



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

Falkirk Council - Report on Improvement Progress
October 2011

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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*.
- 1.2 We previously inspected Falkirk Council in 2008 and awarded it the following grades for its services:
- Housing Management – C (Fair)
 - Property Maintenance – C (Fair)
 - Homelessness – D (Poor)
- 1.3 Since 2009 the Scottish Housing Regulator, Audit Scotland and the other scrutiny bodies operating in Falkirk Council are taking a joint approach to planning of their activity that is both proportionate and risk based – the Shared Risk Assessment process. The objectives of this approach are to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of scrutiny work and minimise the impact of such activity upon the Council. The Shared Risk Assessment process identified a number of uncertainties and risks and as a result, a number of areas were agreed for scrutiny in the Council's 2010/13 Assurance and Improvement Plan:
- outcomes from the Council's choice based lettings system and in particular, potential impacts upon homeless households; and
 - the Council's stock condition information, asset management strategy and investment necessary to bring its properties up to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, by the Minister's target of 2015.
- 1.4 As this inspection focuses on specific service areas only, we have not awarded grades. Instead, we will continue to work with Audit Scotland and other scrutiny bodies to annually monitor the Council's progress.

How we assessed performance

- 1.5 Our inspectors asked two key questions:
- How good are the services we have inspected?
 - How well are these services being managed for improvement?
- 1.6 In order to answer these questions inspection staff and Tenant Assessors:
- spoke to tenants, service users and Council staff;
 - asked other partner organisations for their views;
 - visited temporary accommodation and Bed and Breakfast establishments;
 - 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.
- 1.7 When we provide a summarised assessment, 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

- 1.8 The inspection team was led by John Jenkins, Inspection Manager and included Marion McLellan and Mark Gibson, Inspectors, Sylvia Ward and Carolyn Anderson, Inspection Officers and included our Tenant Assessor, Gordon Mason. We were on site between Monday 13 June and Friday 17 June 2011.

We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

Responding to this inspection

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

2. Inspection findings

In this section we summarise our inspection findings and set out our assessment of Falkirk Council's progress.

Findings

2.1 We found strengths in the Council's housing and homelessness services:

- its new housing allocations policy provides applicants with a good level of choice;
- its new choice based lettings system is appreciated by applicants;
- it has a good approach to monitoring and reporting its lettings performance;
- it has a clear understanding of the condition of its properties;
- it has robust quality assurance processes for homeless assessments;
- it uses good homeless decision letters and makes decisions quickly;
- it has made improvements in the way it assesses the support needs of homeless people;
- it has significantly improved the level of tenancy sustainment and reduced the level of repeat homelessness;
- it has significantly increased its supply of temporary accommodation;
- it no longer uses shared bedrooms and provides good support for people in temporary accommodation;
- in 2010/11 it allocated 52.5% of its lets to Home Seekers, exceeding its target of 50%; and
- it has significantly improved its performance framework and public performance reporting.

2.2 The Council does however have areas of weakness in the delivery of its services, some of which are significant:

- its process introducing a Local Lettings Initiative (LLI) to allocate its mainstream new build properties;
- it has no process to allow the performance of its property assets to be regularly monitored and reviewed;
- it has yet to develop a comprehensive, 30 year business plan reflecting up to date stock condition information;

- its approach to the introduction of some elements of Housing Options;
- its contact with applicants in temporary accommodation is not good;
- an inconsistency in some homeless assessments;
- some inconsistencies in its approach to meeting its duty to provide information and advice to non-priority applicants;
- it places a significant number of people in B&Bs outwith its area;
- it does not carry out risk assessments before placing people in B&Bs;
- it does not always take account of homeless peoples' needs when providing temporary accommodation;
- it has breached the Unsuitable Accommodation Order on a small number of occasions; and
- the number of homeless people awaiting settled accommodation has more than doubled since our last report.

2.3 Falkirk Council has improved its self awareness and made good progress since our last inspection in 2008. Its progress has been verified by tenant groups and other partners we spoke to. It is clear that the Council has introduced a number of new initiatives and important changes to its processes which have resulted in improved outcomes for its tenants and service users. This has included the introduction of a new housing allocation policy reflecting the statutory reasonable preference categories and a choice based letting process for applicants. Although there have been improvements to its Homeless services, progress has been less comprehensive.

2.4 Following the introduction of measures necessary to address the weaknesses identified in this report, we will closely monitor the Council's progress with our scrutiny partners through the annual shared risk assessment process.

Key recommendations

2.5 Our inspection report covers a wide range of issues. Falkirk Council must respond effectively to them. These are our most important recommendations.

Across all of its landlord and homelessness activities the Council should:

- continue to develop ways of gathering and using service user feedback to improve its services; and
- ensure that it consults with tenants and service users before deciding to introduce significant changes to its services.

In asset management the Council should:

- consult on and establish an asset management strategy and action plan for its houses;
- put in place a process to allow the performance of its property assets to be regularly monitored and reviewed; and
- ensure a 30 year business plan is in place for its properties, reflecting up to date stock condition information.

In delivering services for homeless people the Council should:

- reduce the period that homeless people are awaiting settled accommodation;
- ensure consistency in its homeless assessments;
- carry out a risk assessment before putting people in B&B accommodation;
- not place people in temporary accommodation outwith its area; and
- review its approach to Housing Options.

3. Context

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

3.1 Important facts about Falkirk Council as an organisation and as a landlord:

- the Falkirk Council area covers 112 square miles and at mid-year 2010 had a estimated population of 153,280;
- Labour leads the administration of Falkirk Council as a Labour Party/ Conservative/ Independent coalition;
- the Council is the biggest local provider of social rented housing. It owns and manages approximately 16,000 houses representing 24% of the housing stock in the area, including 975 high rise flats;
- Housing Services is part of the Council's Corporate & Neighbourhood Services and is made up of: Tenancy and Estates Management, Housing Allocations and Homelessness, Housing Maintenance & Improvement, Housing Strategy & Development, Private Sector Housing and Housing Advice & Information;
- housing services are delivered through a network of local Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops which can be found in Falkirk town centre, the Camelon and Dawson areas of Falkirk, Denny, Stenhousemuir, Grangemouth and Bo'ness;
- the Council currently delivers its homelessness service from the Accommodation Resource Centre (ARC), located in Falkirk town centre;
- at the time of our inspection Falkirk Council's housing and homelessness services were undergoing a period of change, including a restructure and review of its service delivery;
- the Council lets its houses through a choice based letting system called "Homespot";
- at 31 January 2011 there were 8,815 applicants on its housing register;
- the Council let a total of 1,243 properties during 2009/10;
- at time of our inspection the Council was introducing a number of new IT systems including an integrated housing management system with an interfaced stock condition database;

- from 1 April 2011, the Council charges its tenants an average rent of £53.43 per week, and is below the average of the 26 Councils in Scotland managing houses; and
- 58% of the Council's tenants were in receipt of housing benefit in 2009/10.

