

Communities Scotland  
**Inspection report**

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**South Ayrshire Council**

October 2005

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# 1. Introduction

## About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by Communities Scotland 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*<sup>1</sup>.

## How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

- How good are the services we have inspected?
- How well are these services being managed for improvement?

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to tenants, 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, property maintenance and homelessness services. This is what our grades mean:

A	Excellent	Major strengths.
B	Good	Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.
C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
D	Poor	Major areas where improvement is needed or where a number of very significant weaknesses are found.

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<sup>1</sup> see glossary

### **The inspection team**

- 1.5 The South Ayrshire Council inspection was managed by Michael Cameron (Inspection Manager). The inspection team included Erika Hudleston, Marion McLellan, Marie Savage, Eleanor Sneddon and Jonathan Grant (Inspectors). We were on site between 6 June 2005 and 30 June 2005. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff and tenants of South Ayrshire Council for their time and co-operation.

### **Responding to this inspection**

- 1.6 We expect all inspected bodies to make the summary 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. Context**

### **Geography and population**

- 2.1 South Ayrshire is located in the south west of Scotland, and covers an area of 422 square miles (1,222 square km). Its settlements extend from Dundonald in the north to Ballantrae in the south, and the main population and administrative centre is the town of Ayr. South Ayrshire has an extensive rural area containing a number of smaller villages.
- 2.2 The latest census put South Ayrshire's population at 112,160 people. This is projected to decline by around 2.1% by 2012, although the number of households is expected to grow over the same period by 5.4% - increasing the numbers of smaller households residing in the area.
- 2.3 South Ayrshire has higher level of retired households than the national figure and a lower level of single parent households. Retired households are expected to increase by around 9% by 2012.
- 2.4 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population in South Ayrshire accounts for 0.7% of the total population. The largest BME communities in South Ayrshire are Indian and Chinese.

### **Economy and employment**

- 2.5 The percentage of people in South Ayrshire who are unemployed is marginally higher the national level. A slightly lower proportion of its population is economically active than for Scotland as a whole, mainly because of the number of retired households living in the area. Just over 60% of the Council's rental income is from housing benefit.

### **Social housing supply**

- 2.6 At March 2005, South Ayrshire Council owned 9,024 properties, made up of general needs houses and sheltered housing designed for the elderly or other people who need warden support. More than 50% of its stock is made up mainly of flats, with the remainder being a mix of houses, maisonettes and some

- bungalows. Nearly 60% of its houses are in the town of Ayr, with the rest located in over 20 towns and villages with almost 40 miles separating the furthest.
- 2.7 The Council owns 20% of all houses in South Ayrshire. The total social rented sector has 22.4% of the houses in the area, compared to 29.5% in Scotland as a whole.
- 2.8 More than 40% of Council's stock has been sold since the introduction of the Right to Buy<sup>2</sup>. It is continuing to lose around 400 houses each year through sales to its tenants. The Council sees this as a major challenge to it achieving its strategic housing objectives, and has applied to the Scottish Executive to be granted pressured area status for the suspension of the Right to Buy.

### **South Ayrshire Council**

- 2.9 South Ayrshire Council has 30 elected members, 15 of whom are Labour and 15 are Conservatives. Labour formed the Council's administration on the outcome of a cut of cards. The Council's Social Justice Committee is its key decision making forum for housing and homelessness issues.
- 2.10 This is a period of considerable change for the Council. It has had a number of relatively recent changes at chief officer level, including a new chief executive. Over the last year, it has appointed an almost entirely new management team in housing.
- 2.11 The Council is in the midst of a major structural re-organisation of its housing services. In March 2004, the Council commissioned five strategic reviews covering various aspects of its management and service delivery. The housing service was identified for review as the Council viewed this as an underperforming area of service delivery. It completed this review in July 2004, and decided to initiate a more fundamental review of the structures it uses to deliver housing services.
- 2.12 The Director of Social Work, Housing and Health is conducting this review in phases, and has now completed a restructuring of the service's senior

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<sup>2</sup> see glossary

management. The review and restructuring of the housing management service was nearing completion at the time of the inspection. The next phases of the review will consider the Council's regeneration, housing strategy and development functions, followed by its homelessness services. The Council aims to have the full review completed by autumn 2005.

2.13 As a result of its review, the Council is reconfiguring its services with the aim of establishing a model for service delivery that reflects its changing operating environment, reductions in the level of its housing stock and its objective for continuous improvement. It is shifting to delivery of services through four housing divisions, from six to five area housing offices, and to a mix of generic and specialist working.

2.14 This review has been a significant undertaking for the Council and the attention of councillors and senior staff has been on this major change exercise for much of the last year.

## Key Facts

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Houses owned	9,790	9,411	9,042
Number of applicants on housing list <sup>3</sup> as at 31 March	-	3,206	4,058
Employees in housing services (full time equivalents)	-	160.55	187.83
Housing Revenue Account Gross Capital Expenditure (£'000)	7,500	10,000	9,500
Total possible rental income (£'000)	20,817	20,002	19,892
% of rental income from Housing Benefit	62%	62%	63%
Current tenants' arrears as % of net rent due	7.9%	7.2%	6.3%
Average <sup>4</sup> weekly rent	£37.37	£37.37	£39.84
Average rent increase	0%	6.6%	3.8%
Number of houses re-let	980	937	836
Number of response repairs carried out	39,827	36,382	36,171
Maintenance spend per house	£949	£983	£1,183
Supervision and management spend per house	£469	£445	£506
Right To Buy sales	362	415	374
Number of homeless applications	977	995	1060
Number of evictions	65	29	37

Sources: South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission<sup>5</sup> and Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins

<sup>3</sup> see glossary

<sup>4</sup> see glossary

<sup>5</sup> see glossary

### 3. Housing management

3.1 The grade awarded for housing management is:

B	Good	Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

#### How good is the service?

##### Access

*Social landlords should provide open, fair and equal access to their housing lists and should work with partners to simplify and maximise access to housing.*

- 3.2 South Ayrshire Council uses a good range of ways to promote access to its housing lists, including:
- information and application forms on its website;
  - posters in its area offices giving details of how and where to apply;
  - the recently published booklet - Applying for a Council Home - An Applicant's Guide;
  - its Housing Options Guide, which is also available on-line, provides information on all housing providers in South Ayrshire; and
  - by advertising low demand properties in the local press and on-line.
- 3.3 The Council can arrange translation of its allocations policy, housing application form and applicant's guide into other languages or formats on request. It also advertises the Language Line interpreter service through posters in its area offices.
- 3.4 The Council runs a weekly housing surgery for patients due to be discharged from Ailsa Hospital, and it works with North and East Ayrshire Councils to provide advice on housing options for prisoners due for release from Bowhouse Prison. These are positive initiatives which improve access to its housing.
- 3.5 The Council provides good housing options advice on request to people who apply to it for a house. Its prospect interviews give people good information on

choices of area and house type, houses that are available to let and prospects of obtaining a house of their choice. The Council has trained a number of its staff who deliver this service to the HomePoint standards on housing information and advice. The Council also issues letters on request advising people of their position on the housing list, and it plans to introduce this as a standard part of its written information to applicants.

- 3.6 The Council accepts applications for housing from anyone aged 16 or over, and the number of people on its housing list increased last year by 27% to 4058 at 31 March 2005. However, we found that the Council does not always provide open access to its housing list. We found that it had either not registered on its list or not assessed against its allocations policy over 200 people who had applied to it for a house for reasons such as unsatisfactory tenancy references, anti-social behaviour and former tenancy arrears. Nearly three quarters of these people had been excluded by the Council from its list because they do not have a connection with South Ayrshire. We found that the Council did not tell people that they had been excluded nor did it advise them of their right to appeal.
- 3.7 In the year to 31 March 2005, the Council reviewed its housing list and cancelled over 1700 applications for housing, or 42% of the total number on its list. We found that the Council had cancelled more than one fifth of these applications for inappropriate reasons.
- 3.8 The Council minimises the number of people on its housing list that it suspends from receiving offers of housing. At 31 March 2005, 98 people were suspended by the Council after they advised it that they did not want to be considered for offers at this time. A further 67 – or 1.7% of all people on the housing list – were suspended by the Council for previous conduct or because of eligibility rules. The Council's reasons for applying these suspension are appropriate, however we found that it has some weaknesses in how it manages them:
- it does not always advise people who are suspended of their right to appeal;
  - it does not always routinely review suspensions after a defined period;
  - it requires its tenants with rent arrears and no or a broken repayment arrangement to repay the outstanding amount in full before it will end their suspension; and

- it treats some suspended applicants differently from others in how they accrue waiting time points.
- 3.9 It is for the Council to decide, taking account of relevant legislation, the circumstances in which it will suspend people from receiving offers of housing. However, it cannot exclude anyone aged sixteen or over from its list and can only cancel an application where someone has requested to be removed from its list, where they repeatedly fail to respond to correspondence, or on the death of an applicant. The Council does not provide staff with clear guidance on cancelling or suspending applications. The Council accepted that it had to tackle these weaknesses when we highlighted them during the inspection.
- 3.10 The Council requests tenancy references from any landlord a person who is applying to it has had in the last 5 years. If the Council is unsuccessful in getting a response to a request or if a landlord requests a fee for the provision of a reference, it requires the person applying to pursue the reference. Good practice guidance<sup>6</sup> recommends that landlords should not seek references for tenancies that ended more than 3 years previously.
- 3.11 The Council has a target to inform people of the outcome of their housing application within 10 days of receipt of all relevant information. It publicises this target but does not routinely record, monitor or report its performance against this. From our review of housing applications, we found that it took an average of 13 days to assess applications and 46% were completed within its target timescale.
- 3.12 The Council actively manages its housing list. It carried out a full review of its list in February 2003, following changes to its allocations policy, and it conducts a monthly review of those applications which have reached their anniversary date.
- 3.13 The Council is working with its Registered Social Landlord (RSL)<sup>7</sup> partners to develop a Common Housing Register<sup>8</sup> for South Ayrshire, although it told us that

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<sup>6</sup> Suspending Applicants on Housing Registers: A Guide for Housing Professionals, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2002

<sup>7</sup> see glossary

<sup>8</sup> see glossary

progress has slowed while it is completing its departmental restructuring exercise.

- 3.14 The Council collects information on the ethnicity of people who apply to it for housing, but it does not have full information on these or on the ethnicity of people it has housed. We also found that it does not routinely monitor or report on the information it does have. As a result, the Council is not able to assess whether black and minority ethnic groups are underrepresented on its housing list or in its allocation of housing.
- 3.15 The Council is good at promoting access to its housing list, gives people good options and prospects advice, and actively manages its list. However, its approach to the exclusion, cancellation and suspension of applications is a significant weakness.

#### **Meeting need and maximising choice**

*Social landlords should meet housing need through lettings and should maximise choice for applicants.*

- 3.16 South Ayrshire Council allocates its houses using a needs based allocations policy which prioritises applications on a range of housing needs which reflect the statutory reasonable preference categories<sup>9</sup>. It allocated 836 houses in 2004/05; 23% to its own tenants, 47% to people on its list who were not its own tenants and 30% to homeless people. The Council does award waiting time points to all people on its list, but we found that such awards do not dominate the Council's letting scheme. We analysed 177 lets made by the Council and found that 78% were to people who were homeless or people whose need points outweighed their waiting time points.
- 3.17 We found that the way the Council selects people for an offer of housing is not always clear or in line with its allocations policy. The Council cannot always clearly show why it bypasses homeless people or people in housing need for an offer of housing or why it makes "sensitive lets". We also found that the Council does not provide staff with clear guidance on how to implement its allocations policy, nor does it use formal quality control mechanisms to ensure that its policy

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<sup>9</sup> see glossary

- is consistently implemented. It did introduce a lettings control sheet following an internal audit of its allocations function, but it has not provided staff with clear guidance or training on its use. The Council advised that it would take immediate action to tackle these weaknesses when we highlighted them during the inspection.
- 3.18 The Council has been working with tenants and residents in the Westoaks area of Ayr to regenerate the local community; we discuss the successes of this project later in the report. As part of this work, the Council operates a local lettings initiative in partnership with Westoaks Tenants Association. The Council matches people who request a house in the Westoaks area to empty properties in accordance with its allocations policy. However, it then requires each prospective tenant to attend an interview with a panel of Westoaks tenants; the panel scores each person it interviews on the basis of their response to a set of standard questions, and then makes a recommendation to the Council on whether the person should be offered a tenancy.
- 3.19 We saw a number of cases where allocations did not proceed after the Westoaks panel had recommended that a tenancy should not be given. The Council's own evaluation of the initiative, carried out in 2004, included evidence which showed that it did not proceed with an offer of housing to 15 people who the panel had not recommended for a tenancy. We also found that of 35 houses let through the initiative between 2003 and 2005, only one was to a homeless person compared to 30% of the Council's total lets going to homeless people in 2004/05.
- 3.20 It is important for tenants to have a role in agreeing and influencing allocations policies. It is also positive practice to have new tenants introduced to and welcomed by existing tenants. However, it is not appropriate to involve existing tenants in the selection of new tenants; this can introduce a lack of transparency in decision-making and does not guarantee equality of access for all applicants.
- 3.21 The Council operates a local lettings policy for 234 multi-storey flats at Riverside in Ayr: only people aged 50 years or over are selected for these houses. The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended, prohibits landlords from taking account of a person's age when allocating general needs houses. The Council's

current approach to letting houses in the Riverside area does not comply with the terms of this legislation.

