

St Leger Homes of Doncaster

Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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Arm's Length Management Organisation Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high quality local services for the public.

The Audit Commission inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arm's length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

This service was inspected as part of the Government's arm's length housing management initiative, which encourages councils to set up to manage, maintain and improve their housing stock. The Government decided that councils pursuing this option can secure additional capital funding if the new arm's length body has received at least a 'good' rating from the Audit Commission.

An ALMO is a company set up by a local authority to manage and improve all or part of its housing stock. The local authority remains the landlord and tenants remain secure tenants of the authority. St Leger Homes does not trade for profit, and is managed by a board of directors comprising Council nominees, elected tenants/leaseholders and independents.

The Audit Commission has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

- ALMO Inspections and the delivery of excellent housing management services' (March 2003); and
- 'Learning from the first housing ALMO' (May 2003).

From April 2010 inspections of landlord services of social housing providers are undertaken on behalf of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). The TSA stated in para 4.16 of its regulatory framework (March 2010) that the 2010/11 ALMO inspections required for Decent Homes funding will continue under existing arrangements. This inspection has, therefore, been carried out using the current published ALMO inspection methodology and key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) and not the seven national standards which the TSA published in March 2010.

Summary

1 St Leger Homes of Doncaster provides an excellent, three star, service with promising prospects for improvement.

2 Services are customer focussed and responsive to identified needs. It is easy for tenants to use services and good quality information on services is readily available. It is easy for residents to influence how services are provided. There are a number of examples of changes in services following tenants' comments and complaints. Satisfaction with services is increasing. The diverse needs of tenants are known, regularly updated and services are tailored to meet those needs. Welfare benefits and debt advice is helping people with financial difficulties remain in their homes.

3 A planned programme of maintenance will bring all homes up to the Decent Homes Standard by 2014. Homes are improved to a high standard and tenants have a good choice of fixtures and fittings. An effective repairs and maintenance service is in place. St Leger Homes completes all repairs by appointment and within one visit. The annual servicing of all gas appliances is completed effectively and value is added by carrying out additional safety checks to homes. Empty properties are repaired quickly to a reasonable standard.

4 There is a variety of ways for tenants to pay rent and those struggling to pay are given good advice. It is easy for residents to become involved in the running of the service and tenants' opinions are valued. Estates are well maintained. An appropriate and effective response is made to complaints about antisocial behaviour and borough-wide community safety initiatives are fostered and supported. An effective choice-based allocation scheme is in place. Leaseholders are provided with a fair service.

5 There are a number of weaknesses. The long-term future of a number of properties has yet to be determined. Value for money has not been established across all service areas. Not all service charges are separated from rents and other payments, in line with best practice, to provide tenants and leaseholders with clear information about the cost of services.

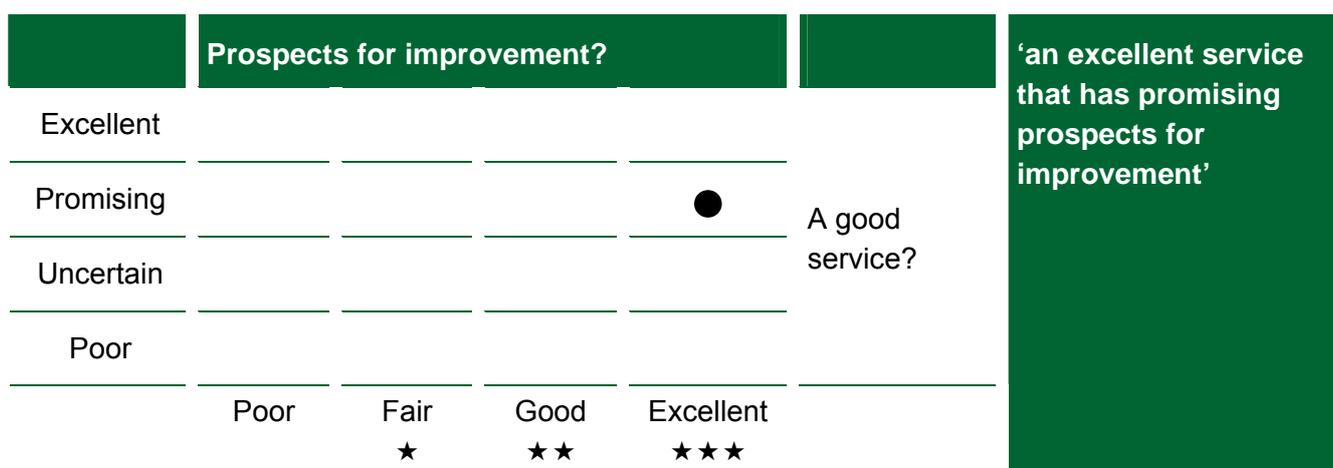
6 The prospects for further improvements are promising. Services have improved over the last two years in ways that are noticed by tenants. Leadership and governance is effective and the organisation has clear aims and ambitions. Relationships with Doncaster Borough Council are improving. A jointly funded independent value for money assessment of St Leger Homes is in progress. Performance management, improvement planning and budget and risk management is robust. The organisation shows a willingness to learn from service users and other housing providers. Staff are well supported and enjoy their work.

7 There are some barriers to improvement. The long-term future of a number of properties has yet to be determined and some tenants are living in homes ill suited to their needs. DDA compliance is not comprehensive and value for money has not been established in all service areas. Staff absence due to sickness is high.

Scoring the service

8 We have assessed St Leger Homes of Doncaster as providing an ‘excellent’, three star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1: **Scoring chart**ⁱ



Source: Audit Commission

9 We found the service to be excellent because it has a range of strengths including:

- services reflect tenants' needs and aspirations;
- a strong customer focus with easy to access services;
- information for customers is comprehensive, easy to read and is available in a range of formats;
- services are increasingly tailored around tenants' specific needs;
- homes are being improved to a high standard and in line with tenants' expectations and needs;
- an effective responsive repairs;
- very effective gas servicing is in place;
- empty homes are repaired and relet quickly,
- support is given to new tenants to help them make and keep a home;
- minor adaptations are fitted quickly;
- tenants have a number of opportunities to be involved to reflect their preferred level of commitment;

i The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- estates are maintained to a high standard and antisocial behaviour is effectively controlled;
- good debt and income maximisation advice arrangements are in place and tenants who fall into arrears are contacted quickly;
- the choice-based lettings system allocates homes in a fair way; and
- tenant satisfaction is increasing.

10 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- the long-term future of a number of properties is unclear;
- too many repairs are completed as an emergency or urgent priority;
- weak performance in collecting repair recharges and former tenant arrears; and
- leasehold management services are underdeveloped and some service charges do not reflect the true cost of provision of services.

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- services have improved significantly with clear customer benefits;
- governance arrangements are sound;
- effective leadership has driven improved performance;
- improvement planning and performance management are strong;
- a value for money culture is developing;
- budget and risk management is sound;
- effective joint working with partners is increasing capacity;
- staff are well supported; and
- the organisation learns from others and uses customer feedback to improve services.

12 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- performance on a range of services remains poor;
- not all recommendations from the previous report have been implemented;
- it is not easy for tenants to routinely comment on the repairs and estate management service;
- some Board members are unaware of all issues facing St Leger Homes;
- staff sickness absence is high; and
- ICT systems are not yet fully supporting services.

Recommendations

13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. These recommendations reflect the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) standards. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costsⁱ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with St Leger Homes Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Strengthen customer access to services, by:

- improving telephone answering performance;
- working with customers to improve access to services by phone;
- promoting the value of different participation activities outside of formal structures;
- setting challenging targets to handle calls at the first point of contact;
- ensuring frontline staff deliver a consistent level of service; and
- making it easy for tenants to comment on the standard of services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- service standards are met;
- customers enquiries are dealt with quickly and satisfactorily; and
- the delivery of outcomes set out in the customer service, choice and complaints section of the tenant involvement and empowerment standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2011.

ⁱ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

- R2** Ensure the diverse needs of tenants are met by:
- developing a robust plan to deliver equality impact assessment for all service areas;
 - further developing a profile of tenants and address gaps;
 - ensuring that all groups are accessing services in the numbers expected; and
 - completing outstanding DDA works.
-

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- homes are adapted to meet needs and people can live more independent lives;
- all premises will be accessible for all visitors; and
- greater ability to understand and respond to the diverse needs of tenants as required under the tenant involvement and empowerment standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have a high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2011.

Recommendation

- R3** Improve the value for money of services by:
- redirecting expenditure from response repairs to more planned maintenance, and reduce the high levels of emergency and urgent repairs;
 - evaluating the value for money of the DLO and other centrally provided services;
 - developing an understanding of comparative costs
 - ensuring that service charges reflect the true cost of services provided; and
 - improving collection performance for former tenant arrears and rechargeable repairs.
-

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more income will be collected;
- tenants will only pay for the services that they receive; and
- the improved quality, efficiency and value for money of services required under the value for money standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have a high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by May 2011.

Recommendation

- R4** Strengthen performance management and organisational capacity by:
- ensuring measurable outcomes for all actions in service plans;
 - assessing the impact of all work and initiatives and routinely report outcomes;
 - shaping the tenant training programme around identified needs and capacity; and
 - reducing the level of staff sickness absence.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- being able to measure the success of work and plans;
- improved training programmes for tenants; and
- increased staff capacity to deliver services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have a high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2011.

Recommendation

- R5** Support Doncaster Council to urgently tackle long-term issues of weak performance in stock option appraisals; in difficult to let and poor quality stock; and in the delivery of aids and adaptations by:
- assessing progress to date in tackling the long-term vacant properties in sheltered housing in the context of a wider housing strategy for older people in Doncaster;
 - developing costed proposals to be delivered within clear timelines to the sheltered housing stock in partnership with tenants and other agencies;
 - setting out a costed programme of works to be agreed with tenants to improve the tower blocks;
 - reviewing historic arrangements around the number and location of depots and offices; and
 - carrying out an urgent review of the delivery of aids and adaptations in the context of national best practice and setting SMART targets to monitor, report and deliver improvements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better housing options for older people;
- improvements to long standing poor housing;
- tenants will have a clearer understanding about the future housing plans;
- people who need aids and adaptation to their homes will receive a better service that is sensitive and responsive to their needs; and
- contribution to the delivery of the home standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have a high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

14 We would like to thank the staff of St Leger Homes and Doncaster MBC who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 21 June to 2 July 2010

Report

Context

The locality

15 Doncaster has an industrial history rooted in coal and transport. Over 291,000 people live in the large town of Doncaster itself and its neighbouring towns and villages, surrounded by wide areas of countryside. About 3.5 per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, with some 4,000 Gypsy and Traveller residents and over 2,000 are new economic migrants.

16 People are less well off than many other parts of the country, unemployment is higher and has been rising, and the health of the population is generally worse. This means greater pressure on public services. People living in Doncaster do not have equal chances of enjoying a long life in good health.

17 Doncaster Together Board is Doncaster's Local Strategic Partnership. Doncaster Together Board is dedicated to improving the quality of life for everyone in the borough by bringing together the key people in the public, private, community and voluntary sectors. Its aim is to deliver the goals of the Sustainable Borough Strategy.

The Council

18 The Council adopted the mayoral system of governance in 2002. The current Mayor was elected in June 2009, as a representative of the English Democrat party. There are no other English Democrats on the Council. Another Independent was second in the mayoral vote, with the main political parties further behind. Labour accounts for 34 of the 63 councillors. The other groups on the Council consist of ten Liberal Democrats, nine Conservatives and ten from other groups.

19 The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Area Assessment reported in December 2009 that the Council performs poorly. The Commission subsequently carried out a corporate governance inspection in March 2010, and recommended that the Secretary of State should exercise his powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 to give directions to the Council.

20 On 30 June 2010 the Secretary of State announced a formal intervention in the operation of Doncaster Council. He appointed a new Chief Executive as part of the intervention, and also three commissioners who hold reserve powers over decision making and senior appointment arrangements. A Recovery Board, to approve and monitor the Council's recovery plan, was put in place in September 2010.

The service

21 Doncaster established an Arm's Length Management Organisation called St. Leger Homes of Doncaster (St Leger Homes) in October 2005. St Leger Homes has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to its 22,000 homes, and receives a management fee for this service. It manages the Council's £14.8 million budget for repairs and £32.5 million capital programme budget.

22 St Leger Homes is managed by a Board that is made up of five tenants, five council nominees and five independents. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team of a Chief Executive and three Directors. It employs 759 staff to deliver the service.

23 We last inspected St Leger Homes in 2007 and judged it to be a good, two-star service with promising prospects for improvement. This outcome has enabled the Council to access additional supported borrowing from central government to help it bring all its homes up to the Decent Homes Standard. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of the judgements made in 2007.

24 Among the criticisms in the corporate governance inspection was one related to slow decision making in key areas. One example was that discussions between the Council and St Leger Homes, about what work the Council wants done to certain categories of homes in the Decent Homes programme, had been slow to reach a conclusion.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

25 St Leger Homes operates in the context of Doncaster's borough strategy. A review of the strategy is due for completion by the end of October 2010.

26 The outcome of that review will shape the revision of the Council's own Corporate Plan which currently has seven priority themes:

- Prosperous Place;
- Skills and Lifelong Learning;
- Healthy and Caring;
- Safer, Cleaner & Greener;
- Improving Neighbourhoods Together (Cross-cutting);
- Equality of Opportunity (Cross-cutting); and
- Environmental Sustainability (Cross-cutting).

27 St Leger Homes mission is to create 'Quality Homes in Quality Neighbourhoods'. It aims to be a customer-orientated organisation that keeps the wellbeing and satisfaction of its customers at the heart of everything it does. Its vision is:

- To deliver excellent services in all that we do.
- To ensure we are customer focused.
- To provide quality homes in quality neighbourhoods.

28 Its strategic objectives are:

- Ensuring we are a customer-focused organisation by putting our customers at the heart of what we do.
- Achieving excellence and having it recognised at inspection.
- Improving our performance and the way we manage performance.
- Ensuring we deliver value for money by making best use of our resources.
- Improving our communications both internally and with others.
- Maintaining and improving our assets by investing wisely and managing our stock.
- Supporting communities through social regeneration activities.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Access and customer care

29 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Service standards were challenging and realistic and agreed with tenants. Services were convenient and met the needs of tenants including those in rural areas. Enquiries were dealt with promptly, with appropriate and accurate advice given. A wide range of information was presented well and available in different languages/formats. St Leger Homes learnt from complaints, but tenants were dissatisfied with how they were dealt with. St Leger Homes did not have a strategy to deliver customer care objectives and performance against service standards was not reported. Office opening hours were restrictive and text messaging was not available. There was limited analysis of tenant satisfaction surveys and no research had taken place to identify any barriers that might prevent customers from accessing services.

30 In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a sound strategic approach to customer care, there is easy access to services through a network of area offices and there is good information for customers. Service standards are agreed with customers and performance against them monitored. Feedback from customers is used to improve services. However, not all telephone calls are answered in line with the service standard and for some service areas performance is poor. Not all enquiries are dealt with consistently or efficiently. The range of numbers is confusing for tenants.