3.2 Important facts about the context in which the Council operates:

- the overall population of the Falkirk area is anticipated to increase steadily over the next ten years. In common with the rest of Scotland, the area is projected to see a significant population growth in those of retirement age and above;
- people aged 16 to 64 account for 65% of the population in Falkirk. This is lower than for Scotland as a whole;
- 27.8% of households in Falkirk are made up of families, compared to the national figure of 26.4%;
- the total number of data zones in Falkirk are 197 with 19% of the population living in the most deprived 15% of areas in Scotland;
- unemployment levels in Falkirk are 6.2%. This is higher than the average of 5.1% in Scotland as a whole;
- 79% of people aged 16 to 64 in Falkirk are economically active. This is higher than the Scottish average of 76.9%;
- the Falkirk economy is significantly more reliant for employment upon its 330 large enterprises compared to Scotland as a whole;
- the chemical and petro-chemical sector, based in Grangemouth has contributed significantly to Falkirk's local economy. Since the opening of the Falkirk Wheel in 2002, tourism has also been an increasing contributor to the local economy; and
- at April 2010 gross weekly earnings in Falkirk were £478 per week. This is 2% lower than those for Scotland as a whole.

4. How well is Falkirk Council delivering housing management?

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

Tenant satisfaction

4.1 Falkirk Council surveyed applicants on its housing register in 2011 to gather feedback on "Homespot", its new choice based lettings system. The results were positive:

- 90% of respondents considered "Homespot" easy to use;
- 81% of respondents understood their applicant group and Band priority; and
- 91% of respondents found it useful to see properties advertised through "Homespot".

4.2 The Council routinely asks new tenants for feedback at their settling in visits. During 2010/11:

- 99% of respondents were satisfied with the offer of housing they received;
- 99% of respondents were satisfied with the advice and information they received during the offer and tenancy sign up process; and
- 92% of respondents were satisfied with the condition of their new property.

Access to housing

4.3 Falkirk Council's housing register is open to anyone aged 16 or over and at 31 January 2011 it held 8,815 applicants. The Council provides information on how to register in posters, leaflets and its website. People can register by post, through the Council's website or at its Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops. It aims to process completed registration forms within three working days and is currently developing its framework to gather and report its performance against this target. The Council provides information in community languages and alternative formats and its website includes a range of accessibility options, including "ReadSpeak" for visually impaired users.

4.4 The Council is planning to introduce a process of routine re-registration on the anniversary of each application. As part of the re-registration applicants will be

- invited to join the Allocations Policy Consultation Panel. This is a positive approach to engaging with applicants on its housing register.
- 4.5 The Council provides applicants with a good level of choice. They can bid for as many properties as they wish, within the Council's ten allocation areas and are advised to place their bids in an order of preference. Bids can be made on the Council's website, in the Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops, by freephone or by completing the form in the "Homespot" Newsletter.
- 4.6 The Council cancels some applications in circumstances which do not comply with good practice. We found it routinely cancels applications where the applicant:
- successfully bids for a Falkirk Council property;
 - is housed by a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) or through a mutual exchange;
 - purchases their existing home under the "Right to Buy"; and
 - becomes a joint owner/ tenant or succeeds to a tenancy.
- When we raised this with the Council, it took immediate steps to amend its procedures.
- 4.7 We reviewed a number of cancelled applications and found weaknesses in the Council's administration. The Council does not always:
- retain relevant information on cancelled applications; and
 - issue applicants with a letter confirming the cancellation of their application, the reasons for this and the action required to have the application reinstated.
- When we raised this with the Council, it took immediate steps to routinely issue a letter to cancelled applicants.
- 4.8 In 2010/11 the Council suspended 868 applicants, representing 8.1% of applicants on its housing register. It monitors and reviews suspended applications weekly.
- 4.9 We reviewed a sample of suspended applications and found that they had been handled and reviewed appropriately in line with policy and procedures. The Council issues a letter confirming the reason for the suspension, provides information on when it will review or lift the suspension and how the applicant can appeal against the suspension.

- 4.10 The Council has been slow to make progress in developing a Common Housing Register (CHR) and it told us this was due to a lack of IT capacity. Homeless applicants are required to register with Link Housing Association's "HomeHunt" scheme, and in addition, the Council will nominate them for vacancies under its Section 5 protocols and nomination agreements with other local RSLs. Some RSLs advertise a selection of their vacant properties in the Council's "Homespot" newsletter. The Council now plans to progress the development of a CHR.
- 4.11 In summary, Falkirk Council has a good approach to access to its housing. It promotes "Homespot", its choice based lettings system, in a range of ways and provides a good range of information to applicants.

Lettings

- 4.12 In our 2008 inspection report we were critical of the allocation policy used by the Council at that time. Falkirk Council introduced its choice based letting system, "Homespot", in January 2010. The Council's present Allocations Policy reflects the statutory reasonable preference categories and aims to maximise the effective use of its housing stock. At the time of our inspection the Council restricted access to its new build mainstream properties to existing Falkirk Council tenants.
- 4.13 The Council allocates applicants to three groups: Home Seekers, Home Movers and Home Starters and awards a Band of One to Four within each group with Band One being the highest priority. The Council sets annual targets for the percentage of lets to each group; Home Seeker 50%, Home Mover 25% and Home Starter 25%. In 2010/11 it broadly met its target with the exception of Home Movers, where it achieved 21% of lets. The Council places homeless households in the Home Seeker group and awards them Band One priority. This is a positive approach to improving outcomes for homeless households.
- 4.14 The Council advertises vacant properties weekly on its website and in the "Homespot" newsletter, which is available in its Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops, Accommodation Resource Centre (ARC) and partners' offices. The adverts clearly state which group of applicant is eligible to bid for each property. It

