



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

Aberdeen City Council Report on Improvement Progress  
April 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 inspected Aberdeen City Council in 2005 and awarded the Council a C grade or Fair for both Housing Management and Property Maintenance and a D grade or Poor for Homelessness services. Subsequently we engaged with the Council regularly to monitor its progress against its improvement plans.
- 1.3 Since Autumn 2009 Audit Scotland and the other scrutiny bodies operating in Aberdeen City Council have been taking a joint approach to planning scrutiny activity that is proportionate and based on risk – shared risk assessment. The objectives of this approach are to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of scrutiny work and minimise the impact of scrutiny activity on the Council. The Assurance and Improvement Plan for Aberdeen City Council published on Audit Scotland’s website sets out the planned scrutiny activity for the Council for 2010/11.
- 1.4 The Assurance and Improvement Plan for Aberdeen City included a review of improvement progress by the Scottish Housing Regulator. We have focused our review activities on those areas of risk we agreed during the shared risk assessment process:
- homelessness;
  - asset management and its progress towards achieving the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015; and
  - gas safety and asbestos management.

- 1.5 As this inspection focused on specific areas only, we have not awarded inspection grades. Instead, we will continue to work with Audit Scotland and other scrutiny bodies to monitor the Council's progress on an annual basis.

### The inspection team

- 1.6 The inspection team was led by Kirsty Anderson (Inspection Manager) and included Marie Savage, Georgina Kent and Donna Matthewson (Inspectors), Sylvia Ward (Inspection Officer) and Stephen Black and Bill Chapman (Tenant Assessors). Our Tenant Assessors also carried out a desktop review of some of the Council's publications. We were on site between 8 November 2010 and 19 November 2010. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

### Responding to this inspection

- 1.7 We expect all inspected bodies to 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 overall assessment of Aberdeen City Council's improvement progress.

### Findings

2.1 We found some strengths in the Council's housing service:

- it has a good awareness of housing need and demand issues within Aberdeen;
- it has a good understanding of the condition of its stock and is moving towards 100% stock condition data;
- information on how to access the homelessness service is widely available and it has good arrangements in place for translators and interpreters;
- it has good tenancy sustainment levels for previously homeless people;
- it has reduced the level of repeat homelessness;
- it gives customer focused interviews;
- it is increasing its supply of temporary accommodation;
- it is increasing the proportion of lets to homeless people; and
- it has undertaken extensive service user and stakeholder consultation on its five year Business Plan.

2.2 The Council still has many areas of weakness in the delivery of its services, some of which are significant:

- its asset management strategy requires further development;
- it has risks in the planning and delivery of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS);
- it is underspending its capital investment budget and its performance monitoring is limited;
- it has been slow to deal with statutory duties in the management of gas safety;
- it does not have formal protocols to allow it to measure outcomes and improve its services and its referral system is underdeveloped;
- it loses contact with a high number of homeless people;
- it has some weaknesses in its homelessness assessment process;
- it relies heavily on bed and breakfast accommodation;

- it is failing to meet its statutory duties by not always providing temporary accommodation when homeless people need it; and
  - it consistently breaches The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004.
- 2.3 The Council has completed a restructure of its Directorates and has appointed a new senior management team for its housing service. In the past year the Council also appointed a manager to the new Homelessness Manager post and relocated the service to improve access. It is currently recruiting a new Prevention Team to assist it to achieve its strategic objectives for the homelessness service. Staff and elected members responded positively to our feedback on the findings of this inspection which gives us confidence that it will continue to deliver improvements. We will monitor improvement progress with our scrutiny partners through the annual shared risk assessment process.
- 2.4 The Council introduced a refreshed planning framework in 2009 and recently completed wide consultation for its priority based budgeting approach to preparing its new five year Business Plan. The Council has made good progress in developing its approach to performance management although there are gaps in its committee performance reports. The Council gathers service user feedback but it does not use this to improve or develop the services. The Council began to record, monitor and report on equalities information in its homelessness assessments in 2009 but its approach to mainstreaming equalities throughout the service is underdeveloped.
- 2.5 The Council is investing in a new HRA business plan model that will allow it to carry out scenario planning and manage risk more effectively. Its expenditure on bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation has increased significantly in the last three years. However, it has begun to take action to reduce its B&B expenditure and plans to reduce this further by limiting the time people spend in B&B and increasing its supply of other temporary accommodation.

## Key recommendations

2.6 Our inspection report covers a range of issues. Aberdeen City Council must respond effectively to them. These are our most important recommendations.

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

- increase its use of service user feedback to improve service delivery, particularly within its homelessness service;
- publicise its translation service on its website in community languages; and
- expand its scenario planning for its business plan for the housing service.

In asset management the Council should:

- complete the development of its asset management strategy and action plan;
- monitor and manage the risks associated with the delivery of SHQS and report on this to Committee;
- improve its monitoring of performance of the investment programme; and
- continue to improve its management of gas safety.

In delivering services for homeless people the Council should:

- improve its performance in maintaining contact with people who apply to it for assistance;
- take all of an applicant's circumstances into account before reaching a decision on intentionality;
- reduce its reliance and expenditure on bed and breakfast accommodation;
- ensure it always meets its statutory duty to provide accommodation;
- ensure it meets the requirements of The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004; and
- continue to improve access to permanent accommodation.

### 3. Facts about Aberdeen City Council and its context

In this section we set out some important facts about Aberdeen City Council and about the context in which it operates.

#### 3.1 Important facts about Aberdeen as an organisation and as a landlord:

- the Council currently has a SNP / Lib Dem coalition administration;
- the Council recently underwent a significant structure change and asset management and the homelessness service are now part of the new Housing and Environment Directorate;
- it delivers its homelessness service from a centralised office in Aberdeen City and housing services from three area housing offices;
- at the time of this inspection the Council owned and managed 22,809 houses, around 21% of the houses in its area;
- around 75% of its properties are flats;
- the Council charges its tenants an average rent of £55.50 per week, the sixth highest of the 26 councils in Scotland with houses;
- it increased its rents by 3.8% in 2009/10, having increased them by 4.2% the previous year and 6.4% in 2007/08;
- it has the eighteenth lowest maintenance and management costs per house at £1,751 per unit; and
- in 2007 it successfully applied for Pressured Area Status for 35 of its 61 letting areas.