- 3.22 The Council gives people on its housing list a good level of choice of housing by allowing them to indicate a preference for:
- any number of its 86 lettings neighbourhoods and 27 sheltered housing complexes;
  - individual streets within four lower demand neighbourhoods; and
  - any type of house and heating system.
- 3.23 The Council will, in certain circumstances, ask people near the top of its list to indicate if they are interested in a house when it has been refused or when the selected applicant cannot be contacted by telephone. This allows these people to express an interest in the property before the Council makes a formal offer. The Council has reduced unwanted offers by 32% and refusals by 44% over the last three years.
- 3.24 The Council gives people on its list further choices by operating nominations with six local housing associations. The number of nominations by the Council which resulted in the nominee being housed increased from 46% in 2003/04 to 80% in 2004/05, although the overall number of nominations had decreased by 23% over the same period. The Council is reviewing these nomination agreements and plans to gather more information on housing association stock profiles as part of its development of a common housing register. It also plans to improve its monitoring of the outcomes of nominations following planned improvements to its IT software.
- 3.25 The Council is good at meeting need and gives a good level of choice for people who apply to it for housing. However, it has a number of weaknesses in how it manages allocations, the way it operates the Westoaks local lettings initiative is poor and it is not complying with legislation by using age to restrict access to some of its houses.

### Sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness

*Social landlords should maximise security of tenure for all residents of their accommodation, and should work to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness through their delivery of housing management services.*

- 3.26 The Council had signed up only 77% of its tenants to Scottish secure tenancy (SST)<sup>10</sup> agreements by 31 March 2005. It does not have firm plans to sign up the remaining 23%, although it advised us that this will be addressed when its new staffing structure is in place.
- 3.27 The Council has granted 58 short SSTs to homeless people since 2002/03. The Council has recognised that there are weaknesses in the way that it manages its short SSTs – we report on these at the *Permanent accommodation* section in homelessness. The Council recently converted one tenant's SST to a short SST following the breach of an antisocial behaviour order (ASBO), and it is closely monitoring the conduct of this tenancy.
- 3.28 The Council provides useful information to new tenants at sign-up interviews and uses this opportunity to emphasise tenants' rights and responsibilities. It gives new tenants an informative handbook and information pack, although some of the information is out of date. We saw that the Council uses tenancy sign-up interviews to explain how tenants can pay their rent and help them to apply for housing benefit. It did not always advise them of the availability of support or how to report repairs when the Council's offices are closed. The Council is reviewing its tenant handbook and advised us that it would adjust the tenancy sign-up guidance to respond to our findings.
- 3.29 The Council works with Ayrshire Initiatives – the wider action arm of a local housing association – to provide housing support workers in each of its area housing offices. The workers provide short-term support to new tenants, longer-term support to more vulnerable tenants, and budgeting, debt and benefit advice to tenants in arrears. The Council can refer any tenant to the housing support workers and meets regularly with them to monitor cases and discuss new referrals. This is a positive initiative to help sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness.

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<sup>10</sup> see glossary

- 3.30 The Council aims to have housing support workers visit all new tenants within six weeks of them moving in. This is a positive way to help identify vulnerable tenants at an early stage, although we found that it does not always achieve the six weeks target or monitor the level or outcomes of visits.
- 3.31 Until December 2004, the Council provided a mediation service to support tenants to resolve neighbour disputes through a joint working arrangement with East Ayrshire Council. Between 2002 and 2004, the Council referred 29 South Ayrshire tenants for mediation. Since then, the Council has used its own trained mediators to provide this service and has secured additional funding from the Scottish Executive to further develop it. This is a positive initiative to address disputes before they become too serious and to support tenants to sustain their tenancies.
- 3.32 The Council has reduced the turnover of its houses – the number of its houses that become empty – by 12.5% in the last three years and it is now nearly 15% lower than the national figure for Scottish councils. The Council is also working to improve the sustainability of tenancies through its broader work with Ayrshire Initiatives' housing support workers and by referring vulnerable tenants to organisations who provide independent advice and support.
- 3.33 The number of the Council's houses which were abandoned increased from 31 in 2002/03 to 78 in 2004/05; this represents 6% of all terminations of Council tenancies. We found that the Council does not systematically monitor levels of abandonments, and it did not always have clear evidence of its checks to trace tenants. It plans to devote increased staff resources to tenancy management and introduce smaller patch working for housing officers in Ayr; it anticipates that this will ensure a more consistent approach to managing abandonments.
- 3.34 Most notice of proceedings (NOPs) issued by the Council are for rent arrears, although it is aware that it does not have accurate figures for the level of NOPs it has issued for other reasons. In the past, the Council would routinely issue NOPs at an early stage to tenants in arrears if they failed to respond to two letters. Since 2003/04, the Council has focused on achieving earlier intervention through personal contact with tenants to stop arrears from rising to serious

- levels. As a result, it issued 2042 NOPs in 2004/05, down by 28% on the number in 2002/03. The Council started court actions against 490 tenants during 2004/05 and was granted 74 orders for the recovery of vacant possession. The Council carried out 37 evictions in 2004/05, down 43% on the number in 2002/03 – although this does not include the number of tenants who abandoned their houses following the granting of an order, as the Council could not provide an accurate figure for this.
- 3.35 We found that the Council uses eviction only as a last resort. Its Rent Control Policy emphasises alternatives to eviction, and we saw that the Council will agree a repayment arrangement with tenants right up to the day of eviction to prevent the action from taking place. It has clear lines of authorisation at each stage of its escalation of arrears actions, and managers actively monitor serious arrears<sup>11</sup> cases to ensure that its actions are fair, consistent and reasonable.
- 3.36 The Council's eviction procedures stress that it should grant a new tenancy when it decides not to action an order for recovery of possession. However, we saw five cases where the Council took no action to recover possession but also it did not provide the occupants with new tenancies. During the inspection, the Council accepted that these cases did not comply with its procedures and that the occupants should be issued with new Scottish Secure Tenancy agreements.
- 3.37 The Council is good at supporting new and vulnerable tenants and it is reducing its use of evictions. It recognises that abandonments are increasing and that it has been slow at getting all of its tenants signed up to Scottish secure tenancy agreements.

### Quality of neighbourhoods

*Social landlords should deliver services to ensure that neighbourhoods are attractive, well-maintained and safe places to live. They should deal appropriately with antisocial behaviour.*

- 3.38 The majority of South Ayrshire Council's housing neighbourhoods are well maintained, with little litter, graffiti or vandalism, although we saw some areas in Ayr North and Girvan with dirty closes, graffiti and untidy gardens. The Council has organised community clean up initiatives in Ayr North with tenants' groups,

local schoolchildren and community safety officers in an attempt to raise awareness of these problems and to improve the local environment. The Council does provide an estate caretaking service for some flats in its priority areas. This includes close cleaning, although the Council plans to reconsider which properties get this service as part of its broader review of estate caretaking. The Council is aware that in some areas inadequate storage for bins detracted from the quality of the local environment. It has plans to tackle this problem in Wallacetoun and is considering proposals for the Westoaks area.

- 3.39 Since 2002, the Council has been working with tenants and residents in the Westoaks area of Ayr to successfully regenerate the local community. In that time, the number of empty houses in the area has reduced by 75%, and we saw many of the positive improvements in the local environment. The Westoaks Tenants and Residents Association has worked closely with the Council over the last four years on a range of initiatives, including:
- the creation of a community garden and flat;
  - local repairs monitoring and decision making on a devolved budget for environmental improvements;
  - the employment of an estate caretaker whose duties include stair cleaning; and
  - supporting diversionary activities for young people.
- 3.40 The Council is also working with the Arran Park Tenants' and Residents' Association in Prestwick to implement the local regeneration model used in Westoaks. Tenants we spoke with are very positive about the initiatives that have taken place to regenerate the area. Police representatives regularly attend the association's meetings, and the Council has reported a 95% drop in reported crimes since this initiative started.
- 3.41 The Council is aware that, with the exception of its initiatives in Westoaks and Arran Park, its management of its estates is largely reactive. We also found that it does not set standards and targets for the management of its estates, nor does it clearly record and monitor reported problems. The Council has acknowledged that until now it has prioritised its work to improve performance in its

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<sup>11</sup> see glossary

management of arrears, empty houses and repairs. It has recently approved a comprehensive estate management policy and procedures, following consultation with tenants and staff, and it is now re-introducing smaller local patch management by officers in some areas and plans to carry out regular estate and garden inspections.

- 3.42 The Council has a number of positive practices and initiatives to minimise the occurrence of antisocial behaviour, neighbour disputes and crime, including:
- a range of physical measures to prevent crime, including CCTV, security door systems and security lighting;
  - an empty house security project which includes remote alarm systems and light timers;
  - a team of fourteen community support officers patrolling hotspot areas seven days a week;
  - a pilot information sharing protocol with the police;
  - regular liaison meetings involving the police, antisocial behaviour team, community support officers and housing staff;
  - the Additional Security project to help women who have experienced domestic abuse to feel safer in their homes; and
  - the development of neighbourhood agreements.

- 3.43 The Council has a good strategic approach to preventing and tackling antisocial behaviour. It is part of a multi-agency Community Safety Partnership and has developed a corporate strategy which focuses on the prevention of antisocial behaviour. The Council has recently established a specialist team of eleven staff to deal with more serious antisocial behaviour reported directly by residents, or through referral by housing staff. The team gathers evidence, supports complainants and manages all legal action relating to antisocial behaviour. Through this team, the Council plans to:
- expand its mediation work to provide a service to people in all tenures;
  - compile area profiles to identify specific anti-social behaviour problems; and
  - establish a 24-hour helpline for victims of antisocial behaviour.

- 3.44 The Council categorises antisocial behaviour complaints according to the level of seriousness and it has published target response times. It issues a helpful guide

for tenants and residents on the services the Council has in place to deal with antisocial behaviour complaints.

- 3.45 The Council's area housing teams will continue to deal with more minor antisocial behaviour and neighbour disputes, in liaison with the new team. It is aware that it does not effectively monitor or report its antisocial complaints or outcomes at area office level. We found that, in those cases managed by the area teams, there were often delays in responding to complaints, information was not always fully recorded, and complainants were not always kept informed of the Council's actions. The Council anticipates that the work of the new team will resolve some problems it has had in monitoring and evaluating the Council's responses to antisocial behaviour.
- 3.46 The Council received 619 antisocial behaviour and nuisance complaints in 2004/05, an increase of 46% from 2002/03. We saw that it uses a wide range of tools to tackle antisocial behaviour including Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), interim ASBOs, acceptable behaviour contracts and mediation, with eviction as a last resort. In the last year, the Council evicted two tenants for antisocial behaviour, obtained two ASBOs and responded to a breach of an ASBO. It is also monitoring two Interim ASBOs on behalf of a local housing association. The Council converted a tenancy to a short SST where a member of the household had breached an ASBO.
- 3.47 The Council has good examples of successful area regeneration projects in partnership with local tenants and residents. It is aware that its other estate services are largely reactive, but has firm plans to change this in some of its areas. The Council is developing a good strategic approach to tackling antisocial behaviour.