- also publicises the previous week's successful bids, detailing the number of bids per property, the Band and Band date of the successful applicant.
- 4.15 In order to discharge its duty to homeless people the Council makes offers outwith its choice based letting system to applicants who are not bidding for, or refuse subsequent offers of housing. It regularly monitors bidding activity and if a Home Seeker Band One does not make any bids in a three month period they are interviewed and made two directly matched offers of housing outwith the "Homespot" system . The Council told us that this is a way of increasing the bidding activity of this group. However, since January 2010, only 12 of the 202 Home Seekers made an offer in this way accepted the property offered, 32 accepted their second such offer and 60 applicants refused their second offer and consequently lost their Home Seeker priority. This approach could affect the quality of outcomes for some applicants and is not customer focused.
- 4.16 The Council suspends homeless people in priority need who are assessed as requiring support to acquire the skills for independent living. These applications are reviewed regularly and when applicants are assessed as being able to sustain a tenancy they are reinstated to the register with Band One priority from the date of their original homeless presentation.
- 4.17 In allocating its houses the Council uses an automatic sequencing process which takes account of the applicant group, area, property size, type and the date it became vacant. We saw that the selection and bypassing process was appropriate, transparent and customer focused. The Council completes a random 5% sample check of applications and a 10% check of allocations which is positive.
- 4.18 The Council operates a Local Lettings Initiative (LLI) to allocate its mainstream new build properties. This restricts access to existing Council tenants and although it undertook extensive consultation prior to introducing its new Allocations Policy, it did not consult tenants or stakeholders on this initiative. The Council did not complete an Equality Impact Assessment prior to its introduction nor has it published documents setting out for applicants the specific terms of its LLI. This is a weakness.

- 4.19 In our 2008 inspection report we were critical that the Council did not have in place a framework for monitoring the outcomes of its allocations. The Council now has a good approach to monitoring and reporting on its lettings performance. It carries out monthly checks on its performance against its lettings targets and reports regularly to its senior management team and elected members.
- 4.20 In summary, the Council has an improving approach to letting its houses. Its allocations policy reflects the statutory reasonable preference categories and it lets over half of its properties that become available to Home Seeker applicants. However, it has weaknesses around the processes introducing its Local Lettings Initiative for its new build properties.

5. How well is Falkirk Council delivering asset management?

In this section we set out our assessment the Council's performance in delivering asset management.

Asset management strategy and planning

- 5.1 Falkirk Council recognises the need for a strategic approach to investment in and the development of its assets. It has an established Corporate Asset Management Group with a representative from Housing regularly attending and has a Corporate Asset Management Plan 2007-2010 in place. The Council's Corporate Plan 2008-2011 includes a commitment to improve overall performance by means of a variety of measures, including maintaining and enhancing its asset base by implementing its 2007-2010 Corporate Asset Management Plan. The Group has developed a draft 2010-2013 Corporate Asset Management Strategy, but this has yet to be consulted on or approved. The Council plans to use this new strategy to inform and guide future investment decisions on its key assets, within an overall framework of systematic option appraisals.
- 5.2 The Council has no approved housing asset management plan that outlines its objectives and targets for how it will manage its properties. A draft Housing Asset Management Plan has been prepared for the period 2011-2016 but the Council has yet to consult with tenants and stakeholders or seek elected members' approval. The Council plans to have its Housing Asset Management Plan in place later this year to ensure that future housing investment plans are clearly aligned to the Council's strategic objectives.
- 5.3 Falkirk Council recognises the need for accurate information on housing demand and stock condition to underpin its approach to asset management. The Council has recently carried out a Housing Need and Demand Assessment as part of the preparations for its 2011-16 Local Housing Strategy. It has identified a range of key demographic trends and issues impacting upon the operation of the local housing market. The Council is aware that this work will impact upon its proposed Housing Asset Management Plan.

- 5.4 The Council plans to undertake a comprehensive customer profiling exercise in order to better understand the current and future housing needs of its present tenants.
- 5.5 Following our previous inspection in 2008 the Council arranged an 11% sample stock condition survey. A further comprehensive stock condition survey was commissioned in 2010 and it now has a 100% external and 88% internal survey data on its housing stock. The Council now has a clear understanding of the condition of its properties. It has plans in place to gather outstanding stock condition information in order to further reduce any reliance upon cloned data.
- 5.6 The Council has recently commissioned an IT database for its stock condition information. It plans to introduce this in July 2011. This will provide the Council with the ability to interrogate and analyse its stock condition information and use this to influence future investment in its properties. It plans to update its new stock condition database as capital investment works are undertaken. The Council also has plans to develop and expand the database to include information on adaptations and asbestos and provide an interface with its new integrated housing management system.
- 5.7 While we can see evidence of a number of specific actions introduced in response to identified problems with particular groups of properties, the Council has yet to establish a process to allow the performance of its property assets to be regularly monitored and reviewed. The Council advised us that it has no specific properties or estates that it was currently monitoring, however it is aware of falling demand for its one bedroom and bedsit amenity properties along with a need to re-structure its "Housing with Care", due to changes in customers' expectations.
- 5.8 The Council has yet to develop a comprehensive, up to date, 30 year business plan reflecting its new stock condition information and elemental life cycle costings associated with its properties; however it plans to have this in place later this year.
- 5.9 Falkirk Council has a three year capital investment programme in place. The Council is aware that it could do more to allow tenants to influence this programme and the prioritisation of works. The current capital investment programme has largely been informed by:

- the Council's Local Housing Strategy review undertaken in 2010; and
- the provisional findings of its stock condition surveys in 2008 and 2010.

In addition, the Council has a five year cyclical maintenance programme in place.

- 5.10 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015. Falkirk Council has made progress in bringing its properties up to the SHQS. In its July 2011 SHQS return to the Regulator, the Council reported that 52% of its stock met the standard at 31 March that year. It did not however provide us with the associated annual projections of the number of its properties expected to comply with the SHQS, the investment necessary and associated funding sources. The Council advised us that this was due to the recent introduction of its new IT systems. It is aware of this area for improvement and the Council plans to submit the outstanding information in October 2011.
- 5.11 Falkirk Council plans to prioritise its proposed £105m investment over the next four years in order to address the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015. Its new IT database will allow it to identify the main areas where its houses currently fail to meet the SHQS standard and develop an outline programme of planned works. The Council has identified potential sources of finance to fund its planned investment programme and is confident that it will achieve the standard within the stipulated deadline.
- 5.12 The Council now has reliable data regarding the works and associated investment needed to bring its housing stock up to the SHQS. It has however still to establish the necessary improvements and costs to upgrade the thermal performance of 2,000 to 4,000 of its non-traditional constructed house types, in order to bring them up to the SHQS.
- 5.13 Falkirk Council is aware that it may face a number of local challenges to achieving SHQS compliance across all of its properties. A number of its flats are located in tenemental buildings where it is a minority landlord. The Council is aware that in these circumstances its ability to improve standards may be limited.

