



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

North Ayrshire Council Inspection Report
August 2008

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1. Introduction

About this inspection

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

How we assessed performance

- 1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:
- How well is North Ayrshire Council delivering its services?
 - Is North Ayrshire Council managed for improvement?
- 1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:
- spoke to tenants, service users, staff and elected members of the council;
 - asked other partner organisations for their views;
 - visited homes and local areas;
 - saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
 - examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
 - analysed published performance and financial information.
- 1.4 We have awarded grades for the housing management, asset management and delivery of repairs and homelessness services. The grades and judgements are based on evidence. The grades summarise performance in the following ways:
- Grade A = Excellent
 - Grade B = Good
 - Grade C = Fair
 - Grade D = Poor
- 1.5 When we provide a summarised assessment and award a grade, we take various factors into account. These factors are:
- outcomes for service users;

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

The inspection team

1.6 The inspection team was led by Jonathan Grant (Inspection Manager) and included Jean Harper, Donna Matthewson, Marie Savage (Inspectors), Martin Walsh (Associate Inspector), Sylvia Ward (Inspection Officer) and Therese Mullen (Tenant Assessor). Janette Boyd and Martin Van Der Lee (Tenant Assessors) carried out a desktop review of some of the Council's publications. We were on site between 21 April and 15 May 2008. 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 make the inspection grades and overview section 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 grades and overview

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

Grades

2.1 The inspection of North Ayrshire Council's housing service took place between 21 April and 15 May 2008. We awarded the following grades:

North Ayrshire Council has achieved an **A** grade for housing management. This is an **excellent** performance.

North Ayrshire Council has achieved a **C** grade for asset management and repairs. This is a **fair** performance.

North Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for services to homeless people. This is a **good** performance.

How well is North Ayrshire Council delivering its services?

Our assessment is that North Ayrshire Council's housing service has major strengths in the delivery of its services.

In housing management:

- it has an excellent approach to working with its customers;
- its performance in income maximisation and re-letting empty houses is excellent;
- it uses an excellent range of methods to resolve antisocial behaviour (ASB);
- it has an excellent range of pro-active measures for managing its estates;
- it has an excellent performance management framework;
- it uses robust action plans for the housing management service;
- it is good at meeting housing need and monitors the outcomes of the lettings process;
- it is working well with partners to maximise access to housing; and
- it promotes early intervention and preventative action in its management of rent arrears.

In asset management and repairs:

- its performance in completing repairs on time is excellent;

- it has an excellent approach to involving tenants in determining environmental improvement works and is very customer focused in its delivery of its investment programme;
- it is good at assessing the sustainability of its houses and in monitoring the performance of its external contractors; and
- it re-lets its houses to a good standard.

In delivering services for homeless people:

- it has already met the 2009 target set by the Government to increase priority need;
- it sees homeless applicants quickly;
- it has a wide range of good partnership working arrangements in place to prevent and alleviate homelessness and has a low level of repeat homelessness;
- it has significantly increased its supply of temporary accommodation which is of a high standard;
- it secures accommodation quickly; and
- it has significantly reduced its use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

2.2 The Council does, however, have a number of weaknesses in the delivery of its services and some are significant.

In housing management:

- there is a lack of transparency in a few aspects of the lettings process which the Council is beginning to address;
- the Council's use of age to enable access to its amenity housing is restrictive; and
- there is limited customer satisfaction and performance outcome information for its ASB services.

In asset management and repairs:

- it does not have a strategic approach to asset management;
- it has unreliable stock condition data;
- its planning and management of programmes to deliver the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) is significantly under-developed;

- it does not subject its main contractor to independent scrutiny and has a limited control over responsive repairs expenditure;
- it does not fully meet its statutory duties on gas safety and the Right to Repair; and
- it does not yet have a focus on value for money in procurement.

In delivering services for homeless people:

- its assessment process is underdeveloped and it is not clear how the Council has arrived at some of its decisions;
- there are weaknesses in the Council's review processes; and
- the Council is losing contact with an increasing number of applicants.

Is North Ayrshire Council managed for improvement?

2.3 We found that the Council has a culture of continuous improvement and the management processes in place to deliver improvements to its housing and homelessness services. This is evident in the Council's leadership and planning, its awareness of areas where it can improve, its current performance and its track record of improvements. It also has a strong performance management system and uses customer feedback when developing its services. The Council was extremely responsive to our assessments during the inspection. However, it is not clear how the Council plans to deal with weaknesses that require a corporate solution, for example in developing a programme to ensure that all of its Property Services offices that are open to the public become compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

2.4 We found that the Council has a limited awareness of its performance in its asset management and repairs services and some important weaknesses in aspects of its planning, performance management and its focus on value for money. Technical Services has also been without a full staff complement for some time and this has impacted on issues of leadership and capacity to deliver. However, the Council responded very positively to our findings, committed to make difficult and significant changes to improve its performance and took many early improvement actions during the inspection.

Key recommendations

2.5 Our inspection report covers a wide range of issues. North Ayrshire 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 focus on value for money in how it procures and delivers its services; and
- ensure that its Property Services offices that are open to the public become compliant with the DDA.

In housing management the Council should:

- review its approach to using age in the allocation of its amenity housing.

In asset management and the repairs service the Council should:

- develop a strategic focus for the management of its property assets;
- improve its understanding of its stock condition;
- improve its planning and management of its investment programmes to achieve the SHQS;
- ensure independent scrutiny of its internal contractor;
- improve its focus on value for money in procurement; and
- ensure it meets its legal duties on gas safety and Right to Repair.

In delivering services for homeless people the Council should:

- improve the management and delivery of its assessment of applications;
- use the results of its review process to identify service improvements; and
- continue to develop its audit framework for case management.

3. Context

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

About the organisation

- 3.1 North Ayrshire Council is located on the West Coast of Scotland and is the largest of the Ayrshire councils covering an area of 885 km². The most densely populated settlements of Irvine, Kilwinning, Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston are situated in and around the south coast area. Other key settlements of Dalry, Kilbirnie, Beith and Largs spread northwards into the more rural parts of North Ayrshire. There are also the two island communities of Arran and Cumbrae with populations accounting for approximately 4% and 1% respectively of North Ayrshire's total population.
- 3.2 The Council has a minority Labour administration and has 30 elected members consisting of:
- 12 Labour;
 - 8 Scottish National Party (SNP);
 - 5 Independent;
 - 3 Conservative; and
 - 2 Liberal Democrat.

The Council operates an Executive / Scrutiny model, with the Executive consisting of six senior Labour councillors. The cross-party Scrutiny Committee comprises ten members, chaired by a member of the main opposition group (SNP).

- 3.3 The Council delivers its housing management services through three divisions which operate in geographical areas covering the Garnock Valley, Three Towns and Irvine. It provides its services from eight local offices spread throughout its area. The Council delivers its antisocial behaviour, homelessness and strategic services through two other divisions. It centralised its delivery of its homelessness service in Irvine four weeks before our inspection. Its asset management and repairs service is delivered by Technical Services and Building

Services, both of which are based in separate offices in Irvine and Stevenston respectively.

- 3.4 The Council's average weekly rent level for 2008/09 is £50.59. Over the past three financial years the Council has increased its rent levels by 7%.

About its current and future tenants

- 3.5 North Ayrshire's population was just under 136,000 at the 2001 Census. The population within Arran has increased by 13% and by 2% within Irvine and Kilwinning. Conversely the population in the Garnock Valley and the Three Towns has declined. The area has higher than average young and elderly populations, 19% and 21% respectively, and a lower than average proportion of working age people. The Council states that, between 2000 and 2016, the population will decline by 7% due to strong levels of migration and an aging population.
- 3.6 Based on Scottish Government labour market statistics, unemployment within North Ayrshire is 4.2% which is higher than the national figure of 2.6%. 54% of the population are in employment, either full or part-time, or are self-employed. This is lower than the national figure of 76%. Incomes within North Ayrshire are 9% below the Ayrshire average and 18% below the Scottish average. Around 20% of all households in North Ayrshire are in receipt of housing benefit and this rises to 65.8% for Council tenants.
- 3.7 North Ayrshire has a relatively small number of ethnic minority households. In the 2001 census, the area's black and minority ethnic (BME) population was 0.7% which is lower than the national figure of 2%.
- 3.8 The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that North Ayrshire has high levels of deprivation within the area accounting for 33 of the 179 most deprived 15% of data zones in Scotland. These levels of deprivation are not concentrated in any one area but are spread across a number of communities.

About its housing stock

- 3.9 The tenure profile in North Ayrshire is similar to the rest of Scotland. Owner occupation is the dominant tenure at 62%, 1% below the national figure whilst 31% of homes are rented from the social rented sector. Of this, 78% rent their home from the Council while 22% rent from 10 RSLs operating in North Ayrshire. In addition 6% rent from the private sector which is similar to the national average.
- 3.10 Right to Buy sales within North Ayrshire as a percentage of the total Council stock have been falling steadily from 3.4% in 2004/05 to 2.1% in 2007/08 and have averaged just under 3% of the total Council stock over the last four years.
- 3.11 North Ayrshire has high levels of deprivation with lower demand stock in areas such as Stevenston, Dalry, Ardrossan, Dreghorn and Kilbirnie. It also has high demand pressures and faces acute affordability issues in some areas particularly the Isle of Arran, North Coast and parts of Irvine. The Council has successfully applied to the Scottish Government for Pressured Area Status for 11 of its allocation areas.
- 3.12 The table below presents a summary of key information for North Ayrshire Council showing trends over the last three financial years.

| Key facts | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08* |
|--|---------|---------|----------|
| Houses owned | 14,392 | 14,001 | 13,665 |
| No. of applicants on housing list as at 31 March | 5,250 | 5,414 | 5,344 |
| Employees (FTE) | 236.5 | 251.5 | 239.6 |
| HRA Gross Capital Expenditure (incl. Capital Funded from Revenue (CFCR)) | £18.7m | £19.3m | £17.9m |
| Total possible rental income (£) | 21m | 32.4m | 25.4m |
| % of rental income from housing benefit | 63% | 63% | 62% |
| % of tenants in receipt of HB | 67.9% | 68.5% | 65.8% |
| % of rent arrears | 7.4% | 5.6% | 5.1% |
| Average weekly rent | £41.30 | £44.19 | £47.28 |
| Average rent increase | 7% | 7% | 7% |
| Houses re-let | 1085 | 1042 | 757 |
| Response repairs carried out | 41,353 | 42,963 | 27,866 |
| Maintenance spend per house incl. cost of service | 1149 | 1074 | 1289 |
| No. of homeless applications | 1638 | 1525 | 1062 |

Sources: North Ayrshire's submission and SG Statistical Bulletins. * Figures cover period up to December 07.

4. How well is North Ayrshire Council delivering housing management?

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

Grade

North Ayrshire Council has achieved an **A** grade for housing management. This is an **excellent** performance.

- 4.1 Our assessment is that North Ayrshire Council's housing management service has major strengths with a small number of areas where improvement is required. The Council has an excellent awareness of its performance overall, a track record of continuous improvement, a strong performance culture and a focus on service quality. It has developed comprehensive action plans for its housing management service and was very responsive to our feedback and findings during the inspection. This is an important factor in our grading assessment.
- 4.2 The Council has developed an excellent range of pro-active approaches to manage its neighbourhoods and it responds to antisocial behaviour complaints quickly and keeps complainants informed of progress. It has an excellent approach to working with its tenants and regularly seeks tenants' views in a number of housing management service areas. It has shown continuous improvement in collecting rent arrears and its performance in letting empty houses is excellent. The Council provides a good range of information for people applying for housing, is good at managing suspensions and is working well with its partners to maximise access to its housing. It is good at meeting housing need and excellent at working with new and vulnerable tenants.
- 4.3 The Council has some areas for improvement, most of which it had already reviewed before our inspection started and that it is currently implementing changes to address. It lacks transparency in some of its lettings processes and its policy of using age to control access to its amenity housing is restrictive. It is improving its currently limited customer satisfaction and performance outcome information for its antisocial behaviour services.