#### **Responsiveness to tenants**

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 3.48 South Ayrshire Council is strongly committed to tenant participation and has well established consultative structures. The Council's tenant participation strategy was developed with tenants and the Council reviews its action plan annually with the South Ayrshire Tenants Group, a representative organisation for the

- Council's tenants. The Council employs a community participation officer and commits significant financial resources to support tenant and resident participation: in 2004/05 it budgeted a total sum for tenant participation of £43,000, excluding staff costs. The Council can provide annual grants of £250 to each tenants' and residents' group.
- 3.49 The Council works with 29 local tenants' and residents' associations, 12 of which are Registered Tenant Organisations. It also supports the South Ayrshire Tenants Group (SATG). This group meets monthly and is a key group with which the Council consults on tenant issues. The Council also works with the Tenants' and Residents' Forum; this group of interested tenants and residents meets every six weeks to discuss broader housing and related issues. The Council has consulted with this group on aspects of its housing policies that affect the wider community.
- 3.50 A range of standing and short-life working groups are used by the Council to involve tenants and residents in more detailed work on specific areas of policy or service development. Examples include the short-life new tenancy working group and a standing working group that determines the content of the Council's tenants' newsletter.
- 3.51 The Council holds an annual tenants' rent conference to consult tenants on proposed rent increases and its plans for capital projects in the forthcoming year. It also hosts an annual housing conference which aims to generate discussions on topical housing issues and is open to anyone living in South Ayrshire. Working groups of tenants, residents, councillors and staff plan the agendas for both of these conferences.
- 3.52 Tenant groups and representatives we spoke with gave strong feedback that they feel involved and supported by the Council. We saw clear evidence that the Council takes account of tenants' views when it develops and reviews its policies and strategies. Some groups expressed a view that other parts of the Council do not engage with tenant and resident groups as effectively as does the housing service.

- 3.53 The Council uses a range of one-off and recurring surveys to gather the views of people who use its housing management services, including:
- a recurring survey of new tenants;
  - an ongoing customer reception survey;
  - a one-off lettings survey;
  - a survey of all people on its housing list; and
  - a one-off survey on its rent arrears service.
- 3.54 The Council analyses the results of these surveys and it is currently developing action plans to respond to issues they have raised. This is a good approach. The Council plans to further improve on its current approach by involving service users in setting survey questions, and by identifying ways to get feedback from harder to reach groups within the community.
- 3.55 The Council has corporate complaints system but the use of this for housing complaints and its departmental appeals systems are underdeveloped. The Council is aware that it does not systematically use complaints to identify possible areas for improvement. We found that its poor monitoring of complaints results in delays in responding to some of these, in one case for up to three months. The Council has policies which give tenants rights to appeal decisions, but we found that it does not always inform them of these rights, nor does it always advise them about the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. The Council accepted our early findings of its weaknesses in complaints and appeals and initiated action to tackle these.
- 3.56 The Council's housing offices are accessible to people with physical disabilities, but not all have loop systems available for those with hearing impairments.
- 3.57 The Council is good at working with tenants, and tenants we spoke with feel involved and supported by the Council. It also has a good approach to gathering the views of people who have used its housing management services. However, its management and use of information from complaints is an area it needs to improve.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should maximise their income, in a way that is fair to service users, and manage costs effectively.*

3.58 South Ayrshire Council provides good information to its tenants on how they can pay their rent and offers a wide range of payment methods, including:

- paying in person at any of its six area offices;
- to rent collectors providing a door-to-door service in the outlying villages;
- using a debit or a credit card to pay over the telephone; and
- paying by standing order or postal order.

3.59 The table below summarises South Ayrshire Council's performance in collecting rent.

	At March 2003		At March 2004		At March 2005*
	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	7.9%	7.4%	7.2%	7.9%	6.3%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	2.5%	4.8%	2.5%	4.9%	1.9%
Total former tenant arrears (£)	£213,875	n/a	£131,261	n/a	£206,971
Rent arrears written off (£)	£166,694	n/a	£264,953	n/a	£131,300

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators<sup>12</sup> & South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission  
 \* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

3.60 The level of rent arrears owed by the Council's current tenants has decreased by 24% since March 2003. The Council now has the fourth lowest level of current arrears of the 14 councils in its peer group<sup>13</sup>; its figure is now below the national figure for the previous year of 7.9% and the target of 7% set by the Accounts Commission for city and urban councils. The percentage of the Council's tenants in serious arrears has decreased since March 2003 and is well below the national figure of 4.9%. In each of the last three years, South Ayrshire has had the second lowest level of tenants in serious arrears of the councils in its peer group.

<sup>12</sup> see glossary

<sup>13</sup> see glossary

3.61 The Council also has a good awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in its management of arrears. The Council is an active member of the Scottish Rent Arrears Forum and the Rent Income Excellence Network, and until recently it had an internal working group which met regularly to discuss improvements to its work in the prevention of rent arrears. The Council has used this work, together with tenants' responses to its 2004 Rent Arrears Survey and staff suggestions, to introduce new initiatives to help it reduce arrears, including:

- information leaflets on budgeting and paying rent during and at the end of a tenancy;
- earlier visits to tenants who are in arrears;
- providing information on support agencies by letter and at interviews when a tenant first falls into arrears;
- arrangements to refer tenants to specialist debt advisors; and
- service level agreements to ensure that Council services involved in the management of tenancies, arrears and benefits have clear responsibilities and guidelines for working together.

3.62 The Council has a well-developed and clear rent control policy and procedures, and we found a number of strengths in its management of arrears:

- it supports tenants in arrears by agreeing affordable repayment arrangements;
- it has regular and sustained contact with tenants in arrears;
- it makes good use of performance targets at area office level and keeps staff informed of these;
- managers monitor performance fortnightly to manage consistency and to identify specific cases that need more targeted action; and
- it maintains good records of all its actions and communications with tenants at each stage of its escalation process.

3.63 The Council recognises the importance of personal contact with tenants particularly before it takes any decision to start legal action. Housing support workers attempt to visit tenants who have not responded to arrears letters. We saw that the Council is good at taking account of tenants' individual circumstances or vulnerability, that staff provide good advice and support to

tenants, and that they are referring increasing numbers for independent advice. We did see inconsistency between area offices on issuing a NOP before a tenant had been visited.

3.64 The amount of money owed to the Council by its former tenants has fluctuated over the last three years and at March 2005 was 3.2% down on the figure at March 2003. Over the same period, the Council wrote off nearly £563,000 in rent arrears. The Council was aware that it needed to improve its performance in the management of former tenant arrears to achieve more consistent reductions in the level of arrears and the amount written off. It recently completed a review of the effectiveness of its procedures on former tenant arrears, and while it is too early to see if it is achieving improvements, this did result in some positive changes to its procedures, including:

- providing more information and advice to tenants who are ending their tenancy;
- improved tracing of former tenants who did not provide forwarding addresses; and
- providing staff with better information to improve monitoring of performance and internal benchmarking<sup>14</sup>.

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

	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05*
	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire
Turnover (no. of new vacancies as % of total dwellings)	11.2%	10.8%	11.1%	11.5%	9.8%
Total no. of re-lets <sup>15</sup>	980	-	937	-	836
% re-let in <2 weeks	16.3%	14.5%	21.4%	16.4%	23.0%
% re-let in 2-4 weeks	15.9%	20.3%	20.9%	24.9%	22.7%
% re-let in >4 weeks	67.8%	65.2%	57.8%	58.7%	54.3%
Average time to re-let	111 days	76 days	86 days	73 days	83 days
% of total annual rent lost due to empty houses	2.8%	2.8%	2.7%	2.7%	2.3%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission  
 \* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

<sup>14</sup> see glossary

<sup>15</sup> see glossary

- 3.66 In 2004/05, the Council saw a reduction in the number of its houses which became vacant. It lost 2.3% of its rental income because of empty houses, a reduction on the figures for the previous two years; its 2004/05 figure is now below the national figure for the previous year. The Council achieved a reduction in the length time taken to re-let empty houses of 25% from 2002/03 to 2004/05, although this is still above the national figure.
- 3.67 The Council has introduced improvements to the way it manages and lets empty houses, including:
- Identification of lower demand houses when they first become vacant to allow more active management of their re-let;
  - piloting of a dedicated team to manage empty houses in one area office;
  - regular meetings between housing management and Environment and Infrastructure staff, to monitor performance on repairs to empty houses;
  - encouraging outgoing tenants to allow prospective tenants to view a property before it is empty;
  - providing prospective tenants with a copy of its re-let standard before they view a house;
  - collecting and analysing reasons why people refuse offers of its houses; and
  - a project in a difficult-to-let area of Ayr, which aims to reduce the impact of longer term empty houses by minimising visible security measures.
- 3.68 At the time of the inspection, the Council was continuing to develop its policy and procedures on empty houses to further improve its management and reporting of performance.
- 3.69 The Council does not operate a time recording system, and so cannot analyse the separate costs of delivering its housing management and maintenance services. Its total costs for the supervision and management of its houses increased in 2004/05 by 14% to an estimated £506 per house, 3% above the Scottish average of £491. This increase partly resulted from budgetary changes leading to an increased expenditure from the housing revenue account on supported housing wardens, one-off costs of redundancies and because of continuing right to buy sales. Excluding the budgetary changes and redundancy

costs, the underlying increase in the Council's expenditure on supervision and management in 2004/05 was 3.2%.

- 3.70 A number of tenant groups and representatives we spoke to expressed concern at increasing costs to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) of the Council's central services. The level of the central service recharge to the HRA did increase over the period 2002/03 to 2003/04; however, the Council reduced this recharge in 2004/05 to a level 5.5% below the figure for 2002/03. Tenants we spoke to were also concerned that the cost of open ground maintenance in mixed tenure estates is being charged exclusively to the HRA. The Council confirmed that this is the case, that is it operating within relevant accounting conventions and that it does not have any current plans to review this aspect of its budget.
- 3.71 The Council has a good approach to maximising its rental income, and a fair and improving approach to minimising its rent loss from empty houses.

#### **Performance management**

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for housing management services, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 3.72 South Ayrshire Council's corporate Business Plan, together with its Resource Plan, sets the strategic direction and priorities for the Council for a three-year period. The current plans are at the end of their cycle, and the Council has started their review by initiating a fundamental examination of its core values. This exercise will then inform value reviews in each of the Council's departments during summer 2005; in turn, this will inform the review of departmental service plans.
- 3.73 The Department of Social Work, Housing and Health has a detailed departmental plan for 2002 to 2005, but this has only a limited number of higher level objectives for housing management services. The Council's local housing strategy also contains a number of strategic objectives for these services. The Council had planned to have a Housing Management Plan in place during 2004, but has not yet achieved this. The housing management service is currently operating without a full set of clear operational objectives.

- 3.74 The Council has established a Council Performance Management System (CPMS) to monitor and report progress against its aims and objectives on a quarterly basis. This sets out all of the Council's service objectives, cross-referenced to the commitments in its Business Plan. Departmental lead officers update a database on the Council's intranet with quarterly progress reports for each objective. This is then reported to the relevant service committee with a "traffic light" approach to summarising progress and with proposed remedial actions where necessary. The CPMS provides the basis for an effective framework to monitor the Council's achievement of strategic and operational objectives. The Council has trained CPMS lead officers, but the framework is not yet operating in housing. It plans to start using the CPMS in housing services after it completes the departmental restructuring exercise. The usefulness of the CPMS in housing may be limited until the Council tackles the current gaps in its service planning for housing management.
- 3.75 The Council's housing management policies and procedures have some strengths – for example, those on rent control – but we found that it does not have a comprehensive suite of up-to-date policies and procedures covering the full range of housing management services it delivers. We also found that the Council does not have an effective framework for managing and reviewing its policies. The Council is aware of some of the weaknesses in its policies and procedural guidance. It has supported a number staff working groups to look at specific areas of policy and procedures, although much of this work has stopped during the implementation of the structure review. It plans to restart this work when the structure review is completed.
- 3.76 The Council does not yet have a comprehensive framework of service standards. It has some standards for estate management and antisocial behaviour and it has developed draft service standards for other service areas, on which it plans to consult with tenants and other service users. This is a positive development, although the current draft standards do not cover the full range of the Council's housing management activities.