- 5.14 The Council uses its Schedule of Rates agreed with its in-house contractor, Building Maintenance Division, to price the improvement works necessary to its houses. The Council regularly benchmarks its costs and performance through the Association for Public Excellence and the Scottish Housing Best Value Network.
- 5.15 In summary, Falkirk Council has an improving approach to asset management. It now has good information on the condition of and the demand for its houses and is in the process of developing a more strategic approach to managing its assets. It has yet to establish a process to allow it to determine the future sustainability of its stock, but it has recently put in place a number of potentially valuable new IT systems and tools to assist it. The Council is aware that it faces a number of potential challenges to achieve the SHQS by 2015.

6. How well is Falkirk 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.

Service user satisfaction

- 6.1 The Council gathers feedback from service users on the quality of its homelessness service. In 2010/11:
- 97% of respondents were satisfied with the reception service;
 - 95% of respondents were satisfied with the assessment service; and
 - 80% of respondents were satisfied with the temporary accommodation service.

Access to service

- 6.2 Falkirk Council received 2,323 applications for assistance from homeless people in 2010/11. This is a slight decrease from the previous year and a 15% drop from 2008/09, when the annual level of homeless presentations peaked at 2,736.
- 6.3 The main access point for homeless applicants is the Council's Accommodation Resource Centre (ARC) which is conveniently located in Falkirk town centre. The ARC office is accessible, with no barriers to disabled people. The Council operates an emergency out of hours service and provides 24 hour freephone contact through its telephone call centre. Homeless people can contact the ARC by telephone or in person.
- 6.4 In our 2008 inspection report, we were critical of the Council's appointments system. Applicants had to wait for long periods of time for their appointment and around one third were losing touch with the service during this delay. Following our inspection, the Council introduced a duty system, whereby homeless applicants are seen straight away. This has improved the service and is valued by service users that we spoke to.
- 6.5 In our 2008 inspection report, we were critical of the Council's approach to publicising its homelessness service. The Council now sends a useful range of material publicising the homeless service to a variety of partner organisations. It conducts periodic audits to ensure this information is displayed. This is an

- improvement since our last inspection. The Council has plans in place to further expand the ways in which it publicises its service. It is developing some of these methods in partnership with neighbouring local authorities. This is a good approach.
- 6.6 Since March 2011, Falkirk Council has adopted a housing options approach. When applicants contact the Council for assistance they are provided with housing options advice in the first instance. This explores ways in which the Council can help prevent the individual from becoming homeless and discusses alternative accommodation arrangements. Initial approaches therefore do not automatically result in formal homeless applications. Shortly before our inspection, the Council began to record housing options cases within its Integrated Housing Management IT system.
- 6.7 Whilst it is too early to measure the full impact of this initiative, we did find some weaknesses in the Council's approach to housing options:
- it does not always record sufficient information on housing options cases. This means that it cannot always demonstrate why it has not taken a homeless application;
 - we saw some cases where the Council advised a homeless applicant of the likelihood a non-priority or not homeless decision without adequately investigating the applicant's circumstances;
 - there is not yet in place any routine audit of housing options cases to ensure that applicants are able to access the homeless service and are being given a consistent service;
 - there is insufficient guidance for staff conducting housing options interviews; and
 - the Council did not conduct an equality impact assessment prior to introducing its housing options approach.
- 6.8 The Council has plans to:
- issue more guidance for staff conducting housing options interviews;
 - quality assure its housing options cases;
 - analyse the overall impact of its housing options initiative; and

- measure the satisfaction of applicants who receive a housing options interview.
- 6.9 The Council told us that it intends to carry out housing options interviews at its Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops. However, at the time of our inspection, it did not have a timescale for this development.
- 6.10 We saw a number of cases where applicants were encouraged to make a mainstream housing application instead of a homeless application, as it was thought that this would be in the best interest of the applicants, as they would be housed more quickly.
- 6.11 In our last inspection, we were critical of the time the Council took to interview people and the high number of applicants that it lost contact with. Its change to a duty system addressed these issues. However, as the Council does not always undertake a homeless assessment when it is reasonable to do so, it is potentially under-reporting the number of people it loses contact with. Such cases are considered housing options cases and as yet the Council does not routinely monitor the outcomes of all housing options interviews. Also, the Council is recording the start of the homeless application from the date of the homeless assessment interview, rather than from the date of the applicant's initial housing options interview. In some cases this may have been several days earlier. This means that in these cases it is under-reporting how long it takes to make an assessment decision.
- 6.12 We reviewed a number of cases where applicants approached the Council for assistance outside of normal office hours. We found that the Council dealt with these cases and recorded information appropriately. This is an improvement from our previous inspection.
- 6.13 The Council collects good information about how people access the homeless service and reviews this periodically. However, it has not as yet, used this information to improve its services.

6.14 In summary, the Council has made significant improvements to the way in which people access its homeless service, particularly around its move to a duty system. There are some areas for improvement in the housing options service; however, this initiative has only recently been introduced and the Council has plans to address these issues.

Advice and prevention

6.15 The Council has a duty to ensure that homeless people can access good quality, free advice and information about homelessness and its prevention. It provides a range of information and advice through housing options interviews and gives applicants a personal housing plan. The plan sets out the actions required by both the applicant and the Council and helps the applicant make informed choices. The Council records the information and advice it has provided on a database and it gives service users a written record of what has been discussed. This is positive. However, the Council does not contact service users to ensure that the information and advice provided has helped resolve their housing situation or prevented them becoming homeless. This means it does not know how effective its service is. The Council told us it plans to contact applicants after two months to see if they have resolved their housing issues and whether any further assistance is required. The Council also plans to audit the quality of the information and advice provided.

6.16 We found that the Council has an inconsistent approach to meeting its duty to provide information and advice to non-priority applicants and intentionally homeless applicants to help them secure accommodation as it relies on applicants to contact them to request further assistance. The Council has a specific support package “Gaining a Home” to assist non-priority and intentionally homeless applicants who require enhanced support and assistance.

6.17 The Council has a range of initiatives to help prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness. These include:

- a welfare benefits officer and income maximisation officer based at the ARC;
- a Homeless Outreach Worker;
- a rent deposit scheme;
- a mortgage to rent scheme;

- family mediation;
- housing advice and information for prisoners in Polmont Young Offenders' Institution;
- floating tenancy support;
- a furniture scheme;
- an education resource pack for secondary schools which is delivered jointly by teachers and young peer educators; and
- a befriending scheme for isolated or vulnerable homeless people.