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

- in common with the rest of Scotland, population growth is predicted to be most significant in those of retirement age and above;
- the gas and oil industries have contributed considerably to Aberdeen's local economy over the past thirty years, and 79% of residents are employed within the service industries;
- unemployment in the Aberdeen City Council area is 2.4%; significantly lower than the Scottish average of 4.9%;
- the gross average weekly earnings for residents in the Aberdeen City Council area is £500 which is above the Scottish average of £486;

- house prices and private sector rents within Aberdeen City are 15.4% higher than the Scottish average; and
- in 2009/10 49% of the Council's tenants were in receipt of housing benefit.

## 4. How well is Aberdeen City Council managing its assets?

In this section we set out our assessment of the Council's improvement progress in how it manages its housing assets.

### Tenant satisfaction

- 4.1 The Council annually undertakes a good range of customer satisfaction surveys for all tenants who participate in a number of capital improvement works. It is however less clear how the Council publishes the outcomes and results and how it uses them to inform future service improvements.
- 4.2 Tenants that we contacted during the inspection expressed some mixed views. Tenants we spoke to told us that there was a lack of communication during the works process and we found that satisfaction rates were better at the end of the works rather than during them.

### Asset management strategy and planning

- 4.3 The Council has not yet developed a documented asset management strategy that outlines its objectives and targets for how it will manage its property assets. It has however developed a comprehensive asset management service delivery plan which provides an effective framework for strategic planning and determining future capital investment requirements. This plan includes the development of an asset management model, which once fully implemented by the Council, will provide a useful tool to determine future sustainability, regeneration and investment priorities.
- 4.4 The Council outlines its existing housing investment and development needs and priorities across a number of supporting strategies which include the Standard Delivery Plan (SDP), Local Housing Strategy (LHS) and Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP). Its strategic aims are set out in the Single Outcome Agreement and these include increasing the supply of affordable houses and achieving the delivery of SHQS by 2015.
- 4.5 The Council has a good awareness of housing need and demand and sustainability issues within Aberdeen. In 2008 it undertook a housing need and

- demand assessment, which the Scottish Government assessed as being both robust and credible. The Council plans to use this with its analysis of its waiting list to determine future sustainability and inform new build opportunities. The Council has also recently undertaken a review of its housing for older people and is converting all one bed cottage type properties to amenity housing for tenants over the age of 55. However it has not yet assessed how this change to practice will impact on housing need and demand for other applicants, including the need for accommodation for homeless applicants.
- 4.6 The Council has a positive approach to dealing with requests for equipment and adaptations. It operates on a needs led basis and it does not operate a waiting list for access to this service. It has recently developed a performance management and monitoring framework and is adapting its ICT systems to allow it to match applicants to adapted properties. It is too early to assess the impact of these developments.
- 4.7 The Council has a good understanding of the condition of its houses. The Council recognised that there were inaccuracies and gaps in the standard method of 10% sample and cloned data and is moving towards having 100% stock condition data by 2012. The Council's database contains data on all SHQS elements from the ongoing stock condition surveys and capital programme updates. The Council currently holds 54% stock condition information. This has reduced its reliance on cloned data and allows it to produce more effective reports on stock characteristics and to develop capital investment programmes to achieve the SHQS. This is an area of strength for the Council.

- 4.8 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015. The Council's HRA Business Plan includes funding for agreed SHQS and other capital investment. However it does not routinely review this and we were unable to fully analyse its financial plans and assumptions in relation to achieving SHQS. The table below summarises the Council's progress towards meeting SHQS.

	Actual	Estimated Projection							
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total stock	23,654	23,107	23,002	22,832	22,547	22,414	22,281	22,148	22,015
No. of dwellings meeting SHQS	6,151	7,857	9,038	11,028	13,303	15,914	18,048	20,155	22,015
% stock meeting SHQS	26%	34%	39.3%	48.3%	59%	71%	81%	91%	100%
No. dwellings planned to bring up to SHQS	2,737	1,523	683	1,990	2,275	2,611	2,134	2,107	1,860
Actual No. dwellings brought up to SHQS	1,006	2,055	1,380	1,990	2,275	2,611	2,134	2,107	1,860

Source: The Council's Inspection Submission

- 4.9 The Council has achieved 48.3% SHQS compliance in 2010, slightly higher than its own target of 48% by the end of 2010. The Council was able to achieve this due to its work to improve the stock condition information it holds and improved analysis and monitoring of this information.
- 4.10 We identified several risks and challenges to the Council achieving the SHQS by 2015:
- its financial capacity to deliver is challenging given the changes to right to buy assumptions and a lack of business plan re-profiling to determine funding requirements for SHQS and the investment programme;

- lack of investment programme planning, setting of delivery targets and delays to delivering its investment programme is resulting in it significantly under-performing;
- a high proportion of its stock is non traditional and may require additional, unexpected SHQS works;
- it has only recently begun to work with owners around the completion of communal improvements where it needs their co-operation in mixed tenure properties; and
- its SHQS performance reporting to Committee is underdeveloped although the Council has plans to improve this.

4.11 The Council reviews the SDP and supporting financial plans annually. It plans to use a new business plan tool to more easily review and revise its assumptions and financial plans; run scenario plans; and demonstrate financial capacity to deliver SHQS compliance by 2015. This however remains a key area of risk for the Council.

4.12 In summary, the Council is developing its strategic approach to managing its assets. It has good information on housing needs and demand and has developed an asset management model to help determine the future sustainability of its stock. The Council has a robust stock condition database and it is using this to determine its investment programme towards achieving SHQS. It is moving towards 100% stock condition information and will use this to further develop its investment programme. However the Council faces several challenges and risks to the achievement of SHQS by 2015.

## New Homes

4.13 The Council's Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) identifies its need to significantly increase the supply of affordable housing in Aberdeen. The Council has been involved in a range of new build initiatives aimed at increasing the supply of affordable homes which includes collaboration with housing partners in Aberdeen and the Scottish Government. The Council has not yet appointed a preferred developer or developed joint procurement arrangements to help deliver a more streamlined and efficient approach.

- 4.14 The Council's plans for building new homes are well developed and are based on a robust assessment of need and demand. This is an area of strength for the Council, allowing it to successfully bid for three phases of its programme to incentivise new council house building. However the rental charges for the new build are significantly higher than its other houses and the Council has not fully assessed the impact this might have on its HRA Business Plan. The Council's own new build programme aims to deliver 124 general and 27 "varying need" homes during 2010/11. This is in conjunction with the Council supporting new affordable housing provision by its partner RSLs and private developers.
- 4.15 The Council has set out standards for its new build housing and these require its housing to meet Housing for varying needs standards and its own sustainable building standards. Community consultation has been an integral element of its new build programme and the Council incorporated all feedback into the design delivery for phase one of its development programme.
- 4.16 In summary, Aberdeen City Council is aware that it faces significant challenges in meeting the need for new affordable housing and is responding well by working with key partners to increase the supply of housing. It has begun its own new build programme to meet identified needs in Aberdeen.

