



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

East Ayrshire Council Inspection Report  
April 2008

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# 1. Introduction

## About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by the Scottish Housing Regulator 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, service users, 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, asset management and delivery of repairs and homelessness services. The grades and judgements are based on evidence. The grades summarise performance in the following ways:

- Grade A = Excellent
- Grade B = Good
- Grade C = Fair
- Grade D = Poor

1.5 When we provide a summarised assessment and award a grade, we take various factors into account. These factors are:

- outcomes for service users;
- how far the service or organisation meets Performance Standards;

- performance against key indicators in comparison with others;
- compliance with legislation;
- how good the leadership and accountability are;
- how far good practice is followed;
- the organisation's level of self-awareness;
- how well value for money is being achieved;
- local context and legitimate local priorities; and
- commitment to, and track record of, improvement.

### The inspection team

1.6 The inspection team was led by Lesley Kerr, Inspection Manager and the Inspection team included inspectors: Jacqui Angus, Marie Savage, Eleanor Sneddon and Donna Matthewson; and Inspection Officer, Joyce Kilpatrick. The team was also assisted by a Tenant Assessor, Nanette Reid. We were assisted on site by Stuart Fair of the Institute of Public Finance Ltd, Associate Inspector. The inspection team was on site between 5 and 30 November, 2007; and the Tenant Assessor was on site 7, 14 and 22 November, 2007. In addition, 3 Tenant Assessors carried out a desktop review of some of the Council's publications. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the elected members, staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

### Responding to this inspection

1.7 We expect all inspected bodies to make the inspection grades and overview section of this report available to anyone who wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

## 2. Inspection grades and overview

In this section we set out our overall assessment of East Ayrshire Council's performance, including inspection grades and we summarise our inspection findings.

### Grades

- 2.1 The inspection of East Ayrshire Council's housing service took place between 5 and 30 November, 2007. We awarded the following grades:

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for housing management. This is a **good** performance.

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for asset management and repairs. This is a **good** performance.

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **C** grade for services to homeless people. This is a **fair** performance.

### How well is East Ayrshire Council delivering its services ?

- 2.2 Our assessment is that East Ayrshire Council's housing service has many strengths in the delivery of its services.

In housing management:

- the Council houses a large number of people in housing need;
- it provides a wide range of ways to access the service;
- the Council provides an excellent range of information to its tenants on tenancy and neighbourhood management;
- it is good at dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB);
- it manages its estates well and tenants are largely happy with the quality of their neighbourhoods;
- it consults with tenants and residents in a variety of ways; and
- its performance in income maximisation and collecting rent arrears is excellent.

In asset management and repairs:

- it has made good progress in gathering reliable information on its assets and the level of investment needed;

- it consults with tenants on priorities for improvement works;
- the Council has implemented service improvements to the repairs service and tenant satisfaction has improved as a result;
- it has a robust approach to asbestos management; and
- it has a good lettable standard for empty houses.

In delivering services for homelessness people:

- the Council offers a housing option to all those it finds to be homeless;
- it has a Tenancy Support Team who provide support to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- it is quick at interviewing homeless applicants; and
- it offers homeless people the same choice as other applicants when allocating permanent housing.

2.3 The Council has, however, a number of weaknesses in the delivery of its services.

In housing management:

- the Council's approach to cancelling and suspending housing applications impacts directly on applicants' prospects of being housed; and
- it has not developed post decree occupancy procedures.

In asset management and repairs:

- the Council is not carrying out gas safety checks within the legislative timescale for all its houses; and
- it does not fully comply with the Right to Repair legislation.

In delivering services for homelessness people:

- the Council has not always provided emergency accommodation to those presenting out of hours;
- it does not have a formal referral protocol with independent advice providers; and
- it has a number of weaknesses in its assessment procedures.

## Is East Ayrshire Council managed for improvement?

- 2.4 The Council has many strengths in its approach to managing improvements in its services. The Council has a Housing Business Plan that has clear links to the objectives and targets in the Local Housing Strategy and the Community Plan. The Council can demonstrate a culture of continuous improvement. It has a well developed approach to performance management and reporting. The Council is committed to service users' views being gathered and used to influence service improvements. It carries out a range of surveys at regular intervals. The Council has a good approach to public reporting, using a wide range of methods. It has a good tenant participation strategy and consults widely with the East Ayrshire Tenants and Residents Federation and individual groups. The Council holds an annual tenants' conference and an annual staff conference. It also has an annual Staff Excellence Award event. The Council has a Modern Procurement Strategy and uses joint procurement where appropriate. It has a robust budgeting process for the Housing Revenue Account.
- 2.5 We found some areas where the Council needs to make improvements. The Council has not reported progress made in the homelessness strategy to all partners. It has not developed performance management within the homelessness service as effectively as in the rest of the housing service.

## Key recommendations

- 2.6 Our inspection report covers a wide range of issues. East Ayrshire Council must respond effectively to them. These are our most important recommendations.

In housing management the Council should:

- improve its approach to suspensions and cancellations of applications for housing;
- develop post-decree occupancy procedures; and
- investigate alternatives to eviction.

In asset management and the repairs service the Council should:

- ensure that it meets its statutory obligations with regard to gas safety;
- continue to improve performance in response repairs; and

- continue to develop its evidence of value for money in its property maintenance rates.

In delivering services for homeless people the Council should:

- ensure that it provides emergency accommodation to people approaching the out of hours service;
- develop a formal referral protocol with an independent advice provider;
- improve the transparency of investigation and decision making; and
- ensure that it can always access housing support for those who are at risk of losing their home.

### 3. Context

In this section we look at East Ayrshire Council as an organisation and the context in which it operates.

#### About the organisation

3.1 East Ayrshire Council is situated in west central Scotland, approximately 30 miles south-west of Glasgow and has both rural and urban areas. It has an area of 125,000 hectares, stretching from Lugton in the north to Loch Doon in the south. The East Ayrshire region is bordered by the neighbouring local authorities of Dumfries & Galloway, East Renfrewshire, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire.

3.2 Following the Election in May 2007, the Council has a minority SNP administration and has 32 elected members consisting of:

- 14 SNP;
- 14 Labour;
- 3 Conservatives; and
- 1 Independent.

The Council has introduced a Cabinet/Executive decision-making structure supported by Scrutiny Groups. It has also amended its Scheme of Delegation to Council officers to strengthen scrutiny arrangements with the aim of maximising challenge and improvement. The Cabinet comprises 10 senior councillors: 9 members from the Administration, and 1 member from the main opposition party.

3.3 The Council delivers its services through three main groupings: Corporate Support; Neighbourhood Services; and Education & Social Services. The Council's housing functions fall within the remit of the Neighbourhood Services Department. It delivers its housing service from six local housing offices spread across East Ayrshire and a Housing Options office in Kilmarnock. The Council also provides housing surgeries at a number of other Council offices dispersed throughout the East Ayrshire area.

3.4 The Council's average weekly rent level for 2006/07 was £44.84 which is lower than the Scottish average of £46.11. Over the last 3 financial years, the Council has increased rents by the retail price index (RPI) plus 1% each year, to help it to

deliver the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) across all of its housing stock by 2015.

### **About its current and future tenants**

- 3.5 East Ayrshire's population, based on the 2001 census, stands at approximately 120,000 and is dispersed over 21 main communities and settlements. Almost half of the population live within the two main towns of Kilmarnock (44,000) and Cumnock (9,000).
- 3.6 In common with many other Councils, the population of East Ayrshire has been declining and ageing in recent years. The elderly population within East Ayrshire account for 21.5% compared to the national average of 21.1%. This upward trend is expected to continue in future years.
- 3.7 Based on Scottish Government labour market statistics, published in 2003 (and modified April 2007), unemployment in East Ayrshire is 3.8% which is higher than the national figure of 2.6%. Seventy one per cent of the population are either employed, in full or part-time employment, or are self-employed. This is lower than the national figure of 76%. Of those in employment, 79% are in service industries; 11% in manufacturing; 6% in construction; 2% in agriculture, forestry and fishing; and 2% in energy and water. Average earnings in East Ayrshire at £23,717 are 3.5% higher than the national figure of £22,932.
- 3.8 East Ayrshire has a relatively small number of ethnic minority households. In the 2001 census, the area's black and minority ethnic (BME) population was 0.67%, which is lower than the national figure of 2%. In 2005, the Council, together with North and South Ayrshire Councils and other key public agencies within the region, established the Ayrshire Race Equality Partnership. Its main aim is to provide a common approach to issues across Ayrshire and to maximise impact through co-ordination and utilisation of joint resources. The Partnership undertook a Needs Assessment Survey of black and ethnic minorities which included a number of housing related issues. The results were launched in September 2005.

### About its housing stock

- 3.9 The tenure profile in East Ayrshire differs from the Scottish average. According to the 2001 Census, owner-occupation is the dominant tenure at 58.7%, 4% below the national figure; 30.6% rent their homes from the Council and this is higher than the national figure of 21.6%; 3.0% rent from registered social landlords (RSLs)\* compared to the 5.6% national figure. In addition, 3.4% rent from the private sector which is about half the national figure.
- 3.10 The Council has sold approximately 40% of its housing stock through Right to Buy since its introduction in 1980, and it has sold about 3% of its houses in each of the last three years. It has worked with a range of partners to provide a range of affordable housing options, which include an additional 808 properties for rent since 1990. The Council confirmed that it receives at least 50% nomination rights to these homes.
- 3.11 The upgrade of the A77 to motorway status has had a positive impact on house prices throughout the region. However, the increase in house prices has resulted in an affordability issue for many households, particularly in the Kilmarnock area. This places an increasing demand on social rented housing.
- 3.12 Due to the falling population in mining villages and towns in the south of the region and low demand for certain house types in the north, there was a significant mismatch between the Council's stock and the profile of applicants on its housing list. This resulted in a high number of vacant properties. The Council has embarked upon an ambitious programme of demolition and new build, working in partnership with local RSLs and the community, to address this.
- 3.13 The undernoted table provides further statistical information on East Ayrshire Council's housing.

