



THE SCOTTISH HOUSING REGULATOR

East Renfrewshire Council Targeted Inspection Report
April 2011

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1. Introduction

About this inspection

- 1.1 This inspection was carried out by the Scottish Housing Regulator under section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of housing service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of *Performance Standards*.
- 1.2 We previously inspected East Renfrewshire Council in 2005 and awarded it the following grades for its services:
- Housing Management – B (Good)
 - Property Maintenance – C (Fair)
 - Homelessness – C (Fair)
- 1.3 The Scottish Housing Regulator, Audit Scotland and the other scrutiny bodies operating in East Renfrewshire Council are taking a joint approach to planning of their scrutiny activity that is both proportionate and risk based – the Shared Risk Assessment process. The objectives of this approach are to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of scrutiny work and minimise the impact of such activity upon the Council. The Shared Risk Assessment process identified a number of significant risks and as a result a number of areas were agreed for scrutiny in the Council's 2010/13 Assurance and Improvement Plan:
- the Council's limited progress towards meeting the Minister's target for all unintentionally homeless households to be entitled to settled accommodation by 2012; and
 - a number of the Council's Statutory Performance Indicators were showing continuing poor or deteriorating performance – for example, repairs service, gas safety testing, re-let times and rent arrears.
- 1.4 In addition, the LAN members identified risks around the accuracy of the Council's stock condition information and the resultant works and investment necessary to bring its properties up to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, by

the Minister's target of 2015. In consultation with the Council we have agreed to carry out scrutiny work in this area in the autumn of 2011.

- 1.5 As this inspection focussed on specific service areas only, we have not awarded inspection grades.

How we assessed performance

- 1.6 Our inspectors asked two key questions:
- How well is East Renfrewshire delivering its services?
 - Is East Renfrewshire managed for improvement?
- 1.7 In order to answer these questions inspectors and Tenant Assessors:
- spoke to tenants, service users, staff and elected members of the council;
 - asked other partner organisations for their views;
 - visited homes and local areas;
 - saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
 - examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
 - analysed published performance and financial information.
- 1.8 When we assess a landlord's performance, we take various factors into account. These factors are:
- outcomes for service users;
 - how far the service or organisation meets Performance Standards;
 - performance against key indicators in comparison with others;
 - compliance with legislation;
 - how good the leadership and accountability are;
 - how far good practice is followed;
 - the organisation's level of self-awareness;
 - how well value for money is being achieved;
 - local context and legitimate local priorities; and
 - commitment to, and track record of, improvement.

The inspection team

1.9 The inspection team was led by John Jenkins (Inspection Manager) and included Marion McLellan and Tom Burns (Inspectors), Carolynne White (Inspection Officer) and Christina Madden and Nadya Wagland (Tenant Assessors). We were on site between Monday 8th and Thursday 18th November 2010. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

Responding to this inspection

1.10 We expect all inspected bodies to make this report available to anyone that wants it, report our findings to tenants and other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised. We will continue to work with Audit Scotland and other scrutiny bodies on the Local Area Network, in order to monitor the Council's progress annually through the Shared Risk Assessment process.

2. Inspection findings

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

- 2.1 We found some strengths in the Council's housing and homelessness services:
- the Council offers applicants a good level of choice in house type and form of heating;
 - it is achieving positive outcomes through its nominations arrangements;
 - it has a good approach to monitoring its lettings performance;
 - its performance in re-letting empty houses has improved recently;
 - its recent performance in gas safety has improved significantly;
 - it provides good support to people in its furnished accommodation;
 - it is quick to make homelessness decisions and does not lose contact with many applicants before it makes its decision; and
 - it houses homeless people quickly.
- 2.2 The Council does, however, have many areas of weakness in the delivery of its services, some of which are significant:
- its approach to offering and letting houses to homeless applicants;
 - its management of suspensions and cancellations;
 - its approach to income maximisation is poor, though recently improving;
 - its repairs performance could be improved;
 - its homelessness leaflets do not provide sufficient information and are not always readily available;
 - its progress has been slow to meet the 2012 target;
 - it has not responded effectively to all our criticisms following our 2005 inspection of its homelessness service;
 - on occasion, it uses poor quality, Bed and Breakfast establishments;
 - it places a significant number of homeless people outwith its area;
 - it does not carry out risk assessments before placing people in Bed and Breakfast establishments;
 - it does not always take account of peoples' needs when providing temporary accommodation; and

- on occasion, it has breached the Unsuitable Accommodation Order.

2.3 The Council's Housing and Homelessness services have been operating without a Head of Service for some time. While we were on site the Council appointed a Housing Service Manager to manage the services. The new Housing Service Manager and his management team responded positively to our initial inspection feedback and we saw evidence of an appetite for change and improvement. Following agreement of the improvements necessary to address the weaknesses identified in this report we will closely monitor the Council's progress with our scrutiny partners through the shared risk assessment process.

Key recommendations

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

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

- continue to improve the quality of its administration and file management;
- ensure that quality assurance processes are in place and followed by staff;
- produce a comprehensive Service Plan;
- improve the performance information presented to its Housing Service Liaison Group;
- ensure that it focuses on continuously improving its services;
- do more to analyse service users views and demonstrate the impact on its decision making;
- improve its approach to dealing with service users' complaints;
- carry out regular and systematic reviews of the value for money provided by its present arrangements for delivering its responsive repairs;
- put plans in place to increase spend on planned maintenance and reduce spend on responsive repairs; and
- put plans in place to reduce the proportion of Emergency responsive repairs.

In housing management the Council should:

- improve its management of cancelled and suspended applications for housing;
- ensure that it treats homeless people the same as other applicants for housing;
- continue to improve its performance in collecting its tenants' rents;
- do more to monitor referrals to and outcomes from its Income Maximisation and Money Advice services; and
- continue to improve its performance in re-letting its houses.

In the repairs service the Council should:

- continue to improve its response repairs performance.

In delivering services for homeless people the Council should:

- improve its progress towards meeting the 2012 target; and
- improve its approach to the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people.

3. Context

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

3.1 Important facts about East Renfrewshire as an organisation and as a landlord:

- the Council is led by a coalition administration comprising members from the Scottish Labour Party, Scottish National Party, Scottish Liberal Democrats and Independents;
- the housing service is part of the Council's Environment Department and is made up of three sections, Property Services, Tenancy Services and Development and Strategy;
- it delivers its housing and homelessness services from a centralised office in Barrhead;
- in March 2010, the Council owned and managed 3,072 properties;
- around 33% of the Council's properties are houses, and around 67% are flats;
- the Council's properties are not evenly distributed across its area of operation; 65% of its stock is in the Levern Valley area, while 73% of its population lives in the Eastwood area; and
- the Council charges its tenants an average rent of £51.90 per week, the sixth lowest of the 26 Councils in Scotland managing houses.

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

- the overall population of the East Renfrewshire area is projected to decline over the next 20 years. In common with the rest of Scotland, the area is projected to see a significant population growth in those of retirement age and above;
- the gross average weekly earnings for East Renfrewshire residents is £619, 27% higher than the Scottish average; however in the Levern Valley area it more closely reflects the Scottish figure. 82% of employees in the Council's area work within the service sector;
- unemployment levels in East Renfrewshire are 2.8%, significantly lower than the Scottish average of 4.9%;

- whilst East Renfrewshire is generally considered to be an area of affluence, there are pockets of deprivation, particularly around the Lavern Valley area, where 24% of the population live in data zones ranked among the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland; and
- 27.6% of households in East Renfrewshire are made up of families, compared to the national figure of 19.5%, reflecting the fact that a high proportion of families are attracted to the area by the excellent performance of local schools.