6.18 In our 2008 inspection report, we were critical of the Council's approach to identifying vulnerable people to specialist services. The Council now uses a matrix to assess the support needs of vulnerable applicants. It refers applicants whom it considers vulnerable to the Housing Support Group. The group assesses each referral to determine what the appropriate housing support should be. Officers prepare support plans with the homeless person and then provide them with a copy. The Council regularly reviews progress to ensure that appropriate support is provided and uses the support matrix to chart progress. This is a good approach. From shadowing visits we found the Council's staff to be knowledgeable and supportive.

6.19 The Council has significantly improved the level of tenancy sustainment since our 2008 inspection report. Its performance in 2010/11 for homeless people is 91.5%, similar to that for all its other new tenants and significantly higher than the national figure of 82.3%. The Council regularly monitors and reports tenancy sustainment in its monthly housing performance report. It has recently begun to gather information on tenancies terminated within 12 months and will analyse the feedback to see if there are any gaps in the services it provide for its tenants. The level of repeat homeless applications has also improved. In 2009/10, the Council reassessed 1.9% of applications as homeless within 12 months. This is significantly lower than the national figure of 6.1%.

6.20 Since April 2009 landlords and creditors have informed the Council when they plan to take re-possession of a house or carry out an eviction action. In response to section 11 notifications, the Council sends out information to those who are at risk of losing their home by recorded delivery and follows up with a second letter to

- those who don't respond. The Council records and monitors cases on a database. It plans to implement a new IT system and record the outcomes of all cases. This will allow it to more easily identify vulnerable individuals or households, help prioritise cases and provide reports which can inform strategic planning decisions about the service.
- 6.21 We saw that there was limited contact between the Council's Homelessness Section and the Rent Arrears Control team until shortly before an eviction was about to take place. The Homelessness Section does not take any action until 10 days before an eviction is due to take place. This does not give it time to respond effectively. We saw a case where a person presented to the Council as homeless four days after it had evicted them. The Council plans to address this as part of the implementation of the rents module in its Integrated Housing Management IT system.
- 6.22 In summary, Falkirk Council has a good approach to advice and prevention. It has made improvements in the way it assesses the support needs of homeless people and makes and manages referrals to other agencies. It has a low level of repeat homelessness and is good at sustaining tenancies. However, it has an inconsistent approach to meeting its duty to provide information and advice to non-priority applicants.

Assessment of homeless people

- 6.23 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.

	2008/09		2009/10		2010/11
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council
All applications assessed in period	2,764	58,068	2,422	56,879	2,381
priority unintentional	60%	57.2%	59.9%	61.9%	58%
priority intentional	3.2%	2.7%	3.6%	2.5%	5.3%
non-priority	11%	12%	8.1%	11%	12%
not homeless	6.2%	6.6%	9.2%	5.9%	6.9%
applicant resolved homelessness prior to assessment	3.5%	4.5%	4.5%	4.7%	5.3%
lost contact before assessment decision	4.3%	11.4%	3.3%	7.4%	3.6%
withdrew application before assessment decision	11.1%	5.2%	10.9%	6.1%	8.2%
ineligible for assistance	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%	0.7%

Source: Scottish Government Housing Bulletins and the Council's self assessment

- 6.24 The percentage of applicants that the Council found to be intentionally homeless, non-priority, or not homeless were all higher than the national average last year. However, the Council's pattern of assessment decisions has changed significantly since it changed to a housing options approach in March 2011. Our analysis of recent assessment decisions shows that non-priority decisions have fallen from 12% to 7.5% and not homeless decisions have fallen from 6.9% to 0.5%.
- 6.25 Scottish Ministers set a target to reduce the number of applicants who receive non-priority decisions by 50% by 2009, and to abolish priority need by 2012. The Council did meet its target to halve the number of homeless people it deemed to be non-priority by 2009. However, the percentage of homeless people it found to be in priority need fell during 2010/11, from 90% to 83%. The Council told us that it expects this figure to increase as a result of it re-focusing initial interviews on exploring housing options.
- 6.26 The Council's improvement plan introduced following our previous inspection states that all applicants in temporary accommodation will be visited and others will be called every fortnight. We found that this does not always happen and most

- contact recorded on case files is letters from the Council requesting information from applicants. This is a weakness.
- 6.27 We shadowed six initial housing options interviews. Of these, four progressed to homeless assessment interviews. We saw staff being sensitive and helpful to applicants. All the service users that we spoke to shared this view. We also saw that the Council has good interview facilities; however, contrary to good practice, it does not routinely offer interviews with a member of the same sex.
- 6.28 We reviewed around 30 homeless assessments and found some inconsistencies in the Council's approach. We found:
- some intentionally homeless cases where the Council did not consider all the relevant information or conduct sufficient inquiries;
 - some inconsistencies in how the Council's support matrix is being completed;
 - some cases where the assessment to determine priority need was overly strict;
 - some cases where the Council was seeking to verify an applicant's local connection through their relatives, even when the applicant qualified through long-term residence in the area; and
 - the Council requests references from landlords in cases of domestic abuse, where there is no need to make such inquiries.
- 6.29 At our last inspection, the Council did not have a quality assurance process for its assessment decisions. The system that it now has in place is a good approach and will help to improve the consistency and quality of the Council's future decision making.
- 6.30 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 length of time the Council takes to make a decision has improved since the last inspection and is now better than the national figure.
- 6.31 The Council's decision letters contain all the relevant information recommended in the Code of Guidance and are easy for homeless people to understand.
- 6.32 The Council's approach to appeals is good and in the cases we reviewed, it responded quickly to applicants.

6.33 In summary, the Council has made many improvements to the way in which it assesses homeless people. It has introduced a robust quality assurance process, uses good decision letters and makes decisions quickly. However, there are still some areas for improvement in the Council's decision-making and it needs to improve the way in which it keeps in contact with applicants.

Securing accommodation

6.34 Falkirk Council uses a range of temporary accommodation consisting of:

- 258 furnished Council properties;
- 12 RSL furnished properties;
- private sector self catering accommodation;
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO);
- supported accommodation; and
- bed and breakfast (B&B) establishments.