- 3.77 With the exception of its management of arrears - where it has a clear framework of performance targets, measures and reports - the Council's monitoring and reporting of performance in housing management is underdeveloped. It is aware that it does not have performance targets that cover all aspects of its service delivery or cascade to all levels in the organisation. The Council's corporate management team get four-weekly reports on its performance in the statutory performance indicators and performance against budget. The departmental management team and the housing management team get a range of reports on service delivery on weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. These reports do not cover all of the Council's housing management activities and do not always make good use of performance targets, trend analysis or benchmarks. The Council's IT system does contain a considerable amount of information about its delivery of services, and the imminent upgrade of its system is an opportunity to address some of these weaknesses.
- 3.78 The Council has a fair approach to performance management, which it knows it needs to improve. It has an effective framework to monitor its strategic objectives, but – with the exception of arrears management – it is poorer at planning and managing its performance in housing management.

#### Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.*

- 3.79 The Council is required by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 to make service performance information available to the public. The Council agreed a corporate public reporting strategy in September 2004 aimed at making its published performance information as relevant and accessible as possible. It now provides every household in South Ayrshire with a calendar which highlights key areas of the Council's performance together with details of how to get more information. It is about to issue the first of its twice-yearly Council Newsletters reporting on performance and linked to the service areas featured in the calendar. It plans to further develop service-specific performance information and the Council's website as public reporting tool. The Council also produces an annual summary of its performance in all the statutory performance indicators.

3.80 Beyond these corporate initiatives, the Council has recognised that public reporting of the performance of its housing services is an area for improvement.

## Grade and overall assessment of housing management

- 3.81 Our overall assessment is that South Ayrshire Council's housing management service is good. We found many strengths along with some areas where improvement is needed, including one significant weakness. The Council is committed to service improvement, and we saw that it has the willingness and capacity to tackle the weaknesses identified in this report. This is a significant factor in our grading of the housing management service.
- 3.82 The Council is good at promoting access to its housing list and giving choice for people who apply to it for housing. It meets housing need in most of its allocations, and it supports new and vulnerable tenants well. We saw successful area regeneration projects in partnership with local tenants and residents, and the Council is developing a good strategic approach to tackling antisocial behaviour.
- 3.83 The Council's working with tenants is a major strength, and tenants we spoke with feel involved and supported. It is also good at gathering the views of people who have used its housing management services. The Council is good at maximising its rental income and is improving its management of empty houses.
- 3.84 We found one significant weakness in the Council's approach to the exclusion, cancellation and suspension of applications. It also has weaknesses in its Westoaks local lettings initiative and it is not complying with legislation by using age to restrict access to some of its houses. These have a direct impact on people applying for a Council house.
- 3.85 The Council's housing management service has some other weaknesses, including:
- 23% of its tenants have not yet been signed up to Scottish secure tenancy agreements;
  - its management and use of information from complaints; and

- its planning and managing of performance in housing management.

3.86 The Council is committed to achieving better services for its tenants and service users. The change process, which is aimed at creating a service which will meet the future needs of tenants, is now close to completion. We found that the Council was aware of many of the weaknesses in housing management we identify in this report, and has firm plans in place that should address some of these weaknesses. The Council accepted many of our early findings during the inspection and has shown a willingness to tackle the areas of weakness in its housing management service.

## 4. Property maintenance

4.1 The grade awarded for property maintenance is:

C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to the repairs service

*Social landlords should have arrangements in place that make it easy for tenants to report repairs and to have them carried out.*

- 4.2 South Ayrshire Council's tenants can report repairs by telephone, in writing, by email or by calling in person at the office. Tenants can also report repairs when the Council's offices are closed by using an accessible out-of-hours telephone service. Almost half of repairs are reported by tenants using the telephone. The Council's repairs satisfaction survey results from July 2004 to March 2005 show that 94% of tenants who reported a repair by telephone were satisfied with the time taken to answer the call.
- 4.3 The Council gives tenants helpful advice about how to report repairs on rent cards, in newsletters, adverts in local newspapers, in the tenant handbook and when staff speak to tenants. In the Council's repairs satisfaction survey 99% of tenants replied that they were satisfied with the information provided by the Council about their repair responsibilities. The Council can make information about repairs available in community languages, but it does not always promote this service in its publications or in its offices.
- 4.4 Tenants highlighted in the Council's satisfaction survey that it did not always provide them with receipts for reported repairs or information about completion timescales. The Council has taken initial action to address this weakness and now aims to provide receipts for all urgent as well as routine repairs with completion timescales. However, we found that it still does not always provide

- tenants with verbal or written details of the target dates for repairs to be carried out.
- 4.5 The Council responds well to tenants' preferences for access to their homes to carry out repairs. In April 2004 it introduced an appointment system for some routine repairs where tenants can choose a morning or afternoon visit from Monday to Thursday. The Council does not monitor how it is performing in achieving appointments, but tenants we spoke to told us that the new appointment system had improved the service. For other repairs, the Council's staff will pass contact details to the contractor to arrange access directly with the tenant.
- 4.6 Access to the Council's repairs service is good. It provides tenants with good information on the repairs service and tenants are able to report repairs easily in a variety of ways. The Council is responsive to tenants' needs and has improved access arrangements to carry out repairs.

**Speed and quality of response repairs service**

*Social landlords should set challenging targets for completing repairs, strive to achieve them and ensure repairs are completed to a high quality.*

- 4.7 South Ayrshire Council sets a challenging target timescale for the completion of emergency repairs. It is one of nine councils that work to a target response time for emergency repairs of four hours or less. The Council sets a target of 3 working days for responding to urgent repairs and 20 working days for routine repairs. The table below summarises the Council's reported performance against these targets over the last three years.

	South Ayrshire's target response time	Performance			
		South Ayrshire			National median <sup>16</sup> 2003/04
		2002/03	2003/04	2004/05*	
<b>Emergency</b>	4 hours	94.2%	93.9%	92.8%	
<b>Urgent</b>	3 days	75.7%	75.5%	81.4%	
<b>Routine</b>	20 days	78.8%	88.5%	89.9%	
<b>Gas</b>	4 hours	94.3%	96.6%	97.7%	
<b>% of repairs due to be completed within 24 hours completed within target</b>		94.2%	94.2%	93.1%	95.1%
<b>% of all repairs completed in target</b>		82.3%	85.7%	88.5%	85.9%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission  
\* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection.

4.8 The Council's reported performance in completing repairs against its target timescales has improved between 2002/03 and 2004/05 in each of its categories except for a slight decrease in performance in completing emergency repairs. Its performance in completing all repairs within target has improved in each of the last three years; its reported figure is now above the national figure for the previous year.

4.9 We found some weaknesses in the way the Council records and manages information about repairs which means that its reported figures overstate its actual performance and do not accurately reflect the service that tenants are receiving:

- the Council does not check the accuracy of reported completion times for repairs;
- it does not include the time taken to carry out a pre-inspection when it calculates how long it takes to complete a repair;
- it does not include the time for any remedial work where it identifies that a repair has not been completed satisfactorily, rather it reports this as a separate repair;
- we found that some repairs are categorised as a lower priority, where staff are aware that more challenging targets would not be met; and
- it measures performance against working days rather than days as it has reported to Audit Scotland.

<sup>16</sup> see glossary

- 4.10 Since June 2004, the Council has been using an independent consultant to survey a sample of tenants who have used the repairs service. Results for January to March 2005 showed that 92% of tenants surveyed were satisfied with the repair and 90% rated the service as good or excellent. Nearly all the tenants we spoke to also told us that they are satisfied with the Council's repair service.
- 4.11 Pre- and post-inspections are important tools for making sure that repairs are targeted accurately and carried out to a high standard. The Council sets out good criteria to help staff select which repairs to pre-inspect, including target timescales for the completion of inspections. It does not have a target for the proportion of repairs to be pre-inspected, but we saw that it pre-inspected 25% of repairs in May 2005. However, we found that the Council's selection criteria are not always used in practice, not all staff were aware of the targets for completing inspections, and it is not fully monitoring its performance in achieving these targets.
- 4.12 The Council recognises that it does not use post-inspections effectively as a tool for controlling the quality of response repairs; in May 2005 it inspected only 0.9% of all completed repairs. The Council provides only limited guidance to staff on when post-inspections should happen, and we found that in practice this is not always being used. We also found that the Council does not fully record or analyse the outcomes of the post-inspection it does. These weaknesses limit the Council's understanding of the service it provides to tenants, and its ability to analyse repair quality to help improve the service.
- 4.13 The Council is operating the statutory Right to Repair<sup>17</sup> scheme, but we found that it does not always identify qualifying repairs appropriately or advise tenants about the scheme. We also identified weaknesses in the Council's systems to ensure compensation payments are made to tenants where it does not carry out qualifying repairs on time.
- 4.14 The Council provides a fair response repairs service. While tenants are very satisfied with the quality of repairs there are weaknesses in the way it monitors performance and controls quality and in its operation of Right to Repair.

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<sup>17</sup> see glossary

### Physical quality of houses

*Social landlords should have good information about the condition of their houses and should deliver effective maintenance programmes that take account of housing quality and home safety needs.*

- 4.15 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015. Landlords were required to prepare a plan showing how they will achieve this, by April 2005. The Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland will assess each local authority's plan. South Ayrshire Council submitted a plan to the Scottish Executive in June 2005 and expects that most of its houses will meet the standard by 2015. It has identified that 3% of its houses may not meet the standard where the design of the house prevents compliance with energy efficiency requirements or where the Council anticipates difficulty in obtaining owners agreement to the necessary improvement works.
- 4.16 The Council completed a survey of the physical condition of 10% of its houses in 2000, which concluded that the stock had been reasonably well maintained. While the Council has done some other survey work, partly to inform its SHQS delivery plan, it has not used routine maintenance information and inspections to update its stock condition information. The Council is aware that its information on its houses is dated and that it needs to improve its knowledge of the condition of its stock. It has recently started a new survey to be carried out by its own staff. While this will provide detailed information on every house the council owns, it will not be completed until 2010. The Council may have to review its SHQS delivery plan as it gets new information from its survey work.
- 4.17 The Council has worked well with tenants to jointly develop the South Ayrshire Standard, which defines the physical quality it will aim to achieve in all of its houses. This standard pre-dates the development of the SHQS and includes some elements – for example loft insulation levels and the installation of double glazing – that exceed the SHQS. The Council is using the South Ayrshire Standard, together with the SHQS, as the basis for its current and future investment plans. It is now budgeting for annual surpluses on its HRA to fund future capital investment in its houses and plans to achieve this by applying annual rent increases equivalent to the Retail Price Index plus 1%. The Council

- is now projecting an accumulated surplus of £9.8 million at March 2006, and anticipates that this approach will allow it to fund the future maintenance of its houses.
- 4.18 The Council has worked well to deliver internal modernisation works to its houses. It is close to completing a 30 year improvement plan to modernise kitchens, bathrooms and electrical wiring. The Council also operates five-yearly cyclical maintenance<sup>18</sup> programmes, but it recognises that it could improve how it plans some of its maintenance work. Its approach to external building repairs is generally reactive, with only a limited emphasis on preventative maintenance. The Council is planning to tackle this weakness by developing comprehensive planned maintenance<sup>19</sup> programmes based on the detailed information it receives from its new stock condition surveys.
- 4.19 We saw that the Council manages the delivery of improvement works well, and quickly challenges poorer performance from its contractors. It gives tenants good quality information on proposed works, provides opportunities for them to speak to staff, and tenants have a choices of layout, colour and design for kitchen and bathroom replacements. The Council regularly monitors improvement works and reports progress to each meeting of the Social Justice Committee. While these reports are very detailed, the Council is aware that they do not include any measurements of quality, for example on tenant satisfaction. It will shortly introduce a new evaluation framework for improvement works which will include an assessment of the quality of work and of how it was delivered.
- 4.20 The Council has installed hard-wired smoke detectors into all of its houses, although it was aware that it had not inspected over 1300 of these since they were installed. It plans to inspect and upgrade all of these detectors by April 2006. It has also fitted sprinkler systems in some sheltered houses, some multi-storey flats and houses assessed in conjunction with the Fire Brigade or other agencies. The Council has installed door entry systems in a number of its houses with common entrances, and is developing a programme of installation to begin in 2006 for 560 properties which are currently without such systems. The

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<sup>18</sup> see glossary

<sup>19</sup> see glossary

Council expects its planned stock condition survey to confirm the results of a lead-piping sample survey from 2004, which concluded that none of its houses have lead pipes.