<b>Key facts</b>	<b>2004-05</b>	<b>2005-06</b>	<b>2006-07</b>
Houses owned	14,704	13,917	13,596
No. of applicants on housing list as at 31 March	4,913	5,287	5,079
Employees	206	214	220
HRA Gross Capital Expenditure (incl. Capital Funded from Revenue (CFCR))	£8m	£10m	£11.4m
Total possible rental income (£)	£33m	£32m	£32m
% of Rental income from Housing Benefit (HB)	60.5%	60.6%	60.3%
% of tenants in receipt of HB	46.9%	41.3%	44.7%
% of rent arrears	4.6%	4.3%	4.10%
Average weekly rent	£41.91	£43.20	£44.84
Average rent increase	9.6%	3.0%	3.8%
Houses re-let	1,487	1,434	1,405
Response repairs carried out	48,846	46,213	48,304
Maintenance spend per house incl. cost of service	£1,016	£1,068	£1,131
Supervision and management spend per house	£438	£488	£533
Right To Buy sales	517	461	313
No. of homeless applications	1,185	1,251	1,187
No. of evictions	99	102	103

Sources: East Ayrshire Council's inspection submission and Scottish Government Statistical Bulletins

## 4. How well is East Ayrshire Council delivering housing management?

In this section we set out our assessment of East Ayrshire Council's performance in delivering its housing management service for tenants.

### Grade

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for housing management. This is a **good** performance.

- 4.1 Our assessment is that East Ayrshire Council's housing management service has many strengths, but set against these are some weaknesses. The Council has a high level of self-awareness and was very responsive to our feedback during the inspection. It has implemented service improvements within the housing management service, and this is a key factor in arriving at the inspection grade.
- 4.2 The Council makes it easy for people to apply for housing and it processes applications quickly. It meets housing need through its allocations and is working with partners to improve the outcomes for applicants. The Council has an excellent range of information for tenants and manages its neighbourhoods well. It deals with anti-social behaviour well and has introduced some innovative practices with its partners. The Council seeks tenants' views and can show increased satisfaction levels in a number of service areas. It has improved the service as a result of feedback from tenants. It is excellent at collecting rent arrears and has shown continuous improvement over a sustained period. The Council revised its empty house procedures and has successfully reduced the time taken to let these. It has supported tenants groups and helped to establish a Tenants Federation, and it also continues to seek the views of a range of other tenants and service users.
- 4.3 The Council has some weaknesses which directly affect tenants and service users, some of which it has begun to address. These include:
- its approach to suspending and cancelling applications for housing;
  - a lack of transparency in some parts of the letting process;
  - no routine investigation of alternatives to eviction; and
  - no post-decree occupancy procedures.

## Tenant satisfaction

- 4.4 The Council's 2007 tenant satisfaction survey found that:
- 83% of tenants who responded said the Council manages its estates well;
  - 69% said the quality of the housing services provided overall was good or very good; and
  - 74% of the tenants who responded were fairly satisfied or very satisfied with the Council as a landlord.
- 4.5 The Council also carried out a survey of users of the antisocial behaviour service and 92% of respondents were satisfied with the speed of response and 75% felt that their situation had improved as a result of its investigations.

## Access to housing

- 4.6 The Council promotes access to its service in a good range of ways. These include:
- six main offices spread across its area;
  - arrangements with 19 local offices to enhance access;
  - operating housing surgeries in smaller settlements;
  - providing information and forms to download on its website;
  - advertising in the local press; and
  - publishing regular tenant and resident newsletters.
- 4.7 The Council is developing a common housing register and application form with five local housing associations to improve access for applicants. It plans to implement this in Autumn 2008.
- 4.8 The Council gives applicants access to a range of advice and information on social rented housing and the private sector in its housing options guide. It has distributed copies of the guide to a wide range of partners. It has arranged training for staff in the homelessness service to HomePoint Type 1 and Type 2 in providing housing advice and information.
- 4.9 East Ayrshire Council tries to make housing information easy to access for applicants whose first language is not English or who have other communication needs. The Council can translate its application form, allocations policy and

- leaflets into other languages on request. It does not always advertise its translation service on its publications but it plans to do this when current supplies are exhausted. The Council has an accessible website with software to read the text aloud and translate this and the written text into different languages.
- 4.10 The Council's housing list is open to anyone aged 16 or over. At 31 March 2007, it had 5079 applicants on its housing list. The Council added 4015 new applicants during 2006/07. At the time of our inspection it had 4868 applicants on its housing list.
- 4.11 In its housing business plan East Ayrshire Council sets a target of five days to process housing application forms. It internally monitors and reports its performance against this target. The Council had met the target for 98% of applications for the year to December 2007. The Council also has a target of 28 days to tell applicants the outcome of their application. It does not report its performance for this area but in our sample of applications we found that it responded to applicants on average in 9 days.
- 4.12 The Council uses a range of checks to make sure it knows that staff are correctly recording application details on to the housing list and pointing applications appropriately. These include:
- an automatic check by its computer software to highlight input errors;
  - managers audit a 10% sample of each month's applications; and
  - a separate officer will check the applicant's points at a home visit.
- 4.13 The Council ranks applications using a points system. It maintains a separate date order list for homeless applicants. It writes to applicants telling them their points, how it has calculated these and what list category they are in. It does not always give applicants information about their housing prospects with this letter. We saw that the Council gave applicants useful information about housing prospects when they asked for it.
- 4.14 We found some weaknesses in the way the Council gives information to applicants to help them make decisions about their housing options:
- when the Council suspends an applicant it does not tell them what their level of points is;

- we saw some examples of the Council advising prospective applicants that they would not be offered housing until they had paid all outstanding debt in full; and
- the Council did not always proactively identify and advise applicants who may be homeless coming through the general application process.

The Council agreed to consider our findings when we discussed them during the inspection.

- 4.15 The Council cancelled 1956 applications in 2006/07. It does not publish in its allocations policy all the circumstances in which it cancels applications and we found cases where it cancelled applications for reasons prohibited by law. This is a weakness. The Council agreed that it will review its approach to cancellations.
- 4.16 At the time of our inspection the Council had suspended 308 applications, or 6% of its list. It has recently expanded its regular reporting and review in its area offices to help it manage its suspended applications. We saw that some reasons for suspensions are not in line with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, in particular where the applicant owes less than one twelfth of the annual rent and taking account of the income of the applicant. The Council confirmed that it had received its own legal guidance in this area. Other weaknesses in its approach are:
- the Council does not publish all the reasons that it suspends applicants for;
  - it is by-passing some applicants for allocations if they have not cleared their debt although it has not formally suspended them; and
  - the Council did not always tell applicants how they could lift the suspension, the length of time it was for and that the Council would review it.
- 4.17 The Council carried out public consultation on all aspects of its allocation policy when it reviewed it in 2006. It gives applicants a wide choice of house type, type of heating and geographic locations. Applicants can also specify particular streets they do not want. However, the Council's policy to suspend applicants for one year if they refuse two offers in six months is overly restrictive. At the time of the inspection one in six suspensions was for this reason.

- 4.18 The Council actively manages its housing list through a rolling review of applications at the anniversary of their application date.
- 4.19 The Council has recently begun collecting information on the ethnicity or disability of those who are applying for housing. It recognises that it will need to use this information to help it understand better who is applying to it and plans to do this as part of its strategic approach to equalities issues.
- 4.20 In summary, the Council provides fair access to its housing list. It processes applications within its targets and is working with partners to make it easier for people to apply for housing. We identified a number of weaknesses that impact directly on applicants' prospects of being housed, including the Council's approach to suspensions and cancellations.

## Lettings

- 4.21 The Council's allocations policy ranks applicants on a range of housing needs that reflect the statutory reasonable preference categories. Eighty four percent of the allocations we reviewed were to people with one or more of these needs.
- 4.22 The Council categorises applicants into six groups and sets a quota annually for lets to each of these groups. For 2006/07 these were: homeless 20%; non-householder 38%; householder 13%; transfer 13%; medical 15%; and miscellaneous 1%. Its computer system randomly chooses what quota group each allocation should come from, but staff are able to manually override this selection. Although we found that there was not always an audit trail to support any change, and that staff had limited guidance on how to select a different category or a different applicant from a list, the outcome information for 2006/07 confirms that the Council's allocations were broadly in line with its quota category targets.
- 4.23 The Council produces a range of reports about allocations including performance against quota group, and the number and reasons for quota changes. It increased the proportion of lets to the homelessness quota during 2006/07 to help move homeless applicants on from temporary accommodation. It allocated 27% of vacancies to this group during 2006/07. The Council's senior officers monitor performance information at monthly operational meetings and report

- annually to elected members. The Council will give enhanced performance information to elected members quarterly during 2008/09.
- 4.24 The Council also uses nominations to housing associations to increase housing options. The Council was aware a significantly low level of its nominations result in a let. It has recently completed a review of the agreements with each of its partners and is working with them to develop a common housing register to improve this area.
- 4.25 In summary, East Ayrshire Council is good at meeting housing need through its allocations. It is working with partners to try to improve outcomes for applicants. Some parts of its lettings process are not completely transparent.