4. How well is East Renfrewshire delivering housing management?

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

Tenant satisfaction

- 4.1 In August 2010 the Council carried out a comprehensive Tenants' Housing Survey. The headline results reveal that 78% of respondents were very or fairly satisfied with the housing services provided by the Council.

Access to housing

- 4.2 East Renfrewshire Council participates in the East Renfrewshire Housing Register (ERHR), a common housing register which it operates in partnership with two local Registered Social Landlords; Arklet Housing Association and Barrhead Housing Association. The ERHR partners use a comprehensive common application pack, but operate their own allocations policies. The Council publicises ERHR in its tenant newsletters and on its website and an application pack and form are available to download or can be obtained from any Council office. The information provided by the Council is available in community languages and alternative formats and its website includes a range of accessibility options, including Browsealoud for visually impaired users.
- 4.3 The ERHR partners surveyed applicants on their housing lists in 2010 to gather feedback on the application process. This is a positive approach. Half of respondents said that the introduction of ERHR made it easier to apply for social housing in East Renfrewshire, while 83% felt the application form was very easy or easy to read and 73% found it very easy or easy to complete.
- 4.4 The Council's housing list is open to anyone aged 16 or over and at 31st March 2010 had 2,086 applicants. Following the introduction of ERHR, the Council and its partners introduced a target of 20 working days to process applications for housing, which is not challenging. The Council reports that the average time to process applications at the time of our inspection was 12 working days. A manager audits a 10% sample of the applications processed each month.

4.5 We reviewed a sample of applications for housing and found that the Council had processed each application and added it to the housing list within the 20 working day target. The majority of applications had been pointed appropriately, in line with the Council's policy, however, we found some weaknesses in the Council's approach:

- it is not always clear that a second member of staff has checked and signed off the processing of applications;
- we saw some cases where there were discrepancies in the points totals recorded, either on the application form, the Council's IT system or the registration letter issued to the applicant;
- some categories of points are generated automatically by the Council's IT system and others are awarded manually. In cases where points are added manually, it is not always clear when and why these are awarded; and
- the standard registration letter issued to applicants does not provide a full breakdown of the points awarded, nor does the letter contain information on the prospects of the applicant being housed in their areas of choice, although the letter does offer applicants a prospects interview.

As a result, some individual records are unnecessarily complex and the Council cannot always demonstrate why it has taken particular decisions. Following our feedback, the Council immediately took steps to improve its administration and management of housing applications.

4.6 In 2009/10, the Council cancelled 1,571 applications. The majority of these resulted from applicants' failure to respond to re-registration letters when ERHR was introduced. At the time of our inspection, the Council did not have a policy or procedures in relation to cancelled applications. It cancels some applications in circumstances which do not comply with legislation, including instances where applicants have been re-housed and where information supplied by applicants is incomplete. The Council were developing a procedure to address this while we were on site.

4.7 We reviewed a number of cancelled applications and found weaknesses in the Council's administration. The Council does not routinely:

- retain relevant information on cancelled applications;

- clearly record the reasons for cancellation; and
- issue applicants with a letter confirming the cancellation of their application, the reasons for this, and the action required to have the application reinstated.

Collectively, the Council's approach to management of cancelled applications represents a significant weakness.

4.8 We also reviewed a sample of cases in which the applicant had been suspended from receiving offers of housing. At the time of our inspection, the Council did not have a policy or procedures in relation to suspended applications. There are a number of weaknesses in the Council's approach to managing suspensions, some of which are significant. The Council:

- does not always specify a date for the suspension to be lifted;
- does not routinely review cases during the duration of the suspension;
- suspends applicants for a period of twelve months in instances where they have refused two offers of housing, which is lengthy; and
- in some cases, it was not clear that the Council had written to the applicant to explain their suspension and the reasons for it. As a result, the Council cannot be certain that these applicants are aware of the status of their application for housing.

4.9 The Council gives general applicants two offers of housing and gives homeless applicants in priority need one offer of housing under the terms of the homelessness legislation. If the applicant refuses this single offer, their priority status is rescinded and they are entitled to only one further offer of housing as a mainstream applicant. This is a weakness. The Council does not routinely re-assess applicants' circumstances after their priority status is rescinded, and so cannot be sure that the applicants' points total accurately reflects their housing need.

4.10 The Council offers applicants a good level of choice in house type and form of heating. Applicants can request a maximum of seven areas and can specify streets, or parts of streets, that they wish, or do not wish to be considered for. Homeless applicants in priority need can request up to seven areas for a period

of one month, however their application will be expanded to cover all areas of East Renfrewshire when this period elapses.

- 4.11 In summary, East Renfrewshire's approach to access is poor. Its target timescale for processing applications is not challenging and there are weaknesses in its approach to homeless applicants' offers and in its management of cancelled and suspended applications, some of which are significant.

Lettings

- 4.12 The Council introduced an interim allocations policy in October 2010. It has firm plans in place to develop a new allocations policy over 2011. The interim policy broadly reflects the statutory reasonable preference categories. At the time of our inspection, contrary to legislation, the Council applied age restrictions to its mainstream bungalows throughout the local authority area. When we raised this with the Council, it took prompt action to suspend the use of age restrictions in its allocations.
- 4.13 The Council splits applicants into five groups, with statutory homeless applicants and special cases awarded the highest level of priority. The Council does not set targets for the proportion of lets to each group; in 2009/10, it let 44% of its properties to statutory homeless applicants, 18% to transfer applicants and 38% to waiting list applicants.
- 4.14 When a property becomes empty, the Council aims, in the first instance, to allocate to a homeless applicant in priority need. It uses selection meetings to match homeless applicants to its empty houses in decision date order, though it aims to take the expressed preferences of applicants into account, where possible, when allocating houses. The Council reports that since the introduction of selection meetings in 2008, its refusal rate has declined from 37% to 18%.
- 4.15 We observed two selection meetings and reviewed the minutes of previous meetings. The Council does not always follow its own procedures on allowing homeless applicants to restrict their areas of choice for a one month period, although the Council told us it endeavours to contact applicants to confirm

- interest in properties prior to making a formal offer. We found some weaknesses around the administration of the selection meeting process. The meeting minutes do not routinely record reasons on why one applicant was offered a particular property ahead of other applicants and do not include outcome information from previous selections, for example refusals or formal offers made. As a result, the letting process for homeless applicants is not fully transparent.
- 4.16 In cases where the Council has no interested homeless applicants for an empty property, or if the property is unsuitable for medical adaptation, it will allocate to an applicant from the general list. We reviewed each of the lets made since the Council's new allocations policy was introduced in October 2010 and found that these were made in accordance with policy, although we found a small number of cases where the reasons for by-passing applicants were not clearly recorded. A manager reviews each case prior to a let being made.
- 4.17 The Council currently operates Local Lettings Initiatives (LLIs) in five areas of its housing stock which are aimed at addressing particular letting and estate management issues. The Council has not published documents setting out for applicants the terms of each LLI, nor has it completed equalities impact assessments. It requests two written tenancy or character references from applicants selected for housing within an area covered by an LLI, which may prove to be restrictive for some applicants.
- 4.18 The Council has a good approach to monitoring its lettings performance. It has recently introduced a detailed monitoring framework which provides information on a range of indicators, including offers, refusals and the reasons for these. It reports this information to its Housing Services Liaison Group (HSLG), however, does not make this information available on its website and it reports only limited information to tenants through its housing newsletter.
- 4.19 Since the introduction of ERHR, the Council no longer makes nominations to its two partner RSLs, as these lets are made directly through the CHR. The Council makes nominations to six other RSLs which operate in the local area and has set a target of 60% successful nominations for 2010/11; to date it has achieved an outcome of 69%, which is positive. The Council set a target to house 25

households through section 5 referrals in 2009/10 and achieved an outcome of 28. In 2010/11, to December 2010, it has housed 10 households through section 5 referrals.