### Investment & home safety

- 4.17 Aberdeen City Council spent 50.4 million on capital programme investment works in 2009/10 and 48.4 million in 2008/09. It increased its average capital expenditure per house in 2009/10 to £2,203, which is well above the national figure of £1,550.
- 4.18 The Council has a fair approach to delivering its investment programme. It monitors its capital programme spend performance and has under-spent in each of the last three years. Whilst the Council has plans to accelerate other programmes, such as heating programmes in sheltered properties, it is also considering other spend opportunities including land acquisition and converting capital spend to revenue and this represents a risk to the Council. The Council's

- capital spend for this financial year is not on target. Nor has it developed delivery targets for investment work in terms of volume and quality. This is a weakness.
- 4.19 The Council still has an underdeveloped approach to involving tenants in decisions about future investment priorities and programmes and does not link this with its rent setting consultation. We saw limited evidence of how it has begun to use customers' views to make improvements to the investment programme. The Council does now provide a good range of publicity information to tenants who have investment works undertaken in their homes. Prior to the start of a project the Council carries out extensive consultation, this includes open days, roadshows and individual visits to tenants in their homes. Through these consultation opportunities it shows tenants samples of the fittings and gives a good level of choice of design in the kitchen and bathroom programmes. The Council also asks tenants if they need an occupational therapy visit to assess any special needs.
- 4.20 The Council is developing its approach to working with owners to deliver its investment programme. It sets out its approach to working with owners in its draft Asset Management Delivery Plan including engaging with owners and advising on potential financial implications and payment options. The Council is also continuing to develop a forward planning approach to delivery by undertaking ongoing survey work and updating its asset management system. It then shares this improved information with owners in mixed tenure properties to allow them to plan for the cost of future investment works.

- 4.21 By law, Aberdeen City Council must make safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues that it provides for its tenants and we assessed the Council's approach to this statutory duty as a significant weakness in our last inspection.

	August 2010	
	No of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances	17115	-
Houses with current gas safety certificates	16150	94%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	14690	85%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	752	4%
Houses where safety check was carried out between one and three months after the due date	358	2%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date	350	2%

Source: Council's inspection submission

- 4.22 The Council is still not fully meeting its statutory responsibility on gas safety for a substantial number of its houses. This is a weakness with 94% of houses having a current certificate in August 2010 and only 85% houses with a gas safety check carried out within 12 months of the previous check. The Council lacks comprehensive internal procedures and early involvement of housing staff to deal with gas maintenance issues. There is also a lack of client control in undertaking post inspections and independent quality checks. The Council's external contractor keeps the gas database and this is a risk the Council will need to manage.
- 4.23 The Council has recently taken steps to improve its management of gas safety. This includes the introduction of a ten month servicing cycle and a procedure which includes, as a last resort, forced access. It recently established a centralised team to closely monitor the contractor's performance and has introduced fortnightly meetings to discuss a range of operational issues. Although it is too early to assess the full impact of these changes and the new access procedure, the Council's performance had improved to 97% by October 2010.

- 4.24 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 by May 2004. In our last inspection we found that the Council was not meeting its statutory obligations on the management of asbestos.
- 4.25 The Council has recently reviewed and updated its Asbestos Management Plan. It also recently introduced a dedicated specialist team to identify and manage at risk properties. It carries out internal asbestos surveys and has an ongoing programme of surveys to ensure that it achieves 100% internal survey information for all its houses by March 2012. It has fully surveyed its common areas and has a re-inspection programme in place. All repairs and maintenance staff in Building Services and asset management staff in Housing receive asbestos awareness training. The Council has developed a draft information leaflet for tenants and it plans to issue this to new tenants and tenants involved in improvement works.
- 4.26 There are a number of areas where the Council can improve its approach to managing the risks from asbestos. It has been slow to develop an asbestos database and it is unclear how its current system is linked to its repairs and investment databases and how contractors and tradesperson and tenants are made aware of the presence of asbestos. The Council is currently developing a web based asbestos management module to address this area of risk. Its performance management reporting framework is underdeveloped and this is an area which the Council committed to improve during our inspection.
- 4.27 In summary, the Council has a fair approach to managing investment and home safety in its houses. It is fair at managing the capital investment budget but could improve its monitoring and reporting on investment targets. It provides tenants with a good range of information but does not consult them on future investment priorities. The Council has an improving approach to meeting its statutory responsibility on gas safety. It meets its statutory duties in relation to asbestos management and has plans to improve its use of asbestos information.

## Value for money in procurement

- 4.28 The Council has a corporate procurement strategy and uses traditional and modern procurement practices. It has used a four year partnering framework contract for the procurement of its kitchen and bathroom modernisation programme. The tender was evaluated on a price and quality basis and is subject to a transparent appraisal process. These contracts include a set of objectives and performance measures and the Council has carried out some benchmarking on its kitchen and bathroom works. The Council has not developed this to demonstrate that it has achieved value for money in its framework agreement.
- 4.29 The Council has procured its new build programme under a Design and Build contract using a quality and price assessment and has procured each phase separately to ensure that value for money is achieved across the three sites.
- 4.30 In summary, the Council's approach to procurement and how it achieves value for money is fair and improving. It has recently introduced competitive tendering for longer term and framework contracts for the majority of its investment programme although its approach does not fully demonstrate that it is achieving value for money.

## 5. How well is Aberdeen City Council delivering services for homeless people?

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

### Access to service

- 5.1 Aberdeen City Council received 2,507 applications for assistance from homeless people during 2009/10, down 10% on the previous year. This equates to 2.58% of all households in Aberdeen City, and this is in line with the national figure of 2.57% of households making homelessness applications. However, in 2010, between April to October, the number of applications rose to 2,116. The Council is not able to fully explain the increase of 451 from the same period in the previous year. The higher level of presentations increased the pressures on the Council to meet its statutory duty.
- 5.2 The Council has improved access to the service by relocating it within St Nicholas House which is in a convenient, accessible location in the centre of Aberdeen. It relocated the service in 2010, on a temporary basis, to offer better access for people with a disability and improved waiting room and interview facilities. Homelessness staff in this office provide a full customer focused service across assessment, temporary accommodation, support, advice and prevention. The Council is developing plans for a custom built one stop shop facility in the city centre, to further improve the service it offers to homeless people.
- 5.3 Homeless applicants may present at St. Nicholas House or any of the other three customer service access points. However, if an applicant presents at the peripheral access points, staff at these offices do not conduct homelessness interviews or take the initial approach form. They arrange for an interview appointment for the applicant with a homelessness officer at the central service. We saw that the Council sees people quickly at the central reception desk. However, there is no privacy in this area and we saw that most callers have to discuss their business in public. The Council's homelessness officers always conduct interviews with homeless people in private rooms but applicants we spoke to found these uncomfortable. The Council carried out an Internal Audit in