### **Tenancies and neighbourhood management**

- 4.26 The provision of good information and access to support are important ways in which a landlord can help to manage and sustain tenancies. The Council provides an excellent range of information to its tenants on tenancy and neighbourhood management through its Tenants Handbook, Tenants Newsletter, its wide range of leaflets, website and calendar it distributes annually. Our tenant assessors found the Tenants Handbook to be clear, comprehensive and useful. They found the website easy to access, with clear and concise information.
- 4.27 The Council has developed a number of approaches to support new and vulnerable tenants to sustain their tenancies and to help prevent homelessness. These include a comprehensive sign up process and the provision of good quality information for new tenants during a visit carried out within 6 weeks of the tenancy beginning. This is a good approach to offering support to tenants at the start of a tenancy. These visits focus on reinforcing tenancy and estate management conditions and identifying any outstanding issues for the tenant. The Council told us that it had carried out 74% of these visits within the target timescale and it plans to further improve this by arranging the new tenant visit during the sign up process and by developing guidance for staff to deal with unsuccessful visits.
- 4.28 The Council has established a Tenancy Support Team to support vulnerable tenants who have experienced homelessness, are at risk of becoming homeless

- or who are experiencing problems in keeping their home. This service offers a range of housing support to vulnerable tenants, but we saw limited evidence that the area housing teams refer people to it at early stages in arrears or anti-social behaviour cases. At the time of our inspection, the Council was considering the introduction of referral criteria to the Team. The percentage of the Council's tenants still in their tenancy after 12 months has shown a small improvement, at 80% for the current year, and the Council is aware of the need to continue to monitor this trend.
- 4.29 The Council's use of short SSTs is consistent with the circumstances permitted in legislation. It grants these to tenants found to be intentionally homeless after it has obtained a court order to recover possession for rent arrears and it aims to put in place a support package. However, the relatively high numbers of short SSTs granted have resulted in some capacity issues within the Tenancy Support Team. In 2006/07 it granted 126 short SSTs, which includes 112 to applicants who were assessed as intentionally homeless, and went on to convert a total of 73 to full SSTs.
- 4.30 In 2006/07, 10.9 % of the Council's tenancies were terminated, which is a slight increase on the previous year and higher than the average for all Scottish councils of 9.3%. The Council does not always know the specific reasons why people give up their tenancies. The number of the Council's tenancies abandoned by tenants has increased from 210 in 2005/06 to 254 in 2006/07, or 1.9% of its stock. The Council has clear and comprehensive procedures for staff to follow when dealing with abandoned properties and they had complied with these in all the cases we reviewed. It knows that it currently does not adequately record the investigation to trace tenants and developed a template to guide staff during our inspection.
- 4.31 The Council issued 4297 Notice of Proceedings for Possession (NOPs) in 2006/07, of which 4133 were for rent arrears, 41 were for antisocial behaviour and 123 were for other reasons. It routinely issues NOPs within six weeks of tenants first getting into arrears, which means that these may be for relatively small sums where the tenant is in receipt of Housing Benefit. The number of NOP actions that resulted in court action for rent arrears was 847 or 20% of the

- number issued. The Council carried out 103 evictions in 2006/07: this equates to 0.76% of its tenancies, and is significantly higher than the national average of 0.27%. The Council offered the majority of these tenants a short SST to remain in their home.
- 4.32 The Council developed its current rent arrears procedures in 2000/01 in response to a high level of rent arrears. They contain clear guidance on the escalation process for staff and include some good practice such as early contact with tenants and access to an In-Court Advisor. The Council reviewed its procedures in 2006. We found some weaknesses in the Council's policy and procedures, that in part reflect that these do not fully adopt good practice guidance published in March 2005. It recognises the high cost and impact of evictions and is considering including a wider range of options to help sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness occurring, whilst maintaining its excellent performance in collecting rent arrears.
- 4.33 The Council does not have clear documented procedures for managing occupancy where it has a repossession order but it does not recover the property. Until it introduced the use of short SSTs it did not routinely offer new tenancies to the occupants. We found some tenants still in their homes after the Council had obtained a court order to recover possession who had not been offered a new tenancy. The Council is aware of this and confirmed that it would introduce procedures on 1 April 2008 to address this weakness.
- 4.34 The Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, places a duty upon Local Authorities and Chief Constables to prepare a joint antisocial behaviour strategy. East Ayrshire Council's strategy, published in 2005, sets out a multi-agency approach to responding to incidents of antisocial behaviour. This also includes arrangements for regular monitoring, review and evaluation.
- 4.35 The Council is dealing with an increasing number of ASB complaints. It received 689 in 2005/06 and 863 in 2006/07. The Council told us that this increase followed a high profile campaign it launched to publicise its services. It also provides a good range of information about ASB in various publications, on the website and at the tenancy sign up. Our tenant assessors found the ASB and

- Community Warden information leaflets to be written in plain English, easy to read, contained relevant information and encouraged tenants to seek further advice. The Council also makes the leaflets available in alternative formats and other languages.
- 4.36 The Council's area housing teams deal with low level neighbour nuisance in its own housing stock and its specialist antisocial behaviour team deals with serious antisocial behaviour cases, across all housing tenures. The Council has good procedures in place to guide staff dealing with ASB and it has an effective ICT system for logging all ASB complaints.
- 4.37 The Council and its partners use a wide range of tools to tackle antisocial behaviour, selecting the most appropriate for the individual circumstances. These include some innovative methods in the use of diversionary activities such as Streetsport Express. The Council's antisocial behaviour team is represented on a Problem Solving Group that is an effective, multi-agency forum that discusses individual cases and hotspot areas. This is a good example of partnership working.
- 4.38 In 2006/07 the Council obtained five ASBOs, down from eight in 2005/06. The Council told us that it considers early and effective action to prevent escalation and the need for legal action. It is clear, however, that it will issue NOPs and proceed to eviction for ASB if it decides that this is the most appropriate action.
- 4.39 The cases we reviewed were actioned quickly and we saw evidence of records and timescales for actions being met in the majority of cases. The Council also kept complainants informed as cases were progressing and it issues a closure letter and satisfaction survey for the more serious ASB complaints. It conducted a survey between January and December 2007 and the results confirmed that satisfaction levels were high amongst those who had used the service. The Council confirmed that it will use the survey information to identify any potential service improvements.
- 4.40 We saw that neighbourhoods are in good condition and well managed. The Council has developed a good range of approaches in partnership with the local communities. A positive example of joint working is the estate walkabouts with a

- representative from the local registered tenants organisation (RTO), during which actions are agreed and then signed off when complete. Other initiatives include:
- estate profiles, action plans and estate management plans;
  - regular checks of stairs, gardens and communal areas by housing officers;
  - garden maintenance service;
  - environment hit squads for litter, vandalism and graffiti; and
  - regeneration projects in selected areas designated as initiative areas.
- 4.41 The Council established a Community Wardens service in 2004 to support these initiatives. It was piloted in the North West, New Farm Loch and Shortlees neighbourhoods of Kilmarnock and in the Auchinleck and Cumnock areas. The Council expanded the service in 2007 to include a mobile patrol to tackle other ASB hotspot areas. In 2005 and 2006 the Council carried out surveys in the communities the wardens covered to find out residents' views and to identify their priorities for improvements. In response to these, Community Wardens now have the authority to issue Fixed Penalty Notices in relation to litter and dog fouling. This is a positive example of customer feedback being used to improve service delivery.
- 4.42 In summary, the Council provides an excellent range of information on tenancy and neighbourhood management. The Council is good at dealing with antisocial behaviour. The Council manages its neighbourhoods well and these are of good quality. It is fair at sustaining tenancies and identifying the support needs of vulnerable tenants. It issues a high number of NOPs and seeks a high number of decrees for eviction for the recovery of rent arrears in particular, but does not routinely investigate alternatives to eviction or refer tenants to external advice providers. There are some weaknesses in its post-decree occupancy procedures.

### Income maximisation

- 4.43 East Ayrshire Council offers tenants a range of methods to pay their rent. These include:
- in person at housing and local offices;
  - by post;
  - debit and credit cards on line and by telephone; and

- by direct debit.

4.44 The table below summarises East Ayrshire Council's performance in collecting rent.

	2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	East Ayrshire Council	National	East Ayrshire Council	National	East Ayrshire Council	National
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	4.6%	7.4%	4.3%	7.0%	4.1%	6.7%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	0.9%	4.5%	0.8%	4.5%	0.7%	4.4%
Total former tenant arrears (£)	£565,377	n/a	£331,305	n/a	£497,321	£27,651,344
Rent arrears written off (£)	£177,617	n/a	£443,683	n/a	£88,839	£7,976,189

Source : Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & East Ayrshire Inspection Submission

4.45 The Council's performance in collecting rent arrears is excellent and has shown continuous improvement over a sustained period, with the percentage of current arrears being well below the national figure. The percentage of the Council's tenants in serious arrears is 0.7% and is significantly below the national figure. In 2006/07 the Council was placed within the top quartile for its performance in collecting current tenant arrears, and was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in relation to the level of serious rent arrears.

4.46 The Council uses a range of methods to achieve this improved performance and these include:

- clear arrears control procedures;
- setting challenging arrears targets;
- making early contact with tenants;
- using a range of contact and payment methods;
- making affordable repayment arrangements;
- clearly recording progress in cases through the ICT system; and
- regular and effective monitoring of performance.

4.47 The Council's former tenants arrears increased significantly by 50% in 2006/07. It writes off the debt at regular intervals throughout the financial year. The Council actively manages its former tenant arrears and has comprehensive procedures which include passing cases to an external debt recovery agency.

4.48 The table below summarises East Ayrshire Council's reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

	2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	East Ayrshire Council	National	East Ayrshire Council	National	East Ayrshire Council	National
Turnover (no. of new vacancies as % of total dwellings)	9.1%	10.6%	11.8%	9.3%	10.9%	9.45%
Total no. of relets	1487	n/a	1434	n/a	1405	n/a
% relet in <2 weeks	12.8%	14.7%	15.5%	15.7%	16.5%	
% relet in 2-4 weeks	48.8%	23.8%	30.8%	28.4%	41.95%	
% relet in >4 weeks	38.4%	61.5%	53.7%	55.9%	41.55%	
Average time to relet not low demand (days)	64*	79*	59	64	31.3	51
% of total annual rental due lost due to voids*	1.9%	2.5%	1.8%	2.3%	1.6%	1.9%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators and East Ayrshire Council's inspection submission

\*Audit Scotland stats for 2004/05 reported a combined low/not low demand figure only

4.49 In 2006/07 the Council lost 1.6% of its total rental income because of empty houses. This is an improvement since 2004/05 and is below the national figure. Its average re-let time has also improved over the last year for not low demand empty houses, from 59 days to 31 days. The Council is aware that its performance for low demand empty houses has reduced over the last year from 102 days to 139 days and confirmed that this was due to their success in reletting houses for which there was previously no demand.

4.50 It has also revised its empty houses procedures to aim to minimise delays and positive initiatives to deliver continuous improvement include:

- introducing a preferred utility supplier;
- selecting applicants on a daily basis;
- pre-allocating properties when a termination is received;
- giving every new tenant a decoration allowance;
- setting challenging targets and close performance monitoring;
- developing strategies to address long term empty houses; and
- appointing an independent consultant to examine current empty house arrangements.

4.51 In summary, the Council's performance in income maximisation is excellent. It is excellent at collecting rent arrears. The time taken to re-let its empty houses is improving and steps have been taken by the Council to ensure continuous improvement in managing empty properties.

## 5. How well is East Ayrshire Council managing its assets and delivering repairs?

In this section we set out our assessment of East Ayrshire Council's performance in managing its housing assets and in delivering a repairs service for tenants.

### Grade

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for asset management and repairs. This is a **good** performance.