6.35 Since our previous inspection the Council has more than doubled its supply of temporary accommodation from 128 units in 2007 to 270 properties in 2011. The Council carried out an analysis of supply and demand in 2010 which showed that there was likely to be a shortage of temporary accommodation properties after 2012. It is developing a Private Sector Leasing Scheme with an initial target of 100 properties by March 2012 to help address this. We found that there is currently a shortage of accommodation for people with chaotic lifestyles.

6.36 The table below sets out key figures on the Council's use of temporary accommodation.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
	Council	Council	Council
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	728	336	367
Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	60%	28%	32%
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days)	50	45	34
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	397	722	624
Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	32%	61%	55%
Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (days)	175	132	137

Source: the Council's self assessment

- 6.37 The Council has worked well to increase the provision of temporary accommodation as alternatives to bed and breakfast (B&B) establishments. It has significantly reduced its use of B&Bs from 60% in 2008/09 to 32% in 2010/11. However, the percentage of homeless households placed in B&Bs showed an increase between 2009/10 and 2010/11. The Council told us this was due in part to the impact of the severe weather and the closure of a local facility which provided 23 places for single men. The length of time spent in B&Bs has also reduced from 50 days to 34 days in the same period; however some people spend considerably longer. We found that the Council is over-reporting its use of B&Bs as it also includes some furnished accommodation in its figures.
- 6.38 The Council is using B&Bs which are used by other Councils and are outwith its area. The B&Bs it uses which are outwith its area are included in its framework contract and are located in Stirling. The number of people placed outwith its area reduced from 263 in 2009/10 to 215 in 2010/11. However, this is almost double the number it placed outwith its area in 2006/07. This remains a weakness. The Council is not carrying out risk assessments before placing people in these establishments. This is an area for improvement.
- 6.39 The Council has a target of carrying out inspections of B&Bs quarterly. This is a good approach; however we found that it did not always achieve this. We visited some B&Bs and found the standard was mixed and service users views varied depending on the establishment they were in. We also found that not all B&Bs met

- the Code of Guidance recommendation that people should have access to cooking facilities. Since our previous inspection the Council has stopped its practice of using shared rooms in B&Bs.
- 6.40 At one of its B&Bs the Council carries out a weekly surgery to provide assistance and support. This is a positive approach. The Council intends to roll this approach out to other B&Bs. A support provider also carries out a surgery at one B&B establishment.
- 6.41 We visited the Council's temporary furnished flats and found them to be of good quality and service users we spoke to confirmed this. The Council carries out three initial settling in visits to people in furnished accommodation and then agrees the frequency of future visits with the household depending on their needs.
- 6.42 The accommodation used by the Council has either HMO licenses or a hotel license. We found some weaknesses in the way the Council records and monitors these licences, gas certificates and visits to its temporary accommodation.
- 6.43 The Council changed its approach to the way it managed its empty temporary accommodation as it recognised its performance was poor. This has resulted in an improved performance but it is still not meeting its target of having temporary accommodation available for let within seven days of the tenancy being terminated.
- 6.44 The Council recently decided that it would not provide breakfast in HMO properties. It did not consult service users before it made this decision; it did not give adequate notification of the change and did not advise service users of the reduction in their charges. This breaches its tenancy agreement and is not a customer focused approach.
- 6.45 The Council has a matrix for identifying support needs. It provides floating support to people in temporary accommodation and also provides supported accommodation. In 2010/11, 12% of people placed in temporary accommodation were in supported accommodation. The supported accommodation we visited was of a good standard and service users were positive about the approach of staff.

- 6.46 The Code of Guidance recommends councils consider proximity to family and friends and accessibility of healthcare, employment, education, training and support when placing people in temporary accommodation. We found that the Council is not always able to do this. The Council does not monitor refusals to temporary accommodation. It plans to use a module on its new Integrated Housing Management IT system to manage and record the provision of temporary accommodation. This will enable the Council to allocate temporary accommodation based on needs and preferences, formally record offers, reasons for refusal and produce monitoring reports.
- 6.47 We found that the Council does not always record discussions about temporary accommodation at housing options interviews and we saw some cases where it wrongly recorded the requirement for temporary accommodation. From its records it is also not always clear why a homeless applicant does not require temporary accommodation.
- 6.48 The Homeless Persons Unsuitable Accommodation Order prohibits councils from using unsuitable accommodation for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days, unless exceptional circumstances apply. At the time of our previous inspection the Council had not breached the Unsuitable Accommodation Order. However, in each of the previous two years, namely 2009/10 and 2010/11, there have been two breaches of the order. This is a weakness.
- 6.49 The Council has a duty to provide temporary accommodation for people it assesses as not having a priority need, or being intentionally homeless, for a period that gives them a reasonable opportunity to find accommodation for themselves. We saw examples of decision letters including a termination date for temporary accommodation. We also found that people were not always able to bid immediately after they received their homeless decision as there were delays in the Council activating their housing application.
- 6.50 In summary, Falkirk Council has significantly increased the supply of temporary accommodation for homeless people, thereby reducing its use of B&Bs. It no longer uses shared bedrooms and it provides good support for people in temporary accommodation. However, it has not responded effectively to other areas for

- improvement highlighted in our previous inspection report. It places a significant number of people outwith its area, does not carry out risk assessments before placing people in B&Bs and does not always take account of peoples' needs when providing temporary accommodation. It has also breached the Unsuitable Accommodation Order.
- 6.51 In 2009/10 the Council secured permanent accommodation for 50% of the people it had a duty to assist. This is lower than the national figure of 60%. Its performance in 2010/11 improved to 59%. The Council introduced its choice based letting system "Homespot", in January 2010 and we found that homeless people have equal choice of accommodation with the exception of the Council's mainstream new build properties. Notwithstanding this, in 2010/11 the Council allocated 52.5% of its lets to Home Seekers, exceeding its target of 50%.
- 6.52 In our 2008 inspection report, we were critical of the length of time homeless people were waiting for housing. The Council now monitors the number of homeless applicants awaiting permanent accommodation and the time involved. Since our previous inspection the number of people waiting for permanent accommodation has more than doubled. At the end of 2010/11 the Council had a backlog of 1034 people who were waiting for the Council to secure them permanent accommodation and 351 people had been waiting for more than a year. The Council is aware of this deterioration in its performance and plans to consult with applicants and tenants on further changes to its allocation policy in an effort to help address this weakness.
- 6.53 We saw some cases where the Council told applicants that it would have discharged its duty if the homeless applicant refused supported accommodation. Under these circumstances the Council continues to have a duty to provide secure accommodation. When we brought this to the Council's attention it told us it would change its approach.
- 6.54 At the time of our previous inspection the Council was not using Section 5 referrals. It subsequently reviewed its Section 5 protocols and nomination agreements in 2009. Over the last three years the Council has successfully referred 22, 26 and 25 households respectively to local Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). It also