- 4.20 In summary, there are a number of weaknesses in the Council's approach to lettings. However, the Council is achieving positive outcomes through its nominations arrangements and has a good approach to monitoring its lettings performance. It responded promptly to suspend the use of age restrictions in some of its housing stock types.

Income maximisation

- 4.21 The Council provides tenants with a wide range of options for paying their rent; however it does not currently record or analyse the numbers of tenants using each payment option.

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

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10
	Council	National	Council	National	Council
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	8.2%	6%	8%	6.1%	8.3%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	5.5%	4.2%	5.1%	4.4%	6.5%

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

- 4.23 The Council acknowledges that its performance in collecting tenants' rents is poor. For the last three financial years its rent arrears have been significantly poorer than the national figures; its performance placing it in the bottom quartile of Scottish local authorities. Over the same period the percentage of the Council's tenants in serious arrears has increased. Again, the Council's performance is poorer than the national figures. However, in 2010/11, its recent performance to December 2010 has improved and its tenants' rent arrears have fallen to 7.2%.
- 4.24 The Council has a Rent Recovery team, based within its Finance Department, responsible for recovering tenant related debt. It has recently introduced revised procedures for rent arrears recovery; however its corporate Debt Recovery policy

- has not been reviewed since 2004. At the time of our inspection, the Council's approach to managing rent arrears cases following decree for repossession was underdeveloped and it had limited guidance for staff. While we were on site, the Council developed amended procedures which set out post-decree management arrangements.
- 4.25 The Council plans to develop a new Rent Policy during in 2011. It has begun consultations with its tenants and thereafter plans to carry out a comprehensive rent harmonisation, setting out a more consistent approach to rental charges across the local authority area.
- 4.26 We found a number of weaknesses in the Council's approach to rent arrears. It relies primarily on letters in the early stages of the arrears recovery process and does not routinely support these with personal contact such as visits, phone calls or text messages. It does not carry out an assessment of household income and expenditure when making repayment arrangements with tenants and so cannot demonstrate that these are realistic and affordable. We saw no evidence of routine joint working between Housing staff and the Rent Recovery team during the arrears recovery process; consequently, the Council is missing opportunities to engage with its tenants in rent arrears.
- 4.27 The Council operates Income Maximisation and Money Advice services which are open to all tenants and residents in the East Renfrewshire area. Its Housing and Rent Recovery staff do not make formal referrals to these services, to sources of independent advice or advocacy services. This is a weakness. The Council acknowledges that it could do more to monitor referrals to and outcomes from its Income Maximisation and Money Advice services. In 2009/10 the services secured backdated benefit claims in the region of £1.3 million for East Renfrewshire residents, which is a positive outcome.

- 4.28 The table below summarises the Council's reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10
	Council	National	Council	National	Council
Total no. of re-lets	248	n/a	253	n/a	278
% of dwellings that were not low demand re-let with 4 weeks	17.4%	49.5%	21.3%	53.5%	24.9%
Average time (days) to re-let houses that are not low demand	65	44	106	41	76
% of total annual rental due lost due to voids	2.2%	1.6%	2.4%	1.4%	2.0%

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

- 4.29 In 2009/10, the Council re-let 278 properties, 25 more than the previous year. In 2008/09, it lost 2.4% of its total rental income as a result of empty houses; higher than the national figure of 1.4%. In 2009/10, the Council's performance improved to 2% and to 1.9% by December 2010.
- 4.30 In 2007/08, the Council reported that it took an average of 65 days to let empty houses that were not low demand. This figure rose to 106 days in 2008/09; significantly higher than the national figure of 41 days, and declined to 76 days in 2009/10. The Council is aware that it needs to improve its performance in managing its empty houses. It has identified the key factors contributing to its poor performance and has developed and implemented a comprehensive Void Improvement Plan to address these. It is supporting this work through monthly co-ordination meetings and detailed performance monitoring. This is a good approach and to December 2010, the Council had further improved its performance, taking an average of 55 days to let houses that were not low demand.
- 4.31 We saw that there are often considerable delays in the Council carrying out repair work to empty houses prior to let. In the case of internal transfers the Council's practice is to commence repair work only after the required 28 day notice period has elapsed, despite the majority of transferring tenants signing

- their new tenancy and handing in keys promptly. This practice contributes to delays in the letting process.
- 4.32 We and our Tenant Assessor visited a small number of the Council's empty properties which had been prepared for re-let and found these to be of a poor standard. The Council has recently developed a new lettable standard for its empty properties following consultation with tenants groups. It has recently introduced the new standard and has firm plans to publicise this early in 2011.
- 4.33 In summary, East Renfrewshire Council's approach to income maximisation is poor, though recently improving. It has a number of weaknesses in its approach to managing tenants' rent arrears. The Council has taken a positive approach to addressing its performance in re-letting empty houses and its performance in this area has improved recently.

5. How well is East Renfrewshire delivering repairs?

In this section we set out our assessment the Council's performance in delivering a repairs service for tenants.

Tenant satisfaction

- 5.1 In August 2010 the Council carried out a comprehensive Tenants' Housing Survey. Headline results reveal that 75% of respondents were very or fairly satisfied with the way that the Council deals with repairs and maintenance.

Home safety

- 5.2 By law, East Renfrewshire Council must make safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues that it provides for its tenants. The table below summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks, at the time of our inspection.

	October 2010	
	No. of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances and flues	2533	-
Houses with current gas safety certificates	2430	95.9%
Houses with gas appliances and flues that are currently capped or have no gas supply	103	4.1%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	1954	77.0%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	63	2.5%
Houses where safety check was carried out between one and three months after the due date	133	5.3%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than 3 months after the due date	384	15.2%

Source: Council's inspection submission

- 5.3 The Council was aware of its poor performance in this area and as a consequence revised its gas safety procedures in May 2010. It now forces entry to its houses in order to carry out a gas safety check, relying upon terms in the tenancy agreement, without first seeking the agreement of the Courts. The Council routinely fits an appliance to alert the tenant to the need for a safety check, and if necessary, restrict the gas supply in properties where forced access has proved necessary. It has effective record keeping and we saw good joint

working between Council departments and its contractor. The Council has good arrangements to quality check its annual safety inspections. It checks the existence and effective operation of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors during gas safety visits.

- 5.4 In summary, the Council's performance in gas safety has improved significantly following the recent introduction of its revised procedures.

Response repairs

- 5.5 Information on how to report a repair is available on the Council's website, in a booklet included with its tenants' handbook and occasionally in publications that it issues. East Renfrewshire's tenants can report repairs by visiting or writing to its offices. Alternatively, they can telephone either the Council's corporate customer contact centre or its Housing call centre.
- 5.6 The Council has recently started to gather information on how its tenants contact it to report repairs and plans in future, to analyse and use this information to improve access for its service users. The Council's recent tenant satisfaction survey indicates that most of its tenants prefer to report repairs by telephone.
- 5.7 East Renfrewshire Council is aware that a significant number of calls to its contact centres are unanswered. The Council is aware that it needs to improve its service and at present is merging its Housing call centre with its corporate customer contact centre.
- 5.8 During out of office hours emergency repairs are reported to and processed by staff responsible for the operation of the authority's Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) system. Gas emergencies can be reported to this number or direct to the Council's contractor.
- 5.9 The Council's target for completing emergency repairs is 24 hours. Its website states there is an additional target of four hours to "make safe" certain types of repairs. The Council does not gather performance information on this four hour target, so it is unable to say how well it is performing. The Council's target for urgent repairs is 10 working days and for routine repairs 25 working days. These

targets are not particularly challenging when compared to other similar local authorities.

