans.
- Performance reports are not always accurately compiled.
- The Council does not consistently recharge tenants, former tenants or owners for the cost of repairs for which they are liable.
- The Council does not always carry out safety checks to its tenants' gas heating systems within the statutory 12 month period.
- The Council is not adequately checking the quality of the work done on its gas systems.
- The Council does not give service users clear information about when repairs will be carried out.
- The Council's approach to complaints in this area does not conform to the Council's policy.

6.4 Angus Council provides a good property management service. The great majority of service users are satisfied with the services provided by the Council. The Council manages its contracts well and collects good feedback from service users on how good the service is. This has led us to award the Council a B for its property management service. The Council has also shown a strong commitment to improving its services following on from previous service reviews and audit reports. We consider that the prospects for improvement are promising.

6.5 We consider that the property management service may improve because:

- The Council has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving maintenance services.
- The Council has been systematically working through the 1999 response repairs service best value review recommendations, substantially changing key service areas.

- The Council is working with contractors to improve performance using target setting and review processes.
- The Council is currently reviewing the methods it uses to assess tenant satisfaction with the response repairs service.
- The Council collects and makes good use of customer feedback in respect of planned maintenance work.
- The Council has set up a forum to develop its approaches to disability adaptations following the recent audit by Audit Scotland.

6.6 Factors pulling against improvement include:

- Lack of an overall guiding strategy for the maintenance service.
- No clear housing quality standard.
- Limited involvement of service users in the development of service improvements.

6.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should ensure that its procedures are designed to ensure that it carries out safety checks on all gas appliances every 12 months.
- ❖ The Council should involve service users in developing policy and procedures to ensure the services provided are tenant focused.
- ❖ The Council should set up a right to repair system that complies with the legislation.
- ❖ The Council should agree and publish service standards for its disabled adaptation services and ensure that the service is resourced to meet these standards.
- ❖ The Council should consistently recharge tenants, former tenants and owner-occupiers for all repairs work for which they are liable.
- ❖ The Council should review its repairs timescales and its arrangements for gaining access, to give service users greater certainty about when their repair will be carried out.
- ❖ The Council should prepare a comprehensive medium and long-term maintenance strategy linked to an agreed housing standard.

## Homelessness

7.1 This section summarise show the Council is responding to the needs of people who are homeless or may become homeless. It also looks at what the Council is doing to help prevent homelessness occurring.

7.2 These are the areas in the homelessness service that are working well:

- ✓ The involvement of the voluntary sector and other external partners in the development and implementation of the homelessness strategy.

- ✓ Partnership working with external agencies and organisations.
- ✓ The progress being made in taking forward the information and advice strategy.
- ✓ Providing quick access to a homeless assessment interview.
- ✓ Making good homeless assessment decisions - where cases have been progressed.
- ✓ The timely provision of council housing to people whom the Council has assessed as being homeless and in priority need.
- ✓ Making good decisions where a homeless person has lodged an appeal.
- ✓ Putting in place a Quality and Compliance Review Protocol.
- ✓ Developing plans for improving the service.

7.3 These are the areas of the homelessness service that could work better:

- The quality and user-focus of homelessness assessment interviews and the assessment process.
- The implementation of the homelessness strategy to agreed timescales.
- Corporate commitment to the homelessness strategy and internal partnership working.
- Having effective measures in place to prevent homelessness.
- Ensuring that information on how to access the homelessness service is widely available.
- Ensuring that all homeless applications are properly progressed and that contact is maintained with applicants.
- Ensuring that applications are assessed within 28 days.
- Ensuring that applicants are provided with a full explanation of the decision reached, of how the Council can help and of their right to appeal.
- The provision of advice and assistance to homeless people who are not in priority need.
- The provision of adequate supplies of a range of good quality temporary accommodation that meets the needs of those who require it, such as families and disabled people.
- The management of front-line homelessness services.
- The management and maintenance of standards in all temporary accommodation used by the Council.

7.4 Angus Council provides a fair homelessness service with some strengths, but also significant areas where improvement is required. The grading we have awarded in homelessness is a C. This reflects the balance in the positive aspects of the services while acknowledging that the Council need to improve the services in a number of significant areas, in particular its work to prevent homelessness. However we do feel that the prospects of improvement are promising.

7.5 We consider that the homelessness service may improve because:

- The Housing Service has as strong commitment to improving the service.
- The Council has a good approach to reviewing and developing its Homelessness Strategy.
- The Council is aware of the weaknesses in the service and has developed a service quality assurance process to help address them.
- Progress is being made in delivering the Temporary Accommodation and Support Strategy.
- The Council is working well with external partners in developing and delivering its Homelessness Strategy.
- The Council is making good progress in implementing its Information and Advice Strategy.
- The Council has agreed new structures and increased resources to support vulnerable homeless applicants.

7.6 The factors affecting the chances of improvement are:

- The lack of effective line management of some front-line special needs staff.
- The lack of target setting and performance management.
- The limited development of the Council's work to prevent homelessness.
- The limited commitment of Council services other than Housing to the homelessness strategy.

7.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should ensure that accurate information on all aspects of the homelessness service is widely available and ensure that all homeless clients are provided with appropriate information, advice and support including information on appeals.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that sufficient time is allocated for conducting homeless assessment interviews and that all Council staff who are likely to come into contact with homeless people are properly trained and supported to deliver services that meet their needs.
- ❖ The Council should plan to ensure that it has access to an adequate supply of good quality temporary accommodation that meets the needs of homeless applicants.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that all departments and sections of the Council with a part to play in taking the homelessness strategy forward are fully aware of their role, properly engage with the process and provide resources and commitment as required.