- successfully nominated 51 homeless applicants to local RSLs in 2010/11. It is working in partnership with local RSLs to increase the use of Choice Based Lettings for homeless applicants.
- 6.55 Councils can now discharge their duty to homeless applicants through the private sector. The Council plans in future to maximise the availability of settled accommodation by using private sector leasing.
- 6.56 In 2009/10 the Council closed 10% of all its cases as “not known”, significantly higher than the national figure of 5.9%. The Council is aware of this and plans to improve its monitoring through the introduction of its new IT systems.
- 6.57 In summary, the Council performance in securing permanent accommodation for homeless people is improving. It is aware that homeless people are still waiting too long for housing and is proposing to review some aspects of its allocations policy to address this weakness. The Council is working with RSLs and plans to use private sector leasing to maximise the availability of other landlords' accommodation for homeless people.

7. Is the housing service at Falkirk Council managed for improvement?

Performance management, planning and reporting

- 7.1 Performance Management is well developed and embedded throughout the Council with SMART targets which link the Corporate Plan, Services Plans and Personal Objectives for staff. Targets are set for teams and individual team members to deliver corporate and service specific objectives and performance is reviewed annually. We saw evidence of how the Council has used the outcomes to develop and improve services. This is a good approach.
- 7.2 The Council uses its ICT system to ensure that performance management is consistently implemented across all service areas. Monthly reports, including a performance commentary, are generated for discussion at Departmental Management Team, Senior Management Team and staff team meetings.
- 7.3 In response to our inspection in 2008 the Council produced an Improvement Plan to ensure that weaknesses identified were addressed. The Council regularly reports progress against the Improvement Plan to its Housing & Social Services Committee. We found good progress has been made against the Improvement Plan and elected members receive sufficient information to assess performance.
- 7.4 The Council monitors and reports on its performance quarterly to the Best Value Forum and uses a range of methods to report its performance to its residents. These include quarterly articles in the "Falkirk News", in its tenant newsletter "In the neighbourhood", on plasma screens in its neighbourhood offices and through the "Performance Zone" on its web site. This is a good approach to performance reporting.
- 7.5 The Council, along with seven other local authorities, is piloting the use of a Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT), a national standard for local authorities to measure and benchmark customer satisfaction. It is using CSMT in five service areas and has plans to extend its use. We saw how the results of these surveys are being recorded and monitored. This is a good approach.

- 7.6 The Council has a comprehensive suite of policies and procedures which staff can access through “Underground”, the Council’s Intranet site. This system is easy to use and allows staff to access the most up to date documents.
- 7.7 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are set annually by senior members of staff and operational targets are discussed with a wider staff grouping. The Council is aware that its target setting process is under developed and it advised us that it is considering involving service users and its Tenant Forum in future target setting.
- 7.8 The Council is a committed member of SHBVN and benchmarks its performance in delivering its housing and homelessness services against both national indicators and the top quartile peer performers. It also benchmarks its repairs service and costs with the Association of Public Service Excellence.
- 7.9 Although the Council benchmarks and widely reports its performance, the presentation of this information could be improved to allow service users and elected members to fully assess performance. The Council is aware that this is an area for improvement.
- 7.10 In summary, Falkirk Council has a good and improving approach to performance management and reporting.

Customer focus and influence

- 7.11 Falkirk Council has customer care and service standards for its Neighbourhood Offices and One Stop Shops and these are available on its website. The standards outline the quality of service the Council aims to provide when in contact with customers through correspondence, by telephone or during home and office visits. While the Council routinely reports its annual performance through its Customer First initiative, the standards adopted are not fully aligned with those published. The Council plans to address this when it reviews its Tenant Participation Strategy in 2012.
- 7.12 The Council is aware that it can do more to involve tenants and service users in the development and setting of customer care and service standards and their subsequent performance monitoring. The Council plans to do this through

- involving its Tenant Forum and Tenant Involvement Group in the proposed reviews of its Repairs Service and Estate Management Policy, both of which will include setting associated service standards.
- 7.13 Falkirk Council has an informative and interactive corporate website which prominently features its Housing and Homelessness services. People can apply for housing and report repairs directly through the website. The Council provides its tenants with a comprehensive and informative newsletter “In the neighbourhood”, twice a year. In response to feedback from its tenants the newsletter now provides a calendar of upcoming opportunities for tenant participation and involvement. In addition the Council also issues a corporate newsletter “Falkirk News” to all households in the area which frequently contains articles relating to its Housing and Homelessness services.
- 7.14 Falkirk Council has a community engagement strategy available on its website. ‘Have your say’ was created in consultation with tenants and other customers of the Council. The plan sets out a number of commitments and proposed actions that the Council will introduce over the period 2011 to 2014, in an effort to further involve local communities in its work.
- 7.15 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires the Council to publish a tenant participation strategy. Its current strategy covers the period 2009-2012 and was developed in consultation with its Tenant Involvement Group (TIG), representatives from its Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs) and with feedback from individual tenants from its consultation register. The strategy is supported by a detailed action plan. The Council’s action plan progress was reviewed in 2010 by its TIG and RTOs.
- 7.16 The Act requires social landlords to consult tenants before increasing rents. In our 2008 inspection report, we were critical of the Council’s approach to rent consultation with its tenants. This has improved. Falkirk Council held a workshop at its annual Tenant Conference in June 2010 in order to gather tenants’ views on the information to be provided and methods of consultation to be used. The Council discussed its proposed approach with its RTO Forum in October 2010. It included an article providing the requested information and postal questionnaire in