Tenant satisfaction

- 4.4 The Council's 2006 tenant satisfaction survey found that :
- 82% of tenants consider their neighbourhood as either excellent or good;
 - 86% of tenants who had visited one of the Council's housing offices were satisfied with the helpfulness of reception staff; and
 - 91% were satisfied with the Council as a landlord.

Access to housing

- 4.5 The Council promotes access to its housing in a good range of ways, including;
- eight local housing offices spread across its area;
 - on TV screens, posters and leaflets located in all its housing offices;
 - information and forms available to download on its website;
 - advertising in the local press; and
 - a quarterly tenants newsletter.
- 4.6 The Council provides prospective tenants with a good housing application pack which it developed in consultation with its tenants. Our Tenant Assessors found the pack to be informative and helpful, but found that the colour of some of the documents made them difficult to read. The Council is aware that its housing allocation policy booklet is out of date and we found that it does not display the booklet in all its offices or interview rooms.
- 4.7 The Council has recently published a good web-based housing options guide which gives applicants access to a wide range of information and advice on social rented housing, housing associations and private renting in North Ayrshire. It also provides further advice on specialist housing options and home ownership.
- 4.8 The Council is aware that its allocation policy is not always comprehensive or clear and does not fully comply with statutory requirements. It has completed a comprehensive review of its allocation policy; its new policy will tackle all the weaknesses of the old one and introduce a range of good practice. It is also developing a common housing register (CHR) and common allocations policy (CAP) with three local housing associations to improve access for people applying for social rented housing in the area. The Council has begun to

- implement these positive changes and intends to complete this process in December 2008.
- 4.9 The Council's housing list is open to anyone aged 16 or over. At 31 March 2008, it had 5,350 applicants on its housing list and had added 3,881 new applicants during 2007/08. The Council actively manages its housing list through a rolling review of applications at their anniversary date.
- 4.10 The Council processed 85% of its housing applications within 14 days in 2007/08. It has improved its target from 28 days in 2006/07 to 14 days in 2007/08 and plans to reduce this further to 10 days in December 2008. The Council took on average 11 days to add applications to its housing list in 2007/08.
- 4.11 The Council has a good approach to ensuring that it assesses applications for housing correctly. We saw that a second officer reviews all assessed applications and managers audit a random 10% sample of applications monthly.
- 4.12 The Council informs applicants of the number of points it has awarded them, a breakdown on how the points total has been calculated and also advises on the applicant's right of appeal against its assessment. However, we saw that the Council does not provide a full breakdown of points when it awards medical priority. The Council plans to introduce prospect interviews when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP.
- 4.13 The Council is good at managing suspensions. At 31 March 2008, the Council had suspended 42 applications on its housing list. It informs applicants of the reason for the suspension, the length of the suspension, their right to appeal and it regularly reviews suspended cases. However, the Council does not publish all of the reasons that it will suspend an applicant. Prior to the inspection, the Council had recognised that this is restrictive and it plans to stop this practice when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP.
- 4.14 The Council cancelled 2,796 applications in 2007/08, mostly because the applicant did not respond to its annual review. The Council follows good practice by issuing three letters before it cancels any applications. We also saw that it

- cancels applications where an applicant accepts an offer of housing from another landlord, without first checking that the applicant does not wish to continue with an application. The Council does not always give applicants good information about the circumstances in which it will cancel applications but it will do this when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP.
- 4.15 We saw that limitations in the Council's ICT system mean that it currently bypasses a number of applicants when allocating a large number of its houses. While we found the process to be transparent, we also found that the Council does not always inform applicants that it has bypassed them. The Council will have addressed these issues when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP in December 2008.
- 4.16 The Council uses age – as a proxy for need – to select tenants for its amenity houses which it has adapted. It is appropriate for the Council to aim to make best use of its stock but we found that this practice restricts access for people under 60 years old with needs that would be addressed by this type of house.
- 4.17 In summary, the Council provides a good application pack, makes good assessments, manages suspensions well and is making good progress in working with partners to maximise access to housing. It is implementing plans to improve where it has identified weaknesses in its approach to allocations, but does not intend to change its restrictive practice in how it allocates its amenity houses.

Lettings

- 4.18 The Council's current allocation policy is needs based and all of the allocations we reviewed were to people with one or more of its defined housing needs. The Council currently awards points for length of time in its tenancies, which is unlawful and for waiting time although none of the allocations that we reviewed were determined solely by waiting time or tenancy points. The Council plans to stop this practice when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP.
- 4.19 We saw that the Council lets its houses in accordance with its allocation policy and maintains good audit trails for its decisions. It completes a quarterly audit of

- a random 10% sample of its allocations, but does not always ensure that offers of housing are checked by a second officer.
- 4.20 The Council ranks applications using a points framework into two groupings: special cases (incorporating homeless applicants) and all other applicants, including its tenants looking to transfer. The Council aims to give priority to homeless applicants and has set a target to achieve 45-50% of its lets to this group.
- 4.21 The Council does not give its staff clear guidance on selecting between the groups. We found that each office determines its own targets for lets and it is not clear how the Council prioritises its selections between the groups. The Council will adopt a group plus points allocation system with a target for lets to each group when it completes the implementation of its CHR and CAP.
- 4.22 The Council monitors the outcomes of its allocations. In 2006/07, it let 48% of its available houses to homeless people, up from levels it achieved in previous years. The outcomes for 2007/08 show that this has reduced to 43.5% and the Council told us that this reduction was to facilitate the demolition of low demand properties.
- 4.23 The Council uses nominations and section 5 referrals to housing associations to increase the housing options for people applying to it. It has achieved an increase in successful lettings through these routes over the last few years.
- 4.24 In summary, the Council is good at meeting housing need through its allocations. It monitors the outcomes of the lettings process and is working with partners to maximise housing options for applicants. The Council has developed a proposed lettings plan as part of its new CAP to address the lack of transparency that it identified in its review of how it lets its houses. The Council will also stop awarding tenancy and waiting time points when it completes the implementation of its CAP and CHR.

Tenancies and neighbourhood management

- 4.25 The provision of good information and access to support are important ways in which a landlord can help to sustain tenancies. The Council provides a wide range of useful information to tenants through its Tenants Handbook, Tenancy Matters Newsletter, TV screens in housing offices and its wide range of leaflets.
- 4.26 The Council has also developed a number of approaches to support its tenants, which include a comprehensive tenancy sign-up process and a useful sign-up pack for tenants. However, we saw that it gave new tenants only a limited explanation of tenancy conditions when it conducts its tenancy sign-ups. Our Tenant Assessors found the sign-up pack generally easy to use, although the Scottish Secure Tenancy (SST) information is less user friendly. The Council aims to visit new tenants within 6 weeks of their tenancy beginning and it has achieved 93% within the target timescale. The Council told us that it has recently introduced an estate management audit to monitor the effectiveness of these visits. It also plans to review its sign up and new tenant visit procedures to further improve their effectiveness. The Council reported in 2006/07 that 83.8% of its new tenants were still in their tenancy after 12 months.
- 4.27 The Council has granted only a small number of short SSTs and we saw that it always uses them in circumstances permitted in legislation.
- 4.28 In 2007/08, 8% of the Council's tenancies were terminated. The rate at which the Council's houses become empty is low and is significantly below the national figure. The Council collects information on why people give up their tenancies and plans to analyse this information to identify potential areas of risk. A reducing number of the Council's tenants are abandoning their tenancies, and in 2007/08, 0.8% of its tenants abandoned their homes. The Council has clear procedures and monitoring arrangements in place for dealing with abandoned houses. It had complied with these procedures in all the cases reviewed.
- 4.29 The Council issued 3,129 Notice of Proceedings for Possession (NOPs) in 2007/08, of which 2,937 were for rent arrears, 18 were for antisocial behaviour and 174 were for other reasons. The Council told us that this level of usage reflects its strategy to tackle historically high rent arrears, particularly levels of

- serious arrears. Its arrears procedures are very comprehensive and we saw that it issues NOPs within 6 weeks of tenants falling into arrears as standard practice. The Council told us that this was an important part of its strategy that has helped it to reduce its arrears. However, we saw that this has resulted in it issuing NOPs for as little as £90. The Council is now reducing the number of NOPs it issues as it is changing its approach to focus on preventative measures and has recently given staff revised guidance on issuing and re-issuing NOPs.
- 4.30 The Council carried out 53 evictions in 2007/08 for rent arrears, which equates to 0.4% of its tenancies, above the national figure of 0.3%. Again, the Council told us that this reflects its strategy to tackle rent arrears. It uses an excellent range of methods to ensure that it takes eviction action only as a last resort, including:
- early personal contact with tenants;
 - preventative action, including making referrals to tenancy support services, welfare benefits and debt advice services;
 - it only authorises court action and evictions after a review by a senior officer; and
 - it works effectively with Social Services to identify and manage support needs for tenants with arrears.
- 4.31 The Council uses an excellent range of methods for contacting tenants in arrears, including a suite of good letters, home visits and by telephone. It also offers a range of support and advice opportunities with routine referrals to Tenancy Support and independent welfare rights and debt advice. The Council does not always complete financial assessments for its tenants in arrears, but it is piloting an excellent scheme to identify ways to support these tenants and agree an action plan with them. The Council is also developing improved outcome performance information for referrals it makes for support and independent advice to monitor their impact and effectiveness.
- 4.32 The Council has recently introduced procedures for managing occupancy where it does not recover a house following the granting of a court order. It has good monitoring arrangements to ensure it effectively implements these, although it was too early for us to assess their impact.

- 4.33 The Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 places a duty on local authorities and Chief Constables to prepare a joint antisocial behaviour strategy. North Ayrshire Council's strategy, published in 2005, sets out a multi-agency approach to dealing with antisocial behaviour. The Council has developed a good working relationship with the police and its community planning partners in monitoring and evaluating the strategy which is due for review in 2008.
- 4.34 The Council is dealing with a decreasing number of antisocial behaviour (ASB) complaints: it received 1,549 in 2007/08 down from 1,747 in 2006/07. The Council told us that the increase in complaints up to 2006/07 followed the expansion of its specialised Antisocial Behaviour Investigation Team (ASBIT), concierges recording complaints and local and national publicity campaigns. The Council provides a range of good information about nuisance in its Tenants Handbook, through its leaflets and in its new ASB Pack.
- 4.35 The Council's housing teams, concierges and community wardens deal with neighbour disputes in the first instance, and ASBIT deal with cases of a more serious or complex nature. It has comprehensive procedures for all staff dealing with ASB.
- 4.36 The Council uses an excellent range of methods to help resolve ASB complaints, which include mediation referrals to SACRO, verbal and written warnings and referrals to Tenancy Support, Home Security and the Stress Management Service. It regularly has case conferences and good working arrangements with its Social Services, Environmental Services and with the police. It makes use of acceptable behaviour contracts and antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs). The Council obtained 4 ASBO's in 2007/08, a decrease of 13 from 2006/07. The Council told us that this reduction reflects its effective, early intervention approach.
- 4.37 We saw that the Council is very responsive to complaints and has a good case management monitoring system. The Council also contacts complainants regularly to advise on the progress of the complaint. It has recently introduced satisfaction surveys for complainants, but it is too early to assess outcomes from these. The Council is also developing a new ICT system to improve performance

- management, service standards and equalities monitoring information in its ASB services.
- 4.38 We saw that the Council's neighbourhoods are generally in good condition and it manages them well. The Council has an excellent range of pro-active approaches to help it manage its neighbourhoods, including:
- its estate caretaker and concierge services;
 - regular estate inspections with tenants and also routine checks of stairs, gardens and communal areas;
 - estate based projects where residents identify and decide the local environmental improvements that are completed in their neighbourhood;
 - neighbourhood compacts where local service providers agree with residents an action plan to tackle antisocial behaviour;
 - community warden patrols;
 - graffiti removal squads and an environmental hit squad;
 - local regeneration initiatives; and
 - good neighbour awards.
- 4.39 The Council's estate inspections, estate based projects and neighbourhood compacts in particular are excellent examples of joint working with the local community, all of which will allow it to identify and address local environmental issues. It supports these approaches with a good, comprehensive estate management practice manual.
- 4.40 In summary, the Council is excellent at working with its tenants to help them sustain their tenancies and supporting those at risk of losing their home. It is reducing the number of NOPs served and routinely refers tenants to independent advice. It provides a comprehensive range of information on tenancy and estate management and its approach to estate management and working with its tenants is excellent. The Council uses an excellent range of methods to deal with antisocial behaviour, is very responsive to complainants and is improving the effectiveness and its monitoring of this service.