- 5.1 Our assessment is that East Ayrshire Council has areas of strength, but set against these are some weaknesses. We saw that the Council has made good progress in developing and delivering its asset management objectives. It has an excellent approach to asbestos management. The Council works well with tenants and some key partners in delivering its capital projects and it is trying to encourage owners to become involved.
- 5.2 The Council does not fully meet its statutory obligations regarding gas safety. The Council has some weaknesses in how response repairs are recorded, verified and monitored. It had no written procedures to guide staff for the revised repairs system.
- 5.3 The Council has acted to review significant areas of its services in an effort to address weaknesses that it had identified before our inspection. We saw an improved performance in relation to response repairs where it has completed a review and introduced revised practices to improve services to tenants. The Council has only used these practices across the whole area since August 2007, and it is too early to evidence a continuous improvement, but we saw some early indications that performance has begun to improve. It has also begun to change its performance in managing gas safety, and expects to be fully compliant by June 2008. The Council has a high level of self awareness of its performance and this is supported by a strong improvement culture at a corporate level. These are important factors in arriving at the inspection grade.

### Tenant satisfaction

- 5.4 The Council's 2007 tenant satisfaction survey found that:

- 98.5% of tenants surveyed found it very or fairly easy to report a repair;
- 75.2% found the timescales to be quite good or very good; and
- 72.6% were very or fairly satisfied with the repairs service provided.

The Repairs Experiment Team carry out weekly phone surveys of 10% of tenants who reported repairs. The most recent survey indicated that 92.5% of those contacted confirmed that they were very satisfied with the service the Council had delivered.

### Asset management strategy and planning

5.5 East Ayrshire Council has outlined its strategic objectives for its housing assets in its Local Housing Strategy (LHS). It aims to:

- increase its understanding of housing supply and demand;
- create sustainable communities in identified initiative areas;
- improve resident satisfaction with their home and the surrounding environment;
- review existing housing models to address particular housing needs; and
- ensure that the Council's houses meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015.

5.6 The Council carried out an option appraisal for its housing stock, which included consultation with tenants groups and tenant representatives, and it decided to retain its stock in 2005. This study, and additional work commissioned by the Council, confirmed that it would be possible for it to retain the housing stock and meet the SHQS by 2015. The Council also obtained information on housing need and the supply and demand trends in the housing market within East Ayrshire from two studies carried out by external consultants.

5.7 It has good information on the areas where there is surplus supply. In areas where the Council identified a mismatch between demand and supply, it has carried out demolitions. It will continue to work in partnership with RSLs and the private sector to provide suitable affordable housing in these locations. The Council is currently progressing plans to address the surplus stock in some of its rural areas. It aims to tackle these areas comprehensively, rather than focus on housing alone. The Council has made good progress with regard to two areas in

- particular, and delivery of plans to achieve its strategic vision for the communities in Bellsbank and New Cumnock are well developed.
- 5.8 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the SHQS by 2015. The Council's Standard Delivery Plan (SDP) was accepted by Communities Scotland in 2006, with a requirement that progress was carefully monitored around the following risks that the Council had identified:
- potential variations in projections for income from Right to Buy (RTB) which contributes to the funding of the capital programme;
  - rental loss due to empty houses; and
  - the need for a 100% stock condition database.
- 5.9 The Council confirmed that it has contingency plans in place to address funding requirements resulting from potential shortfalls in RTB income. It will continue to use capital receipts from land holdings to subsidise any reduction in RTB receipts. It has also introduced revised practices to reduce rental loss due to empty houses and the Council has been effective in significantly reducing the time to let empty properties. These are outlined in paragraph 4.49 of this report.
- 5.10 The Council's information on its stock condition is based on surveys carried out by external consultants in 2000 and 2005. It has added to this information by introducing surveys of all properties. The Council currently has stock condition information for approximately 42% of its properties and aims to have information on 100% of its stock by 2010. It has delivered training to twelve of its own staff to enable them to carry out these surveys. The Council has reviewed its housing asset database and will include its housing stock condition information on the corporate asset management system by April 2008.
- 5.11 In summary, East Ayrshire Council has a good approach to asset management. It has a good understanding of need and demand, and has begun to improve both its stock condition knowledge and the system for recording this information. The Council has confirmed that it will achieve the SHQS for all of its houses by 2015 and it will continue to monitor progress rigorously.

## Investment & home safety

- 5.12 East Ayrshire Council has a 30 year investment plan. It is working towards meeting the requirements of the SHQS for all its houses by 2015 with an ongoing Housing Investment Programme (HIP) which is set for 5 years and updated annually. In the three years from 2004/05 to 2006/07 the Council has been successful in achieving its target to spend all of its £37.8 million budget for capital expenditure. The programme is reviewed regularly through the HIP Monitoring Group, and six-weekly reports are presented to elected members.
- 5.13 The Council consults tenants annually on the priorities for its housing investment work, and it structures its programme to reflect tenants' priorities. It carries out tenant satisfaction surveys for all housing improvement work, and it takes appropriate action to address negative feedback for individual cases. The Council is aware of the need to encourage owners to participate in investment works to meet the SHQS, and we saw examples of it trying to work with owners to get their participation.
- 5.14 The Council is required to carry out safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues that it provides for its tenants' use. It is not meeting its statutory duty for a significant number of its houses. As at mid-September 2007 it had completed safety checks within the required 12 months in only 76.4% of its houses with gas. It had not completed in excess of 2,200 checks within the legislative timescale. Of the 709 properties without a current safety check 164 were long term voids, in each of which the Council had capped the gas supply.
- 5.15 The table overleaf summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks.

	September 2007	
	No. of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances	12437	
Houses with current gas safety certificates	11728	94.3%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	9507	76.4%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	1168	9.4%
Houses where safety check was carried out between one to three months after the due date	480	3.9%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date	573	4.6%

Source: East Ayrshire Council's inspection submission.

- 5.16 The Council recognised that it was not carrying out all annual gas safety checks within timescale, and introduced revised procedures in September 2007. It put in place a remedial action plan and deployed additional resources to support this, including using external contractors. The Council's remedial action plan includes a range of measures to complete the checks and it has put additional resources into the process. By February 2008 the Council's performance was showing signs of some improvement and 80.4% of safety checks had been completed within 12 months. The Council told us that it expects to achieve full compliance by June 2008, and it's revised procedures will ensure ongoing compliance. It now offers appointments to carry out the safety check and it aims to start the process 70 days ahead of the due date.
- 5.17 From May 2004 social landlords have had a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties, and to produce an asbestos management plan. The Council inspected all common areas of flats, and produced an asbestos management plan within the required timescale. It has an asbestos database and a dedicated asbestos co-ordinator, and it has delivered asbestos awareness training to the relevant repairs staff. The Council includes information on asbestos within the Tenants Handbook, and it also issues a standard letter to new tenants at the sign-up.
- 5.18 East Ayrshire Council has detailed and robust procedures to ensure that its houses are in a good condition at the start of each new tenancy. Its current lettable standards, which it reviewed in consultation with tenants, have been in place since August 2007. The Council has advised us that in the year to

September 2007 only nine houses (0.8% of relets) were refused because of their condition. From the empty house viewings that we shadowed we found the houses to be of a good standard.

- 5.19 In summary, the Council is good at meeting its budget for capital investment works, and it tries to work with both tenants and owners in the delivery of the capital projects. It lets its houses in a good condition. The Council has an excellent approach to asbestos management. It does not fully meet its statutory obligations regarding gas safety, but it has committed a range of resources to make sure that it delivers improvement in its performance.

### Response repairs

- 5.20 East Ayrshire Council's repairs service is accessible – tenants can report repairs by telephone, in writing, by e-mail or online on the Council's website. Tenants can also report repairs by calling in person at any of the Council's offices, where they are directed to a freephone in the reception area. The Council operates an out of hours emergency repairs service. In the 2004 tenant satisfaction survey 73% of tenants were very or fairly satisfied with the response they received when they contacted the out of hours service and this rose significantly to 90% in the 2007 survey.
- 5.21 The Council's targets for completing repairs are 24 hours for emergencies, and 3 working days for urgent repairs. The table below summarises the Council's reported performance in completing response repairs within its target timescales.

	Target response time	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	National 2006/07
<b>Emergency</b>	24 hours	87.0%	86.2%	86.4%	94.1%
<b>Urgent</b>	3 working days	73.6%	75.2%	70.6%	87.9%
<b>All emergency and urgent repairs completed in target</b>		81.9%	82.4%	80.7%	-

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & East Ayrshire Council's inspection submission

- 5.22 All other repairs, except for void repairs and new tenant repairs, have a target of 180 days. The Council intended this category to be used only for certain programmed work and is aware that this target is not always appropriate. It has confirmed that officers will recommend to Cabinet that it introduces a more challenging target for non-urgent repairs from April 2008.

5.23 The Council reviewed its repairs procedures in 2006 and introduced a revised system for carrying out emergency and urgent repairs in 2006/07. It began its "Repairs Experiment" in a limited geographical area in January 2007 and has gradually introduced the revised procedures to the remainder of its area. The aims of the revised system include:

- improved performance;
- greater tenant satisfaction;
- increased number of first-time fixes; and
- better use of resources.

The Council had extended the experiment to all of its houses by August 2007 and it plans to report on performance in March 2008.

5.24 Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 the Council's reported performance in meeting its targets for emergency and urgent repairs was poor. It was below its own service targets for 2006/07 (90% for emergency repairs and 80% for urgent repairs), and almost one in five of emergency and urgent repairs were not completed on time in 2006/07. Since the introduction of the revised system for processing emergency and urgent repairs in January 2007, the Council's performance in completing these repairs in target has improved. We saw that where it was operating the new system, its performance for emergency repairs had increased to 93.27%, and for urgent repairs it had significantly improved to 91%. Tenants we spoke to during the inspection confirmed that the service had improved.

5.25 We found weaknesses in how the Council deals with responsive repairs. It:

- is not always categorising repairs correctly;
- does not routinely verify the accuracy of the contractor's reported completion times for repairs;
- does not monitor work instructions issued to sub-contractors;
- is not providing tenants with a written receipt for reported repairs; and
- did not have written procedures in place for the revised repairs system for the guidance of staff.

During our inspection the Council provided appropriate guidance and training for staff.