- its Winter 2011/12 edition of its tenant newsletter “In the neighbourhood”, seeking tenants’ views on its proposed 3.6% increase for 2011/12. Tenants could also provide feedback through the Council’s website. Around 350 responses were received, with some two thirds indicating their support for the affordability and value for money provided by the proposed rent increase. The results of the consultation were presented to the Council’s Policy and Resources Committee meeting on 2 February 2011, before it introduced the rent increase as proposed. Details of the rent consultation feedback, the Council’s decision and the impact upon the Council’s budget and investment proposals were subsequently provided to the RTOs.
- 7.17 In addition, the Council also used the 2011/12 rent consultation exercise to gather general service user feedback. As a result, it has introduced a number of measures to improve future tenant engagement and involvement. This is positive.
- 7.18 The Act also requires landlords to involve tenants in policy reviews, to inform and consult tenants about changes to its services and take tenants’ views into account when making decisions that will affect them. While the Council generally involves and consults its tenants, we found no evidence of tenant consultation around the Council’s recent changes to its Responsive Repairs categories and associated targets or introduction of local lettings initiatives for its new build developments. This is an area for improvement.
- 7.19 At the time of our inspection the Council had twenty Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs) and it makes resources available to these groups to help support their work. It also has an RTO Forum Group which meets regularly and a Register of Interested Tenants, where individuals can express an interest in being consulted on particular topics. The Council holds an annual tenants event, which in recent years, has been jointly hosted with other adjoining local authorities and Registered Social Landlords active in the area. Feedback from participants at these events has been positive.
- 7.20 In our 2008 inspection report, the Council’s RTOs were critical of the Council’s support for tenant participation and its capacity to gather service users’ views and act upon them. RTOs that our Tenant Assessor met and those that provided us

- with written feedback, all acknowledged the progress made by the Council in recent years.
- 7.21 Falkirk Council routinely gathers feedback from its tenants through a range of regular satisfaction surveys; these include response repairs and new house lettings. However the Council recognises that there is room for improvement in its approach to measuring tenant satisfaction in some service areas. It is participating in the Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool (CSMT) pathfinder in an effort to improve the effectiveness of its service user satisfaction measurement. It has recently introduced CSMT surveys for its One Stop Shop/ Neighbourhood Offices, Homelessness Assessments and Homeless Temporary Accommodation and its plan to expand this initiative to other service areas.
- 7.22 The Council has made a number of improvements to its services in response to feedback. However it also acknowledges that it needs to develop its approach and do more to widen the opportunities for gathering and using service users' views to improve services. It has plans in place to:
- improve the consistency of measuring satisfaction across its services;
 - improve its monitoring and identification of trends in service user feedback;
 - use its new integrated housing management system to develop a comprehensive customer database in order to deliver more personalised housing services;
 - involve tenants in the design of its proposed new build developments; and
 - make more effective use of complaints from its service users in order to identify areas for improvement.
- 7.23 The Council has carried out a number of "mystery shopping" exercises using its tenants to look at specific areas of service delivery. This has resulted in a number of actions to improve the services involved. It now has a team of trained service users who it plans to carry out service area inspections in future.
- 7.24 In summary, Falkirk Council has an improving approach to tenant participation but recognises that it could do more to gather feedback from and become more responsive to the needs of its service users.

Sources of evidence

Groups and third parties consulted

- Survey of Registered Tenant Organisations and other tenant groups
- Local Registered Social Landlords
- Other local partner organisations

Interviews / meetings

- Head of Facilities Management
- Head of Business Service
- Facilities Manager (Maintenance)
- Divisional Manager
- Senior Neighbourhood Manager
- Service Managers
- Service Development Officer
- Interviews with various staff from Housing and Homelessness services
- Interviews with RTOs

Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of bed and breakfast and furnished accommodation
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of support visits
- Shadow Housing Support Review Group
- Shadow Homelessness Budget Monitoring
- Review of performance reports and improvement plans
- Review of tenant information leaflets
- Shadowing of allocations
- Shadowing of tenancy sign up interview
- Shadowing of an accompanied viewing
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of information for applicants and tenants

Key documents reviewed

- Falkirk Council's self assessment
- Housing management and homeless service performance reports
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Tenants' newsletters and other publicity material
- Homeless leaflets and publicity
- Website and intranet
- Outcome reports for housing management and homeless
- Protocols with other agencies
- 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:

In its 2008 inspection report the Regulator was highly critical of the allocation policy used by the Council at that time. Significant weaknesses were identified in that its allocation policy did not ensure that available houses were allocated to applicants in the most housing need and its use of waiting time prioritised people with little or no housing need. In order to involve service users in the development of a new allocations policy for the Council, it was important that the participants involved were fully aware of legislative requirements and good practice. A series of workshops were held where service users were introduced to the policy and legislative framework relating to housing allocations and shown examples of best practice followed by other landlords. These workshops included group discussions, quizzes, case studies and a game where groups of participants were asked to allocate the same properties to the same housing list of applicants using different sets of allocation rules. This allowed the groups to determine which approach they considered most effective in meeting the objectives of the allocation policy. The winning group allocating the most houses, to those applicants in most housing need, making the best use of the houses available, in the shortest time.

Glossary

Asset management	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.
Benchmarking	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
Capital Programme	Programme of major repair works funded mostly from borrowing.
CFCR	Capital funded from current revenue
Choice-based letting (CBL)	A lettings scheme that allows people to apply for advertised vacant houses. The successful applicant is the person with the highest priority for the property they have bid for.
Common housing register (CHR)	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
Cyclical maintenance	Planned programme of work to deal with predictable deterioration of building components, for example regular maintenance of window frames.
Housing list	A list of applicants for housing that is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
Housing Options	The housing options approach re-focuses existing services and resources to prioritise the prevention of homelessness and explore alternatives to social housing.
Focus group	A group of people brought together for a structured discussion on a specific subject(s).
Housing Revenue Account (HRA)	The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services.
ICT system	Information and communication system.
Intranet	A restricted web-based network of information within an organisation.
Partnering	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.
Performance Standards	The nationally-agreed standards RSLs and local authorities are expected to meet in providing housing services and in managing their organisations.
Planned maintenance	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
Procurement	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
Registered social landlord (RSL)	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO)	A tenant-representative group meeting certain conditions set down in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and registered with a social landlord.
Right to Buy	The right of many Scottish tenants to buy their property at a discounted price, depending on length of tenancy.
Right to Repair	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.
Schedule of Rates (SOR)	A costed list of all or most of the day-to-day repairs that a client is likely to instruct a contractor to do.
Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)	A minimum quality standard for all of Scotland's social homes. Landlords should achieve the standard by 2015.
Scottish secure tenancy (SST)	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
Section 5 referral	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.
Self assessment	Documents the landlord submits at the start of the inspection to provide information on its performance, context and structure.
Shadowing	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
SMART criteria	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound.

Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI)	Indicators of local authorities' performance that are published by the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
Stakeholder	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.
Tenancy agreement	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
Tenant assessor	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.
Turnover (empty houses)	The number of houses that are vacated in a year, expressed as a percentage of the landlords lettable housing stock.
Void	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.

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**The Scottish
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