Income maximisation

4.41 The Council provides a wide range of payment methods and it publicises these widely. Most of its tenants pay by cash and payments can be made at area housing offices, first stop shops, post offices, Pay-point outlets, by telephone, through interactive voice response and over the internet. It uses regular advertising campaigns to encourage tenants to pay by direct debit.

4.42 The table below summarises the Council's reported performance in collecting rent.

| | 2005/06 | | 2006/07 | | 2007/08* |
|---|---------|----------|---------|----------|----------|
| | Council | National | Council | National | Council |
| Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due | 7.4% | 7% | 5.6% | 6.7% | 5% |
| % of current tenants in serious arrears | 4.2% | 4.5% | 2.9% | 4.4% | 2.8% |
| Total former tenant arrears (£) | 660,535 | n/a | 938,340 | n/a | 569,207 |
| Rent arrears written off (£) | 459,149 | n/a | 274,113 | n/a | 161,300 |

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

* March 2008 figures not yet reported or validated

4.43 The Council's performance in collecting rent arrears has shown a significant and sustained improvement over the last three years, with the percentage of current tenant arrears and percentage of tenants in serious arrears well below the national figures in 2006/07. Over the medium term, the Council has improved its performance continuously since 2003/04 when its current tenant arrears stood at 14%. The Council is aware of the high cost of evictions and promotes early intervention and preventative action to maximise the amount of rent it collects and to prevent homelessness.

4.44 The Council has used an excellent range of arrears management methods to achieve this improved performance, including:

- a comprehensive arrears procedure and good practice manual;
- clear escalation policy that is flexible to individual circumstances;
- wide range of contact methods and early intervention;
- challenging arrears targets with robust performance monitoring;

- effective partnership working with housing benefit, welfare rights and debt advice services; and
- routine referrals of tenants in arrears to Council and independent support and advice services.

4.45 The Council’s former tenant arrears increased significantly in 2006/07. It told us that this was, in large part, a reflection of its strategy to reduce its arrears. The Council actively manages its former tenant arrears, is considering the use of a debt collection agency to collect these arrears and writes off debt at regular intervals throughout the financial year.

4.46 The table below summarises the Council’s reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

| | 2005/06 | | 2006/07 | | 2007/08* |
|---|---------|----------|---------|----------|----------|
| | Council | National | Council | National | Council* |
| Turnover (no. of new vacancies as % of total dwellings) | 7.7% | 9.3% | 8.2% | 9.5% | 8% |
| Total no. of re-lets | 1085 | n/a | 1042 | n/a | 1016 |
| % of dwellings that were not low demand re-let within 4 weeks | 86% | 44.2% | 94% | 47.7% | 96% |
| Average time (days) to re-let houses that are not low demand | 19 | 64 | 13 | 51 | 12 |
| % of total annual rental due lost due to voids | 0.6% | 2.3% | 0.4% | 1.9% | 0.3% |

Source: Audit Scotland’s published performance indicators and the Council’s inspection submission

* March 2008 figures not yet reported or validated

4.47 The Council’s performance in letting houses that have become empty is excellent. In 2006/07, the Council lost only 0.4 % of its total rental income because of empty houses and is the best performing council in Scotland in this regard. The rate at which the Council’s houses become empty is low and has decreased between 2006/07 and 2007/08 whilst the national figure increased slightly between 2005/06 and 2006/07.

- 4.48 The average time the Council took to let its not low demand empty houses in 2006/07 is significantly below the national figure and the Council was ranked second in this indicator in 2006/07. The Council told us that in 2007/08 it let 96% of its empty houses within four weeks. This is an area of significant strength for the Council.
- 4.49 The Council has achieved these sustained improvements through a number of excellent initiatives which include:
- a comprehensive void procedure manual for staff;
 - pre-allocation of properties when it receives a termination notice;
 - categorisation of empty houses by demand and setting challenging timescales for each category;
 - joint inspections of empty houses by housing and building services staff;
 - a dedicated team to repair empty houses;
 - post inspection of empty houses on the day it gets keys back from its contractor;
 - accompanying prospective tenants to view empty houses on the same day;
 - effective liaison with its contractor and monthly meetings to monitor performance; and
 - auditing a 10% sample of completed repairs to empty houses each quarter.
- 4.50 In summary, the Council's performance in income maximisation is excellent and has shown significant improvement over the last five years. It is the best performing council in Scotland at minimising the amount of rent it loses from empty houses.

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

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

Grade

North Ayrshire Council has achieved a **C** grade for asset management and repairs. This is a **fair** performance.

- 5.1 Our assessment is that North Ayrshire Council's performance in its asset management and repairs has some strengths, but set against these are many weaknesses, some significant. We saw that its responsive repairs service is accessible, it gives tenants good information and its performance in completing repairs is excellent. It is good at managing asbestos in its houses. It has an excellent approach to involving tenants in determining environmental improvement works and is customer focused in its delivery of its investment programme. The Council is also good at assessing the sustainability of its houses, monitoring the performance of its external contractors and in the quality of the houses it lets.
- 5.2 The Council does not have a strategic approach to asset management. Its stock condition data is unreliable and its planning, management and delivery to achieve the SHQS is significantly under-developed. It does not subject its main contractor to independent scrutiny, has a limited control over responsive repairs expenditure and cannot demonstrate a focus on value for money. It was also unable to demonstrate compliance with legal and regulatory duties in gas safety and Right to Repair.
- 5.3 The Council has shown a strong willingness to respond to our feedback and make the necessary improvements. We saw many examples of the Council taking immediate action to improve and also taking initial steps to ensure that it has the capacity to make more complex and longer term organisational improvements. The Council's responsiveness and commitment to tackle the weaknesses that we have found is an important factor in our grade assessment.

Tenant satisfaction

5.4 The Council's 2006 tenant satisfaction survey found that:

- 74% of tenants were satisfied with its repairs service overall; and
- 81% of tenants were satisfied with its major works programme overall.

Asset management strategy and planning

5.5 The Council has outlined strategic objectives for its housing assets in its draft Single Outcome Agreement (SOA), Council Plan and its Local Housing Strategy (LHS). It aims to:

- meet people's housing needs and aspirations;
- improve the availability (or increase the supply of, and retain) affordable housing in North Ayrshire;
- meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015, and
- develop and implement a phased programme of market renewal to tackle low demand.

5.6 The Council has some objectives for the management of its housing assets in its Technical Services' service plan. However, it does not have a strategic approach to asset management, supported by a SMART action plan, to ensure that its investment and asset development programmes support the achievement of its strategic objectives. The Council recognised this weakness and committed to develop an asset management strategy during our inspection.

5.7 The Council has a good approach to assessing the sustainability of its stock and forecasting future housing market changes. It uses a range of information including:

- a 2001 study that identified low demand neighbourhoods in North Ayrshire;
- options appraisals for prioritised low demand areas;
- analysis of needs and demands in the local housing market; and
- analysis of its housing list and allocations.

The Council commissioned the development of a Strategic Local Investment Framework (SLIF) in 2007. This identified both areas experiencing high housing market pressure, and areas requiring market renewal. It used this information to

- gain Pressured Area Status for 11 of its neighbourhoods in May 2008. The Council is tackling low demand through a number of comprehensive regeneration initiatives, including demolition and redevelopment. It works well with its partners in these initiatives to address issues of demand and supply in its own housing stock.
- 5.8 The Council's planning of investment works has a number of weaknesses. The Council started an investment programme in 2005/06 that includes works to meet the SHQS and other key investment programmes. However, it cannot demonstrate that its capital programme planning is designed to target SHQS property elements as a priority, and deliver SHQS for all its houses by 2015. For example, over the last two years it has spent nearly 20% of its available resources on window replacement, despite this having a marginal impact on its attainment of the SHQS. The Council made a commitment to its tenants to a window replacement programme at its Tenants Conference in 2005, but it has not involved its tenants in planning how it can balance achieving this commitment with achieving the SHQS. The Council sets only annual investment plans and had not completed its full planned programme for 2008/09. It does not plan ahead to agree and specify work required beyond the current financial year. These weaknesses also mean that it is less well placed to identify potential efficiencies in the procurement of its investment work.
- 5.9 The Council has an excellent approach to involving tenants in determining its environmental improvement priorities and annual programmes. North Ayrshire Council received the TPAS award for Landlord Participation 2007 for its "Estates Based Projects" initiative. The Council has an annual budget for environmental works of approximately £2.5 million. This is a significant strength and represents good practice in involving tenants in how a substantial element of the annual works programme is spent.
- 5.10 The Council involves tenants in some decisions about asset management through its tenants conferences and Major Works and Repairs Working Group. It has consulted tenants on some priorities for SHQS works, on the options to be offered within individual programmes and on packaging capital works. The

- Council has not involved tenants in establishing an overall standard for its houses.
- 5.11 The Council has carried out some analysis of current and future housing needs and demands for its stock, but it recognises that its information is not comprehensive. It intends to procure a housing needs and demand assessment during summer 2008, to provide it with the data it needs, including on diverse needs. The Council has also commissioned the Disabled Persons Housing Service to assess the demand for aids and adaptations, and gather up-to-date information on adapted dwellings in its area. It has identified the need for more one and two bedroom accommodation, and is aware of low demand for its sheltered and amenity bedsit accommodation.
- 5.12 The Council did a comprehensive survey of its stock over a two year period from 2002, but decided in 2005 to commission a new survey to get more robust data on its compliance with the SHQS. However, the Council's external validation of its 2006 stock condition data found significant weaknesses in its survey methodology and implementation. The Council has also not collected cost information as part of its survey work, but is using cost information at the point of procurement. The lack of robust costs estimates within the condition survey means it cannot reliably assess the resources it needs to achieve the SHQS by 2015. In addition, we found that the Council has based its SHQS Standard Delivery Plan on survey information that does not include an assessment of the condition of all the core elements in the SHQS. In response to our feedback, the Council now plans to commission a new stock condition survey focused on SHQS compliance and using external expertise.
- 5.13 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the SHQS by 2015. The Council's Standard Delivery Plan (SDP) was accepted by Communities Scotland in 2006, with a requirement that progress was carefully monitored around the following risks:
- reliance on a rent rise of 4.5% to fund SHQS works;
 - reliance on RTB sales, when its sales and the value of receipts, are reducing; and
 - failure to control management and maintenance costs.