- September 2009 and is aware that it needs to make improvements to interview rooms by removing screens and making them more spacious. Homelessness officers will arrange home visits and also provide a weekly surgery in HMP Aberdeen.
- 5.4 The Council does not interview roofless applicants on the day they attend. The Council does not differentiate between roofless applicants and those who are not when arranging interviews, and arranges interviews according to the application date. It has no plans to change this appointment arrangement to a more responsive system.
- 5.5 The Council is improving on the length of time it takes to interview people who apply for assistance. Over the last three years, it has significantly reduced waiting time for an interview from 22.6 days to 3.5 days. The Council has introduced targets to interview all applicants within three days. The Council tries to offer temporary accommodation to those who require it until it can interview the applicant.
- 5.6 The Council does now monitor initial approaches and records all approaches relating to homelessness as formal homelessness applications. In 2008/09, the Council lost contact with 19% of applicants between initial approach and interview but it has significantly reduced this to 4.3%. The Council tries to contact those applicants who do not attend their interview and if it cannot make contact it keeps the application open for 28 days.
- 5.7 The Council has improved its arrangements for publicising access arrangements for its homelessness service through its website, leaflets and posters. We found that it makes the leaflets and posters available in a range of locations where homeless people are likely to find them.
- 5.8 Our tenant assessors reviewed the Council's leaflets and found them helpful, informative and easy to read. However, they found the website was not user friendly. The Council publicises the provision of information in seven community languages in its Emergency Help leaflets and a range of other publications. It can also provide information in other formats. The Council has good

- arrangements in place for the provision of translators and interpreters, however it does not publicise this well.
- 5.9 The Council provides a 24 hour emergency contact service using a local call rate. The Council provides access to the homelessness service outside of normal office hours through its Regional Communication Centre. Staff record information and pass details to stand-by homelessness staff, at a city centre hostel, who contact the homeless person directly. However, the Council is only able to analyse outcomes for the service users that hostel staff have been able to make contact with and is unable to report on the outcomes for people it loses contact with between the Centre and contact from the standby staff.
- 5.10 The Council has protocols in place for Prisons, Women's Aid, the Cyrenians and discharge protocols with the hospital but does not have discharge protocols with the armed forces or young people leaving care. The Council currently records the source of referrals for all homeless applicants on its homelessness enquiry form but has not begun to analyse the information. The lack of analysis means that the Council is unable to fully assess the effectiveness of access arrangements. However, the Council is establishing a: multi-agency referral protocol; standard referral form with partners and providers; generic protocol agreement and support assessment form with key providers, agencies and stakeholders in the city.
- 5.11 In summary, the Council's approach to access in its homeless service is improving. The Council does not interview on demand and its interview rooms require improvement, but it has improved the time it takes to interview and the number of applicants it loses contact with. Its information on how to access the homelessness service is widely available and in places where people in housing crisis are likely to find it. It has good arrangements in place for translators and interpreters although this is not well publicised.

### Advice and prevention

- 5.12 In 2009 the Council published its Homelessness and Resettlement Strategy for 2009/13 which included its action plan for preventing and alleviating homelessness. The Council identified in the strategy that it would refocus

resources on prevention and tenancy sustainment and achieve this through closer partnership working with other services and agencies. Since the publication of the strategy and the policy statement, the Council has made significant changes to the service including the appointment of a Homelessness Manager. The Council is currently carrying out a major restructuring of the homelessness service to ensure it can meet the requirements of its prevention agenda and the 2012 ministerial target.

- 5.13 In June 2010 the Council approved the development of new services to deliver on actions identified in the Homelessness and Resettlement Strategy including:
- the establishment of a Prevention Team;
  - the creation of an in house private sector leasing scheme of 300 units by 2014;
  - a Prevention Fund for private rented sector deposits;
  - the re-procurement and procurement of existing and new advocacy services;
  - additional support opportunities;
  - improving access to employability and social networks; and
  - corporate pilot initiatives to prevent homelessness.

It is positive that the Council has shown a high level of commitment to delivering its prevention objectives however it was too early during the inspection to assess any outcomes from the various new initiatives.

- 5.14 The Council has a duty to ensure that homeless people can access good quality, free advice and information about homelessness and its prevention. The Council currently funds an Advice and Information Worker's post in the Aberdeen Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) which is accredited to provide information and advice to the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Type III and a drop in service operated by the Aberdeen Cyrenians accredited to provide a Type I and II level service. The Council plans to discuss formal contractual arrangements with both organisations for the period up to March 2012. The Council has recently commissioned two further advice and information services for people who are either threatened with eviction or who have problems relating to substance misuse.

- 5.15 The Council is currently developing formal referral arrangements with external support agencies to improve its recording and monitoring of outcomes. It has plans to recruit additional staff for the prevention team who will also assist it with monitoring.
- 5.16 The Council refers those who receive a non priority or intentionally homeless decision to its Advice and Resettlement service to provide them with information on their housing options and on benefit entitlements. The Council recently carried out a monitoring exercise of its Advice and Resettlement Service and found that 35% of those with appointments did not attend as scheduled. The Council has begun to improve monitoring of the quality and type of advice it delivers and plans to fully review its provision of advice and information when its new prevention team is in place in April 2011.
- 5.17 The Council currently has a range of initiatives in place to prevent homelessness:
- it funds the Cyrenians to carry out homelessness preventative work in local schools;
  - a weekly advice surgery in HMP Aberdeen;
  - the New Tenancy Support Project provided support to 340 households in the first four to six weeks of people moving into a tenancy;
  - it commissions support from specialist agencies such as Penumbra and Turning Point as required for people with SSSTs;
  - the Young Single Person's Housing Project provides support and accommodation for 16 and 17 year old single homeless people;
  - it has links with supported accommodation projects including Aberdeen Foyer, and the Key Project managed by Castlehill Housing Association;
  - jointly commissions with NHS Grampian the Integrated Drug Service – Community Rehabilitation Service; and
  - it provides furniture, household starter packs and food parcels.
- 5.18 In 2009/10, 96.2% of the households the Council housed as homeless were still in their tenancy after 12 months. This is slightly higher than last year and is 20% higher than that for all tenants. The Council attributes the high level of tenancy sustainment for previously homeless people to the support services it delivers.