- 5.10 The table below is a summary of the Council's reported performance in completing response repairs within its target timescales compared with the 2008/09 national median (all repairs) for local authority landlords.

	Target completion time	2008/09	2008/09 national median	2009/10
Emergency	24 hrs	91.4%		86.7%
Urgent	10 days	72.1%		68.5%
Routine	25 days	76%		65%
% of all repairs completed within target timescale		80.5%	91.3%	73.3%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators and information provided by the Council.

- 5.11 East Renfrewshire's reported performance improved in all categories in the first half of 2010/11 when compared with its performance in 2009/10; with 82.2% of all repairs carried out to October 2010, being completed within target. However its performance in 2009/10 was much poorer than in 2008/09 when it was ranked the third lowest performer of 26 local authorities.
- 5.12 The Council operates an appointment system for urgent repairs. In 2009/10 its performance in keeping appointments was good, at 96%.
- 5.13 There are some weaknesses in the way the Council calculates its performance. It has identified that how it records performance in emergency repairs and urgent repairs made by appointment, means that it is under-reporting how well it is dealing with these categories of repair. Conversely, performance on emergency repairs may be overstated on occasions. The Council is taking steps to ensure that in future it accurately records and reports its performance.
- 5.14 The Council's recently re-designed repairs receipt provides details of the reported repair, the target completion date, whether it is a qualifying repair under Right to Repair and if applicable, details of the appointment agreed. The receipt also invites the tenant to complete and return a pre-paid satisfaction survey form.

- 5.15 The Council generally reports the results of its repairs satisfaction survey returns each quarter, though the last report was produced in March 2010. Analysis of its 87 returns, representing 3% of completed urgent repairs during the period July to December 2009, showed very high levels of satisfaction with the quality of repairs, the way they were carried out and the appointments system. The Council has recently introduced a quarterly prize draw in an effort to improve on the historically low number of survey forms returned by service users.
- 5.16 The Council acknowledged that it only recently began to comply with Right to Repair legislation. However, when we were on site, we saw that staff were now able to identify qualifying repairs and were providing relevant information to tenants on the scheme, at the point a repair was reported. Qualifying repairs are recorded on revised repairs receipts issued to service users and a recently introduced leaflet for tenants provides clear information on how the scheme operates. The Council is now monitoring how well it is dealing with qualifying repairs under the Right to Repair legislation.
- 5.17 Pre and post inspections are important ways of ensuring that repairs are carried out to a high standard and targeted accurately. East Renfrewshire Council has arrangements in place to carry out pre and post inspections of repairs.
- 5.18 The Council carries out a pre inspection in situations where:
- a major component may need renewal;
 - the nature or scale of the reported repair is unclear; or
 - where the repair is potentially re-chargeable to a tenant or adjoining owners.
- In 2009/10 the Council pre inspected around 9% of reported repairs.
- 5.19 The Council's target for post inspections is 5% of reported repairs, selected randomly. The Council is currently meeting this target but the method of selection used means the most appropriate repairs for post inspections may not be selected. The Council has identified that it needs to make better use of the information it gathers through post inspections to identify where it can improve its repairs service.

5.20 In summary, the Council has made considerable recent progress in how it carries out gas safety inspections; its current performance has improved significantly. There have also been recent improvements in its repairs performance and it is now complying with the Right to Repair legislation. However it is not accurately recording its response repairs times and there is still scope for improving its performance in some categories of responsive repair.

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

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

Access to service

- 6.1 In 2009/10 East Renfrewshire Council received 353 applications from homeless people, similar to the previous year's figure of 359. This equates to 1.01% of all households in East Renfrewshire Council and is significantly lower than the national figure of 2.57% of households making homelessness applications.
- 6.2 The Council delivers its homelessness service from its Barrhead office. Homeless people can also contact its other local offices to arrange an appointment for an interview. The Council arranges home visits and conducts interviews outwith the office on request.
- 6.3 We found that that the Council does not always accept applications from people presenting at its offices from outwith its area of operation. This is a breach of legislation. When we brought this to the Council's attention it immediately changed its procedures to address this weakness.
- 6.4 The Council publicises access arrangements for its homelessness service through its website, leaflets, posters and plasma screens at its offices. However, we found:
- that its poster was not always prominently displayed;
 - its leaflets were not readily available;
 - the leaflet does not provide comprehensive information on the Council's duties to homeless people; and
 - there is only limited information on its website.
- 6.5 The Council is quick at interviewing people who apply to it for help. It interviews all roofless applicants on the same day that they first approach the service and sees other applicants within two working days. This is a challenging service standard. Officers contact applicants to remind them about their interview and to check that they are able to attend. This is a positive way to minimise the risk of

- losing contact with people. The Council has recently changed its procedures and now records a formal application from first approach and also records the number of appointments which are not kept.
- 6.6 The Barrhead office is accessible. It has a loop system and interview rooms with disabled access. However; we found that there can be delays in carrying out interviews, even when appointments have been arranged, due to pressure on available interview rooms. This issue was highlighted in our previous inspection report published in April 2005.
- 6.7 The Council publicises the provision of information in five community languages in its leaflets and other publications. It can also provide information in other formats. It has effective arrangements in place to provide interpreting services and it publicises this in posters in community languages.
- 6.8 The Council provides an emergency out-of-hours service to help homeless people when its offices are closed. We found that its staff procedures were not clear on how to deal with applications from outwith East Renfrewshire Council. When we brought this to the Council's attention it immediately clarified its procedures.
- 6.9 The Council records the way people access the service but its monitoring and reporting on access routes to the service is limited. The Council is currently developing discharge protocols with local prisons and hospitals.
- 6.10 In summary, the Council's approach to access in its homelessness service is fair. It provides access to its service 24 hours a day and arranges interviews quickly. Its offices are accessible however; there can be delays in accessing interview rooms. The Council changed its approach to how it deals with applications from people who are from outwith its area while we were on site. Its leaflets do not provide sufficient information and are not always readily available.