4.21 Social landlords are required to carry out safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues that they provide for tenants' use. The Council is not meeting this duty for a significant number of its houses. By May 2005, the Council had completed safety checks within the required 12 months in only 58.7% of its houses with gas; 22.9% of checks were not done until more than one month after the date on which they should have been completed. We also found that at the time of our inspection 63 properties did not have a current gas safety certificate in place and one property had not been inspected for over 6 years. This is a significant weakness. The table below summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks.

	At May 2005	
	Number of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances and flues	6991	-
Houses with current gas safety certificates	6658	95.2%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	4106	58.7%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	1287	18.4%
Houses where safety check was carried out one to three months after the due date	734	10.5%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date	864	12.4%

Source: South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission

4.22 The Council's management of gas safety is weak and its monitoring of performance has been poor. We found that the Council:

- was not aware of how poorly the service was performing until it began preparing for this inspection;
- made little attempt to gain access to houses with outstanding inspections, despite having a record of all those affected; and
- has no written policies and procedures for gas safety to guide housing services staff.

4.23 In response to the weaknesses it identified when preparing its inspection submission, the Council has started to actively pursue access to houses without

a valid inspection certificate. The Council is also in the early stages of procuring a new gas servicing contract and it intends to review its management procedures for gas safety. However, it does not expect the new contract and procedures to begin until April 2006.

- 4.24 From May 2004 social landlords have had a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties. The Council has not met the statutory timescale to prepare a written asbestos management plan, nor has it yet identified for common areas in its housing stock whether asbestos is present. However, the Council is doing some good work to manage the risk from asbestos including:
- maintaining a register of known asbestos;
  - inspecting all empty houses for asbestos, making its findings available to new tenants and providing good advice on asbestos to tenants; and
  - surveying all of its houses for asbestos by 2007, although this survey will only cover a sample of common areas.
- 4.25 The Council re-lets its houses to a good standard. Its re-let standard has been drawn together in partnership with tenants and covers key areas of safety including gas, electrical and asbestos checks. The Council publishes the standard, gives it to all new tenants, and post-inspects all work done to empty houses. Tenants we spoke with were very positive about how the Council involved them in the development of the re-let standard, and the Council's monitoring of the standard shows that tenants are satisfied with the condition of their house at the time of re-let. This is an area of strength for the Council.
- 4.26 The Council has a fair and improving approach to ensuring that its houses are maintained in a good condition. Its houses are generally in a reasonable condition with modern facilities, it has worked well to produce its own housing standard and it re-lets to a good standard. The Council has incomplete information on the condition of its houses, although it has firm plans to improve this. It has not yet fully met its legal duties on the management of asbestos, and its management of gas safety is a significant weakness.

### Responsiveness to tenants

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 4.27 The Council's good approach to tenant participation is reported at the *Responsiveness to tenants* section in housing management.
- 4.28 As noted above, the Council worked well with tenants to jointly develop the South Ayrshire Standard, and tenants we spoke with who were involved in this have a real sense of ownership of the Standard. Following this exercise, tenants told the Council that they would value more regular discussions on the delivery of repairs services. In response it established the Repairs Stakeholder Group. This group has had a key role in developing service improvement initiatives, such as the repairs appointment system and the Ayr North Area Team Pilot.
- 4.29 Tenants we spoke with were generally positive about the way the Council responds to their views and were particularly positive about their work with the Council on developing the South Ayrshire Standard and the Ayr North Area Team Pilot. We saw clear evidence that the Council acts on suggestions and comments made by those it consults with.
- 4.30 Since June 2004, the Council has been using an independent consultant to conduct an ongoing survey of a sample of tenants who have used the repairs service. This is giving the Council useful information on tenant satisfaction. It has recognised that its use of tenant feedback on its delivery of improvement works is less well developed, and it is now putting in place a post-contract evaluation framework which will include the collection of tenants' views.
- 4.31 We report on the weaknesses in the Council's use of its complaint and appeal systems at the *Responsiveness to tenants* section in housing management.
- 4.32 The Council is good at involving tenants in its repairs service and it acts on the outcomes of its consultation with tenants. It is developing a good framework for getting and responding to tenants views on its maintenance services.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should manage the cost of their services effectively and procure repairs and maintenance services in a way that takes account of quality and cost.*

- 4.33 South Ayrshire Council spent £1,183 per house on repairs and maintenance in 2004/05; this is an increase on each of the previous two years, and was the second highest level of expenditure of the 29 local authorities managing council houses in Scotland.
- 4.34 The Council delivers its response repairs services through its in-house Commercial Services; the terms of this service delivery are based on a contract awarded by the Council through Compulsory Competitive Tendering in 1997. The Council also employs external contractors for improvement works; it does this through an “All Ayrshire” approved contractor list which it operates together with the other two Ayrshire councils and is managed by East Ayrshire Council.
- 4.35 The Council's approach to taking account of quality and cost in the procurement of its maintenance services is underdeveloped. It has relied on the schedule of rates it first set in 1997, and has applied annual increases to some of the prices contained in the schedule in recent years. The Council has not market tested its responsive repairs service for eight years nor has it reviewed the service against Best Value principles. It has now started to develop a procurement strategy for maintenance services through which it aims to achieve Best Value; as part of its new approach, it plans to do some national benchmarking of repair costs. For improvement works, the Council uses a combination of competitive tendering and price benchmarking; this resulted in the Council allocating 75% of the total value of work to external contractors and 25% to its in-house contractor in 2004/05.
- 4.36 The Council is aware that it does not use measures of quality of contractors' performance and that this limits its ability to assess whether its procurement of maintenance services is achieving Best Value. It will shortly test a new post-contract evaluation for improvement works that will comprehensively assess contractors' performance. It also plans to make better use of tenant satisfaction information which it collects for its response repairs work.

- 4.37 The Council has reduced slightly the percentage of response repairs where the final cost changes from that estimated when it first issues the repair order to the in-house contractor; however, figures for 2004/05 show that the actual cost of repairs increased above the estimated cost by a total of £1,421,906. We reviewed a sample of repairs and found that for those pre-inspected by the Council the final cost was on average 35% higher than the estimated cost; for repairs which the Council did not pre-inspect, the cost increased on average by 379%. We also found a number of weaknesses in how the Council controls the costs of its response repairs:
- it pays for work before assessing if it is correctly charged;
  - it does not check the accuracy of the final cost of repairs through post-inspections, other than for works to empty houses;
  - it takes only limited action to pursue repayment for disputed work; and
  - it does not systematically monitor, analyse or report on variations in the costs of repairs to learn how it could better control these.
- 4.38 The Council is owed over £43,000 by tenants for rechargeable repairs<sup>20</sup> and it has written off £62,000 over the last three years. In 2004/05 it recovered only 18.75% of the total amount it recharged to tenants. We found that it does not always issue invoices to tenants when it identifies rechargeable repairs; as a result, it may be understating the amount of money tenants should repay to the Council. The Council does escalate action when payment is overdue, but it does not always provide tenants with supporting information about payment options or debt advice services, nor does it always maintain good records of its action to support any legal action it may take. It has recognised some weaknesses in its management of rechargeable repairs and recently made some improvement to its procedures.
- 4.39 The Council has had some weaknesses in its approach to taking account of quality and cost in the procurement of its maintenance services, although it is starting to make improvements. The Council's control of repair costs is poor and it has weaknesses in how it manages rechargeable repairs.

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<sup>20</sup> see glossary

### Performance management

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for property maintenance services, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 4.40 The Council's corporate and departmental approach to strategic service planning and monitoring is reported at the *Performance management* section in housing management. The same weaknesses are also relevant to property maintenance, although for these services there is a slightly broader framework of strategic objectives set out in the Council's corporate planning documents, the local housing strategy and the South Ayrshire Standard.
- 4.41 The Council has recognised that it does not have comprehensive policies and procedures in place for its property maintenance services. As for housing management, we found that it does not have an effective framework for managing and reviewing its policies. However, it has established a staff working group and we saw that it is starting to make some positive changes to its procedures.
- 4.42 Our assessment that the Council does not yet have a comprehensive framework of service standards in housing management also applies to property maintenance. It has set good standards for the condition of houses that it lets and it has targets for response times for repairs, but it has still to extend its use of standards across its maintenance service.
- 4.43 The Council does not yet have a fully effective framework for monitoring and managing its performance in its property maintenance services. We found gaps in its information about response repairs and its monitoring of performance in gas safety has been particularly weak. The Social Justice Committee receives some good information on progress of its capital programme, finance and an annual report on performance indicators; however, it does not get regular, comprehensive information on the performance of the Council's maintenance services. Those reports it does get contain only limited trend analysis, comparison of performance against targets and improvement options, although it has some plans to improve these. The Council's monthly operational reports for staff and managers have similar weaknesses although these do cover a slightly wider range of service areas.

4.44 The Council has a broader framework of strategic objectives for its maintenance services than for some other areas of its service delivery, but its management of the performance in its maintenance services is underdeveloped.

#### Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.*

4.45 We report on the Council's developing approach to reporting its performance to the public at the *Public reporting* section in housing management.

### Grade and overall assessment of property maintenance

4.46 Our overall assessment is that South Ayrshire Council's property maintenance service is fair. While there are strengths, there are also many areas where improvement is required – including one area of significant weakness – that directly impact on people using its services. We set out below the key factors we have taken into account in coming to our overall assessment.

4.47 The Council's houses are generally in a reasonable condition with modern facilities, access to its repairs service is good and tenants are generally very satisfied with the quality of repairs. The South Ayrshire Standard and its re-let standard are strengths. The Council is good at involving tenants in its repairs service.

4.48 We found some important weaknesses where the Council is not fully meeting its legal duties, including:

- the significant weakness in its management of gas safety;
- its management of asbestos in common areas; and
- its operation of Right to Repair.

4.49 We also found that the Council has some weaknesses in how it manages performance and its control of repair costs and recharges is poor. It has incomplete information on the condition of its houses and its approach to taking account of quality and cost in the procurement is underdeveloped; however, the Council is starting to make improvements in these areas.

4.50 The Council accepted many of our early findings during the inspection and has shown a willingness to tackle the areas of weakness in its maintenance service.