- 5.19 The Council has reduced the level of repeat homeless presentations since our last inspection in 2005 when this was 19%. In 2009/10 repeat homelessness was 3.8% which is in line with the national figure of 3.7%. The Council carried out an analysis of the reasons behind 30 repeat homelessness cases between January and June 2010 and found that 73% of these had previously been recorded as lost contacts. The Council told us that its reduction in the length of time people need to wait for an assessment interview has had a positive effect on the level of repeat presentations.
- 5.20 We saw that there was limited contact between the Council's homelessness and arrears teams until shortly before an eviction is about to take place. The arrears team sends fortnightly lists of those who are due to be evicted to the homelessness team who attempt to make contact by text, phone or letter to establish if they have received independent advice. The homelessness team reported positive outcomes for 32.4% of the 472 households facing eviction in 2009/10. The Council told us that as part of its prevention strategy it will put new arrangements in place to improve how it manages the eviction process including earlier contact between internal services.
- 5.21 The Council has a process in place to meet its obligations under Section 11 of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. The Council told us that the response to its letters has been minimal but it plans to improve its approach when the prevention team is in place.
- 5.22 In summary, the Council has a number of initiatives in place to prevent homelessness. It is committed to developing a new approach in the prevention of homelessness and is currently restructuring its services to deliver this. The Council has good tenancy sustainment levels for previously homeless people and its level of repeat presentations has improved. The Council recognises that it needs to develop its referral system and put in place formal protocols.

### Assessment of homeless people

- 5.23 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.

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10	
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland
All applications assessed in period	2,213	56,462	2,962	58,427	2,369	56,879
% priority unintentional	36.6%	55.5%	52.3%	57.3%	56.9%	61.9%
% priority intentional	5.0%	2.6%	4.8%	2.6%	4.6%	2.5%
% non-priority	21.2%	14.9%	8.7%	12%	11.5%	11.0%
% not homeless	3.1%	7%	1.7%	6.6%	4.2%	5.9%
% lost contact before assessment decision	16.7%	10.8%	21.3%	11.3%	10.3%	7.4%
% withdrew before assessment decision	16.0%	4.3%	10.8%	5.2%	11.1%	6.1%
% resolved prior to assessment	0.1%	4.3%	0.2%	4.5%	1.0%	4.7%
Proportion of assessments completed within 28 days	54%	67.6%	51.5%	67.7%	66.7%	77.6%

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

- 5.24 The percentage of people that the Council found to be in priority need and unintentionally homeless increased from 36.6% in 2007/08 to 56.9% in 2009/10, but this is still lower than the national figure of 61.9%.
- 5.25 The proportion of applicants that the Council lost contact with before it made an assessment decision more than halved from 21.3% in 2008/09 to 10.3% in 2009/10, but this is still higher than the national figure of 7.4%. The Council reported that between April and November 2010 it lost contact with 28% of homeless applicants both before and after it made a decision, double its target of 14%. The Council recognises that this is a weakness and plans to improve its ICT system so that it can monitor and track the progress of applications more easily.
- 5.26 While the percentage of people the Council finds to be intentionally homeless has reduced from 5% in 2007/08 to 4.6% in 2009/10 this is significantly higher than the national figure of 2.5%.

- 5.27 Scottish Ministers have 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 expanded its priority need categories to include people who are under 26 and to those who have an alcohol or a drug addiction. It exceeded its interim target of 82% in 2009 by 4.8% although this figure decreased to 84% for the period April to June 2010, below the Council's internal target of 85%. The Council reported an increase in the proportion of applicants assessed as non priority from 8.7% in 2008/09 to 11.5% in 2009/10. Although this is in line with the national figure of 11%, this increasing trend presents a challenge for the Council to achieve the 2012 target. The Council told us that it had shifted its strategic approach to focus on homelessness prevention to help it meet 2012 and that its Homelessness and Resettlement Strategy outlines how it is working towards this.
- 5.28 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. In 2009/10 the Council set a target to notify 80% of homeless applicants of its assessment decisions within 28 days but it has yet to achieve it. Between April and October this year its performance was 52%. The average time to issue decision letters from presentation date for the same period was 32 days.
- 5.29 The Code of Guidance recommends that Councils should keep applicants well informed of progress with their application. We saw from case reviews that the Council generally maintains contact with applicants residing in temporary accommodation but does not routinely keep in touch with other homeless applicants.
- 5.30 We shadowed a number of assessment interviews and found that staff conducted them sensitively and that applicants were generally satisfied with the way they were carried out. The Council provides applicants with a written record of the interview.
- 5.31 We found some weaknesses in the Council's assessment of homeless people. It did not always have regard to all the circumstances of an applicant before

reaching a decision on intentionality and does not always record the information it gives to applicants.

5.32 In summary, the Council has made good progress in achieving the 2009 interim target but the increase in the proportion of applicants it assessed as non priority presents a challenge for it to achieve the 2012 ministerial target. It gives customer focused interviews but it loses contact with homeless applicants and has some weaknesses in its assessment process.

### Securing accommodation

5.33 Aberdeen City uses a range of temporary accommodation consisting of:

- 237 furnished Council properties;
- 11 bed and breakfast (B&B) establishments, 103 bedrooms;
- 53 Interim accommodation units;
- 59 supported accommodation units for the Single Persons Housing Project (YSPHP);
- 3 Council owned Hostels with 44 bedrooms; and
- 2 hotels; 5 bedrooms.

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

	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
	<b>Council</b>	<b>Council</b>	<b>Council</b>
Number of homeless households provided with temporary hostel accommodation	380	391	405
Percentage accommodated in temporary hostel accommodation	39.8%	33.2%	27%
Average length of stay for homeless households in temporary hostel accommodation (days)	51	38	37
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	480	513	578
Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	50.3%	43.6%	38.5%
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days)	48	61	56
No. of families with dependent children accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	0	0	3
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	94	273	518
Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	9.9%	23.2%	34.5%
Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (days)	117	138	93

Source: the Council's inspection submission

5.35 The number of people the Council placed in temporary accommodation in Aberdeen increased from 954 in 2007/08 to 1501 in 2009/10, an increase of almost 36%. It accommodates a higher proportion of households in B&B than in other types of accommodation, although this has decreased steadily since 2006/07.