- 5.26 East Ayrshire Council is aware that it does not operate an effective Right to Repair scheme. We found that the Council is not always identifying qualifying repairs, and does not record those repairs which are qualifying repairs. The Council told us that it has now addressed this and has introduced new procedural arrangements, supported by an effective monitoring system. The Council does not provide tenants with information on an alternative contractor for qualifying repairs. It has acknowledged this weakness, and advised us it would start to provide this information immediately. The Council does not pay tenants compensation for late qualifying repairs.
- 5.27 As part of the revised system for reporting repairs, the Council introduced morning or afternoon appointments for emergency and urgent repairs in January 2007. Between January and July 2007 it did not monitor or report on its performance in keeping repairs appointments, but now does so and reported that from July until mid-November 2007 it kept 92% of the appointments made.
- 5.28 Pre- and post-inspections are important tools for ensuring that repairs are targeted accurately and carried out to a high standard. The Council does not set a target for the proportion of repairs to be pre-inspected. However, it sets out clear criteria to help staff select which repairs to pre-inspect, and records the number of pre-inspections it completes. The Council sets a target of one day for urgent repairs to be pre-inspected, but a main aim of the 'Repairs Experiment' is to reduce the need for a large number of pre-inspections by gathering more accurate information from tenants when they report a repair.
- 5.29 The Council has clear criteria for those repairs to be post-inspected. It sets a target of 21 days for post-inspecting all repairs. We found that in 2006/07 it met this target for 95.1% of emergency and urgent repairs, the majority of which were well within the target timescale.
- 5.30 The Council provides advice on how to report repairs on its website and in its Repairs Charter. It will formally launch the revised repairs service in April 2008 and will update the information available to tenants on the repairs service. This will include a new Repairs Charter.

- 5.31 In summary, East Ayrshire Council was aware it needed to improve its performance in response repairs, and in January 2007 it introduced a revised system to address service improvement. Early indications show an improvement in performance, and increased tenant satisfaction with the repairs service. There are weaknesses in the way that the Council records, verifies and monitors responsive repairs.

### Value for money in procurement

- 5.32 East Ayrshire Council's budgeted resources within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2006/07 for repairs and maintenance costs were £898 per unit. This is approximately 11% below the national average of £1,013. It also invests significant sums through Capital Funded from Current Revenue (CFCR) and through its Aid and Adaptations budget. The Council confirmed that the actual outturn for 2006/07 was £987 per unit.
- 5.33 The Council spends a lower level on capital investment in its homes compared to other Scottish councils; it is ranked 26 out of 28 Scottish Councils for overall capital investment. The Council attributes this to its successful performance in consistent levels of capital investment over a number of years, resulting in the housing stock generally being of good quality.
- 5.34 The Council uses traditional procurement methods for most of its housing investment work, with approximately 63% of this work being awarded to external contractors following a competitive tendering process. The remainder of this work is carried out by the in-house Building and Works Department (BWD), who also carry out all responsive and cyclical repairs.
- 5.35 The arrangement with BWD is based on a Schedule of Rates (SOR) originally established under Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in 1997. The Council has carried out comparative analysis with other direct labour organisations, and has carried out some comparisons with the private sector through the competitive tendering exercises. It is confident that it has achieved value for money for repairs and maintenance works through the negotiation of a reduction in rates charged to the HRA. The Council recognised that it needed to demonstrate continuous improvement in this area, and at the time of our

- inspection it was completing a cross-cutting review which included reviewing its SOR, and considering the introduction of a partnering agreement with BWD for responsive repairs.
- 5.36 In summary, East Ayrshire Council has maintained consistent investment in its houses over a number of years, resulting in a comparatively low repair and maintenance spend per unit. The Council procures most of its housing investment work through competitive tendering. It is reviewing its current practice to demonstrate continuous improvement in achieving value for money through its relationship with BWD.

## 6. How well is East Ayrshire Council delivering services for homeless people?

In this section we set out our assessment of the Council's performance in delivering services for homeless people.

### Grade

East Ayrshire Council has achieved a **C** grade for services to homeless people. This is a **fair** performance.

- 6.1 Our overall assessment is that East Ayrshire Council's homelessness service has some strengths, but also some areas where improvement is needed which impact directly on the quality of services to homeless people. The Council showed a willingness to tackle the issues we raised during the inspection. Our grading assessment takes into account this willingness to improve, and it also reflects that the Council has a positive approach in giving all homeless applicants a housing option. These are balanced against the weaknesses that we found.
- 6.2 The Council has a good range of information available across its area. It sees people quickly and has a wide range of initiatives to prevent homelessness. It offers a short SST with support to many intentionally homeless applicants, and has converted a number of these to full SSTs. Its temporary accommodation is of a good standard. The Council gives all homeless people a housing option as part of its commitment to meeting the 2012 target.
- 6.3 There are some areas of the service that the Council needs to improve including:
- it does not have a formal protocol to refer people to the local provider of independent advice;
  - it has a high level of repeat homelessness;
  - it does not consistently record evidence to support how it makes decisions;
  - its review process has some weaknesses; and
  - it does not always have sufficient temporary accommodation available to meet demand.

### Access to service

- 6.4 East Ayrshire Council received 1187 applications for assistance from homeless people in 2006/07, a decrease of 5% on the previous year's figure of 1251. In 2006/07, 2.1% of all households in the Council's area made a homelessness application, slightly less than the national figure of 2.5%.
- 6.5 The main access point for homeless applicants in the north of the Council's area is its Housing Options Office which is conveniently located in Kilmarnock town centre. Homeless people in the southern part of the area can access specialist homelessness staff based at Cumnock Area Housing Office. Homeless people can also contact any of the Council's other five housing offices or smaller local neighbourhood services offices to arrange an appointment for a homeless interview. The Council has delivered HomePoint training to all homelessness and tenancy support staff and plans to deliver this in 2008/09 to frontline staff in offices where homeless people may make an enquiry.
- 6.6 The Council's homelessness staff will arrange home visits and conduct interviews outwith the office, including hospital visits, where requested. It also provides housing options advice for prisoners due for release from Kilmarnock prison through its specialist housing options officer.
- 6.7 The Council publicises its homelessness service through its website, leaflets, posters, local newspapers and in the calendar which it distributes annually to all its tenants. We found that publicity for the homelessness service and the emergency out of hours telephone number was displayed in most places where homeless people are likely to see them. The Council now has ways to make sure that it distributes and regularly replenishes its homelessness publicity material.
- 6.8 Our tenant assessors found the Council's homelessness publications helpful, informative and easy to read. Although not all of the publicity material includes information in other languages or formats, the Council plans to include this as it reviews its publications and replenishes supplies.

- 6.9 The Council has recently started to record initial approaches from homeless people seeking assistance, but we saw that it did not always record a homeless or potentially homeless applicant's details in a consistent way. As the Council only records an application for assistance as a formal application at the point of the first interview, it may be under-reporting the number of approaches for assistance from homeless people and the length of time it takes to deal with their application. During our inspection the Council advised us that it had addressed this weakness through the further development of its ICT systems.
- 6.10 The Council accepts homelessness referrals from a range of agencies and partners, however as it does not record or monitor the source of referrals it does not know how effective these arrangements are. During our inspection, the Council confirmed that it had changed its procedures and now routinely gathers this information.
- 6.11 The Council is quick at interviewing people who apply to it for help. It provides roofless applicants with an interview on the day they first present and has a target of three days to interview all other applicants. It has recently started to record initial approaches and between April and August 2007 it took an average of 1.8 days to interview non-roofless applicants.
- 6.12 Homeless people can contact the Council's Helpline Service for emergency assistance on a freephone number when its offices are closed. We reviewed over 100 out of hours cases between April and November 2007 and saw that the Council did not provide accommodation to 34 people who required it. On 10 occasions it had to offer accommodation to people in the television lounges in the hostels which it converted on an emergency basis into bedrooms, until more suitable accommodation was available. The Council had a poor awareness of these cases. This is a significant weakness.
- 6.13 In summary, the Council's homelessness information is helpful and is available in a variety of publications and in a number of locations. The Council sees applicants quickly, and will arrange interviews across the area and outwith offices. It did not provide temporary accommodation to a significant number of

people who contacted the out of hours Helpline Service and did not have a good awareness of its performance in this area.

### Advice and prevention

- 6.14 East Ayrshire Council published its second Homelessness Strategy in 2006 which includes its plans for preventing homelessness for the period 2006-09. The strategy includes a review of the Council's achievements for the prevention of homelessness which include:
- the Housing Options Office in Kilmarnock providing specialist homelessness services and offering general housing information and advice;
  - a housing education scheme for fourth year pupils at all local secondary schools; and
  - a tenancy support team offering support to those who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless.
- 6.15 The Council also published an action plan for housing information and advice for the period 2006/09. It has successfully completed some of the actions contained within the plan, but others are outwith the target timescales and it has yet to do its annual review. The Council advised us that this will be included in the wider review of the Homelessness Strategy 2006-09.
- 6.16 The Council records the broad nature of enquiries its Housing Options office receives and also completes a checklist of advice given at a homeless interview. It does not always record the details of the advice and information it provides to all homeless or potentially homeless applicants and therefore does not know the type and quality of advice it is offering. This is a weakness.
- 6.17 The Council has a range of positive initiatives in place to prevent homelessness, and to prevent homelessness recurring, including:
- the Children's Learning, Health and Supported Play scheme delivered in partnership with Social Services, Education Services and the Health Service to address the needs of children affected by homelessness;
  - a rent deposit guarantee scheme which has assisted 137 people to secure and sustain a tenancy in the private sector;

- the creation of 1000 Council temporary and permanent furnished tenancies for homeless people since the introduction of the Furnished Tenancies\* grant funding;
- the introduction of the Mortgage to Rent\* scheme in 2005 which allows those experiencing mortgage difficulties to seek assistance from the Council and its partners to convert the mortgage to a rented property; and
- an outreach service at Kilmarnock Prison, on behalf of all Ayrshire authorities, to help those threatened with homelessness on release.

6.18 The figures provided by the Council on the level of repeat homelessness show an improved performance from 15% in 2003/04 to 12% in 2006/07, although this is still higher than the reported national figure of 8.6% for 2006/07. The Council confirmed that it plans to commission research into the reasons for repeat homelessness.

6.19 In 2006/07, 71% of households housed by the Council as homeless were still in their tenancy after 12 months. This is an improvement on previous years. The Council attributes this improvement to the increased support provision, and will continue to monitor performance in this area.