Advice and prevention

- 6.11 The Council has a duty to ensure that homeless people can access good quality, free advice and information about homelessness and its prevention. It is currently completing its homeless action plan as part of the work of the Homeless

- Strategy Working Group (HSWG). The HSWG is a sub group of the Local Housing Strategy Group and has representatives from local RSLs, voluntary agencies and internal Council partners.
- 6.12 The Council provides general housing information and advice to homeless people when they first contact the service and during their homelessness assessment interview. It also offers everyone who it has found to be either intentionally homeless or not in priority need an advice and assistance interview to help resolve their homelessness. It has provided training for staff to enable them to give information and advice to the Scottish National standards for Information and Advice Type I and II. The Council records the provision of advice in a database and has plans to develop a more sophisticated monitoring framework.
- 6.13 The Council signposts homeless people to independent sources of advice and support. It has a service level agreement with the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to give homeless people independent advice and with Govan Law Centre to help people with mortgage difficulties. It is working with CAB to improve the way it records and monitors outcomes for service users.
- 6.14 The Council provides a wide range of information and advice and service users we spoke to were positive about its approach. The Council routinely gathers and reports feedback from service users. We saw the Council being pro-active in helping people to find private rented accommodation.
- 6.15 The Council has recently introduced a checklist to assist officers when they are providing information and advice although we saw that it was not always used. We also found:
- interviews were not always well structured or customer focussed; and
 - the Council does not give applicants a written record of the information provided.
- 6.16 The Council has a range of initiatives to help prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness. These include:
- awareness sessions for local secondary school pupils;

- a rent deposit scheme;
 - a mortgage to rent scheme;
 - a rent arrears liaison officer funded through homeless services;
 - a young persons supported accommodation project; and
 - floating support for young tenants and applicants.
- 6.17 The Council assesses the support needs of those placed in temporary accommodation. Officers discuss support needs and develop comprehensive support plans with homeless people covering ten key areas. The Council refers people who require more intense support to the Supporting People Resource Allocation Group (SPRAG). The Council is aware that the provision of support to people who do not access temporary accommodation is an area for improvement and has identified actions to address this in its 2012 homeless action plan.
- 6.18 The Council has reduced the level of repeat presentations from 7.7% in 2008/09 to 4% for the first six months of 2010/11, but this is still slightly higher than the national figure of 3.7%. The level of tenancy sustainment in 2009/10 for homeless people is 84.4%, similar to that for all its other new tenants.
- 6.19 Since April 2009 landlords and creditors have informed the Council when they plan to take re-possession of a house or carry out an eviction action. The Council writes to those who are at risk of losing their homes and offers an advice and assistance interview. It has plans to review its approach and improve its service as presently the response rate to these letters is low.
- 6.20 In summary, East Renfrewshire Council has a fair and improving approach to advice and prevention. It provides tailored advice and information to those who need it and good support to people in furnished accommodation. It is reviewing its approach to responding to people who are threatened with re-possession or eviction and the provision of support for people who are not provided with temporary accommodation.

Assessment of homeless people

- 6.21 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself whether homeless applicants are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a

priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. The table below provides an overview of the Council's assessment decisions for people who apply to it for assistance.

	2007/08		2008/09		2009/10	
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland
All applications assessed in period	327	56,462	354	58,427	347	56,879
% priority unintentional	58.7%	55.5%	52.2%	57.3%	60.2%	61.9%
% priority Intentional	3.7%	2.6%	2.3%	2.6%	2.3%	2.5%
% non-priority	17.4%	14.9%	20.1%	12.0%	13.2%	11.0%
% not homeless	14.7%	7.0%	20.6%	6.6%	16.7%	5.9%
% lost contact before assessment	4.0%	10.8%	3.1%	11.3%	3.2%	7.4%
% withdrew before assessment	0%	4.3%	0.3%	5.2%	0.6%	6.1%
% resolved prior to assessment	1.5%	4.35%	1.4%	4.5%	3.7%	4.7%
Proportion of assessments completed within 28 days	81.7%	67.6%	85%	67.7%	84.7%	77.6%

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

6.22 The percentage of applicants the Council finds not homeless reduced from 21% in 2008/09 to 17% in 2009/10 but has shown a slight increase in the first 6 months of 2010/11, to 18%. This is significantly higher than the national average of 6% for 2009/10. The Council is aware of its high level of not homeless decisions and plans to review its processes in consultation with the Council's Legal Services, CAB and the Scottish Council for Single Homelessness.

6.23 Scottish Ministers set a target to reduce the number of applicants who received non priority decisions by 50% by 2009, and to abolish priority need by 2012. The Council was slow to respond and failed to meet its 2009 interim target. It aims to meet the 2012 target but acknowledges that this will present a challenge. The percentage of non priority applicants reduced significantly in 2009/10 to 13% but it still remains higher than the national figure of 11%; the percentage of homeless priority unintentional increased to 60% in 2009/10, almost in line with the national figure.

- 6.24 In August 2010, the Council's Cabinet agreed a phased approach to meet the abolition of priority need by 2012. The HSWG agreed a draft action plan at its November 2010 meeting. The first step was to widen the priority need category to include those aged over 45 however, the Council has not publicised this change. This is not a customer focussed approach.
- 6.25 In our 2005 inspection report we were critical of the Council's performance in notifying people of the outcome of their application. The Council's performance in this area has improved significantly since the last inspection and it now generally makes decisions quickly. In 2009/10, the Council completed 85% of its decisions within 28 days as recommended in the Code of Guidance. This is higher than the Scottish figure of 78%. In the same year it lost contact with 3% of applicants before a decision was made; significantly lower than the national figure of 7%.
- 6.26 The Council sends decision letters within a day of completing its inquiries as recommended in the Code of Guidance. It has "crystal marked" all decision letters by the Plain English campaign. However, we found weaknesses in some of the Council's decision letters. It did not always fully explain the grounds for making its decision or clearly detail the Council's duties for providing temporary accommodation or making a reasonable offer of permanent accommodation.
- 6.27 We found that the Council does not always record sufficient information for its decision making. It does not always clearly set out the discussions around homelessness, priority need, intentionality and local connection. This was an area of poor performance in our last inspection.
- 6.28 We also found some other weaknesses:
- the Council gives staff limited written local guidance on determining vulnerability;
 - it does not always follow its system for assuring the quality of its casework; and
 - the Council's procedure for senior officers to countersign decisions is not always followed.

- 6.29 The Code of Guidance recommends that local authorities should keep applicants well informed of progress with their application. The Council regularly visits the people it places in temporary accommodation. However, it does not routinely contact those who are not in temporary accommodation. This is likely to contribute to the 19% of cases where the final outcome for the applicant is not known.
- 6.30 We saw that the Council's officers are sensitive to the needs of people who approach the Council for assistance and give people the opportunity to fully explain their circumstances. The homeless people we spoke to were generally positive with the service they had received. However, we found that the Council did not always advise people that they could have an interview with an officer of the same sex. This is a Council service standard, as well as a recommendation in the Code of Guidance. While we were on-site, the Council re-issued its procedures to frontline staff in response to our feedback.
- 6.31 The Council has a duty to advise homeless applicants of their statutory right to request a review of its decisions within 21 days. East Renfrewshire Council does not advise applicants of their right to review offers of temporary accommodation and it only gives applicants seven days to ask for a review of an offer of permanent accommodation. When considering appeals, the Council took account of additional information provided; however, in some cases there was not a clear explanation of what information it considered at the appeal and it did not always send a letter advising the applicant of the outcome of the review. When we brought this to the attention of the Council it immediately addressed these weaknesses.
- 6.32 In response to our findings in this area the Council :
- arranged training for staff on decision making;
 - has started a review of its procedures; and
 - plans to introduce an audit of completed cases.
- 6.33 In summary, the Council is quick to make decisions and does not lose contact with many applicants before it makes its decision. However, it has made slow

progress to meet the 2012 target and it has not responded effectively to all our previous criticisms on its decision making.

Securing accommodation

6.34 East Renfrewshire Council uses a range of temporary accommodation consisting of:

- 20 furnished Council flats;
- 10 furnished flats in supported accommodation at Overlee House;
- bed and breakfast (B&B) establishments; and
- a Women's Aid Refuge.

6.35 Following our 2005 inspection the Council developed a Temporary Accommodation Implementation Plan. It doubled the number of Council flats used for temporary accommodation and created an additional flat at Overlee House. However, it has not secured further temporary accommodation from the private sector or from other social landlords. In particular we found that there is a shortage of appropriate temporary accommodation for people with chaotic lifestyles. The Council is currently reviewing its Implementation Plan following a review of its present and projected requirements for temporary accommodation.