## 5. Homelessness

5.1 The grade awarded for homelessness services is:

C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments and judgements we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to homelessness services

*Local authorities should provide open, fair and equal access to their homelessness services and should provide a 24 hour crisis response service for roofless households.*

- 5.2 South Ayrshire Council received 1,060 applications for assistance in 2004/05, an increase of nearly 7% on the previous year. This equates to 1.9% of all households in South Ayrshire, compared to a national figure for the previous year of 2.3%. In the previous year, the level of increase in the number of applications received by the Council was one third of the overall national increase.
- 5.3 The Council delivers its homeless services through a centralised team based in Riverside House, Ayr. Homeless people can also apply at any of its local housing offices and a quarter of all people who applied in 2005 accessed the Council's service in this way. The Council provides good access to its homeless services through weekly housing surgeries at the Ailsa Hospital and through its work with East and North Ayrshire Councils to provide housing options advice to prisoners due for release from Bowhouse Prison; 60 people applied for assistance through these routes in 2004/05.
- 5.4 The Council had recognised that it needed to improve the way it publicised the homeless service and developed a range of helpful posters and leaflets in consultation with partner organisations and service users. It now actively publicises the homeless service using this material in a range of locations where people facing homelessness are likely to see them. It has produced a useful homeless information pack for people who apply to it for assistance and it

- provides information on homeless services on its website and through its housing options guide.
- 5.5 The Council has a number of informal arrangements with partner agencies for referring people to the homeless service, and we saw examples of these referrals happening. However, it does not record the source of such referrals, and so is not able to monitor how effective these arrangements are. The Council has recognised this weakness and plans use its partnership working through the information and advice group to develop more formal referral arrangements.
- 5.6 The Council provides an out-of-hours homeless service that people can contact through a freephone telephone number. From March to May 2005, 95 people contacted the out of hours service and received advice and assistance, and the Council provided 57 with temporary accommodation. However, the Council did not always provide temporary accommodation for homeless people who were roofless. We found that the Council could not find suitable accommodation for six households, and poor decision-making by the Council meant that another two people who were roofless were not offered temporary accommodation. The Council is failing in its duty to provide every roofless person with temporary accommodation – this is a significant weakness.
- 5.7 We found that the Council does not record approaches from people seeking assistance as formal applications until they are interviewed by homeless caseworkers or placed in temporary accommodation. As a result, it cannot accurately track all initial enquiries to ensure that they are responded to appropriately, monitor how long it takes to interview people or monitor how many people it loses contact with prior to interview. A further consequence is that the Council may be underreporting the number of people who approach the Council for assistance. We drew this to the Council's attention during the inspection, and it has taken early action to address this weakness.
- 5.8 The Council aims to record the ethnicity of all people who apply to it for assistance, but we found that it does not always obtain this information. We also found from shadowing<sup>21</sup> interviews that the Council's staff occasionally recorded

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<sup>21</sup> see glossary

the ethnicity without asking the person being interviewed. The Council's posters publicising the homeless service advise in community languages that a translation and interpreting service is available, although it does not include this advice in its leaflets.

- 5.9 People calling at Riverside House are required to use a telephone in the public reception area to make contact with the Council's homeless team. This practice forces people to discuss confidential matters within earshot of other service users. As part of its departmental restructuring exercise, the Council has reviewed its provision of office accommodation and the homeless team is to be relocated to an office in the centre of Ayr which will have a dedicated reception for homeless people. The Council always uses private rooms to interview homeless people, aims to offer same-sex interviewers when requested and allows people to be accompanied by a friend or representative. However, it does not actively promote or publicise these service standards.
- 5.10 South Ayrshire Council is not always meeting its statutory duty to provide roofless people with temporary accommodation, and it may be underreporting the number of people who approach the Council for assistance. These weaknesses detract from its otherwise good approach to maximising access to its services for homeless people.

#### **Assessing homeless applications**

*Local authorities should treat homeless people fairly and consistently and be responsive to their individual needs when assessing their application for help.*

- 5.11 The table below provides an overview of South Ayrshire Council's assessment decisions for people who apply to it for assistance. We discuss key trends and the Council's performance in the following paragraphs.

	2002/03		2003/04		2004/05
	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire	National	South Ayrshire
Total number of applications assessed in period	929	47,740	925	49,937	942
Priority unintentional	27.6%	54%	34.3%	54%	32.9%
Priority Intentional	2.1%	3%	1.7%	2%	1.1%
Non-priority	29.0%	21%	22.6%	21%	19.0%
Not homeless	28.3%	9%	24.11%	8%	22.7%
Lost contact/withdrew before assessment	8.9%	9%	11.8%	9%	18.1%
Resolved prior to assessment	2.4%	4%	5.1%	6%	4.9%

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

- 5.12 The percentage of people the Council assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need increased by nearly a fifth between 2002/03 and 2004/05, although it remains well below the national figure. Over the same period, the percentage of people the Council assessed as not in priority need decreased by more than a third. The Council has also slightly reduced the percentage of people it assessed as intentionally homeless.
- 5.13 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself as to whether people who apply for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation, are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. We reviewed 74 homeless applications across the range of assessment decisions and found that the Council generally follows the correct sequence of inquiries and in most cases makes good decisions. However, we reviewed 19 cases assessed by the Council as not homeless and in 13 its decision was incorrect or made with inadequate levels of investigation; for example, the Council assessed as not homeless people who refused its offer of temporary accommodation or who did not attend an interview. The Council assessed 23% of people who applied to it for assistance as not homeless in 2004/05 – nearly three times the national figure – although the percentage of not homeless decisions it makes has decreased by nearly a fifth since 2002/03. The Council has recently reviewed its policy on requiring people to move into temporary accommodation before it would assess them as homeless, although at the time of our inspection it had not provided staff with clear guidance on its revised policy.

- 5.14 We found that the Council does not have effective procedures to manage and monitor the quality of its decision-making throughout the assessment process. It has identified the training needs of its staff who work with homeless people, but it has not yet delivered the necessary training. These factors contribute to the weaknesses we found in the Council's assessment of homeless applications.
- 5.15 The number of people who lost contact with the Council or withdrew their application before their assessment was completed doubled from 2002/03 to 2004/05, and is now significantly higher than the national figure. We found that the Council is not proactive in following up lost contacts nor does it always keep people up-to-date with the progress of its inquiries or follow-up action.
- 5.16 We found that the Council's homeless staff are sensitive to the needs of people who apply to it for assistance and homeless people we spoke with were happy with how the Council had treated them. However, during interviews the Council does not always provide homeless people with all of the information that they should receive nor does it always obtain all relevant information, for example:
- people are not always told that the Council will aim to provide a decision within 28 days or given information about their right of appeal;
  - it does not always discuss people's needs for type or location of accommodation; and
  - it does not give people the option of a written record of the interview.
- 5.17 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 to complete inquiries. The Council's performance in making decisions on applications within 28 days has declined from 76% in 2002/03 to 61% in 2004/05 and, as applications are not recorded until the date of interview, its reported performance will be better than that it actually achieved. From our review of homeless applications, we found the average time taken by the Council to complete its inquiries was 30 days from interview and the longest case took more than 5 months.
- 5.18 Once the Council has made a decision it issues the decision letter quickly; we found from our review of homeless applications that it issued 92% of letters

within one day. The Council uses good decision letters which meet legislative requirements, clearly explaining how decisions have been reached, and inform people about independent legal advice including signposting to Ayr Housing Aid Centre.

- 5.19 The Council treats people well when it conducts homeless assessment interviews, and generally makes good decisions. However, its decision-making in not homeless assessments has been poor, although it has started to address this. We also found that the Council took longer than necessary to make some decisions, loses contact with a significant number of people who apply to it and does not effectively control the quality and progress of its assessments.

### Temporary accommodation

*Local authorities should make available an adequate supply of good quality temporary accommodation to meet the needs for homeless people.*

- 5.20 South Ayrshire Council provides temporary accommodation for homeless people in a range of property types. It uses 4 hostels – providing 35 rooms and 16 self-contained flats; in two of these it works in partnership with Quarriers and Blue Triangle to provide supported accommodation for vulnerable people. It also has 1 unfurnished and 79 furnished flats and houses, 17 of which it leases from a local housing association. The Council's temporary accommodation is located in South Ayrshire's main towns, consists of a range of property sizes, and includes some which are suitable for disabled people. Key figures on the use of temporary accommodation by the Council are set out in the table below.

	2002/03		2003/04	2004/05
	National	South Ayrshire	South Ayrshire	South Ayrshire
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	-	482	600	603
As % of total	36.7%	51.2%	54.0%	58.3%
Average length of stay (days)	26	22	20	24
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	-	182	216	180
As % of total	25.6%	19.3%	19.4%	17.4%
Average length of stay (days)	142	109	88	68
Number accommodated in hostel accommodation	-	252	272	245
As % of total	32.4%	26.8%	24.5%	23.8%
Average length of stay (days)	53	56	55	49

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission  
National comparators are available until 2002/03, after which Audit Scotland ceased collection of this information

- 5.21 From 2002/03 to 2004/05 the number of people placed in temporary accommodation by the Council has increased by 12%. In the same period, the Council's use of bed and breakfast accommodation increased by 25% – it provided 603 people with temporary accommodation in local bed and breakfast establishments in 2004/05. The length of time that people stay in bed and breakfast accommodation also increased in this period from 22 to 24 days, although this is lower than the national figure was in 2002/03. The number of people the Council provided with temporary accommodation in furnished flats or in its hostels remained fairly static over the period 2002/03 to 2004/05, although use of both types of accommodation fell as a proportion of the Council's total provision; this is despite an increase in the number of furnished flats by 19 since 2001. The Council has reduced the average length of time people spend in both furnished flats and hostels. As we note in the *access to homelessness services* section, we saw a number of cases where the Council was not able to offer any form of temporary accommodation outwith normal office hours to people to whom it had a duty.
- 5.22 The Council is aware that it relies on bed and breakfast establishments to provide the bulk of its temporary accommodation, and recognises that it is likely to continue to use bed and breakfast for the foreseeable future. It is currently developing some initiatives to try to reduce its use of bed and breakfast; for example, the Council is working in partnership with private landlords to provide additional temporary accommodation in furnished flats and with local voluntary agencies to provide night stop emergency accommodation for young people. However, the Council has not yet set targets for reductions in its use of bed and breakfast.
- 5.23 The Council recognises that it needs to develop a temporary accommodation strategy, and is in the initial stages of this work. Its recent research on assessing the impact of the abolition of the priority need test, provides a projection of the future requirements for temporary accommodation; this should help the Council in developing its strategy.
- 5.24 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable temporary accommodation – which

includes most bed and breakfasts – for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days unless exceptional circumstances apply. The Council has reduced the number of families it places in bed and breakfast and their length of stay in this type of accommodation. It has also developed procedures to ensure that it does not breach the Order when it places families in bed and breakfast accommodation. However, we found one possible breach of the Order where the Council provided temporary accommodation in a bed and breakfast establishment for longer than 14 days to a woman with a child. The Council advised us that the accommodation was provided at the request of the homeless person, and therefore met one of the exceptions contained in the Order. However, the Council was not able to demonstrate this or that the homeless person had been given a genuine choice and access to independent housing advice before making the decision.

- 5.25 The Council's hostel at Landsburgh House is good quality accommodation with a range of services which provide additional support to homeless people with children. However, households have to share toilet facilities, although they do have their own showers.
- 5.26 The Council's staff always accompany people when they first move to temporary accommodation. They also give advice and assistance on how residents of temporary accommodation can pay rent and report repairs. However, the Council does not provide residents of its furnished flats with good, written information and advice on the accommodation, services and the local area.
- 5.27 We visited bed and breakfasts, hostels and furnished flats used by the Council and found it all to be of a satisfactory or good standard. Most of the residents of the Council's temporary accommodation that we spoke with were happy with their accommodation.
- 5.28 The Council provides good support and services to help people during their stay in temporary accommodation, including:
- tailored support for everyone placed in temporary accommodation;
  - health surgeries for homeless people;
  - transport to schools;

- designated teachers with responsibility for young people affected by homelessness;
- crèche facilities at its hostel at Landsburgh House;
- healthy eating breakfast packs in two of the hostels it uses; and
- free leisure passes to all homeless people and swimming lessons for children.

5.29 The Council is good at determining what is a reasonable period in temporary accommodation to give people good opportunities to secure alternative accommodation when it assesses them as non-priority or intentionally homeless. We found that it considers each case on its own merits and takes account of people's circumstances and the availability of alternative accommodation.

5.30 The Council uses good quality temporary accommodation, it provides good support to people in temporary accommodation and it gives people good opportunities to secure alternative accommodation. However, it relies heavily on bed and breakfast accommodation, has no clear targets for its reduction, has not always met its duty to provide temporary accommodation and it has some weaknesses in its procedures for ensuring that it complies with the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004.