- 5.14 The Scottish Government reviewed the Council's progress in February 2008 and found there was still a risk that it would not meet the SHQS. We found a number of risks for the Council in meeting the SHQS;
- it does not have reliable stock condition information and so cannot identify an accurate level of compliance with the SHQS within its stock;
 - it does not know the level of investment required to meet the Standard and it is not maximising its investment in work to achieve the SHQS;
 - it does not have a clear medium term programme for SHQS and no programme that shows how it will fully comply by 2015;
 - its ICT system does not allow it to analyse data, devise programmes and project manage plans efficiently and effectively; and
 - it is not ensuring that owners fully participate in the investment programme for SHQS.
- 5.15 The Council does not robustly monitor its housing capital programme in terms of progress with SHQS works against annual targets. It sets out and monitors its housing capital programme by traditionally used works types that do not fully reflect the SHQS criteria. It does not report to elected members or senior officers its performance on progress against annual targets for increasing the number of its houses that meet the SHQS. The weaknesses in the Council's stock data and monitoring systems means it does not have an accurate figure on how many of its houses currently meet the SHQS. Overall, this is a significant weakness.
- 5.16 In summary, North Ayrshire Council has an under-developed approach to the strategic management of its housing assets and it does not have a clear strategic direction for its asset management services. It is developing its understanding of need and demand, tackling areas of low demand and has acted to retain stock in pressured areas. It also involves tenants in some asset management decisions. However, it has a poor understanding of its stock condition and its planning and management to achieve the SHQS has significant weaknesses. The Council has committed to make a range of improvements in this area.

Investment & home safety

- 5.17 The Council spent £19.3m on capital and planned works to its houses in 2006/07 and almost £16m in 2007/08. Its capital spending of £1,449 per house in 2006/07 places it 12th out of 28 Scottish Local Authorities. It has focused its housing capital programme on windows, re-roofing, re-rendering, re-wiring, central heating installation, new kitchens and bathrooms.
- 5.18 The Council has not demonstrated that it can deliver all of its housing capital programme or spend all of its investment budget. It overspent in both 2005/06 and 2006/07 by approx £1.5 million, or 9% of its total resources available. In 2007/08 it under-spent by nearly £2 million, and did not achieve any of its planned expenditure on regeneration, refurbishment and lead pipe replacement. It also had a significant under-spend of £0.5m on electrical re-wiring. The Council's performance means that it is not making best use of its available resources.
- 5.19 The Council's approach to monitoring the performance of its in-house contractor is weak. It has not incorporated a challenging set of KPIs in its Buildings Maintenance contract and it has no explicit timescale for completion of planned works. The Council has not established a clear and accountable client control function, and it currently spreads client roles and responsibilities across three service divisions (Housing, Technical and Building Services). This weakness was highlighted by the Council's Internal Audit section in June 2006. In response to our feedback, the Council told us that it will introduce robust client-led performance management systems as part of its plan to re-tender its investment contracts in 2009.
- 5.20 The Council uses the results of post inspections and tenant satisfaction surveys as part of its regular monitoring and review of its contractors' performance in completing investment works. In general, these show higher levels of satisfaction with the in-house contractor than external contractors. However, these results are not directly comparable as the Council uses different frameworks to assess contractors' performance and it told us that the different types of works undertaken by different contractors were a contributing factor. In the past, the Council has struggled to get good response rates for tenant

- satisfaction surveys on capital works. The Council introduced Customer Liaison Officers to communicate with tenants during capital works to their homes, and this has led to an improved rate of return.
- 5.21 The Council's approach to monitoring the performance of its external contractors is good. Its Technical Services staff supervise these contracts using a performance matrix and reporting system, which it has changed as a result of consultation with tenants. The Council's contract supervisor advises contractors monthly of their individual performance scores together with a note of the ranges of scores achieved by all participating contractors.
- 5.22 The Council has a good, customer focused approach to the delivery of its investment works. It gives residents choices on kitchen and bathroom fittings, and a detailed and informative Major Works pack. It also gives tenants good notice of works and it liaises well with them during the works.
- 5.23 The Council's 2006 Tenant Satisfaction Survey shows that 78% of respondents rated the design and layout of their home as either good or excellent. However, given the limitations of its stock condition information and the uncertainties around its compliance with the SHQS, we are not able to assess the overall quality of its houses.
- 5.24 By law, North Ayrshire Council must make safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues that it provides for its tenants. The table below summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks.

| | March 2008 | |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| | No of houses | % of houses |
| Houses with gas appliances | 10,872 | - |
| Houses with current gas safety certificates | 9,638 | 88.6% |
| Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check | 7,294 | 67.1% |
| Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date | 1,245 | 11.5% |
| Houses where safety check was carried out between one and three months after the due date | 622 | 5.7% |
| Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date | 608 | 5.6% |

Source: Council's inspection submission

- 5.25 The Council is not meeting its statutory duty on gas safety for a significant number of its houses. At 31 December 2007, the Council had completed gas safety checks within the required 12 months in only 67.1% of its houses with gas. It had not completed 2,475 checks within the legislative timescale. The Council is aware of its poor performance in gas safety. In March 2008, it temporarily increased the number of staff responsible for managing gas safety. By mid-May 2008, the Council had reduced the number of houses without a valid current safety certificate to 142, of which 109 are empty houses in which it had capped the gas supply. This is positive, although it has still to improve its performance in carrying out gas safety checks within 12 months of the previous check.
- 5.26 The Council has taken further action to improve its performance in managing gas safety. It has re-tendered its gas safety contract, introduced appointments for tenants, developed new procedures with clear timescales and targets for dealing with no access problems, and plans to permanently increase staff resources for managing gas safety. It has also raised tenants' awareness of gas safety checks through an article in its tenants' newsletter. This is all positive. The Council is also developing new KPIs to improve its management of its performance, although it did not include these in its new gas safety contract.
- 5.27 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. The Council has had a good asbestos management policy and procedure in place since 1999, covering housing and non-domestic properties and it reviewed this in 2007. It has surveyed all the communal areas of its houses and regularly updates its asbestos register. It has trained its maintenance staff and external contractors in asbestos awareness and gives tenants guidance on safety precautions in its tenants handbook and leaflets, and advice through a dedicated help-line and home visits.
- 5.28 The Council is aware of a number of areas where it can improve its approach to managing the risks from asbestos:
- it does not routinely provide tenants with a copy of an asbestos survey of their home ; and

- it has not linked its asbestos register and its repairs system to ensure its repairs contractor is forewarned of any risks from exposure to asbestos.

The Council has given high priority to tackling these issues in its improvement plan, although its timescales for completing these is uncertain because of its proposed re-structuring of Technical Services.

- 5.29 The Council developed a detailed minimum re-let standard for empty homes in 2005, in consultation with tenants and applicants. It has published this and provides it to prospective tenants. Empty properties we saw were in good condition. Only seven applicants refused offers of its houses because of condition or décor in 2006/07, and only six between April and December 2007. The Council collects feedback from new tenants on satisfaction with its houses. In 2007/08, 94% of respondents said that the standard of cleanliness and quality of repairs in their new home was fair or good. However, only 65% rated the quality of repairs the Council did after they moved in as fair or good.
- 5.30 In summary, the Council is improving the condition of its stock through investment, but it is not delivering all of its scheduled programmes and significantly under-spent its budget in 2007/08. It is good at working with tenants during the delivery of investment works and lets its houses to a good standard. The Council recognises that its management of its in-house contractor and its gas safety services are weak and it is taking steps to address these. The Council has a good approach to managing asbestos.

Response repairs

- 5.31 The Council's responsive repairs service is accessible. It provides a freephone number and tenants can use this 24 hours a day to report a repair to its call centre. Tenants can also use the freephones available at the Council's local area offices to report repairs. In its 2006 tenants satisfaction survey, 95% of respondents said they were aware that repairs could be reported at the call centre at any time. The majority of its tenants report repairs by phoning the call centre (69%) or using the freephone at a local office (26%). The Council has not asked tenants for their views on the accessibility of the repairs service.

- 5.32 The Council gives tenants information on the repairs service in its tenants handbook, repairs leaflet, tenants newsletters and on its web-site. Our tenants assessors found the information the Council provides to tenants useful, although the density of the text in the repairs leaflet makes it difficult to read. The Council recognises that it is not easy for tenants to report a repair through its web-site and is monitoring tenants' use of emails to report repairs. It plans to develop an on-line repairs reporting system as part of the re-development of its corporate web-site.
- 5.33 The Council offers tenants appointments during normal working hours for routine repairs. Its 2006 tenants satisfaction survey shows that 84% of tenants surveyed were satisfied with the appointments system. However, the Council recognises the limitations of its appointments system and is currently consulting tenants on extending appointments to evenings and weekends; this is a positive development. The Council monitors missed appointments and 99% of these are due to tenants not providing access at the appointed time. The Council will also complete repairs more quickly for vulnerable people and people with disabilities; this is a customer focused approach.
- 5.34 The Council's targets for completing repairs are 24 hours for emergencies, 5 working days for urgent repairs and 28 working days for routine repairs. The table below summarises the Council's reported performance in completing response repairs within its target timescales compared to national median performance.

| | Target response time | Performance (%) | | | |
|---|----------------------|-----------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| | | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | National median 2006/07 |
| Emergency | 24 hours | 99.4% | 99% | 99.7% | 94.1% |
| Urgent | 5 working days | 98.2% | 92.8% | 99% | 87.9% |
| Routine | 28 working days | 88.2% | 83.6% | 94.8% | 89.1% |
| % of repairs due to be completed within 24 hours completed within target | | 99.4% | 91.7% | 90.4% | 93.9% |
| % of all repairs completed in target | | 96.4% | 94.4% | 98.38% | |

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

- 5.35 The Council's reported performance in delivering response repairs for the emergency and urgent categories has improved over the last three years and is well above the national median for 2006/07. Its performance in the urgent and

- routine repairs categories worsened in 2006/07 as a result of restructuring within Building Services, but improved considerably in 2007/08. The Council only includes jobs completed by its in-house contractor in its reported repairs performance. While this means its reported performance figures are not fully accurate, the impact of this omission is likely to be minimal.
- 5.36 In February 2008, the Council started to give a repairs receipt to tenants using its repairs by appointment service and it now confirms appointments in writing and by phone. Its policy is to tell tenants when they report a repair of the target time and date for the repair to be completed, but it does not give tenants a written record of their reported repair for other categories.
- 5.37 The Council does not fully comply with its statutory duties on the Right to Repair. It gives tenants information on the Right to Repair (RTR) in its tenants' handbook, but does not give tenants an annual reminder. It advises tenants when they report a repair if it is a qualifying repair and provides them with a leaflet on their RTR on request. However, it has not had reliable information on its performance in completing RTR repairs within the statutory timescales, and so it has not paid compensation to any tenants. We also found that it did not have an alternative contractor to advise tenants of. However, the Council responded positively to our feedback and tackled some of these weaknesses during our inspection. It now monitors RTR failures, and its first report for April 2008 showed it had no failures. It has also appointed an alternative contractor.
- 5.38 Pre and post inspections are important ways of ensuring that repairs are carried out to a high standard and targeted accurately. The Council pre-inspected 19% of its repairs in 2007/08, and as at December 2007 had completed almost all of these within its target of one day. It recognises that it pre-inspects too many repairs and has introduced some measures aimed at addressing this, and a target to reduce these to 10% by 2008/09. The Council post-inspected 13.5% of all repairs in 2007/08. It closely monitors the results of these and ensures that contractors rectify any failures. However, it does not have a targeted approach to selecting repairs to post-inspect and this limits its ability to focus on repairs that represent a risk to the Council.

- 5.39 The Council's 2006 Tenant Satisfaction Survey found that 74% of respondents were satisfied with the repairs service overall; 13% were dissatisfied with the length of time to complete repairs; and, 10% were dissatisfied with the quality of repairs. In response to this, the Council focused on improving its performance in completing routine repairs on time and increased the number of post-inspections to check on the quality of repairs. The Council collects satisfaction information on repairs and planned maintenance from tenants when it carries out post-inspections.
- 5.40 The Council does not regularly scrutinise its contractors' performance; this is a significant weakness. In December 2007, the Council transferred its repairs inspection staff, who are responsible for checking the quality and costs of repairs, from its Technical Services department to its in-house repairs contractor. It also delegated the collection of tenant satisfaction information on repairs fully to its in-house contractor. When we raised this issue during the inspection, the Council accepted that it needs to put in place proportionate and robust client-led scrutiny of its contractors' performance to ensure it can demonstrate transparency and control in its repairs services.
- 5.41 In summary, North Ayrshire Council's response repairs service is accessible and responsive to the needs of vulnerable tenants. Its performance in completing repairs on time has significantly improved, although its performance figures are not fully accurate. It does not fully comply with the statutory requirements of the Right to Repair scheme, but took immediate steps to tackle this. It is aware it carries out too many pre-inspections and is trying to address this. It uses post-inspections to monitor quality and cost, although it does not target its use of these. It does not yet have proportionate and robust client-led scrutiny of its contractors' performance in the repairs services; this is a significant weakness.