5.36 The Council recognises it is still over reliant on B&Bs and acknowledges that people spend too much time in temporary accommodation. The Council has been working to reduce the average length of time people stay in all types of temporary accommodation. In 2010, the Council increased the use of B&Bs and hotels from 69 units in 30 June 2009 to 159 units in August 2010 to respond to the high level of applications. The Council has made efforts to limit the length of stay in B&Bs and hotels, and now reviews these cases weekly. It has set out plans to reduce its use of this accommodation in its Temporary Accommodation Strategy.

- 5.37 The Council has worked well to increase the provision of temporary accommodation alternatives to bed and breakfast. It has significantly increased the supply of temporary accommodation in its own houses and at the time of our inspection, had increased the supply of temporary accommodation to 237 furnished properties. From June until Sept 2010 it allocated a further 60 flats as temporary accommodation.
- 5.38 The Council told us that the level of use of temporary accommodation and the length of stay reflects the increase in homeless applicants and its constraints of the supply of permanent lets, particularly single applicants waiting for bed-sit or one bedroom accommodation.
- 5.39 The Council is aware that it has not yet addressed a significant weakness we found in our last inspection and it still does not always provide temporary accommodation to those people who require it. In 2009/10, the Council was unable to provide accommodation for 469 households, a significant proportion of households to whom it owes a statutory duty. Between April and September 2010 the Council reported that it failed to provide temporary accommodation for 54% for whom it has a duty and the figure for the month of September was 84%.
- 5.40 The Council reports that applicants do not always accept its temporary accommodation due to the high rental costs. In 2009/10, the Council only arranged 19.4% of the temporary accommodation. During the same period, 49.5% of the temporary accommodation was arranged by the applicant, more than double the national figure of 20%.
- 5.41 The Council introduced a Temporary Accommodation Strategy in August 2009 to reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation and minimise the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. It plans to increase furnished flats from 237 to 300 by June 2011 and to be more responsive to demand for particular locations within the city. The Council is aware that by removing these properties from the mainstream stock it will impact on the number of properties available for permanent accommodation. The Council has begun discussions with the RSLs about using their properties for temporary accommodation. It is launching its

- Private Sector Leasing (PSL) scheme in late 2010 and now provides an additional 17 bed unit through the homelessness service.
- 5.42 In response to our previous inspection report, the Council introduced a tenancy support team. This team establishes relationships with vulnerable tenants and supports them with benefits and form filling and on other tenancy related matters. It continues to intervene, where appropriate, when issues arise once the support has been relinquished.
- 5.43 In our last inspection report, we assessed the Young Single Persons Housing Project (YSPHP) as an excellent project. We found that this project continues to deliver significant advantages to those it supports and has a 90% success rate for young people completing the project.
- 5.44 We found that the Council provides good quality temporary accommodation. We viewed a wide range of the Council's temporary accommodation and found it to be of a good standard. The service users we spoke to were pleased with the quality of accommodation the Council provides. The Council generally provides good support to homeless people in its temporary accommodation.
- 5.45 We found some weaknesses in the Council's use of B&Bs. The Council does not have a standard for bed and breakfast accommodation and does not regularly carry out audits of the accommodation.
- 5.46 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable accommodation for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days unless exceptional circumstances apply. The Council has a poor approach and its number of breaches of the Order over the last three years has increased. The Council told us that it attempted to take account of individual circumstances and some applicants preferred to remain in the accommodation. In 2009/10, the Council had 9 reported breaches of the Order.
- 5.47 Aberdeen City Council does not place homeless people in temporary accommodation outwith its area and has not done so in any of the last three years.

- 5.48 The Council does record offers of temporary accommodation to homeless people and the reasons why homeless people refuse it. The Council assesses peoples' needs but we found it is not always able to take account of an applicant's personal circumstances when allocating temporary accommodation in areas with little temporary accommodation. The Council's planned expansion of temporary furnished flats and its commitment to have a spread across the city will help it meet the needs of people to be close to schools and family support.
- 5.49 In summary, there are weaknesses in the service the Council provides to homeless people who require temporary accommodation. It relies heavily on B&B accommodation; however, it is reducing its use of B&B and is working to improve the supply of other temporary accommodation. It does not always meet its duty to provide accommodation and this is a significant weakness. The majority of its temporary accommodation is of good quality and the Council is working to improve its approach to providing temporary accommodation.
- 5.50 The Council has improved its approach to letting houses to homeless people. In 2009/10 it increased the percentage of lets to homeless applicants to 39%. For 2010/11 the Council has set a target of allocating 50% of its lets across all of its stock to homeless people. As at September 2010, the Council has let 44.4% of properties to homeless people. For three months of this year, the Council implemented a 75% target for allocations to homeless households. The initiative ensured that all families received offers of housing quickly. Due to the Council's lack of single person accommodation the initiative was less successful for this group.
- 5.51 The Council's Allocations Policy works on a points based system and the Council gives households that apply as homeless or with no settled accommodation additional priority or points to reflect their circumstances. Statutory homeless persons applying to the two RSLs operating Homehunt's Choice Based Lettings (CBL) are given a gold pass, the highest priority pass. The Council is currently reviewing its policy.
- 5.52 We saw that the Council records area preferences at the homelessness interview. Where an applicant does not secure an offer of accommodation in

- their preferred area within the first ten weeks of a decision being made, they can be offered a house in their second area of choice. Thereafter the Council tries to take account of personal needs such as proximity to family support or schools as recommended in the Code of Guidance. However where housing of a particular type or size is in short supply the Council has no option but to offer what becomes available. We found that the Council upheld a high number of the appeals against offers of permanent accommodation.
- 5.53 The Council gives homeless people the same number of offers of permanent accommodation and the same quality of offers as it gives to other applicants. The average time taken for the Council to secure permanent accommodation for homeless people was 111 days and for single applicants 167 days. The Council is becoming better at taking account of the particular needs of the applicants when making offers as the sustainability figure for remaining in tenancies after one year for homeless applicants for April to September 2010 is 93.2%. This is a positive outcome.
- 5.54 The Council does not use provisions under section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to secure accommodation for homeless people. Instead, it uses nomination arrangements. In 2009/10, the number of homeless applicants the Council nominated to RSLs for permanent accommodation was 213, of which 208 were successful. In addition, RSLs allocate 50% of any new builds to statutory homeless households. However, the Council is aware it could make better use of section 5 referrals to access RSL houses for homeless people and has now made a commitment to use them to help it to ease the situation on a pressurised system.
- 5.55 In summary, Aberdeen City Council is working to improve its approach to securing accommodation for homeless people. It gives homeless households the same level of choice as other applicants and has recognised the need to offer a greater proportion of its permanent lets to homeless households. However it takes a long time to accommodate people, particularly single homeless applicants and is aware it needs to increase the number of houses it secures for homeless people through its RSL partners.