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

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
	Council	Council	Council
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	103	102	106
Percentage accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	49.5%	49.0%	50.2%
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (days)	8	11	16
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	105	106	105
Percentage accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	50.5%	51%	49.8%
Average length of stay in Council furnished accommodation (days)	86	90	80

Source: the Council's inspection submission

- 6.37 The Council relies heavily upon B&B accommodation. Over the last three years about 50% of the Council's placements were in B&B establishments. The Council's target is to reduce B&B usage to 50% of its September 2010 level by March 2012. The length of time people spend in B&B establishments doubled from 2007/08 to 2009/10, and in 2009/10 a number of people have stayed in B&B accommodation for more than a month.
- 6.38 The Council is using B&B establishments which are used by other Councils and are outwith its area. In 2009/10 the Council placed 105 people in accommodation outwith its area. It is not carrying out risk assessments before placing people in these establishments. This significant weakness was previously highlighted in our 2005 report.
- 6.39 The Council has a monitoring framework to ensure the quality of B&B accommodation and has recently revised its procedures. The standard of sample B&Bs visited by our tenant assessor ranged from very poor to fair. In 2009/10 the majority of placements were in B&Bs assessed as fair. We also found:
- not all B&Bs had recently been inspected by the Council;
 - some people refused B&B accommodation because it did not meet their needs;
 - the B&Bs did not all meet the Code of Guidance recommendation that people should have access to cooking facilities; and
 - the Council is awaiting copies of gas, electric and fire safety certificates from many of the B&Bs it uses.
- 6.40 The Council is aware that its B&B costs have increased in recent years. It attributes the increase to the lack of accommodation for people with chaotic lifestyles and presentations out-of-hours. In 2009/10 the Council spent £57,854 on B&B accommodation for homeless people. This has increased from £28,279 in 2007/08 although it remains significantly lower than the 2004/05 figure of £185,547. The Council has set a challenging target of reducing its expenditure on B&B by 50% of its September 2010 level by March 2012.

- 6.41 Our tenant assessor visited the Council's temporary furnished flats and found them to be of good quality and service users we spoke to confirmed this. The Council provides people in its temporary furnished flats and B&Bs with a specific tenants' handbook which features useful information. It also has recently produced a tenants' newsletter for people in temporary accommodation. This is a good service user focussed approach.
- 6.42 The Council visits people in temporary accommodation every week and provides support tailored to the needs of individuals. The Council also plans to visit people placed in B&Bs weekly, however it is not always able to do so. People we spoke to were positive about the help they received. In 2010 the service successfully re-applied for and retained its Customer Service Excellence accreditation.
- 6.43 The Code of Guidance recommends councils consider proximity to family and friends and, accessibility of healthcare, employment, education and training, and support when placing people in temporary accommodation. We found that the Council is not always able to do this. This was an area for improvement highlighted in our previous report.
- 6.44 The Homeless Persons Unsuitable Accommodation Order prohibits councils from using unsuitable accommodation for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days, unless exceptional circumstances apply. In 2007/08 the Council breached the order once and there were a further two breaches in 2009/10.
- 6.45 The Council gathers feedback from service users on the quality of its temporary accommodation. In 2009/10:
- 84% said that they were happy with the standard of the accommodation;
 - 91% said that they were happy that the accommodation was safe and secure;
 - 94% said that they were happy that the accommodation offered was suitable for their needs;
 - 73% said that the accommodation they were offered was in an area they wanted to live in; and
 - 97% were overall satisfied with the service they had received.

- 6.46 In summary, the Council has a poor approach to providing temporary accommodation. It has not responded effectively to addressing many of the weaknesses identified in our 2005 report. It uses poor quality, B&B establishments, places a significant number of people outwith its area, does not carry out risk assessments before placing people in B&Bs and does not always take account of peoples' needs when providing temporary accommodation. It is also breaching the Unsuitable Accommodation Order.
- 6.47 The Council operates in a challenging context with a high demand for a limited supply of affordable rented houses in the Eastwood area. In 2009/10 the Council secured permanent accommodation for 63% of the people it assessed as having a priority need. This is higher than the national figure of 60% but lower than its performance in the previous year, 67%. The Council has set a target of 70% for 2010/11.
- 6.48 In 2009/10, 44% of East Renfrewshire Council lets were to homeless applicants. The Council introduced a revised Housing Allocations Policy in October 2010 however; it is too early to assess the impact of these changes on outcomes for homeless applicants.
- 6.49 The Council generally houses homeless people quickly but it does not treat them the same as other applicants with regard to the number of offers it makes and areas of choice offered.
- 6.50 The Code of Guidance recommends that local authorities should offer homeless people a genuine choice of accommodation as this is more likely to result in a sustainable tenancy. We found that the Council does not always take account of peoples' needs when allocating accommodation; some of the homeless people we spoke to felt that the Council had not taken account of their personal circumstances or preferences.
- 6.51 We found weaknesses in the way the Council allocates houses to homeless people and also found that it does not always fully discuss geographical areas with applicants to ensure that it is able to take account of their employment and support needs. This was an area of concern highlighted in our 2005 report.

- 6.52 The Council acknowledged that it could further improve its performance in housing homeless applicants if it addressed the weaknesses in its empty homes performance and changed its approach to terminations for transfer applicants. This would improve the service homeless people receive and reduce the costs of temporary accommodation.
- 6.53 In our 2005 inspection we found that the Council had performed poorly in accessing accommodation provided by RSLs. Since our previous inspection, it has increased the number of section 5 referrals it has made to RSLs. The Council has recently commissioned an independent review of its section 5 processes and is now working with local RSLs in an effort to further improve its access to their accommodation.
- 6.54 Councils can now discharge their duty to homeless applicants through the private sector. East Renfrewshire Council plans to survey local private landlords to gather their views on how they can contribute by providing accommodation and maximising choice for homeless people.
- 6.55 The Council's performance in losing contact with applicants before it discharges its duty has fallen to 3%; this is significantly lower than the national figure of 9%. However, the Council does not know the final outcome for 19% of all its homelessness cases. This is a weakness.
- 6.56 In summary, the Council houses homeless people quickly and its performance in providing accommodation is better than national figures. However, there are a significant number of weaknesses in the Council's approach to securing temporary and permanent accommodation for homeless people and it has not responded effectively to address many of the weaknesses highlighted in our 2005 report.

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

Leadership and strategic planning

- 7.1 Through its Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) and Corporate Statement, *Working for you*, the Council has made a commitment to deliver on a set of eleven outcomes to make a difference for local people and to provide services which are of a high standard and deliver value for money. The broader vision is broken into more defined intermediate outcomes in the Council's Outcomes Delivery Plan (ODP). However, while the Council has a clear strategic direction, at the time of our inspection the priorities and targets of the Housing and Homelessness services were less clear.
- 7.2 The Council has developed a draft improvement plan following a recent comprehensive review of both services. In addition, action plans are in place following an External Audit and a recent Internal Audit review of Allocations. The Council plans to combine these into a comprehensive Service Plan and include all competing areas of work, establish priorities and allocate appropriate resources.
- 7.3 East Renfrewshire Council has established a Housing Services Liaison Group (HSLG) bringing together bi-monthly, key elected members with representatives from the Council's tenant groups, in an advisory forum. The Council uses the HSLG to scrutinise the performance of its Housing and Homeless services, develop its policies and procedures and engage and consult with service users. Monitoring of the proposed Housing Service Plan's progress, once established and approved, will be carried out by the HSLG. A draft Homelessness improvement plan has also been recently developed. In this case, progress is to be monitored by the Homeless Strategy Sub Group of the Local Housing Strategy Working Group.
- 7.4 The Housing Convenor meets weekly with the Director of Environment to discuss any areas of concern.