Value for money in procurement

- 5.42 North Ayrshire Council's budgeted resources for 2007/08 for repairs and maintenance spend per house were £1,289. This compares with a Scottish figure of £1,206 per house. The Council has spent 24% of its maintenance budget on responsive repairs compared to 76% on planned maintenance over the last three years.

- 5.43 The Council recognises that the number of repairs it carries out as emergencies is high at 33.8% of all its repairs in 2007/08. In February 2008, it introduced technical support and additional training for its call centre staff to help ensure it diagnoses repairs correctly. It was too soon at the time of our inspection to tell if this was having an impact.
- 5.44 The Council has reduced the number of repairs that it cancels from 9,564 in 2005/06 to 2,846 (or 4.8% of all its repairs) in 2007/08. It cancels 75% of these because tenants have not provided access; it is improving its appointment system to address this issue. It has reduced the level of variations from 76.7% in 2005/06 to 68.8% in 2007/08 by introducing a range of control measures. However, this is still high and the total additional cost of variations in 2007/08 was £850,000. As we report above, the Council does not have effective scrutiny of its contractors' performance; this is a significant risk to the Council in demonstrating full control of its maintenance expenditure.
- 5.45 The Council commissioned an independent review of areas where it could improve value for money in 2007. This highlighted reducing the high level of variations and day rates (40% of all works orders contain some aspect of these) and by offering a discount on voids or volume works. However, it has made only limited progress in addressing these.
- 5.46 The Council has a corporate procurement strategy that outlines the Council's intention to consider modern procurement options and it includes this objective in the Technical Services' service plan. However, with the exception of its gas safety contract, the Council has continued to adopt a traditional approach to procurement in the majority of its response repairs and capital works. It had competitively re-tendered its gas safety contract at the time of our inspection to introduce greater efficiencies and improve its performance.
- 5.47 The Council has not involved tenants in developing its procurement strategy and options or in selecting individual contractors.
- 5.48 The Council uses its in-house contractor – Building Services – to complete its response repairs, cyclical/planned maintenance and elements of its capital

- works. The Council established a measured term contract in 2001 for 3 years with an option to renew it for a further 2 years. It has extended this contract beyond the optional two years. The Council based the contract on a Schedule of Rates (SOR), and it has increased the rates annually to reflect inflation rises. The Council has not reviewed the contract or market tested the prices in its SOR, although it has done some limited benchmarking with other local authorities. This is a significant weakness that limits its ability to demonstrate that its contract provides Best Value. In response to our feedback, the Council told us that it will not extend its contracts again and will competitively tender to ensure its works rates and quality are competitive. It also told us that it plans to do this quickly, although this may not give it sufficient time to fully investigate the most advantageous procurement options for the Council or to assess the construction market to test how best to package its contracts.
- 5.49 The Council procures services for capital works from external contractors for specialist services not offered by Building Services. It uses traditional procurement methods for its housing investment programmes, and procures contracts on a price/quality basis. Due to the problems with the Council's ICT system, it sometimes gives its external contractors batches of work on a monthly or quarterly basis, rather than on an annual or longer basis. This does not allow it to maximise value for money in its procurement.
- 5.50 Historically, the Council has carried out its capital works as single projects. It is planning to package some of its capital programmes. For example it will package re-wiring with central heating, kitchens and bathrooms towards the end of 2008, where these are carried out by a single contractor. However, it has not investigated the potential to achieve economies of scale through this.
- 5.51 In summary, the Council does a high number of emergency repairs and its variations are substantial, although declining. The absence of robust independent scrutiny of its contractor is a risk for the Council in demonstrating control of its expenditure. It has a commitment in its corporate and service plans to develop more modern approaches to procurement for its maintenance contracts, but its current practices do not demonstrate a focus on value for

money. The Council is taking steps to begin to examine its procurement options, although it is not yet clear if this will deliver the most advantageous outcomes.

6. How well is North Ayrshire delivering services for homeless people?

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

Grade

North Ayrshire Council has achieved a **B** grade for services to homeless people. This is a **good** performance.

- 6.1 Our overall assessment is that North Ayrshire Council's homelessness service has many strengths, but also some areas where improvement is needed. The Council has a generally good awareness of its performance and areas where it can improve, although we did find some areas where it was less aware of its performance. The homelessness service has been under-going major organisational change and the Council has worked well to remain customer focused during this period. We saw strong evidence of the Council's willingness and capacity to improve its homelessness services and this is a significant factor in our grade assessment.
- 6.2 The Council has made good progress and has already met the Scottish Government's interim 2009 target, by assessing 88% of homeless applicants as in priority need. The Council's on demand assessment interview service means that homeless people do not wait long to speak to a homeless officer. Its temporary accommodation is of a good standard. The Council has a strong focus on the prevention of homelessness with a good range of initiatives and good partnership working.
- 6.3 We found a number of weaknesses in how the Council manages its assessment of homelessness applications. The Council also recognises that it has a number of areas where it could make improvements to the service, including the quality of its decision letters and review process and its recording of contact with homeless people.

Access to service

- 6.4 North Ayrshire received 1,525 applications for assistance from homeless people in 2006/07, a decrease of 7% on the previous year's figure of 1,638. The Council told us that the number of applications had decreased by a further 2% to 1,497 in 2007/08. In 2006/07, the equivalent of 2.39% of all households in the Council's area made a homelessness application, less than the national figure of 2.46%.
- 6.5 The Council appointed its Homeless Assessment, Prevention and Advice team (HAPA) in 2007 as part of its strategy to improve the quality of the service. Through its major assessment and option appraisal of its homelessness service in 2005, the Council recognised that providing the service from eight offices and with non-specialist staff was resulting in inconsistencies in its approach. The HAPA team moved into a new office conveniently located in Irvine town centre shortly before the beginning of our inspection.
- 6.6 The Council provides an on demand interview service for people who use its homelessness services. It changed its staffing arrangements during our inspection to improve the service by reducing the amount of time people wait before they are seen. The Council has also improved access for homeless service users by extending office opening hours from 8.00am to 6.00pm. This is a good customer focused approach. The Council advised us that it will evaluate the effectiveness of this approach after six months.
- 6.7 Homeless people can contact any of the Council's housing offices to arrange an appointment for a homelessness interview. The Council issues travel warrants to those who require to travel to its offices and homelessness staff arrange home visits and conduct interviews outwith the office on request. Homeless people or people threatened with homelessness on the island of Arran can access the Council's service directly by telephone or by contacting the islands' Social Services Office, Citizen's Advice Bureau or the local RSL to telephone the HAPA team to arrange an interview. We saw that the Council has good arrangements to assess the impacts of centralising its service on accessibility, including a questionnaire it issues to service users to get their views of the new service.

- 6.8 The Council has good publicity arrangements to promote the launch of its new service through advertising in the press and on a local radio station. It also provides general information on its homelessness service through a leaflet, a poster and on its website. The leaflet, which is plain language accredited, states in a range of languages that the Council can provide information in other languages and formats. The Council is aware that it could improve the homelessness section of its website and told us that it has started to review it and aims to complete this in November 2008.
- 6.9 The Council has recently distributed new publicity material, but we did not always find it on display. When we highlighted this to the Council it immediately investigated the reasons why and arranged for its partner agencies to display the materials. The Council told us that it carries out monthly checks to ensure that all material is displayed and replenished as required.
- 6.10 The Council prominently displays its out of hours freephone telephone number outside its homelessness and housing offices. It uses experienced officers, who it has trained to HomePoint Level 2, to deliver its emergency out of hours service from its hostel in Ardrossan. The Council provides transport to help people get to emergency accommodation. It records its delivery of this service well, including why it does not provide temporary accommodation. It attempts to contact anyone who fails to attend a homelessness interview the day it provides them with temporary accommodation out of hours; this is a good approach to minimise lost contacts.
- 6.11 The Council provides emergency bed and breakfast accommodation on Arran and conducts homelessness assessment interviews there on request. The Council will also extend the period that it will house an applicant in bed and breakfast accommodation on Arran where an applicant is likely to secure permanent accommodation quickly. The Council's staff guidance does not outline how this process should be managed.
- 6.12 The Council funds two Mental Health Housing Officers who work jointly with the HAPA team and the local community health team. The officers provide housing advice and information to people who may be homeless and who are about to be

- discharged from hospital. These officers are also closely involved in the Care Programme Approach (CPA) - a joint multi agency initiative to assist people previously in long term care to return to the community. This is a positive approach. The Council does not currently monitor the outcomes for these service users, but told us that it plans to improve performance monitoring in this area.
- 6.13 The Council has recently started to record how applicants are directed from other agencies to its homelessness service through its analysis of a questionnaire for service users. It has also commissioned the local Community Housing Advocacy Project (CHAP) to review all aspects of the homelessness service including how people access it. However, it does not operate a formal referral process from other agencies to its homelessness service or monitor levels of contact. As a result, the Council cannot demonstrate that its access arrangements are fully effective.
- 6.14 North Ayrshire participates in a prison discharge outreach service with South and East Ayrshire Councils, to provide housing options advice and a homelessness interview for prisoners due for release from HMP Kilmarnock. The Council had 47 referrals through the scheme in 2007.
- 6.15 The Council has recently started to record all initial approaches to the homelessness service and now monitors the length of time from when someone approaches it for assistance and when it completes an assessment interview. Where an applicant fails to attend an interview, its officers proactively try to rearrange the appointment. However, the Council only records an approach for assistance as a formal application at the first interview, and so may be under-reporting the number of approaches for assistance from homeless people and the length of time it takes to deal with their application. However, the impact of this is now likely to be minimal due to its recent introduction of on demand assessment interviews and the Council's proactive approach at contacting those who do not appear for interviews.
- 6.16 In summary, the Council is working well to improve access to its new centralised service, although it is too early to fully assess the impacts of its new approach.

We saw that the Council is making improvements to how people can access the service, is adopting a strong customer focused approach and has good arrangements to assess how the new service develops. It has some weaknesses in how it records and monitors access to its service.