- ❖ The Council should implement the service standards for homelessness and temporary accommodation services and put in place appropriate targets, performance monitoring systems and reporting mechanisms.

## **Services for Owners**

8.1 This section summarises how the Council deals with Right to Buy sales and the provision of repairs and maintenance services to owners.

8.2 These areas of services to owners are working well:

- ✓ The Council's performance in completing houses sales within 26 weeks is good.
- ✓ There is good procedural guidance for house sales staff.
- ✓ The Council provides good information for people applying to buy their home.

8.3 These are the areas of services to owners that could work better:

- Offer letters are not always sent in the two-month period required by the legislation.
- The Council does not attempt to recover the costs of work it does to owner-occupied properties in a consistent manner.
- The Council's plans to develop a factoring service are not well developed.

8.4 We consider that the house sales service may improve because:

- there are clear procedures for staff to follow;
- good performance has been achieved through a period of increased demand; and
- the Council has a track record of improving performance in this area.

8.5 We consider that the factoring service may not improve because:

- the plans for the development or implementation of a factoring service are not well developed despite a long lead in period;
- progress meetings are not being held regularly and are not well attended; and
- targets have already been missed.

8.6 On balance we consider that the prospects for improvement of both the house sales service and the factoring service are promising.

8.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should ensure that all properly rechargeable repairs costs are recovered.
- ❖ The Council should, as a matter of priority, develop and implement its plans to introduce a factoring service.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it issues offer letters for the sale of houses within statutory timescales.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it provides a consistent level of service to its tenants.
- ❖ The Council should review the definitions it uses in its cost floor calculations and the dates it uses to monitor house sales applications.
- ❖ The Council should review its tenancy agreement to reflect the correct information on right to buy for those being investigated for antisocial behaviour.

## **Services for Gypsies/Travellers**

9.1 This section sets out how well the Council is managing the site for Gypsies/Travellers that it runs.

9.2 These are the areas that are working well:

- ✓ The site is well managed and has a stable resident group.
- ✓ The site rules are clear and well understood by residents. They are operated in a generally fair and common sense way.
- ✓ The site supervisor has the confidence of the residents and the services he provides are understood and appreciated.
- ✓ The process of managing vacancies on the site and allocating pitches works well.
- ✓ The Council has commissioned a survey of the condition of the site as the first step to assessing investment requirements.
- ✓ The Council has good information on the housing needs of Gypsies/Travellers in the Angus area.
- ✓ The Council has agreed a corporate policy and a policy development statement for services to Gypsies/Travellers.

9.3 These are the areas that could work better:

- The pitch lease agreement says more about residents' responsibilities than their rights or the responsibilities of the landlord.
- The site is in need of significant investment to improve its layout, road surfaces, drainage and the quality and accessibility of amenity units.
- The site rules are, in a number of areas, less favourable to residents than the equivalent arrangements for council tenants.

- There is no framework for involving residents in the process of service improvement or delivery.
- The Council does not collect feedback from residents on service delivery or quality.
- There is no clear strategy or timescale for investment in the site or improving services overall.
- The arrangements for the delivery of mail to the site are unsatisfactory.
- The Council is not delivering services consistent with its approved corporate policy statement and no action plan has been developed to address identified gaps in services to Gypsies/Travellers.

9.4 We consider that services for Gypsies/Travellers are likely to improve because:

- The Council has good information on the housing needs and aspirations of the Gypsy/Traveller community in its area.
- The Council has adopted a clear policy statement relating to the provision of services to the Gypsy/Traveller community.
- The ownership and management of the Tayock site have been brought under a single service.
- Work is underway to assess the investment needs of the Tayock site.
- The Council has shown a commitment to consult residents of the Tayock site when considering changes to the service.
- The draft Local Housing Strategy makes a clear commitment to improving services to Gypsies/Travellers.

9.5 The factors pulling against improvement include:

- The Council has not established an effective strategy for improving services to Gypsies/Travellers.
- The Council has been aware of a range of improvements required to the Tayock site for some time and has made no commitment or financial provision to ensure that they are carried out.
- The Housing service has no clear strategy for service development or improvement set out in its service plan.
- The Council has not developed a clear approach to consultation with, or gathering service user feedback from, the residents of the Tayock site.
- The recent review of the site rules has not resulted in an approach to service provision that is consistent with that for Council house tenants.

9.6 On balance we consider the prospects for improvement in services for Gypsies/Travellers are promising.

- 9.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:
- ❖ The Council should agree with residents a planned approach to reviewing services for Gypsies/Travellers and put in place a programme for the upgrading and modernisation of the Tayock site.
  - ❖ The Council should ensure that its investment plans and service developments are properly resourced and carried out within agreed timescales.
  - ❖ The Council should agree with site residents, arrangements for consultation and feedback on service delivery and the management of the site.
  - ❖ The tenancy agreement and site rules should be reviewed to ensure that they provide rights and responsibilities that are, so far as possible, the equivalent to those enjoyed by Angus Council house tenants.
  - ❖ The Council should work with residents to make appropriate arrangements with the Royal Mail for the direct delivery of post to site residents.

## **Inspection Report**

- 10.1 Any one can ask for a copy of the full inspection report. All reports are on the Communities Scotland web site at <http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>
- 10.2 This summary can also be made available on tape, in Braille, MOON, large print and community languages. For information please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email [campbellj@communitiesscotland.gov.uk](mailto:campbellj@communitiesscotland.gov.uk)
- 10.3 We have asked Angus Council to produce an improvement plan within eight weeks of publishing the inspection report to show how it intends to respond to all our recommendations. We will agree the plan with the Council. We will liaise regularly with the Council and track progress in improving all the inspected services until the next scheduled inspection which will take place within five years.