Performance management, planning and reporting

- 7.5 The Council has adopted the Public Sector Improvement Framework (PSIF) as its corporate self assessment mechanism. It is presently introducing this approach throughout its services. To date, its use and impact in its Housing and Homeless Services has been limited.
- 7.6 The Council's corporate performance management framework has recently been reviewed and a new framework is presently being cascaded through its Departments. A Director's scorecard is presently under development which will incorporate Outcome Delivery Plan progress along with key Performance Indicators and service user feedback data. The Council plans a programme of regular monthly meetings between Directors and Heads of Service to monitor progress. The Housing Services Management team meets monthly to consider detailed performance reports. Although it has recently added more trend information to these reports it has not included any service user feedback. Available performance data is regularly put onto the staff intranet and we saw evidence of its discussion at team meetings.
- 7.7 Currently, some limited performance information is reported to eight weekly meetings of the Housing Services Liaison Group. However this data is selective, not always relevant and due to a lack of narrative, confusing to tenant representatives we spoke to. This view was confirmed by our Tenant Assessor who reviewed the performance information presented to the HSLG.
- 7.8 The Council publishes some performance data in its Environment Department – Mid Year and Outcome Performance Report 2009/10. Some limited performance data has also been included in recent editions of the Council's tenant newsletter. Quarterly Service User Feedback Reports are also available on the Council's website. We saw evidence of a recently expanding range of service user satisfaction results being reported, including those from users of the Homeless service, which is positive. These Feedback Reports also provide comparison with the previous quarter's performance and in some instances, details of Council's targets are specified; however little narrative is attached, even where performance is evidently declining.

- 7.9 The Council is a member of a benchmarking network and has participated in peer reviews. It sets annual targets for some specific service areas following consideration of historic trends and benchmarking against other local authorities.
- 7.10 We have found little evidence of a planned and sustained effort by the Council to improve its performance across a number of key service areas. It has failed to address a number of weaknesses identified in our last inspection in 2005. More recently however, the Council has undertaken a substantial number of reviews, developed improvement plans and started to undertake a number of subsequent actions; though in the majority, due to their recent introduction, information of outcomes or impacts upon service users is not yet available.
- 7.11 The Council has few mechanisms in place to ensure the quality and accuracy of the work undertaken by staff. In some instances when quality assurance procedures were in place, these were not being followed.

Customer focus and influence

- 7.12 The Council has in place corporate service standards for 2009/10, a number of which are specific to the Housing and Homelessness services. Performance against service standards is reported annually to and monitored by the Council's Audit Committee. However reports only highlight non-compliance, contain limited narrative, no trend information and do not provide benchmarking with other local authorities. The Council plans to review its corporate service standards and introduce these by April 2011.
- 7.13 At Housing Information and Advice interviews we saw no evidence of service users being offered assistance to complete homelessness application forms. This is not a service focussed approach.
- 7.14 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requires the Council to publish a tenant participation strategy. The Act also requires landlords to inform and consult tenants about changes to its services and take tenants' views into account when making decisions that will affect them. The Council's present Tenant Participation Strategy, dated 2008/09 is available on Council website. Currently a new strategy and action plan is being developed in conjunction with Working

- Group of tenants from Housing Services Liaison Group. The Council expects that the new Tenant Participation Strategy and action plan will be in place by April 2011.
- 7.15 The Council's approach to tenant participation is well established and resourced. It had nine registered tenant organisations (RTOs) at the time of our inspection and we saw that it regularly engages and consults with its RTOs and other non-registered tenant groups.
- 7.16 In August 2010 the Council carried out a comprehensive Tenant Satisfaction Survey including consultation around its proposed rent harmonisation exercise. 559 households returned questionnaires representing a response rate of 18%. It is positive that a group of interested tenants was used by the Council to test its proposed questions. The Council tells us that it intends to feed back the survey results to its HSLG, Registered Tenant Organisations (RTOs) and in the next edition of its tenant newsletter. It proposes that a resultant action plan is to be developed in consultation with, and progress thereafter monitored by, its HSLG. The Council has yet to decide whether, in future, to carry out such surveys, using the present survey results as a baseline for future monitoring.
- 7.17 Agendas, papers and minutes of the Housing Services Liaison Group meetings, although circulated to members, are not published on the Council's website and this is a weakness given the Group's key role. The Council took steps to address to address this while we were on site.
- 7.18 Tenants' groups we spoke to readily acknowledge the support provided from Council's housing staff; however, a number of groups expressed a wish that the Council consult them earlier and increase the influence and impact of tenants' views on its decision making. Further supporting evidence is available from the Council's recent Tenant Survey. Only 18% of responding tenants were very satisfied that their views were being taken into account by the Council. 44% were fairly satisfied. In addition, 33% of respondents felt that it should be a key priority for the Council to improve taking tenants' views into account.
- 7.19 The Council routinely gathers feedback from service users in a number of other ways, including when it carries out response repairs. The Council acknowledged

- that in some instances, the level of returns had been unsatisfactory and we saw that it had recently introduced a number of measures to improve service user feedback. Tenants and service users we spoke to confirmed that no questionnaires had been issued by the Council upon the completion of responsive repairs or capital improvement works to their homes. During our inspection we saw some limited evidence of the Council acting upon service user feedback in order to improve its services. However, the Council has identified a number of areas for improvement in this area. Its plans include recording comments from service users more consistently; ensuring feedback information is used to improve services and reporting back to service users on comments received and detailing what has been done in response.
- 7.20 The Council has no annual programme of consultation agreed with its tenants groups. This would lay out the areas of potential involvement, projected timescales and the resources needed. All RTOs have access to annual revenue grants and training resources through the Council; however, no formal training needs analysis has been carried out with each group. Also, the Council have yet to agree any annual training plans with each of the groups.
- 7.21 In recent years East Renfrewshire Council has carried out a number of Tenant Led Inspections over specific areas of its services. We saw a number of improvements introduced as a result of these inspections. The Council also maintains a Register of interested tenants, although recently its use has been limited.
- 7.22 The Council's corporate complaints process is well established with leaflets and posters available in reception areas of Council offices. Within the Housing and Homelessness services progress of Stage One complaints is actively monitored and resultant outcomes broadly categorised and reported monthly. While there are sections on Council's website and publications around "you said it, we did it" we found little evidence of direct action following a routine, systematic analysis of trends in Housing or Homelessness service complaints. We found no annual review of complaints received or publication of this information. Not all Stage One complaints are closed by a written response from the Council. However, in cases that we saw where letters were issued to complainants, no reference was

made to potential escalation to the second stage of the complaints process, no Complaints leaflet was provided and there was no signposting to sources of independent advice and support. This is a weakness. Further evidence came from the Council's recent Tenant Survey. 35% of respondents felt that it should be a priority for the Council to improve the effectiveness of dealing with tenants' complaints.