Advice and prevention

- 6.17 In 2007, North Ayrshire published its Homelessness Strategy for the period 2007-2010; this includes its action plan with SMART targets for preventing and alleviating homelessness. The Council developed its Homelessness Strategy in conjunction with its Local Housing Strategy (LHS) in which it identifies the prevention and eradication of homelessness as one of its key strategic objectives. It has a number of working groups with partner organisations that work well together to implement its action plan and to monitor progress.
- 6.18 The Council funds a Health Visitor post for homeless people in partnership with North Ayrshire Community Health Partnership. Through this it gives homeless people, particularly those residing in hostels, easy access to health care, and gives its staff directly involved with homeless people advice on health promotion and support.
- 6.19 Early in 2008, the Council produced a Housing Information and Advice Strategy in partnership with other advice providers in its area. It has had an initial meeting with all partners to progress the implementation of the strategy's action plan. This is a positive step, although it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the strategy.
- 6.20 As part of its restructuring, the Council now funds two specialist advice and information officers to give housing and homelessness advice. These officers have carried out over 400 advice and information interviews, including 160 with homeless people. The Council recently started monthly housing advice surgeries on Arran and Cumbrae. The Council does not monitor the quality of the advice and information it provides, but in response to our feedback it now plans to include this as part of its revised monitoring arrangements.
- 6.21 The Council has an agreement with CHAP to provide independent advice and information to homeless people and those threatened with homelessness. It also

- funds CHAP to deliver a housing education project for young people in all its secondary schools. An evaluation of the project showed that 90% of young people found it useful. CHAP has also carried out homelessness prevention work with local youth groups on behalf of the Council.
- 6.22 The Council delivers a good range of initiatives and works in partnership with other organisations to prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness. These include:
- Barnardo's Families Project offering outreach support to families at risk of homelessness;
 - the pan-Ayrshire Intensive Support Service which provides support to homeless people with chaotic lifestyles, managed by the Simon Community;
 - a Tenancy Support Prevention Initiative which offers mediation and support to homeless or potentially homeless young people to help them to return home;
 - its rent deposit guarantee scheme which has helped 268 people to secure a tenancy in the private sector;
 - its Mortgage to Rent scheme which has helped 23 families since 2006;
 - a Home Security Project, managed by the Council's antisocial behaviour team, to support people experiencing domestic abuse to stay in their own home;
 - 404 permanent furnished tenancies for homeless people; and
 - the multi-agency North Ayrshire Violence Against Women Forum.
- 6.23 Her Majesties Inspectorate of Education recently reported that the Council exemplified best practice in protecting children and minimising the impact of homelessness on vulnerable children. It does this through offering assistance to help them to remain at their own school and by supporting families to stay in their own homes.
- 6.24 The level of repeat presentations to the Council increased from 3.3% in 2004/05 to 6.1% in 2006/07; this is still below the 2006/07 national figure of 8.6%. The Council told us that the figure has decreased to 4.1% for 2007/08. The Council has commissioned research to understand more fully the reasons for repeat homelessness for people with drug, alcohol and associated mental health issues. The Council plans to work with South and East Ayrshire Councils and NHS

- Ayrshire and Arran to use the outcome of the research to review service delivery for this client group throughout Ayrshire.
- 6.25 The Council reported in 2006/07 that 74.4% of homeless people it housed were still in their tenancy after 12 months which was lower than the 83.8% of tenancies sustained by other people housed by the Council. The Council told us that in 2007/08 the proportion of homeless people who have sustained their tenancies has improved to 77.4%. During our inspection, the Council analysed this and told us it found no clear reasons for the difference in tenancy sustainment between homeless people and other tenants.
- 6.26 The Council has recently set up a pilot initiative with local RSLs for them to notify it when they issue tenants with a notice of proceedings. This is in advance of the introduction of section 11 of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003. The Council has also sent letters to private landlords who participate in the rent deposit guarantee scheme, and to local solicitors, advising of the Council's role in implementing the requirements of section 11. This is a good approach.
- 6.27 As soon as the Council takes the decision to evict a tenant, its housing officers immediately notify the HAPA team to arrange a homelessness assessment interview. The Council also has plans to initiate this internal communication earlier in this process and to adopt a case conference approach.
- 6.28 In summary, North Ayrshire has a good and improving approach to the provision of advice and prevention of homelessness. Prevention is the Council's key strategic priority and it has a wide range of initiatives and partnerships to achieve this goal. It has taken positive steps to provide advice and information through its recent appointment of specialist advice and information officers. It has a low level of repeat homelessness.

Assessment of homeless people

- 6.29 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.

6.30 Scottish Government statistics show that North Ayrshire Council found 75% of people who applied to it to be homeless in 2006/07; just above the national figure of 73%. The Council found 81% of these cases to be in priority need, compared to the national figure of 77%.

| | 2004/05 | | 2005/06 | | 2006/07 | |
|--|---------|----------|---------|----------|---------|----------|
| | Council | Scotland | Council | Scotland | Council | Scotland |
| All applications assessed in period | 1,754 | 57,030 | 1,653 | 60,058 | 1,525 | 58,663 |
| % priority unintentional | 48.1% | 53% | 48.4% | 52% | 57% | 52% |
| % priority intentional | 2.7% | 2% | 3.5% | 2% | 3.6% | 2% |
| % non-priority | 14% | 18% | 15.3% | 17% | 13.6% | 17% |
| % not homeless | 11.4% | 9% | 11.4% | 9% | 11.4% | 8% |
| % lost contact/withdrew before assessment | 14.6% | 12% | 14% | 13% | 2.68% | 13% |
| % resolved prior to assessment | 9.2% | 6% | 7.4% | 7% | 10.7% | 7% |
| Proportion of assessments completed within 28 days | 63% | - | 64% | - | 85.1% | - |

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

6.31 The Council advised us that prior to the establishment of the HAPA team, it did not always accurately report statistical information to the Scottish Government. The Council is about to complete a major exercise which it started in June 2007 to rectify inaccurate information that it had previously reported.

6.32 North Ayrshire Council found 57% of all applicants in 2006/07 to be in priority need, up from 48.1% in 2004/05. This is higher than the national figure of 52% for 2006/07. The Council advised us that this figure has increased in 2007/08 to 59.2%. The proportion of people that the Council assessed as non priority has fallen from 15.3% in 2005/06 to 13.6% in 2006/07 and the Council told us that it has significantly decreased to 7.28% in 2007/08. The Council has begun the process of expanding its priority categories to meet government targets for the abolition of priority need in 2012, and this has now started to impact on its homeless decisions.

6.33 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's interim target for 2009 was to assess 88% of homeless

- applicants as priority need. It has made good progress in meeting this target and told us that it recorded 88.3% of applications as in priority need for 2007/08.
- 6.34 Between 2005/06 and 2007/08 North Ayrshire recorded a decrease from 14% to 12% in the figure for those that it lost contact with or who withdrew prior to assessment decision. In 2006/07, the Council recorded a figure of 2.68% but told us that this was not reliable due to inaccuracies in data recording.
- 6.35 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 2006/07 the Council recorded that it had improved its performance from 63% of decisions within 28 days in 2004/05 to 85% in 2006/07 but that this decreased to 72% in 2007/08.
- 6.36 We saw that the Council's assessment interviews were comprehensive and that officers were sensitive to applicants' circumstances. We spoke to service users after their interviews and all were satisfied with the service they had received. However, we found a number of weaknesses in the Council's assessment of homelessness, including:
- limited investigations and incomplete application forms;
 - poor recording and audit trails for its decision making, particularly for intentionally homeless decisions; and
 - lack of recording of final outcomes for homeless applicants.
- 6.37 The Council took immediate steps to resolve these issues during the inspection and told us that in future that a senior manager will verify all assessment decisions. It arranged meetings with officers to highlight problem areas, updated staff guidance and plans to provide refresher training courses for assessment officers.
- 6.38 The Council told us that it carried out a 10% audit of its homelessness decisions each month, although we saw that it had only completed one audit since the establishment of the new team. When we highlighted this to the Council it acted promptly and started a weekly audit during the inspection.

- 6.39 We found that the Council's decision letters did not always include the required information to applicants about the reasons for its decisions. This could make it difficult for an applicant to understand the reasons for a particular decision. Again, the Council accepted this criticism during the inspection and told us that a senior manager would now check all decision letters.
- 6.40 The Code of Guidance recommends that councils should keep applicants informed of progress with their application. We found that the Council did not always record details of its contact with homeless applicants. However, since April 2008, it contacts homeless applicants weekly to update them on progress.
- 6.41 The Council has a duty to provide non-priority and homeless applicants with advice and assistance to help them secure accommodation. It does not record in its case files when it has provided advice and instead records this information on its advice and information database. The Council immediately agreed to make this information available in its case files in response to our findings.
- 6.42 The Council has a duty to advise homeless applicants of their statutory right to request a review of its homelessness decisions. It notifies people of their right to request a review within 21 days in its decision letters and it conducts an informal review prior to the formal review to resolve issues quickly when it can. It also has weekly review meetings to minimise the time applicants have to wait and it ensures that a representative from the local independent advice service attends. However, we also saw some weaknesses in the Council's approach to reviews of decisions including:
- gaps in its recording of relevant information on case files;
 - poor quality letters on the outcomes of its reviews; and
 - no evidence to show that it made use of information from reviews to identify potential improvements to the service.
- The Council responded quickly to address these weaknesses, and informed us that a senior manager would conduct all future reviews of decisions and issue outcome letters. The Council has also set up a new appeals database to improve its monitoring of these arrangements.

6.43 In summary, the Council’s approach to assessing homelessness applications is fair. It has made good progress towards achieving the 2009 and 2012 homelessness targets. We found weaknesses in the way that it manages its homeless assessments, its recording of some of its outcomes and in its review of its decisions. The Council responded quickly to address these issues when we raised them during the inspection.

Securing accommodation

6.44 North Ayrshire Council uses a range of temporary accommodation for homeless people including;

- 170 furnished self contained flats owned by the Council, RSLs and the private sector;
- bed and breakfast establishments;
- a council owned hostel with 11 rooms and 9 self contained flats (one of which is fully adapted for wheelchair access);
- a hostel with 24 rooms managed by a local RSL; and
- 28 units of supported interim accommodation for young people managed by a charitable organisation.

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

| | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|
| | Council | Council | Council |
| Number of homeless households provided with temporary hostel accommodation | 684 | 767 | 845 |
| Percentage accommodated in temporary hostel accommodation | 45.4% | 48% | 56.8% |
| Average length of stay for homeless households in temporary hostel accommodation (days) | 50 | 65 | 25 |
| Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation | 222 | 83 | 11 |
| Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation | 14.7% | 5.2% | 0.7% |
| Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days) | 22. | 19 | 7 |
| No. of families with dependent children accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation | 602 | 747 | 631 |
| Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation | 40.0% | 46.8% | 42.4% |
| Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (days) | 91 | 101 | 75 |

- 6.46 From 2004/05 to 2006/07 the number of households the Council placed in temporary accommodation decreased from 1508 to 1487 but increased to 1609 in 2007/08. Over half of the Council's temporary accommodation placements are in hostels. The proportion of households it accommodates in hostels increased over the last 3 years from 45.4% in 2004/05 to 56.8% in 2006/07.
- 6.47 The Council has worked well to significantly decrease its use of bed and breakfast accommodation from 14.7% in 2004/05 to 0.7% in 2006/07. The Council provides homeless applicants from Arran with bed and breakfast accommodation for a limited period as it has no housing stock on Arran. The Council has plans to explore opportunities to develop links with the private sector on Arran and Cumbrae to improve accommodation provision for homeless people.
- 6.48 The average length of stay for homeless people in hostel accommodation provided by the Council has significantly decreased from 50 days in 2004/05 to 34 days in 2007/08. The Council moves the majority of people in hostel accommodation into temporary furnished flats following a support assessment and takes account of applicants' needs where possible. The average length of stay for people it places in furnished flats has continuously improved from 91 days in 2004/05 to 71 days in 2007/08.
- 6.49 North Ayrshire commissioned research in 2005 to determine how it would address the impact of the abolition of priority need on its temporary accommodation requirements. In response, the Council increased its supply of temporary accommodation through use of its own stock, and through partnership arrangements with local RSLs and the private sector. It plans to commission further research to review its supply of temporary accommodation.
- 6.50 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 had no reported breaches of the Order in the last three years. It has a positive approach to ensure that it moves families from hostel accommodation to temporary furnished flats as quickly as possible.