6.20 The Council's Tenancy Support Team is a positive initiative which offers support to all homeless applicants. The Council offers intentionally homeless applicants a short SST with housing support from this team. The Council granted 112 new short SSTs with support to homeless persons in 2006/07, successfully converted 45 of these to full SSTs, and continued 37 others.

6.21 We found that the Council does not always follow its own procedures after referral to the homelessness team when it starts court action to end a tenancy. The Council advised that this was due to capacity issues and told us it is considering reviewing the referral criteria.

6.22 The Council has not reached agreement with its partners about how it will respond to the requirements of Section 11 of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, but it had identified this as an action within its current homelessness strategy. Following our inspection it discussed the issue with private landlords and RSLs at a joint planning event.

- 6.23 The Council has a duty to ensure that homeless applicants can access good quality advice and information. It aims to provide basic advice and information directly through its Housing Options office and the Cumnock housing office, but it does not have a formal referral protocol to ensure the provision of independent, enhanced housing advice and information. A local voluntary organisation does deliver a general service on a range of issues to those who approach it. The Council had identified the need to agree a formal referral protocol for these applicants.
- 6.24 In summary, the Council has a wide range of initiatives in place to assist in the prevention of homelessness. The Council offers a short SST with support to those it finds to be intentionally homeless. It does not have a formal referral protocol to ensure the provision of independent advice services and the homelessness service is not consistently responding to tenants when court action is initiated. The Council is aware that its level of repeat homelessness is an area for improvement.

#### Assessment of homeless people

- 6.25 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself whether homeless applicants are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. The table below provides an overview of the Council's assessment decisions for people who apply to it for assistance.

	2004-05		2005-06		2006-07	
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland
All applications assessed in period	1160	56,709	1237	57,831	1187	58,663
% priority unintentional	41.2%	52%	41.3%	53%	45.6%	52%
% priority Intentional	10%	2%	8.5%	2%	7.8%	2%
% non-priority	25.1%	18%	33.6%	17%	25.8%	17%
% not homeless	10.1%	9%	6.5%	9%	6.8%	8%
% lost contact withdrew before assessment	5.2%	12%	4.2%	13%	5.0%	13%
% resolved prior to assessment	8.4%	6%	5.2%	7%	7.4%	7%
Proportion of assessments completed within 28 days	86%	-	84%	-	76%	-

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

- 6.26 The Council assessed 74% of all applicants who approached it for advice and assistance as homeless in 2006/07, down 1% on the previous year. It assessed 45.6% of these applicants as unintentionally homeless and in priority need, up 4% on the previous year, but still significantly below the national figure of 52%. The Council's reported figures also show that it finds a higher proportion of applicants not in priority need, and also a higher proportion in priority need but intentionally homeless, than national figures.
- 6.27 Scottish Ministers have set a target to reduce by 50%, the number of applicants given non priority decisions by 2009, and to abolish priority need by 2012. Since 2006 the Council has had a policy of offering all homeless applicants a housing option. It still assesses an applicant's priority need status, and from April 2008 it will increase the number of priority need categories. The Council decided on the most appropriate categories after it analysed the profile of applicants. It will monitor both of these initiatives in order to ensure that it will meet the 2012 target.
- 6.28 We found weaknesses in the Council's management of decision making related to limited recording of investigations. As a result, it was often difficult to see how the Council had reached its assessment decisions. This is a significant

- weakness. We also found that the Council's homelessness guidance to staff is outdated and incomplete, particularly around intentionality.
- 6.29 The Council told us that it carried out a 10% random sample case audit to monitor the quality and consistency of homelessness assessment decisions, but we found that it had not done so as a consequence of the departure of two key managers. When we highlighted this during our inspection the Council immediately reinstated the audits. It also audited a random sample of homelessness applications and this supported our assessments, and showed that 40% did not contain sufficient detail to explain the Council's decisions.
- 6.30 We found weaknesses in the letters the Council sends to applicants to explain its decisions. These included:
- lack of a clear explanation on how decisions are reached;
  - no advice to applicants of the right to appeal offers of temporary or permanent accommodation; and
  - no clear signposting to independent legal advice.
- In its preparation for this inspection, the Council recognised some of these weaknesses and had reviewed and produced a set of standard letters by the time of our inspection.
- 6.31 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 sets a target of 28 days to reach a decision and it reported that over the last three years there was a 10% decline in performance from 86% in 2004/05 to 76% in 2006/07. During the period April to November 2007, this figure had increased to 80%.
- 6.32 We found that the Council's assessment interviews were comprehensive and that its staff were sensitive to applicants' circumstances. We spoke to service users after their assessment interviews and all were satisfied with the service they had received. However, the Council did not routinely offer applicants the option of interviews by officers of the same sex. When we discussed this with the Council it addressed this issue immediately.

6.33 The Code of Guidance recommends that Councils should maintain regular contact with applicants both before and after a decision has been made. We saw little evidence that the Council had regular and sustained contact with all applicants. The Council is aware that this contact is not always maintained for all applicants.

6.34 The Council has a duty to advise homeless applicants of their statutory right to request a review of the decisions on their applications and should have an appropriate system in place for dealing with requests received. The Council operates a review process and advises applicants in decision letters of their right to request a review of a decision within 21 days. However, we saw a range of weaknesses in the Council's approach to reviews including:

- it did not provide them with further information on how it carries out its review process;
- no record of the enquiries made to support the Council's decisions; and
- review outcome letters that did not include information for applicants on how to appeal further if they were dissatisfied.

The Council had produced a new letter to give applicants more information on the review process, but it had not begun to use it at the time of our inspection. When we highlighted these issues to the Council, it prepared an information sheet on the review process for homeless applicants while we were on site. We also saw little evidence that the Council uses information from reviews to help it identify potential ways to improve the service and the Council has now introduced a procedure to address this.

6.35 In summary, the Council's approach to assessing homeless applicants is poor. It did not follow its own quality control process in managing decision making, and we found weaknesses in the way that it records its investigations. This makes it unclear how the Council reaches its decisions. The Council's review process also has a number of weaknesses.

### Securing accommodation

6.36 The Council provides temporary accommodation for homeless applicants in a range of property including:

- 47 furnished self contained flats,

- ten private sector leased properties;
- two hostels: St. Andrews hostel in Kilmarnock which has twenty rooms; and a seven room hostel unit in Cumnock;
- a bed and breakfast establishment; and
- ten units of supported accommodation for young people which are managed by an RSL partner.

6.37 The table overleaf sets out key figures on the Council’s use of temporary accommodation over the last three years.

	<b>2004-05</b>	<b>2005-06</b>	<b>2006-07</b>
	<b>Council</b>	<b>Council</b>	<b>Council</b>
Number of homeless households provided with temporary hostel accommodation	428	390	754
Percentage accommodated in temporary hostel accommodation	60%	53%	80%
Average length of stay for homeless households in temporary hostel accommodation (days)	21	23	20
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	198	170	11
Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	28%	23%	1%
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days)	6 days	5 days	11 days
No. of families with dependent children accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	0	0	0
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	90	180	173
Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	12%	24%	19%
Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (days)	52 days	75 days	75 days

Source: the Council’s inspection submission

6.38 From 2004/05 to 2006/07 the number of placements in temporary accommodation increased by 31% from 716 (or 60% of all those that presented) to 938 (79% of all those that presented). The number of homeless applicants the Council placed in temporary hostel accommodation in 2006/07 rose to 80% from 53% in the previous year. The Council has been successful in significantly decreasing its use of bed and breakfast accommodation from 28% in 2004/05 to 1% in 2006/07.

- 6.39 The average length of stay for people in the Council's furnished flats has increased from 52 days in 2004/05 to 75 days in 2006/07 and to 90 days from April to November in 2007. The average length of stay in hostels has remained constant for the last three years: 21 days in 2004/05; 23 in 2005/06; and 20 in 2006/07 but has sharply increased to 36 days for the period April to November 2007.
- 6.40 The Council's homelessness strategy includes an action in relation to the provision of temporary housing options. It has not quantified this and has not carried out an analysis of demand. The Council's current supply of temporary accommodation has not always met the level of demand from homeless people; we saw evidence that it did not always have accommodation available for people applying out of hours. When we highlighted this to the Council during the inspection, it took immediate steps to address this weakness by increasing the number of its temporary furnished flats.
- 6.41 We visited a number of furnished flats and hostels used by the Council. All of the furnished units were of a good quality. The Council recognised the issues with its Cumnock hostel and it has already identified its replacement as an action in its homelessness strategy. Most of the service users we spoke to were happy with the standard of their temporary accommodation.
- 6.42 The Council provides good support services to help people during their stay in temporary accommodation, including:
- access to a support worker for everyone placed in temporary accommodation;
  - podiatry and dental services for homeless people in hostels;
  - a public health nurse who visits the hostels;
  - travel passes;
  - healthy eating breakfast packs in the hostels; and
  - useful "Welcome Pack" information brochures for those moving into temporary furnished flats and hostels.
- 6.43 The Council had no breaches of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004. It did use an exemption to provide

- temporary hostel accommodation for 36 days to a family with two children. This case highlighted some weaknesses in the Council's internal communication.
- 6.44 The Council has a partnership arrangement in place with an RSL to temporarily house 10 young homeless people aged between 16 and 25 years old. They are supported to get the necessary skills to sustain a tenancy until they are ready to move to permanent accommodation. This is a useful addition to the resources available to the Council, but we saw some weaknesses in its management of placements that may have limited their effectiveness. The Council responded quickly to this feedback during our inspection and began a review of the arrangements.
- 6.45 East Ayrshire Council operates a quota system for the allocation of its houses. It commissioned research to help it assess the anticipated numbers of homeless people who would require housing by 2012, and has been incrementally increasing the quota. The Council increased its homeless quota from 12% in 2005/06 to 20% in 2006/07, and aimed to achieve 28% between April to October 2007. During this period it let 27% of its empty houses to homeless applicants. It has further increased the homelessness quota to 32% from December 2007. The Council will continue to monitor this target to assess its effectiveness in helping to provide a housing option for all homeless applicants.
- 6.46 In 2006/07, the Council secured permanent accommodation for 77% of the people it assessed as having priority need. This figure excludes lost contact cases, withdrawn applications, and those resolved prior to discharge of duty. This is higher than the national figure of 73%.
- 6.47 In 2006, the Council decided to offer a housing option to everyone it assessed as homeless, as part of its homelessness strategy to assist in meeting the 2012 targets set by Ministers to abolish priority need. All non priority applicants are now included in the allocations homelessness group category, and treated in the same way as priority homeless applicants. In 2006/07 the Council secured settled accommodation in its own housing, RSL housing or the private sector for over 50% of the applicants it assessed as non priority. This is significantly higher than the national figure of 15%. This is a positive approach by the Council that