Equalities and diversity

- 7.23 The Council gathers information on the ethnicity of applicants for housing and those presenting as homeless. It is monitoring and regularly reporting this information; however we found little evidence of services being amended or refined as a result.
- 7.24 The Council is in the process of drafting its Equality Strategy and Action Plan for the years following 2010; the final year of its current plan. The Housing service is represented on the corporate working group responsible for the current strategy and on a recently formed monitoring working group.
- 7.25 The Council has carried out a number of equalities impact assessments on recently developed draft policies although this does not include its Local Letting Initiatives. It has a tool available on its intranet site to assist its staff when carrying out impact assessments.
- 7.26 Publications produced by the Housing service include information in several languages concerning the availability of translation services. Documents can also be provided in alternative formats such as large print and Braille. The Council has access to translation services to carry out translation and interpretation work where this is needed. It has limited information on how often this has been used or how the service has been viewed by users. Equalities information is available on the Council's website, and it has included articles on the subject in its magazine.
- 7.27 The Council has produced a booklet "Housing options for disabled and older persons" and this is made available widely.

- 7.28 Training on Equalities and Diversity is included in the Council's induction programme for new staff. The Housing service has also provided refresher sessions for its staff and offered the opportunity to attend additional training. The Council has a guide to accessing translation, interpretation and communication services gives detailed and specific information on the Council's Translation, Interpretation and Communication Support (TICS) Services. This is available to every employee via the intranet.
- 7.29 In summary, the Council is aware of the need for further work in its approach to equalities and diversity.

Efficiency and value for money

- 7.30 The Council has abolished the Significant Trading Organisation (STO) status of its direct works team and integrated its workforce within Housing services, merging the traditional client and contractor roles. The Housing service now carries out all response repairs, along with the majority of work to empty houses and some planned maintenance. Actual costs incurred in carrying out these works are charged to the Housing Revenue Account.
- 7.31 Under this arrangement it is important for the Council to demonstrate that it is achieving value for money. The Council benchmarks its costs and performance against other local authorities through its membership of the Association of Public Service Excellence; however some comparisons are difficult due to the Council's organisational arrangements. This process will assist it in determining its competitiveness; however this is an area that the Council accepts it will require to develop further and review its performance more regularly. We found little evidence of the Council carrying out regular and systematic reviews of the value for money provided by its present arrangements for delivering its responsive repairs. Responsive repairs performance, costs, customer satisfaction feedback and complaints are all separately reported and we could find no evidence of this information being regularly brought together, analysed and considered.

- 7.32 The table below summarises the Council's reported spend on Repairs and Maintenance in 2009/10.

Repairs and Maintenance	2009/10 Council
Response Repairs (£)	2,113,096
Planned Maintenance (£)	757,276
Capital Improvements (£)	350,000

Source: the Council's inspection submission

- 7.33 The Council is aware that in recent years it has spent too much on responsive repairs and not enough on planned maintenance. It set a target that by March 2010, 33% of its revenue repairs expenditure would be spent on planned maintenance activity. However we found no plans in place to deliver improvements in this area.
- 7.34 The Council is also aware that it carries out too many of its responsive repairs in the more expensive Emergency category, however as yet, has no firm plans in place to reduce its costs in this area.
- 7.35 In August 2010 the Council carried out a comprehensive Tenants' Housing Survey. Headline results reveal that 69% of respondents were very or fairly satisfied that the rent paid to the Council represented value for money.
- 7.36 The Council is aware that there is significant scope for improvement in its management of re-letting empty houses. It acknowledges that it has for a number of years, consistently spent in excess of the annual budget set for re-letting empty houses.

8. Next Steps

8.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes.

8.2 If you would like to see the East Renfrewshire Council's improvement plans you should contact the Council by:

Telephone: 0141 577 3001

Website: www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

Sources of evidence

Groups and third parties consulted

- Tenants' and Residents groups
- The Council's external auditor
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Local Registered Social Landlords
- Women's Aid

Interviews/Meetings

- Housing Services Liaison Group
- Director of Environment
- Housing Service Manager
- Internal Auditor
- Staff from Housing Services
- Staff from Property Services
- Staff from Customer First
- Staff from CHCP

Reality checks

- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Observation of bed and breakfast and furnished accommodation
- Observation of gas safety liaison meeting
- Observation at Housing Services team meeting
- Observation at Homelessness Strategy Working Group
- Shadowing of tenancy sign up interview
- Shadowing of homelessness allocation meeting
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of support visits
- Shadowing of Homelessness selection meeting
- Shadowing of repair pre and post-inspections
- Shadowing of void repairs visits
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of information for housing applicants and tenants
- Review of information for homeless people
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of reported repairs
- Empty property visits

Key documents reviewed

- East Renfrewshire Council's Inspection Submission
- Housing management performance reports

Appendix 1

- Repairs and maintenance performance reports and budgets
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Tenants' newsletters and other publicity material
- Publicity for homeless people
- Handbook and newsletter for homeless people
- Council's website
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Protocols with other agencies
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy
- Single Outcome Agreement
- Community Plan
- Corporate Plan

Glossary

Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)	ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further anti-social behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.
Asset management	Ensuring that current and future assets (houses, land, etc) fully support the organisation's objectives – working towards having the right assets, of the right quality, in the right place at the right time.
Benchmarking	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
Capital Programme	Programme of major repair works funded mostly from borrowing.
CFCR	Capital funded from current revenue
Common housing register (CHR)	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
Direct Labour Organisation (DLO)	Internal organisation which carries out work on behalf of housing departments.
HomePoint	<p>A team within the Scottish Government that supports providers of housing information and advice services.</p> <p>HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.• Type II casework.• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.
Housing list	A list of applicants for housing that is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
Housing Revenue Account (HRA)	The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services.
ICT system	Information and communication system.
Notice of Proceedings (NOP)	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
Partnering	In contract management, a structured approach to improving

efficiency and quality of work. It aims to reduce confrontation between the Council and its consultants and contractors. Partnering requires formalised objectives, agreed problem solving methods and an active search for continued measurable improvements.

Performance Standards

The nationally-agreed standards RSLs and local authorities are expected to meet in providing housing services and in managing their organisations.

Planned maintenance

The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.

Pre-inspections

Inspections undertaken to ascertain the nature of the repair required.

Post inspections

Inspections undertaken following work to check the suitability and quality of repairs.

Procurement

The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.

Qualifying Repair

Repairs that qualify for inclusion in the Right to Repair scheme.

Registered social landlord (RSL)

A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Registered Tenant Organisation (RTO)

A tenant-representative group meeting certain conditions set down in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and registered with a social landlord.

Response repairs

Day to day repairs carried out on a reactive basis, distinguishable from planned, capital or cyclical maintenance.

Right to Buy

The right of many Scottish tenants to buy their property at a discounted price, depending on length of tenancy.

Right to Repair

Statutory scheme which sets out timescales for some repairs, and what can be done by a tenant if a landlord does not do the repair within the timescales.

Schedule of Rates (SOR)

A costed list of all or most of the day-to-day repairs that a client is likely to instruct a contractor to do.

Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)

A minimum quality standard for all of Scotland's social homes. Landlords should achieve the standard by 2015.

Scottish secure tenancy (SST)	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
Short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST)	Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a short Scottish secure tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST.
Section 5 referral	Where, under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, a local authority can request a registered social landlord that has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people.
Shadowing	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
SMART criteria	Performance management acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound.
Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI)	Indicators of local authorities' performance that are published by the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
Stakeholder	Any person or organisation using a landlord's service, affected by the landlord's actions or having an interest in the landlord's activities – an interested party.
Tenancy agreement	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
Tenant assessor	Trained tenants (not of the landlord being inspected) who are part of the inspection team. They are involved in preparing for inspection, reading landlord materials and on-site visits as well as talking to tenants.
Tenure	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier.
Variations	A term used to refer to the practice of changing a repair works order on site where the contractor feels additional or alternative work to that specified is required.
Void	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

About the Scottish Housing Regulator

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

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

Our purpose is to:

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

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

www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk

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**The Scottish
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