- 6.51 We visited a number of temporary furnished flats, hostels and a bed and breakfast establishment used by North Ayrshire. All of the furnished flats were of a good standard. The Council's Ardrossan hostel has nine self contained flats attached to the main building to give homeless people opportunities for more independent living. These were of a high standard. All of the service users we spoke to were happy with the temporary accommodation provided by the Council and a recent peer review exercise of the Council's temporary accommodation found it to be of a high quality.
- 6.52 The Council provides good support to homeless people in its temporary accommodation including:
- an outreach support worker to help them prepare for independent living;
 - property support officers responsible for the maintenance of the property, arrears management and furniture storage;
 - access to health services through the public health nurse and the hostel support staff; and
 - access to Children's Integration Workers, managed by Barnardo's and funded by the Council, to minimise the impact of homelessness on children.
- 6.53 The Council records reasons for refusals of temporary accommodation, and it told us that in 2007/08 one in every three offers was refused. It advised us that the main reason for refusal is due to people wanting to stay in a specific area, and it is trying to address this through increasing its supply of temporary furnished flat accommodation across its area.
- 6.54 The Council works with Quarriers to provide two interim supported accommodation projects for vulnerable young people; one for young vulnerable women, and another for young men and women to help them to move towards independent living. The Council has good arrangements to ensure that it discharges its duty to these homeless applicants.
- 6.55 In 2006/07 the Council secured permanent accommodation for 76% of the people it assessed as having priority need. This figure excludes lost contacts, withdrawn applications and those cases resolved prior to discharge of duty. This is a good outcome and higher than the national figure of 73%.

- 6.56 North Ayrshire told us that it took an average of 18 weeks to house homeless applicants in 2007/08, up from 15 weeks in 2006/07. The Council operates in a challenging context with demand for housing exceeding supply in some areas. At the time of the inspection, the Council was trying to secure accommodation for 173 households.
- 6.57 The Council has set a target of allocating between 45% and 50% of its houses to homeless applicants. In 2006/07, it allocated 48 % of its lets to homeless people to whom it had a duty to secure permanent accommodation but this decreased to 43.5% in 2007/08. The Council told us that this was because it is currently involved in a regeneration initiative in Irvine which has reduced the overall number of lets it has had available.
- 6.58 The Code of Guidance recommends that homeless people should be treated on the same basis as others on the number of offers they receive, and that Councils should avoid allocating houses in hard to let areas to homeless people. While the Council currently provides homeless applicants with one offer of permanent housing and other applicants with two, it has firm plans to end these different practices following our inspection. In addition, while homeless applicants are able to choose a wider range of letting areas than other applicants, they cannot choose to exclude hard to let areas. Other applicants are not restricted in this way. The Council told us that it does this to help secure permanent accommodation for homeless applicants more quickly. We saw that the Council offers homeless applicants a similar quality of house as other applicants.
- 6.59 In 2007/08, the Council lost contact with 171 people to whom it had a duty to house, up from 132 in 2006/07. The Council told us that this was due to it correcting inaccurate data that it had previously reported. It also reported outcomes as “not known” for another 65 applicants in 2006/07 but told us that this figure decreased to 46 in 2007/08. The Council now attempts to contact all homeless applicants on a weekly basis to update them on their application and to minimise lost contacts.
- 6.60 The Council offers a tenancy support service and a furniture package to homeless applicants who take up a permanent tenancy in its houses to help

- them sustain their tenancy. The Council advised us that recent changes in grant funding arrangements will allow it to expand its furnished tenancy service to include partner RSLs by autumn 2008. This is a positive development.
- 6.61 The Council works well with its RSL partners and uses section 5 referrals to secure accommodation for homeless people. The Council made 90 section 5 referrals to RSLs in 2006/07 and 70% of these resulted in a successful let. It increased the number of referrals to 98 in 2007/08, and 73% resulted in lets to homeless people. The Council told us it plans to review its approach to section 5 referrals prior to the introduction of the CAP later this year.
- 6.62 In summary, the Council is good at securing accommodation for homeless applicants. It has significantly increased its supply of temporary housing, which is of a high standard. It has also significantly reduced its reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation. The Council houses homeless people relatively quickly and works well with its partners to secure accommodation and provides a good range of support. The Council is working to tackle its loss of contact with some homeless people, the number of refusals of temporary accommodation and the number of offers and choice it gives to homeless people.

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

Leadership and strategic planning

- 7.1 The Council has a clear strategic planning framework. It has completed a draft Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) which it submitted to the Scottish Government in April 2008. The SOA is the Council's over-arching statement of its strategic focus. It outlines the 34 North Ayrshire Outcomes that articulate its contribution to the national priorities set by the Scottish Government and local priorities it identified through consultation with its strategic partners in the local community. The Council sets out its values and its full range of corporate objectives in its Community Plan and Council Plan, which it has used to develop its 34 SOA outcomes. It developed both of these plans with input from a wide range of staff and local stakeholders, and it regularly monitors and reports on its progress against its objectives. Most partner organisations that responded to our request for information were positive about working with the Council and about the strategic direction it has adopted. All of the Council's strategic plans are available on its web-site.
- 7.2 The Council's service plans demonstrate clear links to its corporate strategic objectives, LHS objectives and, where appropriate, its homelessness strategy. These service objectives are supported by generally SMART action plans and it regularly monitors and reports its progress against these. In this way, the Council sets a clear direction for its housing and homelessness services.
- 7.3 The Council's timescales for actions within its service plan for Technical Services are less precise; it has not been able to agree at what point actions should be completed within its three year planning period. The Council has been operating this service without a full staff complement and began to review its Property Services structures during our inspection. It has set objectives when there is some uncertainty around its operational capacity to deliver, and this is a risk for the Council. This is evident in the Council's decision to review its maintenance procurement options whilst its service objective is to adopt contracts based on partnering principles.

- 7.4 We saw strong and effective leadership in the Council's Housing Services and support from elected members that has enabled it to deliver consistent performance improvements and a range of service enhancements for customers. The Council has also shown that it can manage change effectively; for example, we saw that it has remained focused on its service users as it worked through major changes to its homelessness services. We saw that its staff have a good awareness of Housing Services' objectives and it promotes a culture that supports staff development. We found more limited awareness of objectives in Technical Services, which in part reflects the uncertainty over direction for the service. The Council's partner organisations were generally positive about working with the Council on developing and reviewing its service objectives.

Performance management, planning and reporting

- 7.5 The Council has a comprehensive approach to performance management at a corporate level. It reports quarterly on progress against milestones within its Community and Council plans. The Council's Cabinet/Executive system, supported by Scrutiny Groups, assess and challenge performance outcomes presented in twice-yearly service performance reports. The Council makes these reports available on its website. Audit Scotland's Best Value audit in 2005 highlighted as a strength the Council's corporate performance reports that present performance "highs" and "lows". It also includes in these reports trend information and comparisons against other councils' performance.
- 7.6 The Council has an excellent approach to performance management in its Housing Services. We found a significant strength in its very high level of self-awareness of its performance. We also found many examples of it using performance information to drive service improvements over a sustained period. The Council has established and continues to develop a robust Performance Management Framework (PMF) which contains a range of performance indicators with challenging improvement targets. It reports on these monthly, are the focal point of managers' performance review meetings and it gives them to all staff. The Council has a clear commitment to continuous improvement in Housing Services, demonstrated by:
- its use of personal development plans for staff;

- its participation in a range of benchmarking networks and in peer reviews;
 - collecting a wide range of information on the needs and aspirations of its customers; and
 - piloting the Public Services improvement Framework (PSiF) later this year.
- 7.7 The Council is working well to develop its PMF for its homelessness services in the context of significant changes to how the service is structured and delivered. The Council has a good awareness of its performance and where it needs to make improvements. It is still relatively early in this change process, but we saw that it is making good progress overall.
- 7.8 The Council has outlined a range of performance indicators for asset management and repairs services and does some limited benchmarking. However, we found that it had a limited awareness of weaker performance and areas for improvement, some of which are significant. In addition, the Council's main contractor produces the majority of the performance information for repairs and investment and we found no evidence that the accuracy or reliability of this information is regularly assessed independently of the contractor before the Council report it to elected members and the public. In response to our feedback, the Council intends to put in place independent scrutiny arrangements.

Customer focus and influence

- 7.9 The Council works to published Service Standards which it developed in consultation with its tenants. These cover all of its key Housing Services and it publicises them in Council publications and at its offices. The Council has an excellent approach to public reporting of its performance against its targets and service standards through;
- its annual performance report "Performance Matters" and on its website;
 - its tenants newsletter "Tenancy Matters", and at its annual tenants conferences;
 - its Council newspaper and local newspapers; and
 - on TV screens in the reception areas of its offices.
- 7.10 The Council makes housing information easy to access for its customers. Its forms, leaflets and documents are in Plain English and it makes them available

- on request in a range of formats and community languages. It does not always advertise its translation service on its publications, but it has plans to revise this. The Council also offers home visits for homelessness interviews, has introduced portable hearing loops and has plans to begin using its recently received Braille machine. The Council is aware that its web-site requires some improvement.
- 7.11 The Council has been slow in its progress on converting its housing offices to achieve compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. At the time of our inspection it had not completed the necessary works to any of its housing offices or to its new centralised homelessness services office. The Council told us that it is conducting a corporate customer contact review which will affect how the Council receives its customers in future. As this may impact on which offices the Council intends to continue to use, it has decided to wait until it completes the review before prioritising its housing offices for investment. It is aware of what works are required in its housing offices and how much this will cost and offers home visits to tenants who cannot easily access its offices. However, the Council is unclear when it will complete its contact review. This is a weakness.
- 7.12 We found that the Council's Housing Services has an excellent approach to gathering the views of its customers. It uses a range of techniques and approaches to gauge customer satisfaction and collect feedback on its performance including:
- bi-annual large scale tenant satisfaction survey;
 - regular service-specific satisfaction surveys;
 - new tenants survey;
 - exit surveys for people using homelessness services;
 - estate walk-about;
 - its annual tenants conferences; and
 - mystery shopping by tenants to test service standards and quality.
- 7.13 We also saw many examples of the Council using the feedback it gets from these sources to change how it delivers its services.

- 7.14 The Council has developed feedback mechanisms for its asset management and repairs services, but we found weaknesses in how it collects and validates customer satisfaction information. The Council responded well to our feedback and introduced an improved approach during our inspection.
- 7.15 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires North Ayrshire Council to publish a tenant participation strategy. The Act also requires landlords to inform and consult tenants about significant changes to its services and take tenants' views into account when making decisions that will affect them. The Council published its first tenant participation strategy in 2004. It commissioned an independent review of its strategy in 2007 and completed its own scheduled review during our inspection. The Council has also received independent accreditation for its approach to tenant participation and a good practice award.
- 7.16 The Council has an excellent range of consultative forums; for example, its Housing Forum, major repairs working group, Tenancy Matters editorial group, allocations policy review group, and LHS group. It also provides free transport and crèche facilities for some of its tenant events. Tenants that we spoke to who participate in the Council's consultation groups were very supportive of the Council's approach and generally positive about the influence their views have on the Council's decisions. Overall, this is an area of significant strength for the Council.
- 7.17 The Council supports 11 Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs) and 9 non-registered groups. It provides targeted support and resources based on the stage of development of the group outlined by its "traffic light" system. All of the tenant groups that we spoke to during the inspection commented very positively about the organisational support that they receive from the Council.
- 7.18 The Council's 2008/09 budget preparations included a requirement for 3% efficiency savings across all services except housing. As part of this process, the Council decided to replace its sheltered housing wardens service, which is funded from its Social Services budget, with an alarm service supported by mobile alert teams. The Council did not consult with its tenants in its sheltered

housing before it made this decision. The Council took legal advice after it had made its decision and its view is that it was not required to consult on the changes it is making as they are not significant. However, the Council told us that it did consult when it previously changed its wardens service and that it regularly consults on other service changes that affect its tenants. In addition, its tenant participation strategy clearly outlines its aim “to ensure that tenants are able to influence the delivery of services at all levels” and its sheltered housing tenants handbook refers to “tenants influencing decisions and taking part in what happens”. The Council has now notified its sheltered housing tenants of its intention to replace its wardens and has also embarked on a series of individual meetings with tenants to complete housing needs assessments. While the Council is generally excellent at consulting with its tenants on its services, in this instance it has not communicated effectively.

- 7.19 The Council provides an accessible complaints process with good monitoring and responsive, regular updates to customers who have made a complaint. We also saw examples where it has used complaints outcomes to help shape service improvements.