## 6. Is the housing service at Aberdeen City Council managed for improvement?

### Leadership and strategic planning

- 6.1 The Council reviewed its strategic planning framework subsequent to the Audit of Best Value and Community Planning report and in 2009 established a refreshed framework. The Council's Single Outcome Agreement (SOA), Corporate Plan and Service Plan complement each other and set out the Council's vision and priorities. There are links from the Single Outcome Agreement and Corporate Business Plan to the Service Plan. The Council carried out city-wide public consultation to develop its Corporate Plan but it did not consult service users on the Housing and Environment Service Plan. In view of the extensive changes within the Council over the last two years parts of the Service Plan are out of date.
- 6.2 The Council recently conducted extensive public consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on its new five year Business Plan. It took a priority based budgeting approach to preparing the plan and this is positive. When it has concluded the five year Business Plan process, the Council plans to update its Service Plan for Housing.
- 6.3 Following the Accounts Commission hearing and the publication of the Best Value Audit report in May 2008 the Council agreed an action plan and started to respond to the issues raised and the Accounts Commission's recommendations. The Council implemented a new management structure, agreed revised political decision-making structures and new governance arrangements. In the Progress Report in 2009, the Commission found the full impact of the action taken by the Council had yet to flow through and that the Council has a challenging improvement agenda. Within the housing service we saw the Council had a focus on improvement and has responded positively to the new structure and governance arrangements.
- 6.4 The Homelessness and Resettlement Strategy 2009-2013 sets out how the Council will work towards alleviating homelessness based around key themes and the Homelessness Policy sets out how the Council will co-ordinate its

- services to achieve these objectives. The Council implements and monitors the strategy through the re-established Homelessness Strategy Operations Group and the Homelessness Strategy Working Group. We found that not all of the planned actions the Council has set were SMART and that as a consequence of restructuring changes the Council had not met its target timescales for some actions in its Strategy. During our inspection the Council re-drafted targets for consideration by the Strategy Group.
- 6.5 We saw elected members have a good understanding of the challenges the Council faces in achieving its strategic objectives for homelessness. Elected members participate in the Homelessness Strategy Working Group. In June 2010 the Council approved a range of new services and extension of existing services to allow it to meet the objectives and actions within the Homelessness and Resettlement Strategy.
- 6.6 The Council's work with strategic partners was previously underdeveloped. We found that the Council has been working to improve this in the last two years and partners we spoke to said partnership working had improved. Senior staff within housing services are committed to developing this further.

### Performance management, planning and reporting

- 6.7 The Council has a Performance Management Framework which links the Single Outcome Agreement and Corporate Business Plan to Service Plans, Team Plans and employee development plans. It uses a Balanced Scorecard to monitor progress against targets and reports this to the Housing and Environment Committee on an eight weekly cycle. There are however significant gaps in the performance reports particularly in relation to monitoring the Scottish Housing Quality Standard and the cost of the Homelessness Service. The Council does not report the cost of B&B accommodation to the Housing and Environment Committee and this is a weakness that makes it difficult for the Committee to monitor the homelessness service effectively.
- 6.8 The Council records all performance information on Covalent, the corporate performance management system, and the senior management team monitors it

- regularly. The Council reports its performance based on the priorities outlined in its key strategic documents and this is positive.
- 6.9 The Council also has an open approach to council papers being available on the website which means a range of performance and financial information is in the public domain. However it is difficult to find performance information on the website. The Council's reporting of financial performance information is limited although the tenants newsletter contains some high level information.
- 6.10 The Council produces monthly performance reports for managers within Housing and Environment Services and for discussion at the Senior Management Team. These reports detail progress on a month by month basis but do not show annual progress, national nor peer comparators. We found limited evidence of actions resulting from these reports and no evidence that this information is used to develop or improve service delivery. The Council advised us that there are financial implications to upgrading its ICT system to record this comparative information, however this is a weakness.
- 6.11 The Council is a member of the Scottish Housing Best Value Network and benchmarks its performance against seven local authorities. It uses this information to set its targets annually but is not included in any published or reported information. The Council is aware that this is a weakness.

### Customer focus and influence

- 6.12 The Council has homelessness service standards which set out the level of service homeless people can expect and the standards are SMART which is positive. The Council advertises these standards and gives applicants a copy of them. However, we saw no evidence that the Council has begun to monitor its performance against these standards nor publicly report on how it meets these.
- 6.13 In 2010 the homelessness service moved temporarily to the centralised office in St Nicholas House. This office, and the area offices, are compliant with disability discrimination legislation. However in St Nicholas House there is temporary signage; there is a lack of privacy at the reception desk; the interview rooms have screens; and interview rooms become warm and uncomfortable. The

- Council is aware of these weaknesses and the homelessness service will move to purpose built offices in the city centre in 2012.
- 6.14 The Council now records homelessness service feedback on a quarterly basis. For the period July to September 2010 the Council reported that 90.8% of the 65 respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall service and this rose to 100% for temporary accommodation. However, only five temporary accommodation surveys were returned and we saw no evidence that the Council was investigating this low response rate nor using the information to drive service improvements.
- 6.15 We found that the Council has begun to improve its approach to informing and involving tenants in planned maintenance works. Its procedural and publicity material, setting out installation timescales to customers, could be further improved as it currently lacks detail and information about timescales for different types of work.
- 6.16 The Council accepts reviews against its homelessness assessment decisions and offers of permanent re-housing to homeless applicants. In 2009/10 the Council received 166 review requests compared to 110 in 2008/09 and 71 in 2007/08. In all years, most reviews were against offers of housing, where in 2009/10, it received 98 review requests and 65 were upheld. In the same year it received 68 review requests against assessment decisions with 23 upheld. The reviews we saw were dealt with by an officer not involved with the original decision which is positive. However, we found weaknesses in its approach to reviews including:
- the Council told us it is not meeting its 14 day target of responding to requests for reviews of decisions;
  - it does not routinely monitor or report its performance against meeting its target of 14 days to respond to appeals;
  - poor quality response letters;
  - no information advising people of their right to go to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman;
  - lack of publicity around the right to request a review of an offer of temporary accommodation; and