#### Permanent accommodation

*Councils should, so far as possible, make offers of permanent accommodation quickly and should offer the same level of choice and quality of houses as other applicants.*

5.31 The proportion of people applying for assistance to the Council that it found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need – and therefore to whom it has a duty to secure permanent accommodation – has risen from 28% in 2002/03 to 33% in 2004/05; this is significantly lower than the national level of 54% in 2003/4. The Council increased the number of houses it allocated to homeless people by 20% over the last year. In 2003/04, the Council provided permanent accommodation to 86% of the people it assessed as having a priority need; this is significantly higher than the national figure of 56%<sup>22</sup> and was the third highest of Scottish local authorities. The Council has also improved the time it takes to

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<sup>22</sup> Source: Statistical Bulletin Housing Series HSG/2004/5

- make an offer of housing to homeless people: in 2004/05, it took on average 49 days to make an offer, a reduction of one third in 2 years.
- 5.32 The Code of Guidance on Homelessness 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. We found that the Council allocates proportionately more houses it designates as low demand to homeless people than it does to others: in 2004/05, 64% of homeless people were allocated these houses compared to 26% of transfer applicants and 44% of other housing list applicants. This may, in part, be a consequence of the number of homeless people requesting houses in the Ayr North area where a significant number are designated as lower demand. We also found that the Council bypassed homeless people for offers of houses without clear reasons for these decisions.
- 5.33 The Council reviewed its policy in April 2005 on number of offers, accommodation size and areas of choice and it now gives homeless people greater parity with others on its list when it allocates its houses. It gives homeless people up to two offers under homeless legislation and two further offers on the basis of their position on its housing list – it gives four offers to all other people on its housing list. However, the Council does not publish its rules on the allocations to homeless people as it is required to do by section 21 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987.
- 5.34 In one of its local offices, the Council's area team letting staff meet with homeless staff to discuss the most suitable allocations for homeless people. This is a good approach that focuses on the needs of homeless people, although we found that it can lead to delays in getting permanent accommodation.
- 5.35 Since 2002/03, the Council has provided houses with short SSTs to 58 vulnerable homeless people. This form of interim accommodation is an appropriate solution to some people's homelessness. However, we found that the Council is not fully complying with the Homeless Person Interim Accommodation (Scotland) Regulations 2002, and it has a number weaknesses in how it uses this form of accommodation:

- it is not always clear or consistent on the grounds for providing this type of tenancy;
  - it does not always properly serve the necessary notices on prospective tenants;
  - it does not make these tenants aware of their right to appeal its decision to provide this form of accommodation; and
  - it does not routinely and regularly monitor or review these tenancies.
- 5.36 The Council recognises its weaknesses in its use of short SSTs and intends to develop written procedures to guide staff in their use.
- 5.37 The Council has referral protocols with three RSLs for the use of its powers under section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; it is developing protocols with a further three. In 2004/05, the Council made 21 referrals, 19 of which resulted in lets to homeless people. We found that the Council has yet to provide staff with clear guidance on when they should use section 5 protocols. The Council advised us that it does not have all the necessary information on RSL stock and turnover in its area to ensure that it can make best use of these protocols. It recognises that it needs to work with its partners to improve the effectiveness of these protocols and better meet the needs of homeless people. The Council is aware that it does not have accurate information on the number of nominations it makes to RSLs that result in an allocation to a homeless person, and will address this through the implementation of a new IT system.
- 5.38 The Council is working with landlords in the private sector to maximise the availability of permanent accommodation for homeless people. It provides grants to landlords to bring property to a suitable standard for letting with a condition that they participate in a nomination scheme for homeless people. The initiative is at an early stage: so far it has given grants to bring 12 properties back into use, 2 properties have been completed and the Council has successfully nominated a homeless person to 1 of these.
- 5.39 The Council is increasing the number of houses it allocates to homeless people and it secures permanent accommodation for a high proportion of people it assesses as having a priority need. The Council is improving its approach to

how it allocates houses to homeless people; however, we found that it was not always clear why it bypassed homeless people for offers and homeless people are more likely to get lower demand houses. The Council is aware that it needs to improve its use of short SSTs.

### Preventing homelessness

*Local Authorities should work to prevent people from becoming homeless and to reduce the incidence of repeat homelessness.*

5.40 South Ayrshire Council is committed to preventing homelessness occurring, and is particularly effective at taking action to prevent it recurring. As a result, in 2004/05 83% of homeless people were still in their tenancy 12 months after the Council secured them permanent accommodation; this has significantly increased since 2002/03. The Council has also seen the number of homeless presentations from people who had previously presented to it halve over the last three years.

5.41 The Council has a wide range of initiatives to prevent homelessness and to prevent homelessness recurring, including:

- a family mediation scheme which, in a 7 month period, has helped 12 young people to reconcile with their families;
- a rent guarantee scheme which in the last year helped 92 people to secure and sustain a tenancy in the private sector;
- the provision of information on housing and homelessness in all the Council's secondary schools; and
- homemaker starter packs which provided 446 people with carpets, furniture and white goods in the last year.

5.42 The Council holds weekly surgeries in a local hospital to minimise the risk of people coming out of hospital becoming homeless. It is also working in partnership with East and North Ayrshire Councils to assist people who are leaving prison find suitable accommodation. The Council has yet to develop protocols for people leaving the armed forces.

5.43 South Ayrshire Council is one of four local authorities piloting a voluntary accreditation scheme for local landlords which aims to establish standards and good practice in the management of private lets. As part of this the Council is

- developing a protocol with accredited private landlords to ensure the referral of tenants who are at risk of losing their home.
- 5.44 The Council is good at providing support to homeless people, in partnership with a range of external agencies. It allocates a support worker to every person who applies to it for assistance, and homeless people can also access support through an on-call service. Support workers provide homeless people with support from 7 am to 10 pm which is tailored to their individual needs, including help with budgeting, housekeeping, tenancy management and referrals to specialist agencies. The Council continues to provide support to homeless people for at least 4 weeks after they have been given a tenancy or for 6 months for people helped through its rent guarantee scheme. People we spoke with were all very positive about the support provided to them by the Council.
- 5.45 The Council has a long-established multi-agency Youth Housing Support Group (YHSG) which helps young single vulnerable people to access suitable accommodation and appropriate support. Homeless officers and social workers from the Council's throughcare team jointly interview homeless young people to assess their housing and support needs. The YHSG regularly monitors and reviews the effectiveness and progress of these integrated assessments. In 2004/05, the number of young people who terminated, abandoned or lost a tenancy reduced by 11%.
- 5.46 The Council also established the multi-agency Families Affected by Homelessness Group which works to minimise the impact of homelessness on children and to ensure that homeless families can access mainstream services, including education and health services. The level of repeat homelessness by households with children has reduced since the Group started its work in 2004. Both of these groups are good examples of the Council's joint working to provide effective support and assistance for homeless people.
- 5.47 Aspects of the Council's delivery of housing management service help to create sustainable tenancies and prevent homelessness, including new tenant visits, early intervention with tenants in rent arrears and the work of its mediation and antisocial behaviour teams.

- 5.48 The Council is actively working to achieve the HomePoint standards for information and advice. It has published a housing information and advice strategy – in agreement with partner organisations – which sets out clear objectives and delivery actions to ensure access to good information and advice in South Ayrshire. Thirty of the Council's staff are trained to appropriate HomePoint standards and it will train a further six staff this year. The Council ensures that homeless people can access independent information and advice services by partly funding the Ayr Housing Aid Centre. In 2004/05, 49% of the Centre's cases related to homelessness, and it runs a rural outreach service in Girvan and Maybole.
- 5.49 The Council has a good approach to preventing homelessness. All homeless people are offered support and the Council is making good progress in meeting its statutory duties on providing access to information and advice.

#### **Responsiveness to homeless people**

*Local authorities should place homeless people and those threatened with homelessness at the heart of their work to prevent and alleviate homelessness. They should treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 5.50 The Council involved homeless people in the development of its homelessness strategy through focus groups<sup>23</sup>, questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Using these methods, the Council obtained and considered views from 30 people who had used its homeless service. However, the homelessness strategy does not include any specific objectives or actions to develop ways to involve homeless people in decisions about how the Council delivers its services.
- 5.51 The Council is aware that it needs to improve its approach to gathering and using feedback from people who have used its homeless service. It has recently introduced an exit survey for people leaving temporary accommodation, a questionnaire in its homeless information pack, and a questionnaire to collect partners' views on its services. The Council has not yet monitored or analysed the responses from these survey, but plans to introduce an evaluation framework to help it use this feedback to improve service delivery.

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<sup>23</sup> see glossary

- 5.52 We refer to some service standards that the Council uses at *Access to homelessness services*; however, it does not yet have a comprehensive framework of service standards for the homeless service, nor does it not actively promote or publicise those it currently operates to.
- 5.53 Local authorities have a duty to notify people who apply for assistance of a right to have decisions on their applications reviewed and, where requested, to carry out such a review. The Council advises people who apply to it for assistance that they have 21 days to appeal the decision reached and will provide accommodation for the duration of any appeal. It has produced a leaflet on the right to appeal which is included in an information pack it gives to people who apply for assistance and is issued with decision letters. However, we found that:
- the Council does not always advise people of their right to appeal during homeless assessment interviews;
  - it does not publicise the right to appeal in reception areas or interview rooms;
  - people do not always get the information pack which contains the right to appeal leaflet; and
  - not all of the Council's letters to homeless people contain full details of the right to appeal.
- 5.54 In 2004/05, the Council received 37 appeals: 6 against assessment decisions, 4 of which were upheld; and, 31 against offers of permanent accommodation, 9 of which were upheld. From our review of appeals, we found that the Council's decisions were appropriate and that it had considered additional information presented by appellants. The Council will informally review decisions before it hears formal appeals. This can be an effective and quick way to respond to people's concerns over decisions; however, the Council does not record or monitor these reviews to help it identify possible improvements to its service delivery. The Council is aware that its monitoring of formal appeals could also be improved and plans to tackle this through the implementation of its new IT system.
- 5.55 The Council's approach to seeking and responding to the views and priorities of homeless people is underdeveloped, although it has started to get feedback from service users. It operates a homeless appeal process which meets legislative

requirements but could be better publicised. It has not yet fully set out standards of service that homeless people should expect from the Council.

### **Working with partners**

*Local authorities should work corporately and co-operate with other organisations, to ensure that the needs of homeless people are met quickly and appropriately.*

- 5.56 The Council works well with a wide range of partner organisations both in planning and delivering services to homeless people. It has a well-established and regular homeless forum with a number of subgroups which are well-attended. The Council and its partners have recently established an information and advice forum to co-ordinate services and achieve better sharing of information.
- 5.57 We found that the Council regularly consults with its partners and their participation is an integral part of the Council's work on homelessness. Partners we spoke with are positive about working in partnership with the Council and feel that it is willing to listen and implement change in response to their views. The Council also involves partners in decision making when it is delivering the homeless service. The YHSG and Families Affected by Homelessness Group are good examples of agencies working together to improve the outcomes for homeless people.
- 5.58 The Council's partnership working in the provision of support and advice is a particular strength. It has partnership arrangements for the provision of support and advice to homeless people with Ayrshire Initiatives, Ayr Housing Aid Centre, Barnardo's, Belhaven, Blue Triangle, Quarriers and SeAscape.
- 5.59 In partnership with other agencies, the Council has developed an innovative community self-build project. Twelve unemployed homeless young people have worked with the partnership to refurbish eight one-bedroom flats. Each person who successfully completed the project was guaranteed a tenancy if they still needed one, and had an opportunity to obtain employment and other life skills. This is a good example of agencies working together with homeless people to achieve effective solutions to their housing and broader needs.

- 5.60 The Council is excellent at working with its partners in planning and delivering services for homeless people. Communication with its partners is good and the Council has a positive approach to involving and supporting other agencies in the provision of services for homeless people.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should procure homelessness services in a way that takes account of quality and should manage the cost of their services effectively.*

- 5.61 South Ayrshire Council's expenditure on its delivery of homeless services has increased by 23% over the last three year to a cost of £1.32 million in 2004/05. Over the same period, its income – mainly from temporary accommodation charges – has decreased by 26%. As a result, the Council's homeless service now operates with a financial deficit. In 2003/04, the Council reviewed its charges for temporary accommodation to make them more affordable; this is an important factor in the reduction in its homelessness income. The Council has spent more on bed and breakfast accommodation in each of the last three years, although the rate of increase has slowed.
- 5.62 The Council plans to initiate a fundamental review of the homeless service after it has completed its restructuring of its housing service. It carried out an audit of its collection of charges for temporary accommodation in December 2002, and identified that significant levels of arrears were due to delays in the Council's processing of housing benefit claims made by homeless people. In response, it employed two additional members of staff to fast-track its processing of benefit claims from homeless people and it also improved its framework for monitoring homeless arrears. By March 2005, the Council had reduced homeless arrears to a figure 30% lower than the target it set.
- 5.63 The Council procures its provision of support services from a range of agencies through competitive tendering and negotiated service level agreements. It plans to evaluate these arrangements later this year to ensure they are delivering Best Value.