Equalities and diversity

- 7.20 The Council has a comprehensive corporate equalities strategic framework covering race equality, equal opportunities, disability equality, gender equality and a violence against women strategy. It sets equalities objectives in its SOA, Council plan and Community plan and produces an annual equality report which outlines its progress against its objectives and service targets. We found strong support from elected members and staff for the Council's equalities objectives.
- 7.21 The Council has an excellent focus on equalities in its Housing, Technical and Building Services. The Council operates a Housing Services equalities working group and completes equalities impact assessments for all of its policy and service reviews. It works with specific service standards for equalities outcomes and it is currently developing a Housing Services equalities policy to modify its corporate policy around housing issues. The Council launched its accessibility policy during our inspection. It is also developing a base-line of equalities information for adapted properties, applications, allocations and evictions and

through its planned housing needs assessment it aims to get better information to help it plan its services. The Council has increased its resources for equalities activities and demonstrates its commitment to equalities through:

- employing a BME development worker and two mental health housing officers;
- providing a disabled persons housing service to assess housing needs and complete referrals for aids and adaptations;
- a good aids and adaptations service;
- giving priority to vulnerable tenants when they order repairs;
- providing regular equalities training for its staff;
- providing a successful Home Security Project for women experiencing domestic abuse; and
- its plans to adopt LGBT housing service standards.

Efficiency and value for money

7.22 In 2008/09, the Council charges its tenants an average rent of £50.59 per week. In 2006/07 it charged £44.19, below the Scottish figure of £46.65. It has increased its rents by an increase of 7% each year since 2005/06. The Council's total rental income base is reducing each year through Right to Buy sales (1,664 between 2004/05 and 2007/08). The Council has made these significant rent increases largely to fund an increase in its capital investment programmes in order to maintain and improve its houses to achieve the SHQS by 2015. However, as we report above, we found weaknesses in the Council planning for the SHQS and it has not demonstrated that it plans its repairs and investment programmes to achieve value for money.

7.23 The Council's Housing Services management and supervision expenditure has risen between 2004/05 and 2007/08, but this has been from a low starting point; it had the third lowest costs of 29 councils in 2005/06 and 2006/07. Its costs for 2007/08 of £464 per unit remain well below the national figure of £630. The Council's expenditure is rising largely due to the reduction in the number of houses that it manages – a drop of 1,664 between 2005/06 and 2007/08. The Council does not have an efficiencies strategy for its housing costs, but it has recognised that it needs to act to tackle this trend of increasing management

- costs. It is due to begin a resource efficiencies analysis of all of its services in 2008/09. However, the Council's significant improvements overall in its performance, generally good service outcomes and strong tenant focus combined with relatively low management and supervision costs indicate that it is providing value for tenants' rents.
- 7.24 Housing Services has worked well to significantly reduce its income loss from rent arrears and empty properties and it has significantly lowered its expenditure on bed and breakfast accommodation. It has also made some early progress on improving its procurement for its supply of furnishings for its temporary accommodation and expects to save nearly £200,000 by 2011.
- 7.25 The Council delivers its Housing Services from eight local offices and its tenant feedback has indicated that there is a strong preference for local offices over other methods of service delivery. While Housing Services does have a planned review of how it collects cash, any decisions regarding rationalising service delivery to improve efficiencies are dependent upon the outcome of the Councils on-going corporate led Customer Contact Review. However, it is unclear when this review is due for completion and how Housing Services will take this forward.
- 7.26 The Council cannot demonstrate a focus on value for money in its procurement of works contracts for the housing repairs and investment. It has a corporate procurement strategy and has completed some benchmarking with other local authorities on costs, but it has extended its contracts with Building Services without assessing whether these continue to provide value for money. Audit Scotland raised the demonstration of value for money in procurement as an issue for the Council in its 2005 Audit of Best Value and Community Planning.

8. Next Steps

- 8.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes. We ask organisations that receive fair or poor assessments overall in their housing management, asset management and repairs service or homelessness service to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report.
- 8.2 North Ayrshire Council's improvement plan should show how it intends to respond to our findings in its asset management and repairs services. The plan will be agreed with us. We follow up improvement plans at regular intervals.
- 8.3 If you would like to see the North Ayrshire Council's improvement plan you should contact:

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Telephone: 01294 324626

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Website: www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk

Sources of evidence

Groups and third parties consulted

- Tenants' and Residents groups
- The Council's external auditor
- Scottish Government Tenant Rights and Participation Team
- Homepoint
- Scottish Government's Homelessness Team
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Local Registered Social Landlords
- Neighbouring Local Authorities
- Women's Aid
- Shelter
- TPAS
- Disabled Persons Housing Service – North Ayrshire
- Kilmarnock College
- SACRO
- Community Housing Advocacy Project (CHAP)
- Quarriers
- Barnardos Scotland
- North Ayrshire Community Planning Dept

Interviews/Meetings

- Elected members
- Chief Executive
- Director of Social Work
- Director of Property Services
- Corporate Performance Manager
- Corporate Procurement Manager
- Internal Auditor
- Staff from Housing Services
- Staff from Technical Services
- Staff from Building Services
- Staff from Homelessness Services

Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation
- Shadowing of allocations
- Shadowing of tenancy sign up interview
- Shadowing of an accompanied viewing
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of repairs call handling

- Shadowing of repair pre and post-inspections
- Shadowing of void repairs visits
- Review of short SST's
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Review of homelessness assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of reported repairs
- Review of planned maintenance and improvement projects
- Empty property visits
- Estate visits

Key documents reviewed

- North Ayrshire Council's Inspection Submission
- Housing management performance reports
- Repairs and maintenance performance reports
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Tenants' newsletters and other publicity material
- Council's website
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Protocols with other agencies
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard Delivery Plan
- Draft Single Outcome Agreement
- Council Plan
- Community Plan
- Service Plans
- ASB Plan
- Tenant Participation Strategy
- Corporate Procurement Strategy

Examples of Positive Practice

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

Rent Arrears Interview

The Council is currently piloting a rent arrears interview process which aims to identify the underlying reasons for rent arrears accruing and then enable Housing Officers to ensure they signpost the tenant to the most appropriate advice and assistance. It also includes a financial assessment and an action plan that is agreed with the tenant. This is followed up with a letter to the tenant confirming any arrangement and action points.

Tenant Participation (TP)

The Council is the first landlord to achieve TPAS accreditation which is a robust and structured process for assessing how well organisations involve tenants and residents in their services. Its dedicated TP team support the network of existing tenants and residents groups using a "traffic light" system and encourage involvement in other ways such as attendance at Tenants Conferences, working groups, mystery shopping, focus groups, estate based projects and estate inspections. Tenants are also involved in the production of the quarterly "Tenancy Matters" newsletter and have been involved in reviewing the tenants handbook and discussions on the repairs and capital programme.

Estate Based Projects

On an annual basis, the Council allocates a proportion of its repairs budget for environmental improvements on its housing estates. Tenants are directly involved in identifying and prioritising projects. Examples of projects funded from this budget include landscaping, improved parking areas, improved lighting and fencing programmes. These are an excellent example of tenants influencing how resources are used at a local level whilst demonstrating effective partnership working to enhance the local community.

Home Security Project

The Council established this project to support those affected by antisocial behaviour, harassment, threats of external violence or domestic abuse by providing practical support such as the provision of door chains, locks and panic alarms. The intention is to

make the service user feel safe and secure in their home and to help prevent homelessness.

Stress Management Project

This project is provided by NHS Ayrshire & Arran and offers a range of therapies and techniques to help people cope with the stress of the situation when experiencing ASB. The ASBIT team makes the referral and the service is well received by service users.

Neighbourhood Compacts

The Council has developed Neighbourhood Compacts in the areas where Community Wardens operate and they set out a programme of actions agreed between service providers, external partners and the local community for tackling ASB and wider community issues. Regular Neighbourhood Compact meetings are held to monitor and evaluate progress of local priorities.

Good Neighbour Awards

These awards were introduced in June 2007 to recognise positive neighbour contributions. Tenants were invited to nominate their good neighbours who for example, made them feel welcome, help them with shopping or looked after their pets when they are on holiday. A winners award ceremony was held in September 2007 and this is to become an annual event.

Void Management

The Council has developed a comprehensive Void Procedure manual and performance monitoring framework to ensure continuous improvement in its management of empty houses. Key elements of these procedures includes tight timescales set for each stage of the voids process, pre-allocation of properties during the notice period, effective joint working with Building Services including joint void inspections and categorisation of voids with specific challenging targets, daily monitoring of voids spreadsheet, monthly liaison meetings to monitor performance and resolve any operational issues and excellent performance by Building Services' dedicated voids repair team in meeting targets.

Capital Works – Customer Focus

The Council has a good and customer focused approach to the delivery of capital works. Residents have choices with regard to kitchen and bathroom fittings. Residents are provided with a Major Works pack which is detailed and informative, and are also given good notice of works and customer liaison is good during the works. The Customer Liaison Team visit all tenants in advance of any planned repairs and improvements being carried out in their home. During this visit they assess whether the tenant requires any additional support in order for the work to be done. This includes arranging for help to move furniture, respite care during the day and arranging transport to respite care.

Partnership Working - Families Experiencing Homelessness Support Group

The Council established a group to look specifically at issues experienced by homeless families and children. The group is chaired by Barnardo's and attended by representatives from the Homelessness Team, Women's Aid and the NHS. One area that the group focused on was the recognition that children in temporary accommodation may not have a quiet place to study. The Council has agreed to provide desks and chairs to help children with their studies while they are living in temporary accommodation. North Ayrshire Council has also agreed through this group that it will fund taxis to transport children to school where they are living in temporary accommodation which is not close to their school of origin. The Council will fund this for the length of time they remain in temporary accommodation or will move the household to alternative accommodation nearer the school. This is a positive approach to minimise the disruptive effects of homelessness on families.

Child Protection Training

The Council provides multi agency child protection training for all its staff working with children. This raises staff awareness of child protection issues that may face homeless families and helps safeguard the interests of vulnerable children. Homelessness staff participate in the delivery of this training which is carried out on a regular basis.

Tenancy Support Team Prevention Initiative

One of the Council's objectives within its Homelessness Strategy is that "fewer people become homeless in the first place" and the Tenancy Support Team Prevention Initiative is one example of how the Council achieves this.

Appendix 2

The initiative was created in 2003 specifically for single homeless young people or those threatened with homelessness aged between 16 and 18 years of age and who are not threatened with violence. The Tenancy Support Team delivers the project and offers mediation and support to young people and their families to enable them to return home. In its first year of operation the project had a success rate of over 90% and was extended to include 19 -25 year olds. 2007/08 figures provided by the Council show a 77% success rate in homeless prevention.

Glossary

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| Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) | ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further antisocial behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment. |
| 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 |
| Common housing register (CHR) | A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area. |
| Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) | Internal organisation which carries out work on behalf of housing departments. |
| HomePoint | <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">• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.• Type II casework.• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation. |
| Housing list | A list of applicants for housing that is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock. |
| 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. |
| Notice of Proceedings (NOP) | The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property. |
| 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.

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| Performance Standards | Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland, jointly agreed by the SFHA, COSLA and Communities Scotland. |
| Planned maintenance | The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components. |
| Pre-inspections | Inspections undertaken to ascertain the nature of the repair required. |
| Post inspections | Inspections undertaken following work to check the suitability and quality of repairs. |
| Procurement | The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents. |
| Qualifying Repair | Repairs that qualify for inclusion in the Right to Repair scheme. |
| 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. |
| Response repairs | Day to day repairs carried out on a reactive basis, distinguishable from planned, capital or cyclical maintenance. |
| 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. |

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| 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. |
| Short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST) | Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a short Scottish secure tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST. |
| 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. |
| 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. |
| Tenure | The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier. |
| Variations | A term used to refer to the practice of changing a repair works order on site where the contractor feels additional or alternative work to that specified is required. |
| 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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