- places it well to deliver the 2009 and 2012 targets. One consequence of this may have been an increased length of time to house homeless applicants; up from 9 weeks in 2004/05 to 14 weeks in 2006/07. This is lower than the national figure of 18.6 weeks. The Council will continue to monitor the impact of this policy on waiting time and the demand for temporary accommodation.
- 6.48 As part of its policy to offer all applicants a housing option, the Council offers short SSTs with tenancy support to many applicants it assesses as intentionally homeless. This approach has delivered positive outcomes for some homeless people. The Council requires those applicants with former tenant arrears who accept a short SST to agree to a repayment arrangement.
- 6.49 The Code of Guidance recommends that homeless applicants should be treated on the same basis as others on the number of offers they receive and that Councils should avoid allocating houses in hard to let areas to homeless people. The Council makes two offers of permanent accommodation and allows applicants to apply for up to 5 lettings areas, the same as for all other applicants.
- 6.50 The Council operates a nominations process and uses section 5 referrals to secure accommodation for homeless applicants. The number of section 5 referrals that the Council made to RSLs in 2006/07 decreased by 26% to 76 from 102 in the previous year. The number of homeless households housed through section 5 referrals is low with only 26 households housed in 2005/06 decreasing to 25 the following year. The Council nominated 62 homeless applicants to RSLs in 2006/07 and only 4 were successfully housed. The Council has recently reviewed its section 5 protocols with local RSLs, but recognises that it needs to develop its partnership working arrangements to ensure better outcomes.
- 6.51 In 2006/07 the Council lost contact with 23% of its homeless applicants prior to its discharge of duty. This was a significant increase from the 12% figure it recorded in 2005/06. The Council told us that it has successfully reduced lost contacts to 14% for the current year, and it is continuing to analyse lost contact cases to establish the reasons for these. .
- 6.52 In summary, the Council has a fair approach to securing accommodation for homeless people. It has a good standard of furnished temporary flats and a

range of support measures in place for applicants. As part of its preparation for 2012 the Council provides a housing option for all applicants, including those to whom it does not have a duty to do so. However, its supply of temporary accommodation does not always meet demand and it has not fully developed its arrangements with other accommodation providers.

## 7. Is the housing service at East Ayrshire Council managed for improvement?

### Leadership and strategic planning

- 7.1 As identified in Audit Scotland's Best Value and Community Planning Review (2006), the Council's Chief Executive and the corporate management team provide clear direction on strategic and corporate issues. It meets fortnightly, and is supported by an extended management team involving all chief officers. The Council's Community Plan is the overarching planning document in which the Council outlines its Core Values. The Community Plan has six thematic action plans and each of these has a four year lifespan. These are all subject to a mid-term review. The Community Plan is available on the Council's website, together with the Customer Service Commitment statement.
- 7.2 The Local Housing Strategy clearly reflects the Council's core values and the themes within the Community Plan. The Housing Business Plan (2006–2009) supports the delivery of these wider visions and outlines the housing service's contribution to the Council's objectives. The Council developed the business plan after it had carried out a Best Value Service Review and a Stock Options Appraisal. The plan includes detailed information about the service standards that the Council developed in consultation with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. The Council has also included a timetable of surveys, consultations and feedback mechanisms. The housing service has a range of targets for all areas of its activities. We saw that it monitors many of these at regular performance meetings, and reports the outcomes in the annual performance report. It widely distributes this report, and publishes it in the local press and on the Council's web site.
- 7.3 The Council developed its LHS and its homelessness strategy in partnership with a range of internal services and external organisations. All the partners that we spoke to in relation to the LHS were clear about their contribution and about the progress being made. The homelessness strategy is overseen by the East Ayrshire Health and Homeless Implementation Group but we saw that no detailed information is discussed by this group. Instead, progress is reported to and discussed by the housing service's senior management team. Most partners

we spoke to were positive about working with the Council, and confirmed that they were involved through a range of initiatives that contribute to the homelessness strategy. A small number expressed concern about the absence of more regular, formal meetings. The Council will begin the annual review of the homelessness strategy in December 2007 and will hold a number of Homeless Planning Days with all of its partners. These events will review the progress of the 2006-09 Homelessness Strategy and prepare the Strategy for 2009-12.

### Performance management, planning and reporting

- 7.4 The Council has a comprehensive approach to performance management at corporate and strategic levels and it has begun to develop these arrangements further in relation to individual services. The Council introduced a revised committee structure after May 2007 and has a Cabinet/Executive system supported by Scrutiny Groups. The Cabinet implements the policy framework and takes the majority of key strategic and service decisions. A Governance and Scrutiny Committee has overall responsibility for scrutiny and review, and also receives performance review reports from the Council's services.
- 7.5 East Ayrshire Council fully demonstrates its commitment to developing a culture of continuous improvement by:
- development of an improvement plan following the Audit Scotland Best Value and Community Planning Review (2006);
  - carrying out best value service reviews on a three year cycle;
  - full participation in benchmarking networks by providing statistical and qualitative information around performance;
  - conducting and analysing resident surveys in partnership with community planning partners; and
  - developing a variety of existing community consultative structures, including a residents' panel, accessed by all partners.
- 7.6 The Council's housing service provides annual updates of progress on its various strategies. In addition, elected members receive twice-yearly reports on progress of the Housing Business Plan (HBP) 2006/09 including the housing service's statutory performance indicators. These are presented with comparisons against the Scottish figures and some compared against the

Scottish Housing Best Value Network figures. The housing service will also report performance on the allocations quota outcomes to elected members on a quarterly basis throughout 2008/09.

- 7.7 The Council has developed the housing service's performance management system for most areas of operation; it gathers and analyses a range of data; and uses this to set overall targets for the service. We saw that the housing service sets different targets for different geographical areas, taking into account the local circumstances where appropriate. The ICT system the Council uses for housing services is able to produce good quality performance reports. Managers within the housing service meet monthly to review performance, and we saw that individual managers had analysed their performance and were aware of the reasons for results in relation to housing management areas of activity. In discussions with front line staff, we saw that they are aware of the targets that they should meet and that they are highly motivated to achieve these.
- 7.8 Performance management within the Council's homelessness service is less well developed. The Council has recently improved its homelessness ICT system and now has the capacity to produce detailed management reports. It discusses performance at the monthly performance meetings, but homelessness data does not directly relate to the targets set, so it is difficult to assess progress against these. The Council recognised this and will introduce regular monitoring of revised targets from April 2008.

### Customer focus and influence

- 7.9 The Council uses a three-part exit survey to gather the views of people who have used its homelessness service. We saw that these surveys are not always fully complete and the Council has not yet analysed the findings that it does have or used them to identify potential ways to improve services. The Council did not involve service users in developing the service standards for the homelessness service, but it has plans to establish a service user forum to help it to do this type of work.
- 7.10 The Council carries out regular postal surveys of those who have used the housing service, and we saw that it has successfully improved some elements of

service delivery as a result of these. It also carries out a tenant satisfaction survey every three to four years and the most recent was conducted in May 2007.

7.11 We found that the Council's approach to public reporting of housing performance is excellent. The Council has a well-developed public performance reporting framework and the housing service has introduced a range of methods to comply with this. The methods used include:

- the website;
- the local newspapers;
- tenants newsletter;
- annual tenants conference;
- council newsletter; and
- the tenants calendar.

The Council's website won a national award in 2005. It is easy to access and easy to understand, and information on the statutory performance indicators is available, together with all the housing service's plans and strategies. The Council consults annually with tenants on the content of the calendar and it has included a range of information identified by tenants. Tenants and officers that we spoke to confirmed that the calendar is a positive development and has proved to be extremely popular.

7.12 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires East Ayrshire Council to publish a tenant consultation strategy. The Act also requires landlords to inform and consult tenants about changes to its services and take tenants' views into account when making decisions that will affect them. Before the 2001 Act the Council did not have a strategic approach to tenant participation. Following this, it developed a tenant participation strategy and encouraged the establishment of registered tenant organisations (RTOs) in response to the legislation. Tenant participation is now well established, and the Council can demonstrate continuous improvement in tenant participation. The East Ayrshire Tenants and Residents Federation was formed in October 2007.

7.13 The Council has a good approach to consulting tenants on proposed policy and service changes. The Council now has nineteen RTOs and it continues to

promote their development in areas that do not yet have one. Most RTOs are affiliated with the Federation, and these all continue to receive support from an external consultant funded by the Council as well as from the housing service's customer liaison officer. The Council holds an annual tenants' conference and regularly holds one-off consultation events in order to discuss a particular area of service delivery. In addition to the Federation and the RTOs, the Council has a citizens' panel that it consults with on a range of issues. This is a good approach to make sure that it consults with a wide group of tenants.

- 7.14 The Council uses the corporate complaints procedure to deal with complaints about the housing service, and it produces quarterly reports. Senior managers agree improvement activities from these reports at their regular meetings. The Council deals with complaints to local area offices in an informal way, but it has not yet developed a system to monitor these to ensure that they are appropriately handled and to use them to identify potential improvements to the service it delivers.

### Equalities and diversity

- 7.15 The Council demonstrates its commitment to equalities issues by having Equalities as one of its core values. It has a corporate equalities strategy group that sets objectives and monitors how services are complying. The community planning partners have developed an integrated impact assessment tool that is currently being piloted in one service. This will be used by all services following the pilot. The Council has a range of forums that deal with the various equalities issues and the corporate management team receives regular reports on the disability audits that have been undertaken. The housing service has an equalities and diversity group that has developed an action plan that reflects current good practice. The Council has identified the need to develop information on housing demand from the BME community, including using the information it gathers from applicants for housing.
- 7.16 The Council's website has a virtual website assistant called 'Chloe'. This enhances access to online communication in minority languages. The software will read the text aloud in these languages and can translate written text. The Council has a significant Cantonese population of more than 200 in its area and it

advised us that it has been able to help this minority ethnic group access support and assistance through the Chloe initiative.