- no evidence that the Council uses information from reviews to help it identify potential ways to improve the service.
- 6.17 The Council carries out a monthly audit of homelessness applications. It reviews one random case from each homelessness officer's caseload which is around seven cases per month.
- 6.18 The Council has a corporate Complaints Procedure which it publicises on its website and in leaflets, however we found no visible information on how to make a complaint within the Area Offices. The Council sends all complaints to the appropriate Directorate for a response. Housing and Environment Services centrally record and monitor complaints to manage responses within timescale. However, it does not record or monitor subject matter, trend information or volume of complaints. Consequently, it cannot show that it uses this information to develop or improve service delivery.
- 6.19 The Council is currently undertaking a Priority Budget Setting Process and is holding extensive consultation events with tenants and stakeholders over its five year Business Plan. We saw that events were well attended and the Council provided detailed information.
- 6.20 The Council is starting to use the national Customer Satisfaction Measuring Toolkit for four parts of Housing & Environment Services. The Homelessness Service has included additional questions to collect information on service users' age, out of hours contact and usage of interpretation or translation services.
- 6.21 The Council holds annual Tenant Open Days and its Sheltered Housing Network was nominated for Best Group by TPAS. However, customer satisfaction information, in the main, is limited to aspects of the repairs service and the investment programme. We saw no evidence of service user feedback being used to improve services, particularly within the homelessness service.

### Equalities and diversity

- 6.22 The Council is developing its approach to equalities. It sets out its approach to equalities in its Single Equalities Scheme. This includes an Action Plan for each

- service to use, clearly showing timescales and responsibilities. However, it does not include targets. Staff have received equalities training and further training by Grampian Racial Equality Council (GREC) was being planned during our inspection.
- 6.23 The Council has a legal duty to consider how changes in its policies or strategies may impact on various equalities groups. It completes Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments for all aspects of its homelessness service. This is a good approach.
- 6.24 The Council makes publicity material available in alternative languages and formats and advertises the interpretation and translation service. It can provide this service internally or it contacts Language Line depending on which language is required. However, our Tenant Assessor reported that there is no link to the translation service on the homepage of the Council's website and its availability is only advertised in English.
- 6.25 The Council produces an Equalities Newsletter annually and its leaflets and publications are available, on request, in alternative formats and languages. It also publicises access to the translation and interpretation service. Although it records these requests it does not monitor or report these, or use the information to improve the service.
- 6.26 The Council jointly funds a temporary Ethnic Minority Housing Outreach Worker until March 2011, to assist it to provide housing options advice. The Council plans to train a number of staff to undertake this work but it has not fully assessed its capacity to do so, or considered if this will deliver value for money.
- 6.27 In response to an internal audit report in September 2009 the Council began to record, monitor and report on equalities information in its homelessness assessments. This included analysis by age group, gender, ethnicity and ability but it restricted this to those households to whom it had a duty to re-house. The Council does not have robust ethnicity information on its current or future tenants to help it to develop its services.

## Efficiency and value for money

6.28 The Council has a 30 year Business Plan in place for the housing service and carries out an annual review of the plan. The Council acknowledges it has carried out limited sensitivity analysis on its objectives in the plan to date. During the inspection the Council invested in a new business plan model and will begin to use this later this year. The Council has adopted the new model to make it easier for it to consider different planning scenarios in its Business Plan reviews and incorporate an assessment of risk areas including delivery of the SHQS.

<b>Aberdeen City Council</b>	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10</b>
Average supervision and management expenditure (Cost per house per year)	£428	£656	£721

Source: SG Statistics – Local Authority Housing Income & Expenditure tables

6.29 Rents at Aberdeen City are relatively high and at £55.50 per week are the sixth highest in Scotland. Supervision and management have been rising over the last three years but remain lower than the Scottish figure of £778 for 2009/10. The Council plans to reduce its costs and from 2010/11 it decided to reduce costs by 5% on a recurring basis. The Council has been working to resolve recharging issues from the HRA, some arising from the restructuring, and now has a more accurate picture of the HRA costs as a result.

6.30 The Council has not carried out a cost and value assessment of the homelessness service as a whole although it carries out a detailed financial assessment for individual projects. The Council reports the costs of bed and breakfast accommodation (B&B) to the Finance and Resources Committee but not to Housing and Environment and this limits the Committee's ability to fully scrutinise the homelessness service. The Council's B&B costs have increased steadily over the last three years. The B&B budget is the responsibility of Finance staff although the Council is in the process of moving this to Housing. We saw the Council has been working to reduce costs by reviewing charges and has plans to reduce expenditure on B&B by limiting the time people spend in B&B and increasing its supply of other temporary accommodation.

## 7. Next Steps

- 7.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes.
- 7.2 Aberdeen City Council's improvement plan should show how it intends to respond to our findings in asset management and services for homeless people. Aberdeen City Council does not need to submit its improvement plan to us. We will continue to work with Audit Scotland and other scrutiny bodies to monitor the Council's progress on an annual basis.
- 7.3 If you would like to see Aberdeen City Council's improvement plans you should contact the Council by:

**Telephone: 01224 522367**

**Email: COLINR@aberdeencity.gov.uk**

**Website: www.aberdeencity.gov.uk**

## Sources of evidence

### Groups and third parties consulted

- Tenants' and Residents groups
- The Council's external auditor
- Scottish Government – Housing and Regeneration Team
- Homepoint
- Scottish Government's Homelessness Team
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Neighbouring Local Authorities
- Local Registered Social Landlords
- Women's Aid
- Shelter
- TPAS

### Interviews/Meetings

- Elected Members
- Chief Executive
- Director of Housing and Environment
- Head of Service (Asset Management)
- Head of Service (Housing Management)
- Homelessness Manager
- Planning Manager
- Performance Manager
- Procurement Manager
- Internal Auditor
- Staff from Homelessness Team
- Staff from Asset Management Teams
- Staff from Finance

### Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation
- Shadowing front line homelessness staff
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of advice and information interview
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of planned maintenance and improvement projects
- Review of gas safety certificates

### Key documents reviewed

- Aberdeen City Council's Inspection Submission
- Relevant policy and procedures

## Appendix 1

- 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
- Single Outcome Agreement
- Community Plan
- Corporate Plan
- Service Plan
- Corporate Procurement Strategy

## Glossary

<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>HomePoint</b>	<p>A team within the Scottish Government 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>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>	The nationally-agreed standards RSLs and local authorities are expected to meet in providing housing services and in managing their organisations.

<b>Planned maintenance</b>	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
<b>Procurement</b>	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
<b>Registered social landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
<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>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>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>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>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)

The Scottish Housing Regulator  
Highlander House  
58 Waterloo Street  
Glasgow  
G2 7DA

Tel: 0141 271 3810

E: [shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:shr@scottishhousingregulator.gsi.gov.uk)



**The Scottish  
Government**



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