5.64 The Council is a member of the homeless benchmarking sub-group of the Scottish Housing Best Value Network Group. Through this group's benchmarking, the Council recognised that its charges for temporary accommodation were higher than its peers', and reviewed them to ensure they are more affordable.

#### Performance management

*Local Authorities should have clear objectives, standards and targets for their homelessness service, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

5.65 The Council's homelessness strategy and action plan is the key planning document for the development and delivery of its services for homeless people. We saw that the Council is making good progress in implementing most of the actions from its strategy. It has a good approach to monitoring the achievement of its strategic objectives on homelessness: the Homeless Strategy Working Group regularly monitors progress, continuously reviews its actions and identifies new actions to address any emerging gaps in the service. This group reports to the multi-agency Corporate Homeless Strategy Group and the Council regularly reports performance against the action plan to the Social Justice Committee.

5.66 The Council recently commissioned research to identify options to help it to prepare to meet the legislative requirement to provide permanent accommodation to all unintentionally homeless people by 2012. Having considered the findings of this research, the Council has now agreed on a number of actions aimed at meeting this requirement, including:

- increasing its prevention work to reduce the number of people who become homeless;
- increasing the number of its houses it lets to homeless people; and
- further work with local housing associations to increasing the supply of houses for homeless people through the use of section 5 referrals.

5.67 While the Council has strengths in its strategic planning and monitoring in homelessness, it is aware that its management of the performance of its homeless service is underdeveloped. It sets only a limited number of performance targets in its homeless policies and procedures, and it does not always and consistently measure its performance against these. Its performance

- reports for the management team provide only limited information on the homeless service, and we found only informal arrangements between managers and staff for the management of performance. The Council anticipates that the implementation of its new IT system will provide an improved framework to monitor and manage its performance in the delivery of homeless services.
- 5.68 We also found that the Council makes little use of management quality control systems to ensure that its policies and procedures are implemented and to manage the quality of decision-making in homelessness. As a result, the Council was unaware of weaknesses in some key areas of its service delivery, for example in its assessment of homeless applications and the out-of-hours provision of temporary accommodation for roofless people. This is a significant weakness.
- 5.69 Until March 2005, the Council was delivering its homeless services without an agreed and comprehensive set of policies and procedures. It now has these in place, however we found that staff are still working without documented guidance on a number of key policy changes, such as the allocation of permanent accommodation and its “homeless at home” policy.
- 5.70 The Council’s approach to joint training with its partners is good: it runs an annual programme of training events covering issues affecting homeless people. The Council got positive feedback from participants in last year’s programme. It has assessed the training needs of its staff working in homelessness and is working with Ayr Housing Aid Centre to provide training tailored to these needs. The delivery of this training has been delayed, but this has allowed the Council to amend some of the programmes to respond to some of the early findings of this inspection.
- 5.71 The Council has an effective framework for its strategic planning and monitoring in homelessness, but its management of the performance of its homeless service is less well developed.

### Public reporting

*Local authorities should give stakeholders and service users the information they need about the homelessness service, its plans and performance.*

- 5.72 The Council makes its homelessness strategy and action plan available to the public, including through its website. It reports its progress on achieving its homeless objectives and actions to its Social Justice Committee and to its strategic partners, but does not publicise this more widely.
- 5.73 South Ayrshire Council does not publicly report information on the performance of its homeless services other than its annual reporting of statutory performance indicators. The Council also produces a useful annual review of its key achievements for the previous year and key challenges for the year ahead; however, it does not publish this document.

### Grade and overall assessment of homelessness services

- 5.74 Our overall assessment is that South Ayrshire Council's homelessness service is fair. We found that, while the Council has some real strengths in its delivery of services for homeless people, it has a number of significant weaknesses that directly impact on people using its services. We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.
- 5.75 The Council treats people well when it conducts homeless assessment interviews. It uses good quality temporary accommodation and it gives people good opportunities to secure alternative accommodation. The Council's approach to preventing homelessness and its provision of support to homeless people are good, and its work with partners is excellent.
- 5.76 While the Council has these strengths in its delivery of services for homeless people, we found some important weaknesses which diminish the service user's experience of the service, including:
- it not always meeting its statutory duty to provide roofless people with temporary accommodation;
  - its poor decision-making in not homeless assessments;
  - its reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation, without clear targets for its reduction; and
  - homeless people are more likely to get lower demand houses as permanent accommodation.

- 5.77 We also found that the Council may be underreporting the number of people who approach it for assistance, does not effectively control the quality of its decision-making and its management of the performance of its homeless service and use of feedback is underdeveloped. The Council is improving the way it allocates houses to homeless people, but it is not always clear why it bypasses homeless people for offers. It has some weaknesses in its use of short SSTs and its procedures on the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004.
- 5.78 The Council accepted many of our early findings during the inspection and took action to start tackling some of these. It has a track record of innovation in homeless services, achieving improvements and partnership working. The Council has shown a willingness and capacity to tackle the areas of weakness we have identified in this inspection.

## 6. Recommendations for improvement actions

- 6.1 These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority within each of the key service areas.
- 6.2 Across all of its landlord and homelessness activities South Ayrshire Council should:
- tackle the weaknesses in its service planning and performance management systems;
  - improve public reporting on performance in housing and homelessness; and
  - develop and promote a comprehensive set of service standards.
- 6.3 In housing management the Council should:
- ensure that it changes its approach to the exclusion, cancellation and suspension of applications from people who seek its help to find a home;
  - review its Westoaks local lettings initiative, and its use of age to restrict access to some of its houses;
  - sign-up those of its tenants who do not yet have Scottish secure tenancy agreements; and
  - improve its management and use of information from complaints.
- 6.4 In property maintenance, the Council should:
- improve its management of gas safety;
  - improve its management of performance and costs in response repairs;
  - further improve its consideration of quality and cost in the procurement of maintenance services;
  - ensure that it complies with its legal duties on the management of asbestos in common areas and on Right to Repair; and
  - ensure that it has good information on the condition of its houses.
- 6.5 In homelessness, the Council should:
- ensure that it always provides roofless people with temporary accommodation;
  - improve its decision-making in “not homeless” assessments;
  - accurately record and report first contacts with people applying to it for assistance;

- develop a clear strategy to ensure a sufficient supply of temporary accommodation, to reduce its reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation;
- put in place effective systems to manage the quality and progress of homeless assessments; and
- further improve its approach to allocating permanent accommodation to homeless people.

## 7. Next steps

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

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Department of Social Work, Housing and Health  
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### Sources of evidence

#### Groups and third parties consulted

- 30 local tenants' and residents' groups
- Tenants' and Residents' Forum
- South Ayrshire Tenants' Group
- The Council's external auditor
- 7 local housing associations
- Ayrshire Homelessness Forum
- Barnardo's
- Belhaven Tenancy Support
- Ayrshire Council on Alcohol
- SeAscape
- NHS Ayrshire and Arran
- Ayr Housing Aid Centre
- HomePoint
- Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Team
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman

#### Interviews/meetings

- Councillor Andy Hill, Leader of the Council (Labour)
- Councillor John McDowall, Vice-Convener Social Justice (Labour)
- Councillor Winifred Sloan, Shadow Convener (Conservative)
- Councillor Ian Stewart, Convener Social Justice (Labour)
- Tenants' and Residents' Forum
- South Ayrshire Tenants' Group
- Tom Cairns, Chief Executive
- Jenny Thomson, Acting Director of Social Work, Housing & Health
- Brian Davidson, Director of Environment & Infrastructure
- Senior and front-line staff in the Department of Social Work, Housing and Health
- Senior and front-line staff in the Department of Environment & Infrastructure
- Senior Corporate Policy Officer
- Chief Accountant (HRA)
- Community Safety Manager
- Public Health Facilitator

#### Reality checks

- Observation of South Ayrshire Council's tenant consultation conference on its inspection submission
- Observation of the Social Justice Committee meeting on 16 June 2005
- Observation of meetings of the Families Affected by Homelessness Group, the Homeless Forum, the Information and Advice Forum, and the Youth Housing Support Group
- Observation of Ayr North Allocations Meeting
- Observation of North Ayr Area Team Pilot meeting
- Observation of Westoaks local lettings initiative meeting
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Shadowing the homeless out-of-hours service
- Shadowing of interviews with homeless people and joint assessment interviews

- Shadowing of support visits and temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of arrears interview
- Shadowing of repairs out-of-hours service
- Shadowing of repair pre-inspections
- Shadowing of allocations interviews
- Shadowing of tenancy sign-up interviews
- Shadowing of allocations
- Visits to temporary accommodation
- Review of short SSTs
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of complaints
- Review of reported repairs
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of section 5 referrals
- Review of empty house management records
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Estate visits
- Empty property visits
- Observation of information and advice to service users

#### Key documents reviewed

- South Ayrshire Council's inspection submission
- Corporate and departmental plans and performance reports
- Local Housing Strategy
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard Delivery Plan
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Allocation policy, application form and guide to policy
- Protocols with other agencies, including section 5 protocols
- Tenant newsletters
- Council's web site
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Homelessness strategy and updates

### Examples of positive practice

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

#### Void security project

The Council has also developed a void security project in a difficult-to-let area of Ayr, which aims to reduce the impact of more visible security measures. The project uses good methods to reduce vandalism and improve general appearance of the local area to increase the letting potential of the properties. These including:

- an initial tidying-up and ongoing maintenance of gardens;
- putting up curtains and avoiding the use of security covers on windows and doors;  
and
- installing light timers and a remote alarm system.

#### Homelessness and children's education

The Council recognises the particular difficulties children face when confronted with homelessness. It works with its partners to minimise the disruption in children's education through a range of initiatives, including:

- providing transport to school when a family are accommodated in temporary accommodation that lies outwith the school's catchment area;
- automatically offering children a support worker from Barnardo's;
- providing a designated person in each school to support homeless children;
- developing a rapid assessment pack which is used when educational records have not yet reached the school and they are unaware of the child's educational ability;  
and
- providing sessions on "*Awareness of homelessness*" as a part of schoolteachers and classroom assistants continuing professional development.

## Glossary

<b>Average</b>	The arithmetic mean – the sum of all the values divided by the number of values.
<b>Benchmarking</b>	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
<b>Common housing register</b>	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
<b>Cyclical maintenance</b>	Planned programme of work to deal with predictable deterioration of building components, for example regular painting of window frames.
<b>Focus group</b>	A group of people brought together to have a structured discussion on a specific subject or set of subjects, facilitated by an independent person.
<b>Housing list</b>	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the council to allocate its housing stock.
<b>Inspection submission</b>	Documents submitted by the landlord at the start of the inspection to provide information on its performance, context and how it is structured.
<b>National median</b>	The central value of the ordered performance of all Scottish councils.
<b>Peer group</b>	A group of organisations facing similar tasks and challenges with which comparisons can be made.
<b>Performance indicator</b>	A measure of how a council is achieving its objectives. Performance Indicators can be compared with a pre-set standard (a benchmark) or with other organisations.
<b>Performance Standards</b>	Housing standards for all social landlords in Scotland.
<b>Planned maintenance</b>	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
<b>Rechargeable repairs</b>	Work that is the responsibility of the tenant but has been done by the landlord.
<b>Registered social landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland.

<b>Re-lets</b>	Lets made to the second or subsequent tenant. Distinguished from new lets that are made when the property is first built or modernised.
<b>Right to Buy</b>	Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy.
<b>Right to Repair</b>	A scheme which gives tenants legal rights to have certain repairs in defined times.
<b>Scottish secure tenancy (SST)</b>	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
<b>Serious arrears</b>	Where a tenant owes more than 13 weeks rent payments and this is more than £250.
<b>Shadowing</b>	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
<b>Statutory reasonable preference categories</b>	People who have one of these housing needs: homelessness, overcrowding, large families, living in below tolerable standard housing or unsatisfactory living conditions.

## Regulation & Inspection

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