31 There is a sound strategic approach to access and customer care. The customer access strategy reflects the ethos of putting the customer first and sets the aims and objectives for delivering this. An action plan sets out how the strategy is to be delivered, with some improvements already in place, such as working with tenants to review the website and to improve reception areas. This is an effective strategic framework for delivering a customer-focused service.

32 St Leger Homes has a good understanding of how customers access their services. By gathering information on customer preferences St Leger Homes has developed its customer access strategy to reflect the most popular means of access. Information on the number of visitors to local offices and the nature of enquires has been used to ensure that there are always enough staff to cover peak times. Identifying the most common enquires for training courses has meant training is relevant for customers. This is allowing customers to access services in ways that are convenient to them.

33 It is easy to access services in person. Nine well-used local offices are equipped to deal with all enquiries and take payments for the Council and St Leger Homes. St Leger Homes has consulted service users about office opening hours, with feedback suggesting that the existing hours, although traditional, were meeting most needs. In response to some customers finding access difficult at these times, Saturday morning appointment slots at four libraries have recently been introduced. This is a responsive service meeting customers' needs.

34 Access to services by telephone is improving. Although the free phone number for repairs and choice-based lettings is well understood and used, customer feedback showed that the range of other numbers in use was confusing. In response to this telephone numbers have been rationalised with one number for each of the offices. The new telephone numbers have been promoted but reality checks with customers suggested that some confusion remains. Performance in answering calls in line with the service standard is mixed. There is a target to answer 95 per cent of calls in 20 seconds. In 2009/10, for customers telephoning the free phone for repairs or choice-based lettings, performance was 78 per cent; although this has improved this year to 83 per cent. Telephone answering by the area offices meets or exceeds the target in a number of areas but some offices fall short of meeting the target. The level of abandoned calls is generally low. The time taken to answer calls made to direct lines is not currently captured and monitored. Occasionally customers may find the telephone service frustrating.

35 St Leger Homes makes use of technology to improve access to services. The website is informative and easy to use, offering a number of online services. St Leger Homes also makes use of text messaging across a range of services. This increases the options for customers in accessing services.

36 Enquiries are not always dealt with in a consistent manner. Some enquiries are not always dealt with consistently with some passed around officers and not dealt with effectively. Reality checks also showed that some enquiries were not handled well. For example, a complaint of racial harassment was not dealt with in accordance with procedures and inappropriate advice was given following an enquiry about aids and adaptations. This means that customers are not always receiving a quick, appropriate and efficient service.

37 A wide range of high-quality information is readily available. Printed material is professional in its style and easy to read. All publications are assessed on how useful and easy to read they are by a customer communications panel. The Tenants' Handbook is well laid out and easy to read with diagrams to identify repairs. The handbook is in an A4 loose file format allowing the easy introduction of updated information in a cost-effective way. It easy for people to find the information they need.

38 Service standards are stretching. The standards have recently been reviewed with customers and cover the key areas across services that are most important to customers. The customer charter and service standards clearly set out the service standards and how they are monitored. Complementing the service standards are a number of customer promises. The standards are monitored, although for some monitoring arrangements still need to be developed, for example, the performance on direct lines is not captured. Overall this monitoring shows that service standards are being met. It is easy for customers to see what standards they can expect and most standards are being delivered effectively.

39 St Leger Homes encourages and generally makes it easy for customers to comment on services. Through tailoring surveys the quality and usefulness of customer comments has improved. While some service areas still rely on traditional survey forms, others use telephone surveys. This gives a quicker and statistically representative response. St Leger Homes has also commissioned a social enterprise company to carry out satisfaction surveys following decent homes work and plans to extend this to other areas. This employs local people and people with disabilities to carry out telephone surveys and allows more qualitative information to be gathered. Improvements are required in gathering satisfaction with repairs and estate services. St Leger Homes has good information on satisfaction levels and ways in which most services can be improved.

40 Tenants are taking an active role in assessing service quality. Tenants acting as mystery shoppers are feeding back on areas such as standards in properties ready for letting, decent homes work and services in area offices. Tenant inspectors have been recruited to inspect the performance of the grounds maintenance and cleaning services provided by the Council. Customers are actively involved and directly influencing how services are delivered.

41 Customers have influenced services. These include the introduction of a landline number for repairs which is cheaper for customers telephoning from mobile phones and improvements on estates following estate walkabouts. Improvements as a result of customer feedback are promoted in the tenants' newsletter, although reality checks showed that some tenants are unaware of the improvements made. When customers see changes they suggest happen, they will make more suggestions.

42 Customer care training is provided for all staff. Tenants met during the inspection said staff are friendly and helpful. Personal contact with tenants is important to St Leger Homes and developed through estate-based staff and home visits. St Leger Homes want to improve their approach and more money is available for training this year. This will focus in particular on the area identified above around dealing with enquiries effectively at the first point of contact. A well-trained staff will deliver a good service.

43 Satisfaction with landlord services is generally high. Satisfaction is captured across a range of services and shows that, for most, satisfaction is between 80 and 99 per cent. The main exception being for complaints handling which is improving but currently is at 64 per cent. Overall satisfaction with services as captured by the STATUSⁱ survey is 80 per cent, an improvement on past years.

44 St Leger Homes deal with complaints satisfactorily. A strategic focus is developing through a centralised service with better coordinated and consistent responses. Target response times are set at three days for acknowledgement and ten days for a full answer, with recent performance showing these are kept. Complaints are separated into service failure and service dissatisfaction to help identify any faults in policies and procedures. Accurately targeted action to prevent more complaints is taken. If dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, customers have the right to appeal. An effective complaints procedure can improve services and helps to protect vulnerable adults.

45 St Leger Homes welcomes complaints as an opportunity to improve services. Complaints feed into service reviews and managers use them as a means to improve services. A seconded member of the customer relations team works with the team completing decent homes works to address the high number of complaints about decent homes work. Learning from complaints is shared and 'storyboards' promote learning from any individual complaints effectively to Board members and staff.

Diversity

46 In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. St Leger Homes addressed diversity issues with a strong corporate commitment and effective leadership. A comprehensive diversity strategy and a diversity team linked with the Council's diversity agenda. All staff and board members had received diversity training and customers were profiled. Offices were either DDA compliant or the St Leger Homes had plans to move to DDA compliant accommodation, but there were no plans to make sheltered or multi-storey blocks compliant. St Leger Homes did not identify vulnerable tenants consistently and did not analyse service take up by different groups.

47 In this inspection we found strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. A strong strategic approach to diversity and clear leadership is embedding diversity as a way of working within the organisation. St Leger Homes has a good understanding of the diverse needs of its tenants based on customer profile information. This is used well to tailor individual services and address barriers to services at a strategic and policy level. There are effective arrangements to deal with incidents of hate crime and domestic violence and good support for vulnerable customers through strong partnership working. However EIAsⁱⁱ have not been extended to cover wider

i STATUS – The Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey

ii Equality Impact Assessments.

service areas, there are some gaps in customer profiling and assessing the impact of tenancy support is not fully developed.

48 The strategic approach to equality and diversity (E & D) is strong. A single equality scheme brings together previous schemes for race, disability and gender. The scheme incorporates statutory duties, and broadens the approach covering the seven diversity strandsⁱ. An action plan is in place to deliver the strategy, with actions incorporated into the various service plans, against which progress is regularly monitored. E & D is being mainstreamed in all areas of the business.

49 St Leger Homes shows clear leadership and commitment to ensure diversity is an integral part of services. A board-appointed champion for diversity and an E & D steering group, initially chaired by the chief executive, give diversity a high profile. Service areas nominate equality champions to sit on the group that monitors progress on the single equality scheme action plan and promotes diversity. All staff and Board members attend compulsory E & D training and refresher training is regularly run. The tenant training programme includes courses on diversity. Staff have a comprehensive diversity guide covering a range of issues and including practical issues with a 'dos and don't' section and advice on how to organise inclusive tenants events. A myth-busting guide about the Gypsy and Traveller communities is freely available and aimed at overcoming the negative perceptions often associated with this group. This approach is helping ensure that diversity is embedded in the organisation.

50 Performance indicators for E & D have only recently been developed. There are a range of indicators covering all service areas which measure for example the uptake of services and satisfaction by diverse strands, lettings, access to information and hate crime. Some work is still needed to ensure data is always consistently collected to allow monitoring in this way, and performance reporting against these indicators is only just starting. However, this further embeds E & D in the organisation by providing a clear indication of how services are performing in relation to E & D issues.

51 Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) are used effectively to identify barriers and improve services. EIAs are structured in their approach. Drawing staff from all sections of St Leger Homes, trained managers and equality champions complete EIAs. Challenge from a member of the community engagement team ensures assessment leads to change. Mandatory consultation with residents and special interest groups ensures a comprehensive assessment. St Leger Homes assess the equality impact of all key strategies. A rolling review programme of new and existing policies is in place. Agreed action plans are in place for all assessments and this has delivered a number of changes noticed by customers. This helps to ensure that strategies and policies reflect customers' diverse needs.

ⁱ The seven recognised strands of diversity are race, disability, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation and religion and belief.

52 It is a weakness that EIAs have focused on strategies and policies rather than service areas. This means St Leger Homes has not fully addressed the recommendation from the previous inspection. There are plans to start assessing service areas from July 2010, as part of developing compliance with the new social housing equality framework. However, none have been conducted to date and this is a missed opportunity to assess the impact of all services for all customers.

53 St Leger Homes has a good understanding of its customer profile. Information has been gathered for 90 per cent of tenants across the seven strands of diversity. The depth of understanding of each strand varies, for example, 88 per cent of tenants' ethnicity is known and 72 per cent of tenants' sexual orientation. The information has been gathered in a variety of ways including surveys and face-to-face interviews with staff trained on how to collect diversity information. The reasons for collecting the information and the use it has been put to is promoted. This is encouraging more tenants to provide their details. This level of information is allowing services to be tailored to meet tenants' specific needs.

54 Tenant profile information is put to good use. As well as meeting individual needs the diversity information has been used at a strategic and policy level. For example, working with the Council, St Leger Homes identified tenants with a disability not receiving disability benefits and as a result of contacting them an extra £84,000 in benefits was claimed. Targeting a higher than average level of arrears among Kurdish tenants with tailored advice and support also secured a 33 per cent reduction in arrears. This approach is clearly benefiting tenants.

55 St Leger Homes actively seeks to remove barriers to create inclusive services. GISⁱ mapping was used to identify areas with high levels of BME communities, of older people and people with disabilities. Assessments of service take-up in these areas showed low repair reporting and low level claiming of disability-related benefits. Action was taken to improve take-up including publicity drives and targeted advice in community languages. Some DDAⁱⁱ works to sheltered schemes and the communal areas of flats is still outstanding but resourced plans are in place to rectify this. This is encouraging people from diverse backgrounds to take up more services and making sure that services are accessible for all customers.

56 It is easy for people with diverse needs to access services. Information in translation and interpretation services is readily available and used regularly. All publications include community language symbols for translations and options for other formats. Repair orders include 'alerts' to highlight individual needs, communication preferences, passwords, asbestos and residents who may exhibit challenging behaviour. St Leger Homes responds well to the diverse needs of customers.

i Geographic information system.

ii Disability Discrimination Act.

57 There are appropriate support arrangements for vulnerable people living in St Leger Homes accommodation. Support is available through external agencies and in-house to meet different types of need. Need is assessed when properties are offered and suitable support put in place. As part of their day-to-day duties, St Leger Homes staff identify people who may need support and refers them to relevant agencies. This is helping vulnerable people sustain their tenancies.

58 Capturing the effectiveness of tenancy support in sustaining tenancies could be further improved. Anecdotally there are several examples where support has helped tenants but a lack of formal monitoring of tenancy failures, or where support has maintained a tenancy, means St Leger Homes cannot show the impact of tenancy support.

59 St Leger Homes is proactive in safeguarding vulnerable adults and children. A designated member of staff acts as a referral point for any concerns colleagues may have about tenants or members of their household. Referrals are risk rated and where appropriate are referred to the Council's Social Care team. Staff have made 38 referrals since January 2010, as a result of identifying concerns while carrying out their day-to-day duties. This is helping ensure that vulnerable people, including children, are identified, safeguarded and supported.

60 St Leger Homes addresses hate crime effectively. Effective partnership arrangements for dealing with hate crimes are in place. All offices are designated hate crime reporting centres and staff are trained in dealing with cases. A 24 hour target for responding to complaints encourages a quick response. The approach is victim centred with some cases dealt with through support and mediation but others through enforcement action against the tenancy. Partners work together to resolve cases and cases are monitored through the Hate Management Action Partnership (HMAP) which St Leger sits on. In total 110 incidents were reported to HMAP in 2009/10, of which 33 cases were from St Leger. Cases are closed by HMAP once it is agreed that a resolution has been found. This is providing a supportive service to victims of hate crime.

61 Partnership arrangements to help survivors of domestic violence are effective. St Leger Homes works as part of the multi-agency arrangements to support and manage cases. Officers work with survivors on their preferred solutions and refer to Women's Aid and other agencies for support. A sanctuary scheme is available to help survivors remain in their home if this is their wish and there is also liaison with the homelessness unit. There has been a recent campaign to encourage reporting and greater numbers are coming forward. This is ensuring that survivors of domestic violence are able to access services that best meet their needs.

62 Specific measures are in place to support women from diverse backgrounds fleeing domestic violence. St Leger Homes has access to specialist services to help Asian women experiencing domestic violence and to address honour-based violence and forced marriage. Women's Aid has specifically trained workers able to offer advice and support and St Leger

Homes can refer cases for this help. This provides specific services to some of the most vulnerable women, and their children, needing support.

63 St Leger Homes addresses diversity through a range of partnerships. In addition to those described above, staff participate in MAPPAi, safer communities and various other multi-agency forums that support vulnerable people. This has led to several changes in services that support vulnerable people, including an easy read guide to the CBL scheme and stretching service standards around complaints about hate crime and offensive or racist graffiti. This will foster good community relations.

64 An external assessment in 2010 shows St Leger Homes meets the EHRC Code of Practice in Housing. The two ticks, 'positive about disability', symbol was awarded two years ago.

65 The staffing profile broadly reflects that of the local community. A performance measurement monitors staffing profile, and targeted recruitment and an apprenticeship scheme helps address any imbalances. This brings as wide a range of views as possible from the workforce to reflect the diverse needs of the community.

66 There are some weaknesses in the collection of profile information. The details of household members are not collected which misses an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of diverse needs. Also, in some service areas the assessment of performance and satisfaction in relation to diversity is underdeveloped. For example, no targets are set for BME applicants using the housing allocations service. St Leger Homes recognises this and intends to address these as part of improving how its IT systems support diversity information recording and monitoring.

67 The Council's aids and adaptations service has a number of weaknesses. Some people wait too long to have their needs assessed and for work to be carried out. Recent improvements have been made to address these weaknesses but these have yet to result in any significant improvements to service delivery. The Council is not measuring and reporting performance in this area to allow people to understand and challenge the service. Publicity and promotion are poor. St Leger Homes has taken steps to improve the service for some tenants.

i Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) support the assessment and management of the most serious sexual and violent offenders.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

68 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a strong understanding of stock condition and works were planned effectively to meet and maintain decency standards. Property improvements were prioritised appropriately and choices met tenant aspirations. Tenants influenced DHS programme decisions and were kept well informed about delivery of the programme. Procurement initiatives tested the market, ensuring value for money. The DHS standard was out of date and did not reflect better components available in the market place since it was agreed.

69 In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. The strategic approach to investment planning is developing. Homes are improved to a high standard and in line with what customers want. Programmes are generally well managed, published, and work is customer focused. Energy efficiency work is good and helps to make homes and areas more sustainable. St Leger Homes tackles low demand homes, garages and shops well. Effective procurement has secured savings. A strategic approach to environmental work and planned maintenance is well developed. A high number of homes are still non-decent and the long term future of a large number of properties is uncertain.

70 St Leger Homes has a good understanding of the condition of its stock. A Council in-house stock condition survey was completed in 2003 and supplemented by a stock condition data validation report in April of this year. Additional surveys of non-traditional stock, multi-storey blocks and property 'MoT' information has added further detail. Asset information is held on a database, regularly updated with details from decency schemes, planned works, responsive repairs and void works. As well as information from surveys including DDA, fire risk assessments, stock condition and asbestos surveys. This means resources can be accurately directed into areas where they are in greatest need.

71 The sustainability of neighbourhoods has been strengthened. Resident feedback, neighbourhood indicators and stock condition information shape investment programmes with a 'worst first' approach. A broad range of neighbourhood indicators measure the health of neighbourhoods and identifies problem areas that need action. The sustainability of a neighbourhood is enhanced through a variety of means ranging from minor estate improvements through to decent homes works (DHS). Tenants endorse this approach. Falls in the number of empty properties and improved relet times point to the success of the approach.

72 Programmes of work are managed effectively, completed on time and within budget. This has been recognised by CLG which brought forward £2 million in funding from 2010/11 into 2009/10. Benchmarking shows that costs generally reflect those of other large landlords in the region. A whole-life approach to costs has been adopted leading to the standardisation of several items. Quality is not compromised with environmentally friendly and inexpensive to run items, such as combination boilers and solar-reflective glass fitted. A whole-life approach to costs will lead to greater savings over the longer term.

73 Procurement has been effectively used to gain additional benefits. Contractors go through an exacting recruitment process that includes tenants. Contractors are selected according to complex criteria that incorporate both cost and quality and also additional features, such as, local labour and training requirements. This has led to around 40 local people benefiting from apprenticeship training programmes.

74 St Leger Homes management of asbestos is effective. A comprehensive asbestos management plan is in place based on sound data about the location of asbestos. Before works commence contractors and operatives confirm that information on asbestos is passed to them electronically. All communal areas have been surveyed. Tenants are made aware of the risks of asbestos before DHS works start. Staff have been on asbestos training and there are clear guidelines for them to follow when dealing with enquires. The approach protects the health and safety of staff, contractors and residents.

75 There is good joint working with the fire service to improve safety on estates. There are personal information boxes in the lobbies of the tower blocks that the fire service can access. This provides a floor layout of the block and identifies where vulnerable tenants live and where there are households with children under five. Tenants are also given advice on what to do in the event of a fire and there are posters to reinforce this. The ALMO has recently facilitated a training exercise for the fire service by allowing them to arrange a mock fire in an empty flat in a tower block with the fire service required to 'save' dummies placed in the flats. The fire service takes referrals from the ALMO, visits tenants and provides fire seals and battery smoke alarms where needed. It also provides and fits flashing beacons for people who have a hearing impairment. This helps ensure the safety of tenants and joint working between organisations adds value for both partners.

76 Homes built using non-traditional construction methods are improved effectively. Most homes built using non-traditional methods have been surveyed, found to be sound and are included in DHS programmes. Programmes have been developed to reflect the specific needs of properties particularly around insulation. External cladding is used to enhance properties appearance and improve their insulation. Visits to improved properties showed them to be attractive and inexpensive to live in. SAP ratings on improved properties have risen considerably from around

48 to 72. Investment ensures the long-term future of non-traditional and other types of housing.

77 The standard of improvement works is high. Tenants agreed a local DHS which includes energy efficient and contemporary features such as over bath showers. The decent homes programme is published for residents but some leaseholders were unaware of it. Standards of construction are generally high and materials of good quality. Tenants get plenty of choice of fixtures and fittings and personal preferences are accommodated when possible. Tenants receive £25 redecorating cost per room via vouchers from various companies or as a cheque. This gives more flexibility and choice.

78 Tenants have influenced the programme. Responding to customer feedback the programme has been changed to focus on 'worst first' and whole house refurbishment. Tenants have made numerous changes to work specifications including electrical fixtures and fittings, lighting, further choice of bath panels, toilet seats and emulsion colours. St Leger Homes offers adjacent owners the option to use the investment partner to do work on their homes but there is little take-up. Improvement works reflect tenants' wishes.

79 Tenants are generally kept well informed and supported during improvement works. Information includes a helpful DVD and leaflets/advice that explain how work will affect residents. It is made clear to residents that disruption is extensive and practical help and support ensures tenants can properly prepare. A series of innovations have helped communications including site notice boards outlining works and operatives' photos and contact details. Better communication has helped to reduce the number of tenant refusals from 12 per cent in 2007/08 to only 3 per cent in the 2009/10 programme and reduce the average time spent in properties by two days to 14. Overall current customer satisfaction rating is 97 per cent, based on a high 74 per cent return rate. Nevertheless during the inspection we met a number of tenants who were still confused about what they were entitled to. Good communication helps tenants cope with work to their homes and reduces complaints.

80 Planned improvement works are used to identify and meet the needs of vulnerable tenants. If during improvement works disabled tenants are found to need an adaptation to their home then this is completed alongside decent homes work. This approach is ensuring that the needs of tenants with disabilities are met promptly and disruption is minimised through programming all work to take place at the same time.

81 Satisfaction with DHS works is increasing and complaints falling. St Leger Homes and its contractors have worked closely with residents to increase satisfaction and reduce the number of complaints. Complaints are welcomed and have been used to improve the service. A number of innovations such as mobile respite facilities and individual property day books, recording all works within a home, have been introduced. DHS works have attracted a high but falling number of complaints from residents.

82 An effectively managed range of cyclical servicing contracts is in place. Cyclical servicing contracts are agreed for gas appliances, lift maintenance, Legionella testing, fire safety equipment and door entry systems. Tenants and their visitors are well protected.

83 A strategy to shift investment from responsive to planned programmes has been successful. The strategy adopted a target to achieve a 60/40 split between planned and responsive maintenance expenditure by 2011/12. Presently the split is at 55:45. Responsive repairs are more expensive than planned work.

84 The asset management strategy has a number of uncertainties. Decisions on the long-term future of sheltered accommodation and a number of multi-storey blocks have yet to be agreed with the Council. Previous proposals have not been acceptable to the Council, and new plans have yet to be approved. Some people are living next to empty properties and in poorly insulated flats. This is reducing the quality of life for these tenants.

85 The external appearance of a number of properties is poor. Exterior paintwork of a number of properties show signs of peeling or fading paintwork. Boundary treatments are haphazard in some places and illegal car parking is common. Future programmes will replace unsightly timber fittings with Upvc fittings but boundaries tend to be dealt with on a piecemeal basis. The overall appearance of estates and their sustainability is diminished by unattractive features.

86 A high number of homes have not been improved. The DHS will be achieved in 2014 but around a third of homes have not been improved to meet the decent homes standard. Average SAP ratings that have fallen from 63 in 2006/07 to 60.7 in 2009/10. However, the national methodology used to calculate SAP ratings changed in this period and resulted in lower scores. Current performance in homes that are still to be improved is in the bottom quarter of benchmark averages. Improvement targets are modest at 65 which is still below benchmarked lower quarter of 68. Low SAP ratings partially reflect the level of homes that are still non-decent and the high level of non-traditional properties. A positive target of 72 has been set for 2014 on the completion of the decency programme. This is based on addressing energy inefficiencies of non-traditional properties and identifying where they are in the programme. Some tenants are living in properties that do not reflect modern standards, have poor energy efficiency and are expensive to heat.

87 There are other weaknesses including:

- the number of complaints about decent homes works is falling but still high at around 9 per cent of all properties where works are carried out;
- leaseholders are only just starting to be involved with proposed improvements; and
- outcomes from energy efficiency work, such as lower heating bills, are not measured.

88 A garage site investment plan is being developed but in the meantime a priority matrix is in place and the asset management team uses this to decide whether any repairs should be carried out or the garage let so that there is no wasted investment in unsustainable sites.

89 Slow progress in undertaking appraisal of stock investment options reduces VFM. Although St Leger Homes is avoiding significant investment in stock awaiting a decision on its future, it still needs to undertake responsive repairs that may ultimately prove to be an ineffective use of resources.

Responsive repairs

90 In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Performance had improved following a service review. Diagnostic information was available to aid the reporting of repairs and appointments were available for customers. There were inefficiencies in the service including high levels of emergency repairs, low levels of planned maintenance and an ineffective approach to canvassing tenant satisfaction.

91 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The repair service has a customer focus and tenant satisfaction is high. Working practices are generally efficient, but there are too many emergency and urgent repairs. Performance on completing repairs within target timescales has deteriorated.

92 The repairs service has a customer focus. It is easy to report repairs either in person, by email, over the phone and by fax. Contact numbers are widely promoted and an appointment given at the point of contact. A comprehensive repairs handbook includes repairs diagnosis diagrams and handy tips. Appointment slots are flexible, and include evenings and Saturday mornings, although take-up is limited. Appointments are confirmed by text and when the operative is on the way. Operatives can do additional repairs in properties. Tenants are informed if the repair is a right to repair and satisfaction levels for repairs and maintenance increased from 68 per cent in 2006 to 81 per cent in 2009.

93 The repair service is generally efficient. An in-house DLO completes all repairs. The DLO has adopted mobile working methods, including PDAs to schedule and manage repairs in real-time. Operatives can go to the first job direct from home saving travelling time. Multi-skilled operatives drive vans carrying an imprest stock which helps ensure that about 85 per cent of repairs are completed 'right first time'. Optitime and van-tracking technology directs the closest operative to new jobs. Front-line staff have repairs diagnostic software to ensure that repair orders are accurate. Efficient working methods give a better service and saves money.

94 Effective use is made of pre- and post-inspections to improve the service. The proportion of pre-inspections has fallen from 8 per cent in 2007 to 5 per cent in 2010 and are limited to diagnostic and rechargeable repairs. St Leger Homes aims to reduce it further with all diagnostics completed by operatives. Ten per cent of all repairs are physically post-inspected. A

further 10 per cent are 'inspected' through telephone surveys; tenants recommended this approach. The findings are shared with operatives and suggestions for improving the service are acted on. This is an effective way of ensuring a quality service that responds to tenants' needs and aspirations.

95 A programmed approach to minor repairs is progressing well. St Leger Homes dispersed stock have annual property MoTs completed where a team of multi-skilled handymen team will visit an area and go from property to property completing any minor non-specialised repairs. This avoids expensive visits to single dispersed properties to complete a few minor repairs.

96 Since the last inspection several improvements have been made. These include:

- defects liability periods are flagged on the repairs reporting system and repairs occurring during this period are tracked;
- work given to subcontractors has reduced to about 10 per cent of all work and is generally restricted to specialist trades; and
- the average responsive repair job cost has fallen over the last three years from £104.41 in 2007/08 to £84.97 in 2009/10.

97 The service still has several inefficient practices, for example:

- the level of emergency and routine repairs is still significantly below best practice at 39 per cent of all orders (13 per cent and 26 per cent respectively). This weakness has not been addressed since the inspection in 2007;
- alternative means of supplying operatives have not been investigated; and
- tenants cannot routinely comment on the service, although this was changed while the inspection team was on site. Satisfaction is mainly gathered by a 'ring around' of 10 per cent of tenants who have recently had a repair completed.

98 Performance in some areas has declined over the last year and targets were missed in several areas. Performance in completing non-urgent repairs remained largely unchanged at about 12 days; and the good performance in appointments made and kept remained at around 99 per cent. Performance in completing emergency repairs on time has declined from 95 per cent 2008/09 to 87 per cent in 2009/10. Over the same period completing urgent repairs on time fell from 96 per cent to 89 per cent. Encouragingly recent trends show improvements in this area. Newsletters and the website carry details of repairs performance so this is available for tenants. Only good performance in all areas of the service will produce consistently high levels of satisfaction.

Empty (void) property repairs

99 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Relet times continued to improve after a comprehensive review. St Leger Homes had set challenging targets and delivered the lettable standard.

100 In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. The management of empty homes is strong. Empty homes are repaired quickly to an agreed standard. Homes are relet quickly and new tenants are supported. The future of a number of long-term voids has yet to be resolved.

101 The management of empty homes is effective. A specialist voids team repairs around 1,600 empty properties a year to a high standard. All properties are inspected by St Leger Homes staff before letting. The appearance of estates is maintained by avoiding the use of security screens to doors and windows on void properties. Letting homes more quickly helps people in need find homes, improves an estate's appearance and makes more efficient use of resources.

102 The speed of reletting voids has consistently improved. The average time to relet a property has fallen consistently over the last four years from 69 days in 2005/06 to 24 days in 2009/10, against a challenging target of 23 days. This is in the top quarter of ALMO performers. The number of lettable voids and rent loss has largely remained unchanged over the same time period. This largely reflects the natural turnover of tenancies. About 150 properties, mainly obsolete properties with shared facilities in sheltered accommodation, have been vacant for some time while a decision on their long-term future is made. Long-term empty homes can have a damaging effect on local areas.

103 Void rent loss has consistently been in the third quarter of all ALMOs. Cumulative year end performance for 2009/10 at 1.72 per cent is higher than previous years. Even excluding long-term voids rent loss for the year stood at 1.4 per cent, significantly above an ambitious target of 1.10. Low rent loss means more money to spend on other priorities.

104 Voids are repaired to a good standard and effectively let. Tenants agreed a void property standard to let properties at a consistent standard across the borough. When practicable prospective tenants are given an opportunity to discuss choices of things such as kitchen design and colours. All viewings are accompanied and prospective tenants see the void standard so they can effectively judge how well the property has been repaired. Any items left in reasonable condition by the previous tenant are left for the new tenant. Gardens are 'tidied' and a detailed lettings interview ensures that tenants are given support at the start of their tenancy. Tenants are advised of the preferred energy supplier in the area and other options available to them. A handyman service is available to help tenants carry out essential tasks, such as putting up curtain tracks, when they first move in for up to two hours. All new tenants are visited within six weeks of moving into their new home. Few properties are refused because of the condition they are in. Tenants are less likely to move if their new home is in good condition, they are well supported and the area's sustainability is enhanced.

105 Voids works are tailored to meet the new tenant's specific needs. Decency or other major works are agreed with the tenant before they move in. Disabled adaptations are also completed before occupation. Vulnerable

tenants who need assistance with decorating are identified when they apply for housing and decoration is arranged according to their taste. Other tenants are offered an option of a decorating pack, including materials and tools, or a decorating voucher for a local DIY supplier. These initiatives help vulnerable tenants achieve a home that is welcoming and meets their needs.

106 A value for money review of the service led to a number of improvements. The speed with which voids are relet has increased and the cost of their repair has fallen from £2,174.58 in 2007/08 to £1,903.03 in 2009/10. Refusals of properties have fallen, further reducing end to end letting times. The introduction of area-based specialist voids teams has cut relet and travelling times. Empty properties are relet quicker and at lower cost.

107 There are some weaknesses with the service.

- St Leger Homes does not provide a Paypoint for energy suppliers; this would help tenants connect to suppliers more quickly.
- No incentives are offered to tenants for giving notice of termination to allow the relet process to start earlier, so ensuring a quicker turnaround.
- Few back-to-back lettings are completed, only around six last year.
- There are inconsistencies in the standard of some ready for let homes.
- There is a lack of consistency with some tenants receiving additional works that other tenants are unaware they are also entitled to.

Gas servicing

108 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. St Leger Homes complied with gas safety regulations and tenant satisfaction was high. Monitoring and reporting of the programme was effective and gas certificates were recorded appropriately. A culture of gas safety is developing and links are made with wider fuel poverty initiatives. Weekend and evening appointments were available and outstanding services were pursued, including through legal action.

109 In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. A customer- focused approach ensures that access arrangements are effective and performance in completing gas servicing is high. Quality checks and file management is robust. When missing, smoke detectors are fitted and existing ones checked. Leaseholders holding valid gas safety certificates are not monitored.

110 Performance on gas servicing is strong. Immediately prior to the inspection only six homes had outstanding gas safety certificates. Of these, the majority were outstanding for one month and an injunction had been secured to allow access to one property with a longer outstanding gas service. The needs of vulnerable people and of the servicing programme are appropriately balanced. Servicing programmes include solid fuel heating, and chimneys are swept. Board reports detail the number of any outstanding services, including the period overdue. Strong performance protects the health and safety of residents.

111 Gas servicing procedures are effective. A robust gas servicing policy and procedure details roles, responsibilities and access arrangements. Responsibility for gas servicing rests with a single person. Servicing is programmed over nine months, freeing resources to deal with emergency breakdowns during the winter months. ICT systems flag outstanding services to remind staff that access is required if the tenant makes contact. When all else fails, injunctions under 'Statutory Nuisance' within the Environmental Protection Act are sought. Addresses where it has previously been difficult to gain access are highlighted and fast-tracked through the system. Sound procedures ensure that all appliances are serviced annually.

112 A culture of gas safety is developing. Reception areas and vehicles carry gas safety messages; the tenants' repairs handbook has a gas safety section and it also features in tenants' newsletters. A gas safety DVD is available outlining the dangers of not having appliances serviced. Reports on the progress of the gas servicing programme are made as part of the monthly performance update to the Board and property services committee. This reduces any risks to the health and safety of tenants and their households.

113 The service has a strong customer focus. The website carries broad details of the servicing programme and tenants are informed of the actual day of service at least two weeks in advance. If inconvenient, tenants can cancel the appointment and arrange a more specific one on an AM/PM, early evening and Saturday morning basis. Exceptionally, Sunday appointments are available. Access is gained to nearly 90 per cent of properties on the first visit and abortive visits have fallen to 1 per cent. The contact centre gathers customer satisfaction and last year around 98 per cent of people were satisfied. Leaseholders are offered servicing at competitive rates but St Leger Homes is unsure of the take-up of the service. The lack of monitoring of leaseholders is a weakness. Good access arrangements lead to lower rates of outstanding services.

114 The servicing programme promotes other messages around fire safety and fuel poverty. In 2009 St Leger Homes entered a partnership agreement with South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue to provide free smoke alarms and fire safety checks on all properties without alarms. So far the partnership has fitted 250 smoke alarms. Hard-wired alarms are fitted under the decency programme. Appointment letters include leaflets and information on affordable warmth. This partnership has added value to the work being done in this area.

115 Quality assurance is robust. The in-house contractor, external assessors and peers all assess the quality of work. A risk-based approach is adopted reflecting issues such as the condition of equipment and any concerns around an individual's performance. This is an effective means to maintain quality.

116 Effective IT systems are in place. All operatives have hand-held PDAs and electronically complete CP12'sⁱ. Good records are kept with CP12 and other documentation readily to hand. Tenants' electronic records are updated with details of gas servicing.

Aids and adaptations

117 The aids and adaptations service is provided by the Council and is not a delegated function under the St Leger Homes management agreement. Both minor and major adaptations to tenants' homes are delivered by the Council and St Leger Homes has to refer all requests for adaptations to the Council. Customers are waiting a long time to have aids and adaptations to their homes. This section of the report comments on the impact of all aspects of the service for St Leger Homes customers but does not allocate an overall score for the service.

118 St Leger Homes has made extensive efforts to improve the service for its tenants. The ALMO deals with any adaptations identified through the decent homes work. Working with the Council, it has part funded a mobile minor adaptations service. A gap analysis of the service with the Council has resulted in an improvement action plan being agreed. This is leading to a reduction in waiting times, although it is still too early for it to have made a noticeable difference to customers.

119 A proactive approach is adopted to meet tenants' adaptation needs through improvement works and the preventative maintenance 'MOT' service. As part of the decent homes programme, St Leger Homes employs an OT who makes assessments and recommendations on adaptations. The work is then completed alongside decent homes work. If the property included in a programme actually meets the decency standard, but an adaptation is needed, St Leger Homes seeks approval from the Council to carry out the work, funded through the capital programme. In 2009/10, 748 adaptations were fitted through the decent homes programme. The property MOT service will fit minor adaptations such as grab rails. This is an effective means of identifying need and installing adaptations without delay.

120 Good use is made of existing adapted properties to best meet need. An accessible housing register operated by the Council's strategic housing service matches adapted empty properties to suitable applicants. The scheme has proved successful with 1,500 applicants currently on the register, although a significant proportion of these are waiting for an OT assessment before they can be actively considered for properties. About 500 households have been rehoused over the last five years and 139 in the last year. This is an effective use of resources to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

ⁱ Landlords gas safety certificate.

121 Due to the weaknesses in the Council's service some tenants wait too long for both major and minor adaptations to their homes. Limited performance information makes it difficult to assess how well the service is meeting tenants' needs.

122 The adaptations service is improving from a low base. Until recently, people have been waiting up to eight months for non-urgent minor adaptations. Encouragingly urgent cases are prioritised and dealt with within 48 hours. Some tenants have been waiting for an adaptation since June 2008, although there are signs of improvement. People are struggling in homes ill-suited to their needs.

123 Promotion of the aids and adaptations service is ineffective. No published information is currently available, although a leaflet is in draft format. Enquiries about the service did not receive a clear response and on one occasion a caller was advised that rather than wait they should fit their own adaptation. Other responses showed that recent changes to the way in which minor adaptations are carried out have not been communicated to reception staff.

124 Management of the adaptations service is not effective. Other than the number of adaptations completed (902 minor and 303 major adaptations in 2009/10) little performance information is available. The Council has indicated that waiting times for an occupational therapist (OT) assessment is 18 months for a major adaptation and 12 months for a minor adaptation, but this is not formally monitored. The number of tenants waiting for an assessment, or the variance in waiting times between the six areas in which the Occupational Therapy service operates, is unknown.

125 A Home Improvement Agency (HIA), commissioned by the Council, effectively manages the installation of major adaptations for some applicants. From receipt of the OT referral to completion of the work takes an average of 16.2 weeks, which is within good practice guidelines. A database shared between St Leger Homes, the Council and the HIA allows the progress of cases to be tracked by any of the parties.

126 Disabled Facilities Grant satisfaction surveys, carried out on completion of works, show high levels of satisfaction. However, these do not include questions on how long applicants waited for the OT assessment and their satisfaction with this aspect of the service. St Leger Homes has asked that the survey forms be changed to capture this, and for the postal survey to be replaced with a telephone one. This will gather a more accurate picture of satisfaction.

Income management

127 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Rent collection was effective with early intervention by personal contact and signposting to benefit and debt advice services. Evictions only took place as a last resort. The collection of former tenancy arrears had improved and exceeded targets. There was a range of convenient payment options, but no evening or weekend initiatives to contact tenants. Information for tenants on rent and service charge setting was not comprehensive and the IT system did not prompt action in line with procedure. Housing benefit entitlement was not assessed at tenancy sign up.

128 In this inspection, we found strengths continued to outweigh weaknesses. Rent collection rates are high and new means of paying rent introduced. Good partnership working is in place and financial exclusion is tackled. Staff have clear guidelines for recovering arrears, evictions are falling. However, satisfaction gathering is ineffective and performance around former tenant arrears (FTAs) is weak. The profiling of tenants in debt is not fully developed. IT systems lack the functions that other more effective systems have.

129 A wide range of payment methods is offered to customers. These include direct debit, standing order, payment by telephone or online, at St Leger Homes and Council office pay desks and by swipe card at retail outlets and post offices throughout the borough. Direct debit dates have been increased from two to four options, although these are not yet available on a weekly basis. Payment methods are promoted in customer leaflets and correspondence, such as arrears letters and rent statements. This helps to ensure customers can pay by the method they most prefer.

130 St Leger Homes is tackling financial exclusion among its tenants. St Leger Homes is part of the local financial inclusion (FI) partnership which has developed a comprehensive FI strategy for the borough. The partnership also works with sub-regional partners (funded by the regional efficiency and improvement programme) to develop more effective, coordinated advice services and financial skills training. Working in partnership is more likely to produce desired outcomes.

131 St Leger Homes provides clear information on rents. Tenants have clear information on how rents are set through a factsheet explaining target rent calculations, which are in line with government expectations. Quarterly rent statements are easy to understand and tenants can get additional statements on request. Separate debts, such as rent arrears, court costs and rechargeable repairs are separately identified in rent statements and letters to customers. Newsletters and leaflets promote rent payment and benefit advice. Tenants know how rents are set and have accurate rent account information.

132 Performance in relation to current rent collection and arrears is good. In 2009/10, the level of rent collected as a percentage of the rent debit was 98.46 per cent and arrears outstanding, 1.64 per cent. Both of these compare well to best performing ALMOs, placing St Leger Homes performance in the top 25 per cent (including arrears from previous years, and 100.96ⁱ per cent excluding arrears, which is also strong performance). This is particularly encouraging given the challenging economic climate.

133 Every effort is made to ensure people remain in their homes. Customers now receive a financial healthcheck at sign up, and they are then rated as high, medium or low risk to help inform support or advice and alert rent officers to any extra monitoring that may be needed. Arrears are acted on quickly if there are any problems and St Leger Homes now makes formal referrals to partner agencies, with feedback on the outcomes, rather than simply signposting people to them. Strong management of cases focuses on supporting customers to maximise incomes and legal action is only taken when unavoidable. This has resulted in the level of legal action falling continuously, with evictions now totalling 57, compared to 103 in 2007.

134 Staff have clear guidelines on recovering arrears. A new (February 2010) Income Management Strategy provides a clear framework in which the future service is to be delivered, against clear targets related to current and former arrears. Procedures give a comprehensive guide to staff on the action needed to recover arrears, while focusing on providing support in the form of benefits and debt advice and early intervention before arrears become so large that tenants cannot repay them in reasonable timescales. Comprehensive training on benefits and money advice supports this. The approach is tailored around the most productive collection tactics. For example, a payment incentive scheme did not lead to an increase in rent receipts and was discontinued. This has helped tenants and provided the framework for the strong performance indicated above.

135 IT systems continue to lack the functionality of other more up-to-date systems. They have several weaknesses:

- arrears recovery escalating procedures are ineffective;
- documents in tenants' preferred formats have to be manually produced; and
- payments against repayment agreements or court orders are not automatically checked.

136 More encouragingly, rents staff have mobile IT which give access to account information for home visits. The system is expanding to include partner agencies that provide support to tenants in arrears. St Leger Homes recognises the system's shortcomings and is seeking to replace the IT system in 2011. Poor IT systems reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

i More rent was collected than due in the year as previous years arrears were recovered.

137 Effective advice and support is offered to tenants. Since the last inspection, St Leger Homes has engaged positively with a range of partners in the Doncaster Financial Inclusion Group to develop a comprehensive financial inclusion strategy for the district. Staff have used the networking opportunities this has brought to develop enhanced services with partners related to debt and money advice, access to affordable credit and financial capability training. These are supporting its preventative approach to arrears management. This is an effective means of helping tenants to maximise their incomes to support better arrears recovery.

138 St Leger Homes continues to have a positive relationship with the Council's housing benefit section. Good liaison arrangements are in place around benefit verification and dealing with individual complex cases. Benefit surgeries in area offices and joint work on promoting benefit take up has continued to be proactive. The approach would be strengthened by updating the service level agreement (SLA) with the Council to reflect this. This supports tenants in ensuring they claim their full benefit entitlement and the prompt assessment of benefit claims.

139 Financial inclusion (FI) initiatives are having a positive impact and increasing capacity to support customers. St Leger Homes has protocols with the local credit union and money advice agency to provide help and support to tenants in financial difficulty. The protocol with the latter follows a review of the previous arrangements. This has released funding for a dedicated FI team at St Leger Homes to provide a strategic focus for FI work, an officer to help map hotspots and measure performance, and an in-house benefits advisor. A dedicated financial inclusion website provides information on money issues for customers. Self-help advice and links to agencies that can offer support or to downloadable documents, such as budgeting forms, as well as government and local initiatives are available. Weekly-paid, low-cost home contents insurance is also promoted to tenants. Tenants can better manage their money and are at less risk from money lenders.

140 The approach to financial inclusion has some weaknesses. St Leger Homes does not have a clear strategy or action plan of its own towards the new partnership financial inclusion strategy (FIS). The Council's and St Leger Homes response to the recession is recent, despite its severe impact on parts of the local community. A clear strategic framework would give the Council and St Leger Homes certainty that their response is putting resources into the services that are needed most.

141 St Leger Homes still does not have well established satisfaction data for the service, despite it being identified as a weakness in 2007. A new programme of face to face surveys began this year, undertaken by the local Credit Union and DWDTⁱ money advice service to encourage tenants to give frank feedback. It is too early to judge results and this only enables a picture to be developed from people having received successful referrals for

ⁱ Doncaster West Development Trust

additional support. St Leger Homes still does not have a clear picture of customer perceptions of the service.

142 A detailed profile of tenants falling into arrears has not been established. Profiling is limited to a simple breakdown of cases by ethnicity and language used. No analysis of the breakdown of stages or legal action and no other diversity strands or other financial capability/take-up analysis have been completed. No evidence has otherwise been provided of how this information has been used. This demonstrates this is a key area needing further development. Debt profiling can help target efforts to prevent people falling into debt.

143 Individual case management has several weaknesses. These include:

- case compliance checks are not always taking place prior to court proceedings;
- referral to the Council's housing options team is only made after a court order is received; and
- records inconsistently completed and a lack clarity on follow up with customers, HB or partners.

Early referrals reduce the risk of cases escalating and good record keeping keeps service standards high.

144 Performance in relation to former tenant arrears (FTAs) is relatively weak. The level of new FTAs created each year has not slowed, despite the decrease in evictions, but St Leger Homes does not know why this is. The FTA balance has fallen by £60,000 since the last inspection, but this disguises write-offs of around £1 million over that period. Its collection rate is poor at only around 10 per cent in 2009/10. Rechargeable repair collection performance is a Council function and also poor at 5.73 per cent for 2009/10, and has fallen over the past three years. This means that the income collected to spend on services is reduced.

145 St Leger Homes is still holding on to very old, irrecoverable arrears rather than focusing on newer debts. Despite the write-offs referred to, there are still over 3,200 live FTA cases, of which 40 per cent (totalling £730, 000) are over six years old which has grown from 18 per cent (£350, 000) in 2006/07. Most of these are not in payment and may be unenforceable in law, despite the level of write-offs above, and slow progress is being made in writing off these older debts. This was a weakness highlighted in the 2007 inspection report and means resources are not being freed to help staff focus on other recoverable debts. The St Leger Homes is not taking action to address this and is therefore prevented from establishing a clear baseline to enable staff to focus on the cases most likely to generate successful payment.

146 Collection of service charges and garage rents are effective. Leaseholder service charge collection performance totalled 100.4 per cent of the service charge due in 2009/10. Garage rent collection is close to 100 per cent of rent due. This represents a high level of performance.

Resident involvement

147 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Tenant satisfaction with opportunities to be involved had improved and there were resources to deliver resident involvement commitments. Service standards were in place and performance was monitored and reported to tenants. St Leger Homes offered a range of ways for tenants to get involved in its activities, individually and in groups, and had engaged successfully with hard to reach tenants.

148 In this inspection we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong strategic approach to resident involvement and a wide range of opportunities for tenants to become involved. There is a comprehensive and well supported structure for involvement, with residents able to influence at all levels of the organisation. St Leger Homes seeks to ensure that residents with diverse needs are represented and that their views can inform services. However, resident involvement impact assessments have not been carried out and some opportunities are being missed to promote the value of involvement activities.

149 There is a strong strategic approach to resident involvement. A strategic objective of the organisation is 'to empower and involve customers in service development and monitoring'. A comprehensive tenant participation strategy, supported by a tenant participation policy and a Tenants Compact, have been reviewed and refreshed with residents recently. Local tenant compacts have been developed in ten areas and there is a target to achieve a further five each year. St Leger Homes commitment to resident involvement is clearly communicated through the strategic approach and it provides a clear framework to show how this will be delivered. This is resulting in well supported residents who are clearly able to influence services.

150 Resident involvement is encouraged through a comprehensive menu of involvement activities. A range of options and activities are offered including mystery shopping, reality checks, surveys, special interest focus groups and focus groups for particular activities. The annual tenants' conference is well attended and has proved a successful way of engaging with residents. A database of over 1,400 'involved' tenants is annually refreshed and updated and indicates in what manner tenants want to be involved. Tenants on the database are called on for particular consultation exercises, or to sit on focus or working groups, to help review or develop service areas. A calendar of involvement is available at local offices and on the website, so that tenants are kept informed of what resident involvement events and activities are happening. This allows tenants to be involved in ways that suit them.

151 A formal participation structure is in place. There are over 50 Tenant and Resident Associations (TARAs), and a number of tenant clubs, that are active in their local areas and clearly make a difference in influencing how services are delivered to address local issues. TARAs are supported by the Federation of Tenants and Residents and nominate representatives to sit on

the Standing Joint Committee (SJC) the formal consultative body for St Leger. All strategies or policies are discussed by the SJC before they are considered by the Board, and performance information is also regularly reported on. Monthly meetings between the SJC and the executive directors share information and discuss any developments in the business. Minutes of meetings are fed back to the TARAs and are available on the website. This is allowing tenants to influence all aspects of St Leger's business and activities.

152 The formal tenant participation structures are supported through area forums. These are held every two months in four areas across Doncaster. They bring TARAs in a particular area together to allow them to receive reports from St Leger Homes, and partner organisations, about local issues and to consider how services are performing in their areas. The meetings also allow good practice to be shared among TARAs. To try and use this approach to involve more tenants, St Leger Homes is piloting two of the meetings in easily accessed venues and opening them up to any tenants in the area. If this is successful it will be rolled out across the borough. A board member and a member of the SJC attend the forums, so that they can listen and take account of local views from the areas. This means that a wider group of tenants are able to put their views forward and reflect more local issues.

153 St Leger Homes has increased tenant representation and involvement in the governance structures. In addition to tenants sitting on the main Board there is also additional tenant representation on the three service committees. In recruiting tenants to these positions, St Leger has sought to increase the representation of the tenant base by ensuring that tenants from the specialist group for young people (DYTAG), and the BME TARA, are represented. All reports to the Board have to show how any strategies or policies have been consulted on. This includes demonstrating who has been involved in any consultations, what suggestions were made and what has happened or changed as a result of these suggestions. This helps increase tenant involvement over decision-making processes.

154 Tenant involvement is developing a scrutiny role. A tenants' scrutiny panel has been set up to hold St Leger Homes accountable for service delivery, and to help develop the local offer for tenants. Tenants are currently being recruited to the panel, although meetings have already started and performance information is being considered. The members will be supported by training with an accredited business administration course being run from July. Members of this panel cannot sit on the Board, the committees or the SJC so that they can be independent in scrutinising services and performance. Although this panel is in its early days, it is already showing its potential in scrutinising services.

155 St Leger Homes involves a wider group of tenants through focus and working groups. Focus groups are selected from the database depending on the interest stated, and to get a good mix of tenants so that different perspectives can be obtained. Focus groups have been used to look at a variety of issues and policies such as reviewing service standards. A repairs

focus group meets regularly to discuss issues relating to this service and, more recently, a group has been set up to look specifically at why older people and people with disabilities have high refusal rates for decent homes work. When introducing the 'type talk' service the ALMO invited representatives from the deaf action group so that their experience could inform the approach, which led to the introduction of a fax service as well as the type talk facility. This allows services to be informed from a range of perspectives.

156 St Leger Homes seeks to engage with tenants who are harder to reach. Groups specifically for young people, people with disabilities and for tenants who live in rural areas are established. St Leger uses these groups to discuss a range of issues and also encourage representatives in the groups to become involved in some of the other participation structures. The SJC is not representative of all diverse needs but seeks to use co-opted members to try and increase representation from diverse groups, some of whom become permanent members. There is a religious calendar giving the dates of the main religious days so that these can be avoided when planning some of the larger involvement activities. St Leger Homes carried out a diversity audit of TARA members in 2009 and developed action plans with each TARA to try and increase membership from a more diverse group of tenants; for example buddying up with people who may not be confident in coming to meetings. A further audit is underway to assess whether this has been successful in attracting more people from different backgrounds. In these ways St Leger is helping to ensure that involvement activities are tailored to respond to different needs and reflect the diverse needs of its residents.

157 St Leger Homes tries to identify, tackle and remove any barriers to involvement activities. The reasons for the drop in satisfaction by BME tenants for opportunities to participate were investigated. A survey of 103 BME tenants showed that some might get involved in the BME TARA if there were Saturday morning meetings and this is now being followed up. There were also some issues around translation and language barriers and information was provided to address this. This is a positive response to feedback from tenants and is encouraging more people to be involved who otherwise may be deterred.

158 St Leger Homes is actively seeking to expand the ways in which it can consult with and involve residents. An e-forum has been set up with about 40 members so far and is being used for consultation exercises. An e-TARA is also being set up so that tenants not able to participate in their local TARA have a forum they can join. The web is used for information and feedback, and Facebook is also increasingly used as a means of getting information out to tenants and receiving comments. It is proving popular with young people.

159 There is effective support for resident involvement. A team of community engagement officers supports and facilitates involvement activities. There are constitutions and codes of conduct for TARAs and the SJC that support the effective running of business. St Leger Homes

contributes funding to the tenants' resource centre and pays start-up grants and running costs to TARAs. There is also funding for training, the newsletter and paying expenses incurred by tenants. This helps increase the impact that resident involvement can make.

160 Tenants are well supported by training. There is an annual training programme which is regularly reviewed with training evaluated to assess the difference it has made. Training opportunities are also sent out with the rent statements resulting in some tenants who are not involved in existing involvement structures putting themselves forward for training. 'Confidence' training is offered to build the capacity for tenants to engage further, and in one case this has led to a new TARA forming. Tenants are encouraged to attend training because their local TARA receives £10 for every member who attends a training session. E-learning has recently been introduced to widen the opportunities for tenants to take part in training at a time convenient to them. Training programmes are not informed by any audit of training needs of involved tenants, which is missing the opportunity to tailor training to meet any particular needs and to ensure that resources are targeted in the most effective way. Training give tenants confidence to make an impact.

161 Resident involvement is influencing services. Tenants feel that their views are listened to and that they are able to influence services. There are many examples that demonstrate this, such as the introduction of preventative maintenance through property MOTs. A panel of tenants, staff and board members is responsible for prioritising bids through the estate improvement fund of £80,000 so that tenants can influence how this money is spent. The formal participation structures allow tenants to influence at all levels. The 2009 tenant STATUS-style survey showed that 67 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the opportunities for participation, an increase from the previous survey, and 71 per cent of tenants felt their views were taken into account when making decisions.

162 Resident impact assessments have not been carried out. Some assessment is made of events such as the annual tenants' conference 'Unity in the Community', and learning is fed into the arrangements for the next event. Training events are also evaluated. However, there has been no overall impact assessment of resident involvement or of the different options offered for involvement. This makes it difficult to assess the difference that resident involvement makes.

163 Opportunities for tenants to become involved are ineffectively promoted. The resident involvement structure relies in a large part on the formal structures and TARAs. While this results in effective resident influence over services, and it is clear that TARAs contribute positively to their local areas and how services are delivered, there is the potential for some tenants to be deterred. Tenants who are not able or willing to be involved in the formal structures or local TARAs, because for example of time commitments or meeting times, may not see other forms of involvement as a means of influencing services. The menu of involvement offers a good range of opportunities for tenants but the strength of the formal structures, while

positive, risks overshadowing the importance of the other options. Opportunities are being missed to promote the importance and outcomes from participation activities.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy Management

164 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Policies and procedures complied with legislation and best practice and St Leger Homes services broadly met the 'Respect' standard. St Leger Homes used a range of remedies to investigate and respond to antisocial behaviour (ASB), and harassment and outcomes from effective joint working with partners were evident. Challenging service standards were delivered and perpetrators were supported to change their behaviour. Customer satisfaction levels with how ASB was dealt with were relatively low and some information to tenants was not easy to understand.

165 In this inspection strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities. New and existing tenants receive effective housing support. St Leger Homes works with partners to balance prevention, support and enforcement action for antisocial behaviour (ASB). The effectiveness of managing ASB needs to be established and the standard of case work closely monitored.

166 At the earliest opportunity tenants are made aware of their rights and responsibilities. At initial viewing of the property, the lettings interview and post-letting visit tenants are informed of their responsibilities and the consequences of failing to meet them. Other services are also discussed, such as resident involvement and furnished tenancies. At the outset the tenant and landlord have a good understanding of each others' responsibilities.

167 The tenancy agreement has been reviewed and revised regularly with the latest review in 2010. This led to a number of changes following consultation with tenants such as allowing pets to be kept in flats subject to a 'behaviour agreement'. Introductory tenancies have been introduced from June 2010, although this is slow in comparison with many other organisations. Tenants' views on the introduction were mixed, which led to lengthy consultation exercises. Although now in place it is too early to assess any impact.

168 Tenancies are controlled in an effective manner. A programme of tenancy verification visits is in place and around half of all tenancies are currently verified. Visits are used to check property condition, market any services such as Smartwater and direct debit and to assess any support needs. A risk-based approach prioritises visits to tenants who have not had contact with their landlord for some time. Neighbourhood alliance projects also complete tenancy verification visits. Visiting tenants is an effective means of uncovering tenancy fraud and identifying support needs.

169 Enhanced support assessment and referral processes for new tenants are emerging. New tenant visits have always been carried out but have recently been enhanced and linked to a matrix completed at sign up that identifies the level of proactive support the tenant requires to sustain their tenancy. Information on the cost of running a home and help with the practicalities of a tenancy are recent innovations. Staff have yet to be supplied with clear guidance on issues that should be raised with new tenants. Encouragingly, benefit advice and help with completing Housing Benefit forms and estimates of benefit awards have been in place for some time. Support and advice during the early stages of a tenancy can be vital in securing its future.

170 St Leger Homes deals with ASB through a strong strategic framework based on partnership working. The Safer Doncaster Partnership monitors progress on ASB and a series of joint action groups made up of senior staff from agencies dealing with the problem coordinate a strategic approach. Using local knowledge, hot spots are identified and action plans, agreed with local residents. Action plans are put in place to tackle the problem. A coordinated and targeted approach such as this has proven to be successful in dealing with ASB.

171 A broad-based neighbourhood approach deals with estate-wide ASB problems. Crime figures and other indicators of areas under stress direct agencies to focus resources on specific areas. 'Neighbourhood Alliances' of several agencies, led by the Police, coordinate the response to problems in a particular area through a one-off intensive approach. The agencies agree short action plans implemented over a three-week period. St Leger Homes contribution includes 'tidy ups', refurbishing community facilities and promoting the approach with residents. An opening and ending 'ceremony' celebrates any achievements. Seventy eight per cent of residents surveyed after neighbourhood alliance projects felt they had been successful in improving their area. The approach is creating a community-based solution to ASB, providing a long- term solution.

172 St Leger Homes effectively tackles ASB. A comprehensive ASB policy and procedure helps guide staff on how to deal with cases, and cases are only closed with the complainant's consent. St Leger Homes is a signatory to the Respect Standard and reviews its compliance against the standard, developing action plans to address any gaps. A centralised ASB team has recently been set up with staff seconded from the Council, St Leger Homes and the Police. The team manages the most difficult cases where a high level of expertise and involvement is needed.

173 A wide range of tools is available to help staff tackle ASB. Prevention and support measures include visits, sometimes with the Police or other agencies, a mediation service and arrangements for support through a range of agencies to help sustain tenancies. Formal legal action is used less regularly and actions against the tenancy even less. An effective approach to prevention has led to more cases being resolved without the need for enforcement activity.

174 St Leger Homes uses diversionary activities as a means of tackling ASB. A steering group of staff considers suggestions for diversionary activities, including those made by tenants, and funds the most effective ones. Examples include young people working with older people to create a mosaic panel in a communal hall, a floating mini moto project, a boxing project and work with young people to grow plants in an allotment. The activities are helping lessen the potential for ASB on estates by diverting young people into other activities.

175 Customers experiencing ASB are supported well. It is easy for tenants and residents to make complaints about ASB, and there are target times for staff to respond, that are generally kept. The Council provides an out-of-hours response team. This allows issues such as noisy parties to be addressed, and for proactive monitoring of areas where particular ASB cases are ongoing. Emotional and practical support is provided for complainants and witnesses in ASB cases through support, target hardening and other security measures. Successful prosecutions of perpetrators are advertised widely to encourage complainants to be confident that action will be taken. People suffering ASB are now more likely to complain, as they can see positive outcomes from other cases being delivered.

176 St Leger Homes has a good understanding of how effectively it is controlling ASB. A range of performance information is gathered and discussed by the management team with headline performance reported to the Board. Presently nearly a thousand cases are live, of which nearly 40 per cent are for untidy gardens. Only 42 cases have been ongoing for more than a year. Strategically, the impact that the partnership approach makes on tackling ASB, criminal damage and hate crime is measured by partners on the neighbourhood management group. Performance measures show that the level of ASB and crime figures, are reducing. Neighbourhood alliance projects are evaluated through surveys that show improved satisfaction as a result of the scheme. The outcomes from mediation service cases are also assessed. A longer term evaluation of some initiatives and to measure the impact on resident perceptions would improve understanding of the most effective means of controlling ASB.

177 Satisfaction with the service is generally high. Satisfaction figures for 2009/10 show that 86 per cent of complainants were satisfied with the way their case was handled and 80 per cent were satisfied with the outcome. However, this is based on a low response rate. St Leger Homes is now carrying out telephone surveys to increase the response and get a better understanding of the service from a customer perspective.

178 There are some inconsistencies in the way cases are managed. Not all cases that have been closed indicate that this was done in accordance with the procedure and signed off by the team leader. Careful supervision of cases will ensure high standards.

Estate Management

179 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a holistic approach to estate management. Regular 'estate walkabouts' took place and tenants influenced environmental improvements. However, the condition of estates was of a variable standard.

180 In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Estates are generally managed and maintained to a high standard. St Leger Homes works closely with partners to improve neighbourhoods. Areas are stable and tenant satisfaction is good and improving. Caretaking and cleaning standards are publicised and satisfaction gathered.

181 St Leger Homes has placed an emphasis on good estate management. Residential and mobile caretaking teams maintain estates and common areas to a high standard. Estate management staff and other agencies regularly hold well-publicised estate walkabouts and have easy access to estate improvement budgets. Tenancy conditions are enforced and support is provided for those who may have difficulty maintaining their gardens. An attractive environment helps sustain neighbourhoods.

182 Tenants are encouraged to maintain their property to a high standard. St Leger Homes demonstrates its commitment to high standards through an annual gardening competition and gardening service for people who cannot manage their own. Tenants who do not maintain their properties are tackled. Residents who allow bulk rubbish to accumulate in their gardens are told that it must be removed. The rubbish is sprayed with Smartwaterⁱ so if it is subsequently fly tipped it can be traced back to the owner and action taken. Well-maintained environments foster pride in estates.

183 Estates with higher than average number of voids and complaints of ASB are supported through a targeted approach. Estates showing signs of stress are targeted for intensive support. The Balby Bridge estate has a local office and staff have placed a particular emphasis on improving estate management. Small budgets are available for staff to spend on specific projects designed to improve the environment. Estate walkabouts are completed more frequently than elsewhere. A 24 hour concierge system and CCTV monitoring improves security and deters crime. The caretaking and concierge services work well together exchanging information, dealing with security issues and supporting vulnerable residents. This will encourage people to remain on estates and reduces the negative perceptions of some areas by the wider community.

ⁱ SmartWater is an anti-theft system. It is a liquid containing a code which can be read under ultraviolet light

184 The residential caretaking service maintains the appearance of estates well. Three estates benefit from a residential caretaking service that provides internal cleaning of blocks, keeping the external appearance of estates well maintained and free from litter. Local standards around the specification and frequency of work have been agreed with residents. Standards are monitored by residents and staff on a regular basis and reported to the local TARA. An action plan is developed to address any particular concerns or issues. Satisfaction surveys in these areas have been used to improve the service further and led to changes in the frequencies of cleaning. People are more likely to want to stay in homes in attractive areas.

185 Estate cleaning standards are publicised well. Local standards and work schedules for caretakers are displayed in blocks so residents know what service they can expect. Caretakers keep a log book of the work completed so they can show if they have met their work schedule for that day. Caretakers respond flexibly to the needs of their tenants, and an out-of-hours service is also available. This allows residents to assess the quality of the service they receive.

186 Mobile caretaking services maintain areas not covered by a residential caretaker to a high standard. The service focuses on the most challenging areas and deals with other issues on a responsive basis. The team is flexible and can adapt its approach to deal with recurring problems. Stretching service standards are in place, such as, dealing with racist or offensive graffiti within 24 hours. The appearance of estates is being maintained and problems are dealt with quickly.

187 Monitoring of the grounds maintenance and the cleaning services service level agreements (SLA) with the Council is effective. St Leger Homes uses various techniques to maintain high standards including estate walkabouts, mystery shopping and formal tenant inspections against agreed standards. In one area, following complaints from residents about the Council's ground maintenance service responsibility was transferred to the local caretaker, resulting in a saving of £11,000, and a better service for residents. Monitoring shows that the grounds maintenance service meets the required standards.

188 Satisfaction with the area as a place to live is increasing. Dissatisfaction with the area fell last year from 12 per cent to 10 per cent. Estate-based staff ask people why they are dissatisfied and, when possible, solutions are put in place. This has included developing a garage site investment plan, addressing illegal car parking and improved monitoring of estate caretaking. People are less likely to move and create the expense of reletting empty properties for St Leger Homes.

189 Recycling arrangements on estates need further development. The caretaking service recycles bulk refuse at local depots. However, not all estates have recycling facilities and it is difficult for some residents to live an environmentally friendly lifestyle. Easy access to recycling facilities will increase the amount of material recycled.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

190 In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The service was resourced well, and had a useful leaseholder manual and service standards. Leaseholders were given clear notice of charges for the coming year that they could pay in a variety of convenient ways. There was, however, little consultation with leaseholders on the cost of maintenance and other services. Schedules of planned maintenance had not been provided and there were no arrangements for leaseholders who had difficulties in meeting property improvement costs. Service charges had not been comprehensively apportioned between rent and service charge payers.

191 In this inspection, we found that found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Information available to leaseholders is good. A comprehensive and up-to-date leaseholder handbook is available, together with a plain English explanation of the lease. These give clear explanations of responsibilities and rights of the leaseholder, the Council and St Leger Homes and of the overall service offered, including repairs and maintenance, service charges and payments, involvement and complaints. Although limited, they also detail service standards agreed with the leaseholder forum. Leaseholders have clear information about the service provided. The current lease is not fit for purpose and leaseholders have not been consulted on some areas of service.

192 Leaseholders are now more satisfied with the service. Positively, St Leger Homes undertakes an annual survey of leaseholder satisfaction and this shows growing satisfaction with most aspects of the service. Overall satisfaction with the service has increased to 71.2 per cent in 2010 from 41.2 per cent in 2007, while at the same time, dissatisfaction has halved. This compares well with the neighbouring ALMOs that St Leger Homes has compared itself with. Satisfaction with all other individual aspects of the service, other than external maintenance of communal areas has also seen strong improvement. This includes for example, ease of access to the service and service charge information. This demonstrates that the improvements have had a positive impact as they have become more embedded.

193 A leaseholder forum provides an opportunity for leaseholders to voice their opinions. Leaseholders are positive about the forum and feel this offers an open forum for discussion while St Leger Homes is responsive to the questions that are raised. A leaseholder bulletin provides effective feedback and information on issues discussed at the forum. An open and positive dialogue is helping maintain a positive relationship between leaseholders and St Leger Homes.

194 Robust procedures are in place to ensure accurate apportionment of charges for services and repairs. Quarterly service charge statements as well as annual invoices and estimates provide clear details of charges; these are checked thoroughly before being sent out. More recently work has taken place with a leaseholder representative to demonstrate the process for recharging work, to enable this to be shared with the forum. Leaseholders we spoke to felt this was positive and that when they have needed to raise queries, they have been resolved quickly. Leaseholders are more likely to pay charges which are fair and accurate.

195 Leaseholders can now access a range of services that were only previously available to tenants. For example, gas servicing, property improvements and responsive repairs are available at cost. Leaseholders are also able to access support regarding ASB or money advice services if they are in difficulty paying their service charges. This helps to ensure the service provided to leaseholders is more comprehensive.

196 A clear protocol is now in place between St Leger Homes and the Council around the administration of right to buy applications and setting of service charges. This was a weakness last time and now ensures appropriate information and charging should any tenants become leaseholders in future.

197 Financial support is now available for leaseholders to meet major repair costs. Since the last inspection, St Leger Homes has worked with the Council to introduce better options that include low interest loans and payment over extended periods for major works. This helps leaseholders less able to afford lump sum payments for improvement works.

198 The current lease is not fit for purpose. Under the terms of the lease, St Leger Homes cannot effectively recharge leaseholders for some major work that will be undertaken and there is no effective reference to ASB. Management fees do not cover the cost of service provision. A review is ongoing, but is unlikely to be accepted by existing leaseholders, as it will mean higher costs for work undertaken. By chance the impact of this has been limited as there has been only one new leaseholder since the last inspection, but this could rise if the housing market changes in future. St Leger Homes cannot recover all its costs from leaseholders and therefore, tenants will be subsidising some leaseholder services.

199 Leaseholders have not been directly consulted about some key aspects of the service. For example, there has been no consultation on buildings insurance or the service charge setting policy and they have not been invited to be involved in key procurement or contract management forums.

200 Leaseholders still do not have clear information about future planned works. No information has been sent to leaseholders on works that may be taking place over the next three or five years, to help them plan for the likely costs this will involve. In some cases, such as re-roofing work for example, this could mean a significant contribution to the overall costs. Recently, some leaseholders have received letters where work is planned in the current year, but again this does not provide clear information on the likely costs. This is a key weakness, particularly as it was highlighted as an issue in the last inspection. It means leasehold customers may incur significant unanticipated costs in the future that the St Leger Homes could more effectively assist them in planning for.

Allocations and lettings

201 In 2007, we found that this was an area of weakness. Arrangements to manage the waiting list were not clearly set out and there was ineffective publicity as to how applicants were prioritised. The IT system was ineffective, allowing staff to operate outside of the allocations policy without authorisation and nomination targets were not met. The housing register was reviewed regularly and there were effective arrangements to match adapted properties with applicants with mobility restrictions. St Leger Homes worked effectively with the Council to meet the needs of homeless households and planned to introduce a choice-based letting scheme in the near future.

202 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. A choice-based lettings scheme (CBL) is now in place for people who wish to apply for social housing in Doncaster. With the Council, St Leger Homes set up a CBL scheme in November 2007 and has since expanded the scheme, in phases, to include ten of the 13 housing association providers in the area. Greater clarity is needed around rehousing people with rent arrears and under-occupation needs to be more effectively addressed. Targets need to be set around the rehousing of people from diverse backgrounds.

203 St Leger Homes supports the Council and other providers in discharging their housing obligations. Appropriate priority is awarded to homeless families and other households in emergency situations are supported. Staff attend MAPPAi and other forums aimed at sustaining communities. Multi-agency arrangements are in place to help manage high risk lettings. Protocols are in place for joint arrangements to manage former serious offenders or help support survivors of domestic abuse. This is particularly important given the presence of several offender institutions in the area.

i MAPPAi: multi agency public protection arrangements ensure the effective management of high risk offenders living in communities and include issues around housing.

204 Procedures for the lettings and allocations scheme are comprehensive. Staff have clear guidance on how to assess applications and allocate properties in line with the revised allocations policy and choice-based lettings scheme. These have been written in line with the changes brought in with the policy and are supported by improvements to the IT system. Thorough checks on information to support applications, approval levels and a review of every application on the anniversary of its registration, ensures a consistent approach. Except in relation to people with arrears, as described below, these help ensure a transparent and fair process.

205 It is easy for all applicants to use the CBL system. DVDs (with subtitles in community languages) and easy read instructional guides in various formats are available. An easy to read guide developed by a social education centre provides a very simple step-by-step guide to the process, although it makes no reference to the appeals process. Bidding for properties is easy and can be made in person, over the phone, by text and online. St Leger Homes website, the local free press and newsheets all advertise available properties. A wide range of local agencies and applicants receive regular updates on available properties. Information on properties and facilities in local areas (such as schools, transport and places of worship) is available, with information about the likely availability and demand for properties. Easy to use systems attract more bidders.

206 St Leger Homes has taken care to ensure that all sections of the community can use the CBL system. CBL awareness sessions with a wide range of community and customer groups ensure agencies and individuals supporting vulnerable people can use the system. St Leger Homes staff provide support to people who need it, this includes assisted bidding for those who cannot do so themselves. Regular reviews of bidding activity identify vulnerable people who may not be bidding and others who are only bidding for properties for which they have little chance of success in. Help is given to such applicants to bid and since October 2009, 22 people have found new accommodation who otherwise may have struggled with the bidding system. This helps to ensure everyone can access the scheme.

207 Support is available for applicants during the bidding process. Applicants receive good information about their rehousing prospects and the number of allocations made in their preferred areas in the last year. After each bidding round the number of bids and the priority of successful bidders are published on the website. Applicants can make informed choices on the type of property and areas their bids are likely to be successful for.

208 Good use is made of adapted properties. The allocation of adapted properties is through a dedicated register. Highlighting of adapted properties in mail shots helps applicants identify their availability and bid for them. This helps to make the best use of scarce adapted properties and reduces the demand for disabled facilities grants (DFGs).

209 Allocations are fair and audit trails clear. File checks show application decisions and offers are made in line with policy and that relevant information is collected and checked to support banding decisions, updated priority and offers. This helps prevent fraud and reassures applicants about the fairness of the system.

210 A review of the allocations policy has ensured greater fairness and best use of housing stock. Monitoring of lettings and customer feedback raised questions about how well the policy supported some applicants, particularly those moving on from supported accommodation. Monitoring data and widespread consultation with customers and other stakeholders led to several changes. The ratio of properties let to each CBL priority band was adjusted, bedroom size eligibility amended for certain groups and priority groups in each band revisited. The review is addressing previous inequalities and has increased successful move-on for both people leaving care and other supported housing.

211 The introduction of CBL has led to improvements in related services. Void reletting times have fallen along with the turnover of properties. Nominations from housing associations in the borough have increased and home exchanges are better promoted. More applicants with disabilities and adapted properties are matched.

212 St Leger Homes does not currently have a comprehensive under-occupation incentive scheme. Priority is awarded to transfer applicants in high-demand areas but there are no other incentives, such as financial or moving assistance, offered to encourage take-up by tenants whose homes are larger than their needs suggest. St Leger Homes has had some success in this area. During 2009/10, 44 households were rehoused with priority for under-occupying releasing homes with a total of 66 bedrooms. Fifty five of the 80 overcrowded households were rehoused through this route. Incentive schemes are being discussed but are not yet in place. Better use could be made of the housing stock to meet local housing needs.

213 Although the level of lettings made to BME applicants is positive, monitoring of lettings in relation to diversity is not comprehensive. In 2009/10, allocations to BME applicants were 7.9 per cent of all lettings, exceeding the 6.95 per cent of applicants on the waiting list. However, while the numbers of lettings are broken down by different ethnic groups, this is not set against any targets/population data for each group. Monitoring does not, for example, include offer and refusal levels or level of appeals. Data is also not analysed effectively for other diversity strands. St Leger Homes is not ensuring its letting arrangements are effective for everyone.

214 Although amended, St Leger Homes has not effectively addressed the previous weakness relating to exclusion of people with (former) rent arrears. It no longer excludes people when they apply, but instead does not make offers to people at the top of the list in arrears, at officer discretion, without clear guidance on levels of arrears or management sign-off. These people are told at application that they may not be eligible for offers, but are not restricted from bidding nor told they are excluded before the decision is made to offer the property to another applicant. They therefore have no right of appeal at the actual time they are not considered. This is in effect 'retrospective exclusion' without appeal, which is poor practice, rather than each case being considered on application, then reviewed regularly, based on arrears and repayment history.

215 The CBL scheme is not comprehensive. Accredited private sector housing and low-cost home ownership stock are also not included. Despite St Leger Home and the Council promoting a sub-regional CBL scheme, no plans are in place to expand the scheme. This restricts opportunity and choice of tenure for applicants.

Is the service delivering value for money?

216 In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Costs had been identified, benchmarked and compared favourably for most services. St Leger Homes had reviewed underperforming services and had learned from others. VFM was embedded and a range of strategies set out investment priorities and options for procurement. Modern procurement methods were used, influenced by tenants. Efficiency targets were exceeded and inward investment was evident. St Leger Homes did not fully understand costs for the internal maintenance service, and their competitiveness had not been tested.

217 In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Budget management is strong and the approach to procurement is satisfactory. St Leger Homes makes significant efficiency savings that are reinvested to improve key services. However, it is not clear that St Leger Homes fully understands the cost of all services, the relationship with the quality of services and how it compares with other organisations. The value for money (VFM) of several services is untested and recommendations from the previous report have not been fully met.

How do costs compare?

218 To better understand costs and performance in its particular context, St Leger Homes has sought relevant benchmarking partners in the last year. While using benchmarking data to provide headline information, it has also undertaken more specific benchmarking with local St Leger Homes and benchmarking clubs such as Checkmateⁱ. Much of the local benchmarking has been recent and outcomes are limited. Benchmarking can effectively highlight high costs and provide opportunities for learning.

219 Not all costs compare favourably to other housing providers. Cost comparison benchmarking figures showing mixed results. High costs are shown in some areas such as major works or cyclical maintenance, responsive repairs and resident involvement. Others areas though such as estate services show lower costs. Overall DHS costs (based on the Eurohouse benchmarking for 2008/09) increased by 5.7 per cent and St Leger Homes overall ranking was 5th out of 7 partners in the benchmarking group. This however should be balanced against the high quality components fitted by St Leger Homes.

220 The ALMO has undertaken some work to improve costs. This is particularly so where this can be achieved by better procurement and has had some success, with significant efficiency savings and better material costs overall. However, St Leger Homes recognises that more work is required to understand why its costs in the context of its performance are what they are and to address these where they are too high.

How is value for money managed?

221 Procurement has driven efficient working. Efficiency savings of £778,000 were secured in 2009/10 in, for example, improved product sourcing and further savings made over last three years. Acting as the lead agency in the Efficiency North group's current material e-procurement exercise saved around £100,000 on kitchen supply costs. Projected long-term savings over the life of the DHS programme total £9.8 million in direct and supply chain costs.

222 St Leger Homes has continued to achieve significant cashable efficiency savings each year, which have exceeded targets. This has enabled around £2 million in accumulated surpluses (taking account of an unanticipated deficit in 2008/09) to be returned to HRA reserves for use in other housing service provision. In 2009/10, efficiency savings of £1.1 million were achieved, with savings of £1.8 million projected for 2010/11, against a target of £1.5 million. Savings can fund other priorities leading to improved services for tenants.

ⁱ An online nationwide repairs and maintenance benchmarking service for social landlords

223 An understanding of repair and maintenance markets has secured savings and improvements in services. Savings have been made and services improved through expanding in-house services. A robust, consultant's report showed that a cheaper and better quality gas servicing programme could be delivered in-house. This resulted in savings of around £328,000 over three years and a competitive, per unit cost of £94.49 for servicing and repairs. In a similar manner quantity surveying services (cost management) are also now delivered in-house, saving £200,000 against external consultancy costs. Gas servicing is cheaper and of a better quality through better procurement.

224 Good progress has been made in moving expenditure from expensive responsive repairs to better value planned maintenance. The strategy adopted a target to achieve a 60/40 split between planned and responsive maintenance expenditure by 2011/12. Presently the split is at 55:45 while at the previous inspection the split was 17:83. More money is available to spend on other priorities.

225 St Leger Homes and the Council are anxious to improve the VFM of all housing services and have jointly commissioned a reportⁱ into the VFM of St Leger Homes and the Council's strategic housing services.

226 There is no definitive assessment of value for money across the service. Although the Board receives benchmarking data there is no analysis of the overall picture over time, to help determine measures of success against the strategy. Individual service reviews are beginning to analyse individual service areas, but there is no single report or data pack per service area which goes to the Board, although this is reported to senior management. It could be a positive picture, as some additional/increased services have been undertaken and salary and inflationary increases have previously been absorbed by the efficiency savings achieved. However, overall costs of providing the service increased in 2008/09 and again in 2009/10 (taking account of unanticipated costs in 2008/09). The Board is unaware of some work in this area and cannot therefore fully contribute its skills and expertise to improving VFM.

227 A number of obstacles are hindering a value for money culture. Customers are largely uninvolved in VFM exercises or the allocation of resources and savings. Formatting of reports on efficiencies achieved and planned is poor with vague references, no 'minus' costs recorded and a lack of clarity on non-cashable efficiencies. There is no definitive assessment of value for money across the services or analysis of the overall picture over time, to help determine measures of success against the strategy. There is no single 'VFM report' or 'PI pack' per service area. Outcomes from St Leger Homes approach are not clearly demonstrated.

i At the time of the inspection the tender for the report had only recently been issued and no findings were available. .

228 Little progress has been made with the Council in addressing some of the key issues in overhead and stock options. The Council and St Leger Homes have been reviewing the location of depots and offices, despite it being clear these do not offer modern, efficient ways of working for some time. Further proposals are to be made by St Leger Homes to the Council by December 2010. Decisions by the Council on the long-term future of some properties have been outstanding for some time, leaving many properties empty. Delays in addressing long-term and outstanding issues undermine VFM and increase costs.

229 The value and cost of services supplied by the Council are not rigorously tested. A comprehensive review of service level agreements (SLAs) has not been agreed, despite significant efficiencies gained in previous reviews. Historical arrangements have not been reviewed effectively or have taken a long time to reach any resolution resulting in some service areas charges that do not cover the costs of the service provision. The Council's performance on collecting district heating charges, garage costs and weak performance in FTAs and recharge recoveries are examples of this. Regular reviews of SLAs lead to cost-effective and efficient services.

230 St Leger Homes has not rigorously established the value for money of the direct labour organisation (DLO) responsible for maintenance and repairs. An interim VFM report completed by consultants in January of this year is limited in both its scope and testing against what the market could provide. The report has yet to be finished and presented to the Board and discussions on its findings are limited. St Leger Homes cannot demonstrate that its' DLO offers VFM, nor that it has robustly tested it against the market.

231 The VFM of the estate and grounds maintenance service has only partially been established. Cost comparison of some aspects of the service with other ALMOs suggests that costs are reasonable. Reviews of SLAs governing the service have led to some service improvements for the same cost. A more detailed analysis of VFM taking account of costs, performance and satisfaction provides a more comprehensive picture.

232 Tenants of St Leger Homes are subsidising communal maintenance for the wider community. An internal report, in 2009, established that council tax payers should contribute around £500,000 towards the cost of grounds maintenance, which is currently paid for solely by tenants. Despite this, the fee paid by St Leger Homes to the Council through SLAs has increased by around £10,000 in 2010/11. An understanding that SLA terms will remain unchanged means this will continue into the future. This does not provide tenants with VFM as they are paying for the service from which other people benefit.

233 There has been no investment plan agreed with customers for the use of efficiency savings. All savings are put back into HRA reserves and, while the ALMO can bid for extra specific funding, some of which has been successful, this is looked at on a reactive basis. This is despite the management agreement suggesting a plan for use of surpluses by St Leger Homes will be agreed by the Council. The recycling of savings is a powerful incentive for staff to look for them.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

234 In 2007, we found that drivers outweighed barriers (strengths outweighed weaknesses). Tenant satisfaction was improving, and St Leger Homes had implemented change to improve services. Value for money was improving over time and efficiency targets exceeded. Investment priorities had been assessed robustly. In some areas however, St Leger Homes had been slow to implement previous inspection recommendations.

235 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. St Leger Homes has made a series of significant developments that have had positive outcomes for tenants. These include: choice-based lettings service; free phone telephone service for repairs reporting; annual 'MoT' maintenance check and new ways for customers to pay their rent. Efficiency savings have been sustained over the past few years and significant changes to the responsive repairs service has led to reductions in costs and staffing. Progress has been slower in some areas, such as the disaggregation of service charges, some improvements for leaseholders and the absence of equality impact assessments for some service areas.

236 Progress is being made to achieve the Council's wider housing objectives. The decent homes (DHS) programme is progressing well and all homes will be decent by 2014. The programme has delivered additional benefits around local labour and apprenticeship schemes. Environmental issues are tackled and St Leger Homes staff and the Council coordinate well around issues including antisocial behaviour (ASB) and support for vulnerable people. Progress, although slow, is being made by St Leger Homes and the Council about the long-term future of the sheltered housing schemes and other properties with very low energy efficiency (SAP) ratings. Twenty obsolete sheltered flats have been transferred to a local housing association for demolition and replacement with accommodation that will better meet current demand and aspirations. A jointly commissioned VFM study on both St Leger Homes and the Council housing services will report, probably around the New Year. Some historic arrangements around the number and location of depots and offices need further urgent scrutiny.

237 Performance over a range of key indicators shows mixed results. Improved performance in rent arrears recovery and sustained good performance in other areas, such as gas servicing, the number of repairs appointments made and kept and dealing with ASB is encouraging. Other areas of service have seen little change, such as the number of empty properties and telephone response times. Performance has deteriorated on repairs completed within timescale and waiting times for major aids and adaptations remain unacceptably high.

238 Under performance in some areas and the level of service charges have not been addressed. Service reviews have not comprehensively addressed underperformance in some areas such as former tenant arrears (FTAs). Some charges do not cover the costs of service provision. For example, district heating charges and garage costs, both of which are set by the Council. More money could be collected to spend on other priorities.

239 St Leger Homes has responded to external reports and changes in the industry. A value for money review and health check of the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) made recommendations around productivity. The response was comprehensive with the introduction of remote working, multi-skilling and IT innovations. A challenging report on governance arrangements led to the introduction of appraisals for Board members and a streamlining of the committee structure. Services have kept pace with changes elsewhere, such as, the introduction of CBL and electronic means of communication.

240 St Leger Homes has continued to achieve significant cashable efficiency savings each year and exceeded targets. This has enabled around £2 million in accumulated surpluses (taking account of an unanticipated deficit in 2008/09) to be returned to HRA reserves for use in other housing service provision. In 2009/10, efficiency savings of £1.1 million were achieved, with savings of £1.8 million projected for 2010/11, against a target of £1.5 million. St Leger Homes has made efficiency savings and released money to spend on other priorities.

241 The procurement strategy is comprehensive, setting out the principles and approach to procurement across the organisation. It sets out a risk-based approach that supports value for money and recognises the importance of the supply chain, supporting small and medium sized enterprises (SME), maximising e-procurement opportunities and the involvement of customers. It is supported by a long-term action plan that sets out the key actions to enhance existing procurement arrangements over the next four years. Effective procurement will help the company secure VFM over the long-term.

242 Recommendations from the previous Audit Commission inspection report have largely been implemented. The disaggregation of service charges, some improvements for leaseholders and the absence of EIAs for some service areas remain the significant uncompleted recommendations. The full details of progress against previous inspection recommendations are shown in Appendix 2 of this report.

How well does the service manage performance?

243 In 2007, we found that drivers outweighed barriers (strengths outweighed weaknesses). There were clear aims and plans setting out responsibilities for delivery that were generally SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound). Both the Board and the Council monitored progress. Strategies were agreed to deliver key services and tenants had influence in setting standards for service delivery. There was effective leadership and learning from others. The implementation plan for the procurement strategy was not robust, and it was not always clear in monitoring information, whether performance met targets. Satisfaction surveys were not analysed systematically.

244 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. St Leger Homes has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve in the future and performance is generally improving. It takes difficult decisions to improve key services for customers. Improvement planning and performance management are strong. St Leger Homes is a learning organisation and seeks to continually improve. Plans are generally SMART but would be improved by greater detail. Target setting is inconsistent and outcomes from activities are not recorded.

245 A structured approach is adopted for service area improvement. A series of services have been reviewed recently leading to a number of changes that customers will notice. These include a single point of contact for customers, advertising of available properties in the local press and open-house viewings of properties. VFM is considered for each service area as a standard part of the review. Customers are included in reviews and their suggestions acted upon. Service reviews have improved services in response to the weaknesses identified by customers and standards achieved by high-performing housing providers.

246 St Leger Homes seeks to continuously improve services and learns from others. St Leger Homes is a member of networks, good practice groups and benchmarking clubs. It routinely benchmarks the costs and quality of services against other ALMOs. Comparative performance through benchmark groups is included in performance reports to scrutiny bodies including the Board. Good practice from elsewhere has been adopted and innovations in services have been taken up.

247 There are signs of an improving and more constructive relationship between St Leger Homes and the Council. A jointly-commissioned report into the VFM of both St Leger Homes services and strategic housing services at the Council should, if acted upon, help resolve concerns around VFM. Issues around the long-term future of a number of poor quality and unattractive sheltered schemes should be resolved by the Council in the near future if the current plans remain on track. .

248 Performance monitoring between St Leger Homes and the Council has improved. Performance is now monitored in quarterly meetings by looking at a series of key performance indicators (KPIs) and qualitative issues, such as the level of complaints. Performance information can be accessed online and is available to partners such as the Council. Information can be easily updated and contains all the features required to make an accurate assessment of performance.

249 Complaints are seen as an opportunity to improve services. Complaints have been centralised to improve the consistency of the service and service standards around them are tighter. St Leger Homes worked particularly hard to reduce the high number of complaints around improvement works carried out under the decent homes programme and this is showing signs of success. Complaints have led to numerous changes in services and particularly in the decent homes programme. Complainants can expect to be taken seriously, their complaints investigated thoroughly and services changed as a result.

250 Performance reporting is strong. An easily-accessible and comprehensive electronic performance monitoring system gives a readily understood picture of St Leger Homes performance. Reporting is by service area and covers all aspects of both the tenant experience when using services and necessary management information. Service areas report their performance on a monthly basis which is presented in a dashboard format to the Board. Detailed quarterly performance reports to the Board set performance in a historic context and include benchmark figures and progress towards targets. Managers can also use a narrative section to provide context and background details. An accurate assessment of performance can be made and shared.

251 Action plans and other projects are effectively monitored. Action planning for specific improvement projects such as IT and other time limited tasks such as gas servicing is monitored electronically. The system is an easy and effective means to track performance and progress.

252 The approach to budget setting is strong. An annual round of budget setting follows a zero-based budgeting approach. Budgets are set in a manner that reflects strategic priorities and issues which are important to tenants, such as the environment. Budgets are monitored and reported on a monthly basis with reports to senior management and the Board. This is an effective way to deploy and manage resources.

253 Poor performance is not comprehensively addressed. Poor performance is addressed through performance clinics but to date only three have been held dealing with: voids, the capital programme and HR (absenteeism mainly). Outcomes from the clinics are mixed with, for example, absenteeism continuing to rise. Other areas of poor performance are not highlighted such as former tenant rent arrears and the percentage of repairs completed on first visit both of which are in the bottom quarter of housing providers' performance. Variable performance will limit St Leger Homes capacity to achieve its objectives.

254 Tenants are involved in performance monitoring. The range and style of indicators has been agreed through the tenants' forums with delivery against targets reported every two months to each of the four forums. Consultation on the range of indicators was also completed at the 2010 Unity In The Community tenants' event. Performance is also reported in the tenants' magazine (see June edition page 3 on website) and on the website. However, it is a weakness that performance information provided to tenants does not include benchmarking data to show how well their landlord compares to others. This makes it difficult for tenants to judge whether services need to improve. It is encouraging that benchmarking will form part of the performance information for the new scrutiny panel. Involving tenants in this manner will improve services in way which reflects their needs and aspirations.

255 Practice in using target setting as a management tool is variable. Some targets are unambitious while others are overly ambitious. For example, the number of sickness days lost and current arrears against annual debit are both below previous year's performance. The target for the percentage of rent collected against annual debit and the percentage of rent lost through dwellings becoming vacant are both significantly above previous years performance. Well-set targets will drive improvements in performance.

256 The impact of a number of St Leger Homes services on performance is unclear. The impact of financial inclusion work and support for vulnerable people has not been analysed to understand their impact on sustaining tenancies. Any savings generated by the property 'MoT' have not been calculated. Decreases in tenants' fuel bills following insulation works completed as part of the DHS programme have not been calculated. These are missed opportunities to demonstrate the worth of tenancy support and insulating homes.

257 Reality checks showed a number of examples of poor service delivery. Staff at area offices showed a lack of training in dealing with complaints of racial harassment. An analysis of training records shows that only a handful of staff attended hate crime awareness training. Compliance checks on rent arrears cases showed poor quality control. Customers judge services on their personal experience.

258 St Leger Homes has developed a more comprehensive service review programme and structure. In 2009/10, it developed a new programme, decided by a cost, quality and performance matrix, with a new review process, designed to provide more robustness. It has revisited the arrangements and amended these this year, providing a two-stage process: the first undertakes an assessment of the service to prioritise areas and the scope of the review more clearly, with the second phase being the review itself and consultation with customers to develop an action plan for improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

259 In 2007, we found that drivers outweighed barriers (strengths outweighed weaknesses). St Leger Homes took action to address skills gaps in staffing arrangements and procured new technology to meet emerging priorities. There was a robust improvement plan to develop IT capacity. Clear targets to achieve efficiencies and financial planning were effective. St Leger Homes attracted competitive rates for procurement through a consortium and used partnering arrangements to achieve further efficiencies. Targets for testing the competitiveness of the direct labour organisation were clear.

260 In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. Governance is effective and supported by a committed senior management team. Staff are enthusiastic and generally trained well. Relationships with key partners are good and the relationship with the Council is improving. Sickness absence is high and ICT systems lack the functions of other more effective systems.

261 St Leger Homes relationship with the Council is improving. Effective and enduring working partnerships have reduced ASB and supported vulnerable tenants. Other areas of service have not enjoyed productive partnerships to date. In particular, developing a robust approach to value for money; agreeing long-term plans for obsolete sheltered accommodation; and poorly insulated and unattractive multi-storey blocks. A series of delays in decision making has left properties standing empty for some time and tenants living in unattractive, expensive to heat accommodation. Encouraging recent progress in dealing with these issues must be maintained to settle their long-term futures and ensure positive outcomes for tenants.

262 St Leger Homes has increased capacity by developing services in partnership with others. A series of major changes have been made through working closely with tenants. These include changes to the specification for decency works and the selection of contractors. Working with wider partners has led to improvements to debt and welfare benefits advice and this has helped to reduce arrears. Services for people in housing crisis have also improved. Contractors have helped push savings and improve components used in the decent homes programme. The Council has introduced a CBL scheme managed by St Leger Homes, and this has seen a significant improvement in the allocation of homes. Some services have received external accreditation, including TPAS for effective tenant involvement and the disability two ticks symbol. Good partnership working has improved services for customers effectively.

263 Relationships with customers are strong and this harnessing of the tenants' contribution to service improvement has had a positive impact on service standards. Tenant satisfaction with services is increasing and it is easy for people to access services both in person and electronically. St Leger Homes has a good understanding of its tenants' diversity profile and increasingly services are tailored to tenants' specific needs. Profiling has helped target services at some groups who are under stress due to financial problems, disability or the need for additional support in accessing services. New tenants are supported well and communities have access to funds to improve their environment. Decency works are of a high standard and improved insulation is saving tenants money. Leaseholder services have improved and satisfaction with the service is increasing. Applicants for properties can make informed choices about their future housing and properties are let in a transparent manner. Housing services for St Leger customers are better.

264 An emphasis has been placed on developing sound governance. A comprehensive response was made to a challenging external report on governance. A dedicated officer is responsible for governance and secretarial support is available for the Board. Board meetings are held regularly with papers and minutes provided on time and in an easily understood format. A policy to ensure members leaving the Board are replaced with effective, well-trained people is in place.

265 Training and appraisal has developed the Board's skills and capacity. The Board has matured since the last inspection and is now more business like. It takes a more strategic overview of the services provided, which has been supported by the change in subcommittee structure, enabling more detail to be explored in relevant forums rather than dealing with all service areas at board level. Skills have been developed more systematically through training, buddying and appraisal. The level and detail of performance information and other reports has been amended to better reflect the information board members need. Board members have a good awareness of diversity and VFM and their roles in relation to these. St Leger Homes has the effective Board they need in order to be able to develop and improve.

266 Senior officers and Board members provide clear leadership. The Chair and Vice Chair demonstrate an understanding of the main issues facing St Leger Homes and of the tenant perspective. The Chair has good links with the Council and other agencies working in the area. The senior management team is experienced and has the necessary skills to lead the ALMO. A number of changes have been made to the team over the last 18 months including a new Chief Executive and Director of Property Services. The Board and senior staff have a good professional relationship. A clear path is mapped out for St Leger Homes.

267 Some Board members are still developing in their roles. A number of members were unaware of specific issues relating to St Leger Homes and its relationship with the Council. Similarly some were unaware of underperformance in former tenant arrears (FTAs) and a fall in repairs performance. To be fully effective, the drive to improve needs to come from a well-informed Board and some members are still developing in their roles.

268 St Leger Homes staff adopt a high profile on their estates. The sustainability of areas has been built through effective estate management and St Leger Homes staff adopting a high profile on estates through estate walkabouts, community events and competitions. Properties are improved to a high standard that reflects tenants' preferences and aspirations. The effectiveness of recent changes is reflected in rising levels of tenant satisfaction.

269 St Leger Homes makes a contribution to wider strategic housing issues in Doncaster. Senior officers are members of key strategic groups including the Housing Improvement Board and the Safer Doncaster Partnership. Officers have made a contribution to the emerging Doncaster Housing Strategy. Working with regeneration agencies obsolete stock is to be demolished and replaced with property that better reflects current demand and aspirations. St Leger Homes works with a range of partners to improve services, for example, dealing with domestic abuse, hate crime and providing support for victims. However, more needs to be done with the Council and other partners to mitigate the impact of the recession. Effective joint working increases capacity.

270 Financial planning is sound and a strategic and operational risk register is in place. The Council is confident about St Leger Homes financial management and it has delivered its efficiency targets. St Leger Homes undertakes robust medium-term financial modelling, based on known and projected financial data and alternative possible scenarios. This has helped to demonstrate a viable business plan, taking account of foreseeable possible changes in funding and investment decisions. The risk register covers major and minor risks and contingency plans to deal with them should they occur.

271 St Leger Homes supports and develops staff and management. A training budget of £260,000 for 2010/11 compares well with other organisations. Staff we met during the inspection said they had received sufficient training to complete their duties and to develop their wider professional skills. During 2008/09 all managers undertook an extensive, certified Leadership Development Programme. An annual appraisal system is in place and regular '1 to 1s' are held. Staff are regularly updated on their own, and their sections, performance in appraisals and team meetings are held regularly. Staff surveys were completed in 2006 and 2008 and are now run annually in-house. The last survey attracted a response rate of 90 per cent and showed high rates of satisfaction with St Leger Homes as an employer, but there were some issues around staff communications. These

are being addressed. Staff turnover is low at 6.36 per cent each year. Well-trained and satisfied staff are more likely to deliver good services.

272 St Leger Homes has used its growth and purchasing power to improve employment and training opportunities for local people in the area. The increase in the range of services offered, such as solid fuel servicing, dedicated services to leaseholders, property MOT service, estate caretaking and CBL have led to an increase in staff from 666 in 2005 to its present 759. A rolling programme for future jobs fund placements (30 places in total) and modern apprentices (six places in total) and shared apprentice schemes have improved local employment prospect. The schemes are promoted locally in schools and job centres. Local labour and purchasing stipulations in contracts have further developed the prosperity of the area. This is an effective means of building the area's capacity.

273 St Leger Homes has had some success levering in additional funds into the service. This has included funding for air source heat pumps for properties not connected to mains gas and the connection of some properties to mains gas at cost. Funding has been secured from the New Deal for Communities programme for fencing, CERT (Carbon Emissions Reduction Target) funding for external render and further funding for fuel switch from coal to gas. Over the last year additional external funding has totalled £2.25 million. This has helped the ALMO to realise its ambitions to build sustainable communities.

274 Staff absenteeism is high. Levels of sickness absence at 6.3 per cent are high and worse than last years average of 5.7 per cent. Both figures compare badly with best practice benchmark of 4.2 per cent. The increase is mainly due to a rise in short-term absenteeism which is generally considered easier to control than long-term absenteeism. New sickness absence procedures are being introduced but not all managers have been trained in them yet. Presently nearly three working weeks per employee, per year, are lost to absenteeism. This represents a risk to St Leger Homes in its ability to deliver its services efficiently and to make further planned improvements.

275 IT systems do not reflect modern standards. St Leger Homes has recognised that having effective IT systems is key to further service improvements. Currently the Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Rents and Estate Management systems lack the functionality required to support service improvements. Positively, a new system covering these key areas has been procured with resourced plans in place for implementation. St Leger Homes uses the Council's telephone systems that cannot provide service performance information on service quality such as the number of calls answered on time and fulfilment rates. Resourced plans are in place to replace old systems and introduce a CRM system by June 2011. This will help deal with enquiries more effectively and avoid tenants having to repeatedly explain an ongoing issue they may have. Modern IT systems will enable improved services for tenants and improve VFM.

Appendix 1 Performance indicators

Table 1: **Doncaster 2006/07 to 2008/09**

Performance indicator (former BVPI ref)	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	England top 25per cent 2008/09
63 Average SAP rating	63	65	60.7	73
66a Percentage rent collected	99.54	98.39	97.88	98.64
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.42	0.42	0.40	-
74a/Ni Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	72	73	74	-
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP/views taken into account	61	61	61	-
184a/Ni LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	60	63	55/62.6	
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	5.2	11.5	20.26	-
212 Average relet time (days)	55	45	27.78	24.1

Appendix 2 Previous recommendations

Table 2: **Recommendations of previous inspection in 2007**

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Improve access and customer care by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ agreeing an access strategy to set out how access and customer care objectives will be delivered; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ including targets in performance information reported to tenants; 	Partially completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ enabling tenants to access services using text messaging; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ reviewing the accessibility of current office opening hours in consultation with tenants; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ analysing tenant satisfaction surveys and breaking down results by geographical and demographic categories; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ researching barriers to access preventing some customers from accessing services as frequently as others; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ensuring customer complaints are responded to in writing and on target; and 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ including the menu of involvement in the tenant compact 	Completed
R2 Improve arrangements to service heating appliances by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ agreeing procedures for servicing solid fuel appliances; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ providing information to tenants on maintaining solid fuel appliances; and 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ maximising opportunities to install and service smoke detectors 	Completed

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R3 Improve diversity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ meeting the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Rented Housing; ■ ensuring the workforce reflects the local community; ■ carrying out impact assessments for all service areas; ■ profiling tenants reporting harassment; and ■ assessing Disabled Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance for sheltered accommodation and communal areas of multi-storey accommodation 	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Not completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Partially completed</p>
<p>R4 Improve allocations and lettings by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ agreeing procedures and publicity for allocating properties to people on the waiting list; ■ ensuring the IT system provides a clear audit trail of waiting list applications and properties offered to applicants; ■ collecting supporting documentation for registration; ■ not excluding households in rent arrears from offers of accommodation if they can demonstrate compliance with repayment agreements or vulnerability; ■ ensuring partners meet nomination targets; and ■ agreeing local lettings policies to promote balanced communities. 	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Not completed</p>
<p>R5 Improve income management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ investigating reasons why tenants do not pay rent; ■ identifying arrears due to housing benefit; ■ itemising charges for different services, such as communal cleaning, in rent statements and letters; 	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Not completed</p>

Recommendation	Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ maximising the potential of the former tenancy arrears debt recovery agent so that it concentrates on long standing cases or where the location of the former tenant is not known; and 	Not completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ensuring housing benefit assessments are calculated at sign up. 	Completed
R6 Improve services to leaseholders by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ agreeing a formal protocol between ST LEGER HOMES and DMBC; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ accurately charging for all services received, including caretaking and concierge services; 	Not completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ considering the offer of additional services leaseholders are likely to find beneficial for a charge, such as gas servicing and internal repairs; 	Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ consulting leaseholders under the requirements of section 20 of the Leasehold and Commonhold Reform Act 2002; and 	Not completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ agreeing a policy for leaseholders who cannot meet their contribution to programmed repairs. 	Completed
<i>AC inspection report 2007</i>	

Appendix 3 Reality checks undertaken

When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:

- visits to estates, empty (void) properties, office reception areas and schemes where improvement work had been undertaken;
- observation of meetings, tenancy sign-up and the customer contact centre; and
- file checks and mystery shopping of services and the website.

Appendix 4 Positive practice

'The Commission will identify and promote good practice. Every inspection will look for examples of good practice and innovation, and for creative ways to overcome barriers and resistance to change or make better use of resources'. (Seeing is Believing)

Customer profiling is used to identify groups who may not be taking advantage of all services and benefits available to them. The under-claiming of disability related benefits by older people was identified and a targeted take-up campaign led to a number of successful claims.

Annual property MoTs are used to complete minor repairs to dispersed properties on a programmed basis. This avoids expensive trips to isolated properties to complete one or two minor repairs.

An emphasis is placed on fire safety in multi-storey blocks. The fire and rescue services have carried out fire drills in multi-storey blocks including mock rescues from the upper floors. The foyers of all multi-storey blocks have fire safety boxes containing floor plans of the blocks and the location of any vulnerable tenants who may have difficulty in evacuating.

St Leger Homes is proactive in safeguarding vulnerable adults and children. A designated member of staff acts as a referral point for any concerns colleagues may have about tenants or members of their household. Referrals are risk rated and where appropriate are referred to the Council's Social Care team. As a result of identifying concerns while carrying out their day-to-day duties staff have made 38 referrals since January 2010.

A handyperson service is available to help tenants carry out essential tasks in their new homes, such as putting up curtain tracks. The handyperson is available when tenants first move into their new home for up to two hours.

A gas safety DVD is available outlining the dangers of not having appliances regularly serviced. The DVD is given to tenants and to tenants groups.

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0844 798 7070

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