### Efficiency and value for money

- 7.17 The Council charges its tenants an average rent of £44.84 per week that compares favourably to the national figure of £46.65. Its loan debt per unit is 72% of the national figure. East Ayrshire Council's supervision and management costs for 2006/07 are £582, and are below the national average by 8.4%.
- 7.18 The budgeting process for the Housing Revenue Account follows current best practice, is robust, and we saw that the Council follows an effective methodology. The Audit Scotland Best Value and Community Planning Report (2006) confirmed that the Council has a sound budgetary control system in place, and that budgetary monitoring reports are regularly produced at a corporate and departmental level.
- 7.19 The net cost to the Council's general fund for the homelessness service in 2006/07 was £35,000. The Council significantly reduced its use of bed and breakfast accommodation in that year largely by shifting its provision to hostel accommodation.
- 7.20 The Council's housing service adheres to the corporate procurement strategy, and can also demonstrate some innovative joint procurement with partners in the combined service delivery points in Dalmellington and North-West Kilmarnock. The Council's Building and Works Department conducted benchmarking with other local authorities, and also with the broader industry during competitive tendering exercises. The Council is currently completing a cross-cutting review of its service to improve performance and to help it to demonstrate value for money in its property maintenance services. It has also completed a Repairs Experiment to help improve performance and to help to generate savings. The Council advised us that analysis to date confirms that this experiment has produced savings of £66,000 for the housing service. The most recent tenant satisfaction survey, and the regular sampling of tenants who have received a repair, show that tenants are more satisfied with the service than previously. The

Council has reduced the number of no access repair visits, and also advises that it has improved its performance for first time fixes.

## 8. Next Steps

- 8.1 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, asset management and repairs service or homelessness service to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report.
- 8.2 East Ayrshire Council's improvement plan should show how it intends to respond to our findings in services for homeless people. The plan will be agreed with us. We follow up improvement plans at regular intervals.
- 8.3 If you would like to see the East Ayrshire Council's improvement plan you should contact the Council by:

**Telephone: 01563 576000**

**Email: [chris.mcaleavey@east-ayrshire.gov.uk](mailto:chris.mcaleavey@east-ayrshire.gov.uk)**

**Website: [www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk](http://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk)**

## Sources of evidence

### Groups and third parties consulted

- Tenants' and Residents groups
- The Council's external auditor
- Scottish Government Tenant Rights and Participation Team
- HomePoint
- Scottish Government's Homelessness Team
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Registered Social Landlords
- Neighbouring Local Authorities
- Women's Aid
- Shelter
- Bentinck Centre
- Salvation Army
- Rape Counselling & Resource Centre
- Ayrshire Household Recycling
- East Ayrshire Advocacy Services
- Blue Triangle Housing Association

### Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation
- Shadowing of allocations
- Shadowing of tenancy sign up interview
- Shadowing of an accompanied viewing
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of repairs call handling
- Shadowing of repair pre and post-inspections
- Shadowing of void repairs visits
- Review of short SST's
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of reported repairs
- Review of planned maintenance and improvement projects
- Empty property visits
- Estate visits

### Key documents reviewed

- East Ayrshire Council's Inspection Submission
- Housing management performance reports
- Repairs and maintenance performance reports
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Tenants' newsletters and other publicity material
- Council's website
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Protocols with other agencies
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard Delivery Plan

### Examples of Positive Practice

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

#### **Involving tenants in influencing local service delivery**

The Council jointly undertakes regular Estate Walkabouts with representatives from RTO groups and is an opportunity for tenants to identify estate management issues and influence future estate and budgetary priorities. This approach is supported by the development of estate action plans which formalise these arrangements and allow tenants to analyse and monitor progress at a local level.

#### **Partnership working in dealing with ASB**

The Council, along with key partners such as the police and fire service, have set up an ASB Problem Solving Group. This consists of front line officers meeting every two weeks to share information and agree subsequent action. This group are now responsible for co-ordinating and analysing data to ensure that resources are targeted to those areas experiencing ASB.

#### **Street Sport Express**

This project was developed by the Council's Leisure Development Section and is focused on the delivery of sport to engage young people and divert their involvement in antisocial behaviour within their local communities. The idea behind the project was to take sport to the places where young people tended to congregate. The Community Wardens identified the hotspot areas and encouraged young people to participate. This is now an important tool in tackling and preventing antisocial behaviour.

## 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>Asset Management</b>	Ensuring that current and future assets (houses, land, etc) fully support the organisation's objectives – working towards having the right assets, of the right quality, in the right place at the right time.
<b>Benchmarking</b>	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
<b>Capital Programme</b>	Programme of major repair works funded mostly from borrowing.
<b>CFCR</b>	Capital funded from current revenue
<b>Common Housing Register (CHR)</b>	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
<b>Direct Labour Organisation (DLO)</b>	Internal organisation which carries out work on behalf of housing departments.
<b>Fixed Penalty Notices</b>	These are one off penalties, issued by Community Wardens, in relation to litter and dog fouling.
<b>Furnished Tenancy Grants</b>	Part of the recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force to set up a national framework for furnished tenancies, one element of which is for a furnished tenancy grant scheme for units let to a homeless person.
<b>HomePoint</b>	<p>A Scottish Government team 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 and explanation.</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 that is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
<b>Housing Revenue Account (HRA)</b>	The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services.

<b>ICT system</b>	Information and communication system.
<b>In Court Advisor</b>	The In Court Advisor is employed by the Council to act on behalf of tenants in arrears who have to attend court. They provide independent advice and assistance and liaise with the housing or housing benefit service.
<b>Mortgage to Rent Scheme</b>	Helps people who are in danger of having their homes repossessed to stay in their home as tenants of a social landlord. The property is sold to a landlord and then rented back to the household.
<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>Partnering</b>	In contract management, a structured approach to improving efficiency and quality of work. It aims to reduce confrontation between the Council and its consultants and contractors. Partnering requires formalised objectives, agreed problem solving methods and an active search for continued measurable improvements.
<b>Performance Standards</b>	Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland, jointly agreed by the SFHA, COSLA and Communities Scotland.
<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>Problem Solving Group</b>	A group of operational officers from key services within the Council and outwith, such as the Police. This group are responsible for co-ordinating and analysing data to ensure that resources are targeted to areas experiencing ASB.
<b>Procurement</b>	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
<b>Qualifying Repair</b>	Repairs that qualify for inclusion in the Right to Repair scheme.

<b>Registered social landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
<b>Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO)</b>	A tenant-representative group meeting certain conditions set down in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and registered with a social landlord.
<b>Response repairs</b>	Day to day repairs carried out on a reactive basis, distinguishable from planned, capital or cyclical maintenance.
<b>Right to Buy</b>	The right of many Scottish tenants to buy their property at a discounted price, depending on length of tenancy.
<b>Right to Repair</b>	Statutory scheme which sets out timescales for some repairs, and what can be done by a tenant if a landlord does not do the repair within the timescales.
<b>Schedule of Rates (SOR)</b>	A costed list of all or most of the day-to-day repairs that a client is likely to instruct a contractor to do.
<b>Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)</b>	A minimum quality standard for all of Scotland's social homes. Landlords should achieve the standard by 2015.
<b>Scottish Secure Tenancy (SST)</b>	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
<b>Short Scottish Secure Tenancy (SSST)</b>	Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a short Scottish secure tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST.
<b>Section 5 Referral</b>	Where, under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, a local authority can request a registered social landlord that has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people.
<b>Shadowing</b>	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
<b>SMART criteria</b>	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound.
<b>Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI)</b>	Indicators of local authorities' performance that are published by the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
<b>Stakeholder</b>	Any person or organisation using a landlord's service, affected by the landlord's actions or having an interest in the landlord's activities – an interested party.

<b>Street Sport Express</b>	This project aims to divert young people from anti-social behaviour by taking sport to them at the places they meet.
<b>Tenancy Agreement</b>	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
<b>Tenant Assessor</b>	Trained tenants (not of the landlord being inspected) who are part of the inspection team. They are involved in preparing for inspection, reading landlord materials and on-site visits as well as talking to tenants.
<b>Tenure</b>	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier.
<b>Variations</b>	A term used to refer to the practice of changing a repair works order on site where the contractor feels additional or alternative work to that specified is required.
<b>Void</b>	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

## About the Scottish Housing Regulator

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) is an executive agency of the Scottish Government. We exercise independently the regulatory powers of Scottish Ministers in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. We register and regulate independent social landlords. These are usually housing associations, but they can also be housing co-operatives or companies limited by guarantee. We also inspect the housing and homeless services provided by local authorities.

We operate independently and impartially, while remaining accountable to Scottish Ministers for the standard of our work and for inspecting and reporting within the overall context of Scottish Ministers' strategic objectives for the social housing sector and tackling homelessness. A code of practice sets out what Ministers expect from us in delegating their regulatory powers to us. Our independence is further safeguarded by a Regulation Board that supports the Chief Executive to manage and direct the organisation.

Our purpose is to:

- protect the interests of current and future tenants and other service users;
- ensure the continuing provision of good quality social housing in terms of decent homes, good services, value for money, and financial viability; and
- maintain the confidence of funders.

Our work supports the principles of public service reform by promoting good services that are organised around the needs of the people who use them. We encourage registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities to be open, accountable, efficient and well governed. And we expect them to provide equal opportunity and open access to their services.

**[www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk](http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk)**

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## Availability in other formats

This document can be translated, on request, into your community language. Please phone 0141 271 3810 or email [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk).

يمكن ترجمة هذا المستند، لدى الطلب، إلى مختلف لغات المجتمع. يرجى الاتصال بالهاتف على رقم 0141 271 3810 أو بالبريد الإلكتروني بالعنوان [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk)

এই দলিলটি আপনি চাইলে আপনার কমিউনিটির ভাষায় অনুবাদ করা যেতে পারে। দয়া করে এখানে ফোন করুনঃ 0141 271 3810 অথবা এই ঠিকানায় ই-মেইল করুনঃ [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk)

這份資料可以為你翻譯成中文。請致電 0141 271 3810 或發送電子郵件至：[shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk)，要求獲得中文譯本。

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Możemy zapewnić tłumaczenie niniejszego dokumentu na Państwa język ojczysty, proszę zadzwonić pod 0141 271 3810 lub wysłać e-mail do [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk)