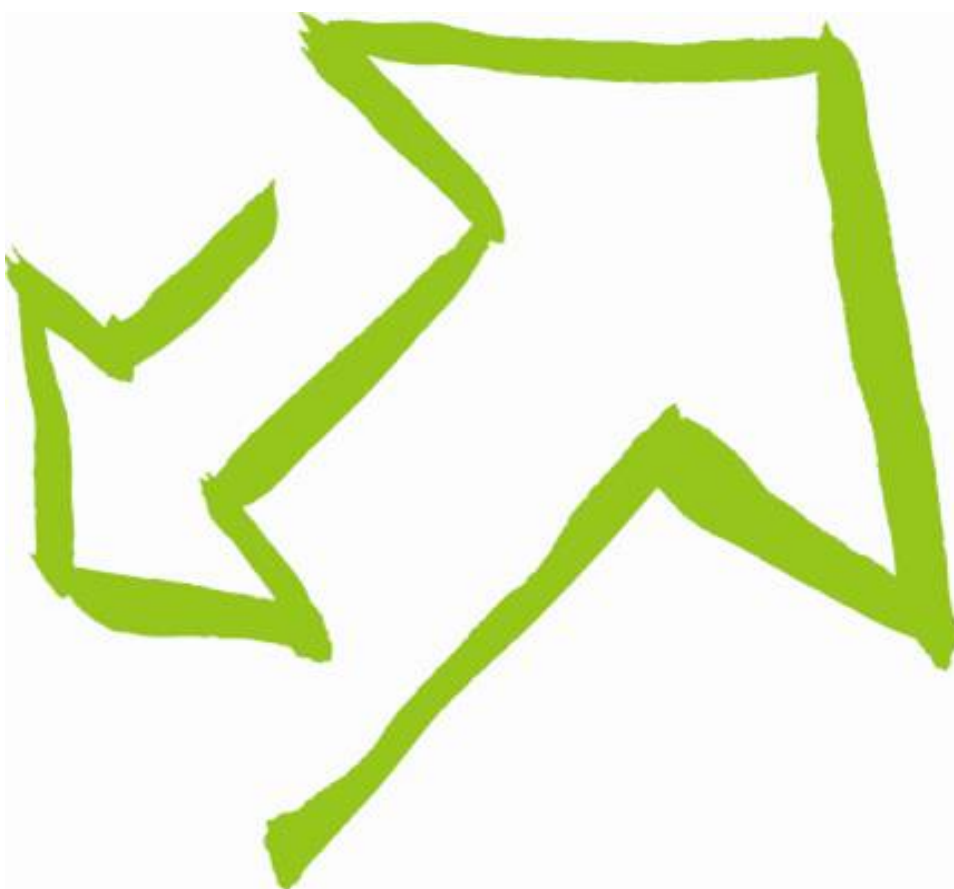


Housing Management Services

Staffordshire Housing Association

October 2008



Contents

Housing Association Inspections	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	5
Recommendations	8
Report	11
How good is the service?	13
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	33
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	40
Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken	41
Appendix 3 – Positive practice	42

Housing Association 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.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms 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.

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), 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 association;
- 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.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its lead regulation staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the Housing Association's future business prospects.

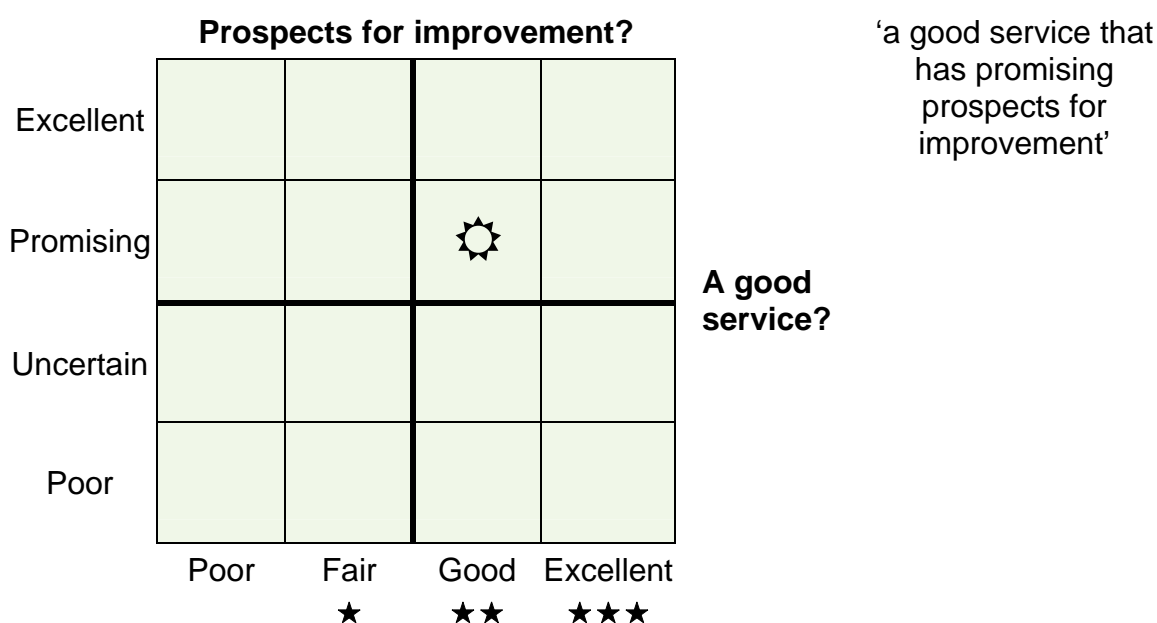
Summary

- 1 Staffordshire Housing Association provides a good, two-star service to its customers, and has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services are accessible and customer-focused, which is reflected in high levels of customer satisfaction. There is a positive approach to equality and diversity, which is supported by effective partnership working and a growing awareness of the diverse needs of its customers. Homes are well maintained, with high levels of energy efficiency, and meet the decent homes standard. Repairs are easy to report and completed promptly.
- 3 Homes are re-let to a good standard. Performance on gas servicing and other health and safety checks is sound and customer-focused. There is strong performance on income and arrears collection and an appropriate approach to arrears management that balances support with recovery. SHA has a customer-focused approach to preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour, supported by effective partnership working. A range of procurement methods are being used along with efficiency gains to re-invest savings to improve service delivery.
- 4 Some weaknesses remain. The approach to service standards is underdeveloped for specific services and there is limited customer involvement at a strategic level. A programme of equality impact assessments has recently commenced but has yet to impact on services. Not all customers are offered a repair appointment and properties take longer to re-let than the target time. Vulnerable customers are waiting too long for major adaptations to their home. The strategic approach to value for money is weak and there are inefficiencies within the responsive repairs service.
- 5 There are a number of strengths that support the promising prospects for improvement. There is a track record of generally high performance and levels of customer satisfaction, with a range of improvements delivered. Capacity to deliver improvement is supported by strong financial management, a positive approach to staff training, effective use of procurement and a focus on partnerships and external investment to improve services. However, the approach to performance management and improvement planning is still developing, and customer involvement in shaping services is recent and yet to make a significant impact on services to customers.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Staffordshire Housing Association as providing a ‘good’, two-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 chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- high overall satisfaction with the association as a landlord;
 - a strong commitment to customer care, which is reflected in accessible services, increasing opportunities to participate and complaints are well managed;
 - customer census information is used to tailor services to the diverse needs of customers;
 - an effective range of support is provided to vulnerable customers, with good use of signposting to relevant providers;
 - a focus on meeting the diverse needs of its customers through the development programme;
 - homes are well maintained, energy efficient and meet the decent homes standard;

¹ 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.

- repairs are easy to report and completed promptly against challenging completion times, with high levels of customer satisfaction;
- homes are re-let to a good standard;
- a robust approach to gas servicing and other health and safety checks ensures tenant safety;
- a range of ways for customers to pay and the approach to income and arrears collection is highly effective in helping to maximise resources available to fund services to customers;
- a customer-focused approach to preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour; and
- savings are re-invested to improve service delivery.

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

- an absence of service standards for specific services,
- a programme of equality impact assessments has not yet been carried out;
- customers are not yet shaping the planned investment programme;
- repair appointments are not offered to all customers, inconsistencies in the responsive repairs service have not been addressed through contractor management meetings, and inefficiencies do not represent value for money; and
- there are long waiting times for people waiting for major adaptations to their homes.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a track record of good performance and delivery of a range of improvements;
- effective leadership and a comprehensive corporate strategy provide a clear vision and directs resources, actions and improvements;
- strong performance targets are challenging;
- staff are well-motivated, customer-focused and effectively supported through training;
- risks are effectively managed and financial capacity is strong;
- there is a track record of delivering efficiency and procurement savings as well as external investment to support service delivery; and
- partnership working with customers, contractors, local authorities and a range of other agencies and organisations is adding capacity.

Scoring the service

10 However, there are barriers to improvement. These include:

- customer involvement in shaping services is recent and yet to make a significant impact on services;
- there are gaps in performance management and monitoring, as well as a need for greater scrutiny by the board and customers; and
- the approach to improvement planning is not consistent and requires further development.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² 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 tenants and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

- R1** Strengthen the focus on customers and access by:
- establishing measurable service standards for all services in consultation with customers;
 - capturing customer satisfaction for all services; and
 - increasing the influence of customers at a strategic level.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a more consistent service to customers; and
- customers shaping the future direction of services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

- R2** Strengthen the approach to diversity by:
- assessing the equalities impact of all new and existing policies and procedures;
 - establishing firm plans to make the satellite office comply with the Disability Discrimination Act;
 - establishing a range of key and local performance indicators and targets for the major adaptations process and incorporate these into the performance management framework; and
 - securing Occupational Therapist assessments for all applications for major adaptations.

² 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.

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services are delivered fairly and equitably and meet the diverse needs of all customers; and
- a reduction in the time vulnerable customers will have to wait for major adaptations to their home.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the repairs service by:

- maximising the number of repair appointments offered to customers; and
- focusing on completing repairs in one visit and establishing a performance target for this.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a more efficient repairs service with an improved customer focus.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2009.

Recommendation

R4 Strengthening the approach to value for money by:

- updating the value for money policy and procurement strategy to reflect current practice and link them to the value for money action plan; and
- addressing the inefficiencies within the responsive repairs service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a strategic focus to delivering value for money; and
- a more efficient responsive repairs service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

R5 Strengthen performance management by:

- establishing performance indicators for all services and regularly validate these externally;
- including comprehensive benchmarking data when reporting against performance to the board and customers; and
- fully implementing the business improvement planner as the single improvement plan, ensure this is SMART and is regularly monitored by the board and customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a greater awareness of relative performance against others; and
- improved co-ordination of plans to continually improve.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

12 We would like to thank the staff of Staffordshire Housing Association who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 28 July to 1 August 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13** Staffordshire Housing Association (SHA) operates predominately throughout North Staffordshire, which includes the City of Stoke-on-Trent with 68 per cent of SHA stock located here and the neighbouring districts of Newcastle-under-Lyme (with 19 per cent of the stock) and Staffordshire Moorlands (with 9 per cent of the stock). The association also has 4 per cent of its properties in Stafford Borough. North Staffordshire has a population of 458,000 in 2001, of which 96.6 per cent of the population were white, 1.4 per cent were Pakistani, 0.4 per cent were Indian and 0.2 per cent were of a Caribbean origin. Over the past ten years, North Staffordshire has been subject to outward migration of around 11,000 residents, primarily from Stoke-on-Trent, although there are indications this is now stabilising due to the arrival of new migrants from Eastern Europe.
- 14** North Staffordshire is traditionally a manufacturing and mining area that has suffered sustained industrial decline and a lack of significant replacement employment opportunities. Within the 2007 Multiple Indices of Deprivation, Stoke-on-Trent ranks high for overall deprivation at 16th out of 354 local authorities, yet Newcastle-under-Lyme at 152nd and Staffordshire Moorlands at 192nd are much less deprived although both have hotspots of deprivation.
- 15** Historically, house prices in North Staffordshire have been low. As a result there is a high level of owner occupation and much poor quality private sector housing available to rent. House prices have risen considerably over the past four years, with an average property price of £169,789 in 2007 against an average salary of £18,918, resulting in an increasing issue of affordability. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has identified a shortage of suitable accommodation for older people and BME households in the city.
- 16** In 2003, the fragility of areas of the North Staffordshire housing market were recognised and declared a Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder, such as the inner city areas and mono-tenure suburban estates. A regeneration agency, called RENEW North Staffordshire, was formed and has established a large programme to restructure the housing market through demolition and new build.

The Association

- 17 SHA is a traditional housing association and was formed in 1984 through the merger of two housing societies local to North Staffordshire. It manages around 2,500 mostly sustainable homes that are dispersed across North Staffordshire providing a range of affordable rented housing and shared ownership properties for single people, families, older people (including a retirement village and an extra care scheme), key workers and people with diverse support needs. SHA has a non-registered subsidiary, Blue Mountain Housing Association (BMHA), which has a focus on providing housing and support to refugees and BME communities. There is a strong demand for SHA properties, with 1,100 applicants registered on the choice based lettings scheme in March 2008.
- 18 SHA has diversified to provide a wide range of housing services within the North Staffordshire housing market. These include private sector renewal; repair and improvement services for home owners through their in-house Home Improvement Agency; supported housing to meet a range of needs such as domestic violence and homelessness; regeneration and development services, and new provision of homes to meet unmet needs, specifically extra care for older people and housing for BME communities. SHA is also a partner agency with RENEW North Staffordshire and has been appointed as the lead housing association for the Stoke-on-Trent area of major intervention and a strategic lead agency in Fegg Hayes and Chell Heath. This involves being a private sector partner on a detailed Neighbourhood Intervention Plan to support selective clearance, replacement housing, regeneration and investment in the area.
- 19 The profile of SHA's customers is predominately older; with 56 per cent aged over 55 and a fifth being over 75. Only 16 per cent of customers are under 35. Less than 17 per cent of customers consider themselves disabled and 3.6 per cent are from a BME community.

The service

- 20 The Board of Management provides the strategic direction for the association. It comprises five men and five women and includes one tenant board member. Payment for members was introduced in October 2007 following a comprehensive governance review. The main board is supported by an audit committee.
- 21 The association is managed by an executive team comprising of a Chief Executive, a Director of Resources, a Director of Housing and a Director of Business Development.
- 22 SHA currently employs 104 members of staff, based out of its head office and nearby satellite office, both are in central Stoke. The association works with specialist contractors who deliver all aspects of its repairs and maintenance service, apart from an in-house gas engineer who undertakes the majority of the annual gas servicing programme. Its annual turnover is approximately £9.5 million and SHA made a surplus of £650,000 in 2007/08.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 23** The mission of Staffordshire Housing Association is 'Building communities, sustaining neighbourhoods and improving people's lives in North Staffordshire'. This is delivered through four key objectives set out within the association's Corporate Strategy 2006-2011:
- to provide high quality homes and services which people want;
 - to regenerate communities and invest in neighbourhoods;
 - to make the most of our resources; and
 - to have effective practices that supports our mission and values.
- 24** These four objectives have a number of outcomes monitored by Board. They are translated into operational plans, team plans and individuals' personal targets, and are also informed by six cross cutting themes:
- customers at the heart of the business;
 - equality and diversity;
 - excellence and efficiency;
 - effective partnership working;
 - clear communication; and
 - optimising financial resources and balancing risk.

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

Access and customer care

- 25** This is an area of strength. Services are accessible and customer-focused, which is reflected in the high levels of customer satisfaction achieved. Customers have increasing opportunities to participate and through this they are having an impact on improving services. The handling of complaints is effective and SHA can demonstrate it has responded to and learnt from them. However, the approach to service standards is still developing, particularly for specific services, and customer involvement at a strategic level is improving but under-developed.

- 26** Services provided by SHA are accessible. Services can be accessed in person at the main office in Stoke, which is easy to reach by bus and has customer car parking. It is open from 8.30am - 5.30pm from Monday to Friday. Alternative opening hours were piloted but rarely used. Telephone contact is the most commonly used method of accessing the service by 76 per cent of customers, with around 3,000 calls per month, and is monitored through independent telephone mystery shopping. There is a freephone repairs hotline for customers to report repairs. Following a telephone survey to customers in 2007, an additional out-of-hours messaging service was introduced. Telephone calls are answered quickly by knowledgeable staff. Home visits are made by appointment if requested or held at the premises of a third party such as an advocate or support worker. Customers can access services electronically through text messaging, email and the website. SHA is currently reviewing its approach to how customers access its services, and the results of this will inform future improvements. This means that customers have a range of ways to access the housing service.
- 27** Access arrangements are well advertised. This is through posters and signage in and outside the main offices and schemes. Written information on access arrangements is available in the main office, within the residents' handbook, on the website and in the quarterly magazine to all customers. This means that new and existing tenants are likely to be aware of the range of ways they can access services.
- 28** The main office is accessible and customer-friendly. Reception facilities are welcoming, well managed and staff are friendly and professional. The main office complies with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and is disabled-friendly. SHA provides an information leaflet for disabled visitors that explains how to access the main office. Private interviewing facilities are available, but limited to one room. There is a play area to keep children occupied and toilet facilities are available for customers. Feedback from customers visiting reception in 2007 showed 96 per cent were satisfied with the service provided at the office. Although SHA currently lease a non-DDA compliant office for its Community Services team and BMHA near its main office, it has a useful and publicised procedure in place to ensure customers with accessibility problems are seen at the main office or at home. These measures help to ensure the service is accessible to all customers of the association.
- 29** Written information to customers is generally high quality, easy to read and has been produced with customers. SHA produce a comprehensive range of good quality leaflets and written information written in plain English for its customers. These are available in the main office and downloadable from the website. SHA has recently introduced a 'customer approved' stamp mark to denote written information that has been approved by the Customer Editorial Panel. Written information now contains contact information, an equality statement and an explanation of its availability in alternative formats. This helps to ensure tenants are generally informed about the service and how to access it.

How good is the service?

- 30** SHA has an effective website. It is easy to use, clear and informative, with a range of information for customers covering all services. It was redesigned in consultation with customers in May 2008 to offer greater readability and interactivity. Translations can be made through the website into 12 community languages, although it is not immediately obvious how to do this, and the text size can be varied. The website does not yet have a Browsealoud facility, although this is being considered. A range of information can be downloaded, such as the planned maintenance programme and the customer involvement booklet. Requests for some services can be made through the website, such as reporting a repair, making a general open enquiry or requesting tenancy support. Although applications for housing cannot be made through the website, customers can pay their rent this way. This allows customers to transact with the service, access information and request services at any time.
- 31** SHA provides a high level of customer care. Providing customer care is a key corporate priority and staff provide a high level of customer care. All staff and contractors participate in a rolling programme of customer care training as well as a good awareness of when to tailor services to the individual needs of customers or signpost them to another service in order to resolve their enquiry. This helps to ensure a culture of responding positively to the needs to all customers in order to resolve their enquiry.
- 32** Overall customer satisfaction levels are high. In the latest STATUS customer satisfaction survey covering all customers, which was undertaken in 2005, SHA recorded 91 per cent level of customer satisfaction with the overall service provided. This places SHA among the best performing housing associations. SHA plans to undertake another STATUS survey in November 2008. From April 2008, SHA has introduced a consistent approach to service specific customer satisfaction surveys, called the Customer Index of Service Satisfaction. Using a consistent scoring approach, SHA can compare levels of customer satisfaction and focus improvements where satisfaction is lower. Although there are gaps in the coverage of satisfaction surveys, such as income management, where information is collected the satisfaction results are regularly above 90 per cent. Tenants are therefore generally satisfied with the services they receive.
- 33** A range of consultation and feedback mechanisms are in place and used to improve services. SHA uses satisfaction surveys to gain customer feedback on particular services. Customers are encouraged to fill in compliments, comments and criticisms through feedback opinion cards. In 2007, SHA undertook 27 separate customer consultation exercises covering a range of issues. A telephone survey was used by SHA in 2007 to assess customers' views on potential improvements to the telephony service. In addition, the results from consultation and feedback are used to inform service improvements, such as deciding the style of kitchen to be installed and the introduction of a messaging option for out of hours callers who do not need the emergency repair service.

- 34** Customers have access to increasing opportunities to participate in the service. 'Placing customers at the heart of everything' is a key theme within the corporate strategy. SHA offers its customers a range of opportunities for involvement, from locally focused residents' associations to service improvement panels that develop key service areas such as access to services. Involved customers are supported through an involvement handbook, training and a dedicated member of staff to co-ordinate and develop customer involvement. This support is set out in a comprehensive customer involvement strategy, which was revised in 2007 to further expand involvement opportunities and reflect the latest guidance from the Housing Corporation. Customers are now members of a number of service improvement panels such as for maintenance. This range of measures contributes towards the corporate target to increase the proportion of customers satisfied with opportunities for involvement, and an interim health check telephone survey showed high levels of satisfaction with participation. Customers are therefore supported to participate and have a growing confidence in their influence on services.
- 35** Customer involvement has made a significant contribution to improving and shaping services. SHA assesses the impact of customer involvement on an annual basis, with the latest assessment in April 2008 linking involvement events to outcomes for services and contribution to strategic priorities, as well as rating the impact and value for money of each event. It showed that out of the 67 events held, 27 resulted in a scheme improvement, 19 in a service improvement and six increased customer capacity. For example, the Editorial Panel revised the tenants' handbook and leaflets, which was assessed on the scoring matrix as providing a significant impact and represented good VFM. The outcomes of customer involvement and resulting actions by SHA are publicised to customers through the quarterly newsletter within an 'involvement news' page. This means that customers can see the impact they are making on the service through their involvement.
- 36** Complaints are managed effectively. An up to date and robust complaints and compensation policy and procedure are in place to resolve matters promptly. These reflect guidance from the Housing Ombudsman Service and were developed with customers, incorporating both formal and informal complaints. SHA maintains a database of complaints. There is a range of ways to make a complaint, such as through the website, on a complaint form and a freepost customer comment card. Complaints are reviewed quarterly by a panel of staff and customers, where learning and improvement points are identified and implemented. Performance on complaints is reported to the Board every quarter. Two complaints have proceeded to the Housing Ombudsman in the last two years and the determinations for each have been implemented. This helps to ensure that issues causing complaints are resolved and do not reoccur again.
- 37** SHA has an effective approach to compensation. It is integrated into the approach to complaints and is wide-ranging to include compensation to those directly and indirectly affected. The focus of the approach is to give managers the delegated authority to deal with compensation in a proactive way, which includes the discretion to award up to £500. In 2007/08, £3,129 of compensation was paid out in 11 cases. As a result, compensation may be paid to all those who have suffered loss.

How good is the service?

- 38 SHA's approach to service standards is still developing. Although over arching corporate service standards were developed with customers in 2004, most of these are not measurable or monitored on a systematic basis. They have been assessed through mystery shopping and customer satisfaction telephone surveys and the results of these are reported annually to customers and available on the website. Service standards covering specific services are not yet in place but are being developed with customers through the service improvement panels. Currently customers are unlikely to be aware of what level of service they can expect.
- 39 Customer involvement at a strategic level is under-developed. Consultation on policies was through a Customer Liaison Panel and has been replaced by the Staffordshire Housing Association Residents' Panel, which will have a greater focus on strategic development and future priorities for the association, but has yet to meet. The new service improvement panels will consider strategic issues, but these are only just being established. This represents a missed opportunity for customers to shape current priorities.

Diversity

- 40 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The association has a well developed, positive and proactive approach to equality and diversity, which is supported by effective partnership working and a growing awareness of the diverse needs of its customers. SHA is focussed at meeting local housing need for its current and future customers, with a wide focus that covers vulnerable people, older people, BME communities and those socially excluded. Although there are well developed plans in place, equality impact assessments have only recently commenced.
- 41 There is a well developed corporate approach to equality and diversity. The promotion of equality and diversity is a corporate priority for SHA and a strong value that is embedded within the organisation. It has a wide-ranging equality and diversity policy in place, which is supported by separate equality schemes covering race, gender and disability. These are well publicised to customers. A comprehensive diversity action plan translates the policy and other requirements into improvements for customers, although this is not SMART³. The Chief Executive chairs an internal diversity action group which provides leadership to the delivery of the action plan. A board member has recently been appointed to champion diversity issues and all board reports consider diversity implications. The board monitors a range of key performance indicators on diversity issues. This ensures the association is focused on meeting the diverse needs of all its customers.
- 42 SHA generally complies with equalities legislative duties and guidance. The association is a member of a number of partnerships and networks to share good practice, access support and receive guidance to meet its duties and responsibilities around diversity. This was supported by an independent review, which concluded that SHA complied with its equality duties, the Commission for Racial Equality's code of practice in rented housing and the various Housing Corporation regulatory requirements. This provides assurance to customers that the association is meeting these formal requirements.

³ Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound

- 43 There is a growing awareness of the diverse needs of customers. SHA has customer profile data on 71 per cent of its customers and is visiting the remaining 500 households to obtain full profile information. Information gathered has been used to identify customer needs through, for example, the vulnerability flags on the IT system, which are accompanied by guidance for staff on how to respond to identified needs. All staff and Board members are trained on diversity as part of the compulsory training programme, and this has been extended to staff from the main contractors. Training includes modules on cultural, gender and disability awareness. SHA has plans to increase its understanding of the needs of its customers, through, for example, the inclusion of additional questions on faith and sexuality on housing application forms. The association has undertaken a range of activities to promote community cohesion, such as holding a forthcoming city-wide conference. The association has improved its awareness of the range of diverse needs of its customers and is better placed to respond.
- 44 Partnership working has strengthened SHA's approach to equality and diversity. The association's close ties with Blue Mountain Housing Association (BMHA) are being fully exploited and best practice is shared between the two organisations. For example, BMHA staff succeeded in encouraging diverse customers to participate in SHA's customer involvement database. The joint funding of the Rowan Village extra care scheme is an example of where partnership working has secured funding to meet the needs of older people. The association receives support and advice from a range of national equalities organisations and works in partnership with a number of local organisations on initiatives to support its diversity work. For example, SHA is a key partner and, through BMHA, is also an advisor on a local BME Forum that has helped lever development funding for BME specific developments to meet local housing need. It has also supported and sponsored awareness raising events such as the promotion of Adult Learners Week to its customers. The focus of these partnerships is to benefit services to customers.
- 45 There is effective support available and provided to vulnerable customers. Individual support needs are addressed through the tenancy support team, which provides a flexible approach according to need. Floating support is currently provided to 42 vulnerable customers. In addition:
- adaptations are built into planned programmed works;
 - maintenance contractors adapt their services to meet the needs of vulnerable customers and work with support workers to ensure a tailored approach;
 - accommodation is provided for young people leaving care through a referral scheme delivered through the Staffordshire Leaving Care Partnership, which provides a route to a permanent tenancy; and
 - vulnerable customers in need of advocacy are signposted to relevant local support agencies, such as Advocacy Services in Staffordshire and the local Citizens Advice Bureau.

This assists vulnerable customers to live independently in their home and sustain their tenancy.

How good is the service?

- 46 Written information is available in alternative formats. Clear equality statements in 12 community languages are included in written information, and inform customers about availability in other formats, such as large print or on audio tape. SHA provides some documents already translated, and has access to interpreters through LanguageLine that complement staff who can speak ten languages. Translated documents are placed on the website and are accessible to others within that community. Where customers have a hearing impairment there is a T-loop in the main offices to assist them. A textphone is available for people with hearing difficulties and some staff are trained in the use of British Sign Language. This helps to reduce the barriers for customer access.
- 47 SHA takes a positive approach to dealing with harassment and domestic abuse. Staff recently undertook awareness training about domestic abuse. The association is a member of the North Staffordshire Domestic Violence Forum and uses its protocols for sharing information and monitoring. Tenancy support is provided for victims of domestic abuse and hate crimes, and additional security can be installed to allow the victim to remain in their home. Specific refuge provision is provided by SHA and managed by a local support organisation. Following a strengthening of the tenancy agreement, SHA can and has evicted perpetrators of harassment and domestic abuse. The association works with local partners to ensure adequate provision of services to support victims of harassment, racial harassment and domestic abuse. Although no incidents of racial harassment were reported during 2007/08, it is likely that this is under reported so SHA has promoted awareness among its customers through its quarterly magazine of ways to report incidents. This helps to ensure that staff are sensitive to the needs of victims.
- 48 Involved customers are increasingly representative of the tenant body. The association has been proactive in recruiting involved customers from BME communities and more young people. A large database of involved customers contains people from a range of backgrounds with a variety of needs, and these customers are encouraged to get involved in improvement groups. Through the customer involvement service improvement panel, SHA seeks to ensure that the profile of involved customers represents the customer base by including disabled and hard to reach customers. This helps to ensure SHA is aware of the needs and expectations of all customers and can tailor services to meet the needs of all groups.
- 49 SHA is addressing local housing needs through its development programme. Through its work with BMHA and the BME Forum within Stoke-on-Trent, SHA has secured external funding for a number of developments that address the needs of BME communities. This includes building larger family houses in Cobridge and a sheltered housing scheme for Asian elders in Normacot. The association has already built 171 homes that are purpose built for wheelchair users and 17 per cent of its directly managed stock is purpose designed accommodation for older people, which includes a retirement village and a recently opened mixed tenure extra care scheme where some residents have a learning difficulty. Through its approach SHA can demonstrate that it is responding to the diverse housing needs of local people.

- 50** The association is tackling social exclusion through its regeneration work. As a partner in the RENEW North Staffordshire housing market renewal programme, SHA is leading the regeneration of a suburban neighbourhood of Stoke-on-Trent, at Fegg Hayes and Chell Heath. The association's regeneration team is working with local agencies on master planning in this area and has made a social investment through positive engagement projects with the local community and young people. SHA has funded a number of schemes aimed at increasing the confidence, skills and aspirations of local people and pupils from local schools, particularly those who are at risk of being excluded. Its intervention is tackling poor stock condition, empty properties, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion. This is helping to improve the reputation of the area and improve the life chances of residents.
- 51** SHA has yet to assess the equality impact of its strategies, policies and procedures. Although a programme is now in place to carry out equality impact assessments, supported by training for managers and guidance, this has only recently commenced. Therefore, the association cannot currently be sure services are being delivered equitably.
- 52** SHA's workforce is not yet fully representative. Although SHA is currently exceeding its targets in relation to staff with a disability, it is not currently meeting its targets on the recruitment of people from a BME community, but a review of selection procedures is leading to improvements. This means that staff do not fully represent the communities they serve.

Stock investment and asset management - capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repairs works

- 53** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. SHA effectively manages its housing assets, which are supported by a robust strategy and comprehensive stock data that is modelled to ensure programmes deliver well maintained homes. Although customers do not fully influence maintenance programmes, they are consulted on specifications and overall customer satisfaction is high.
- 54** An effective asset management strategy is in place. This integrates with the corporate priorities through a detailed action plan, while being used to direct investment decisions. The strategy is based on an understanding of the stock and includes an assessment of the impact of the operating environment. It addresses key challenges facing the stock, such as the predominance of one bedroom properties and homes in unsustainable areas, and has clear plans to tackle these following an option appraisal process. However, the strategy does not address the ratio of planned versus responsive repairs, which was 46:54 in 2007/08 rather than a 60:40 split. This ensures risks are managed within the approach to stock investment in order to support the corporate strategy.

How good is the service?

- 55** SHA possesses up-to-date and comprehensive stock condition information. This is detailed, refreshed in 2006, and updated monthly on the asset management database where it can be easily manipulated by a standalone IT programme to support modelling exercises that assist in devising the association's maintenance programmes. There are plans to integrate this system with the housing management IT system in 2008/09. This helps to identify the investment needs over the next 30 years, including maintaining properties to the decent homes standard, improving energy efficiency and addressing health and safety issues, such as the management of asbestos.
- 56** The planned maintenance programme is effective in improving and maintaining properties. SHA has spent £1.4 million on its planned programme over the last three years and has completed its decent homes programme before the Government's 2010 target. This programme has been delivered on time, although the budget has been overspent in each of the last three years by an average of 6 per cent. Customers receive written details of current and future programmes, which are also available on the website. This means that customers live in well maintained homes.
- 57** There is a positive approach to dealing with refusals, with just two refusals in 2007/08. For example, show flats are regularly used and programmes are planned to reduce disruption to customers. This helps to ensure programmes are fully delivered while being customer-focused.
- 58** SHA has been proactive in improving the energy efficiency of its homes through its maintenance programme. Its properties have a high energy efficiency rating of 87.5 under the Standard Assessment Procedure, which compares well against its peer housing associations. The association has been successful in attracting additional resources to support its insulation programmes and a large amount of energy efficient light bulbs have been accessed and distributed to new and existing customers. It is also piloting eco-refurbishment of terraced housing with a range of partners. This benefits customers by reducing energy bills while also reducing the health risks associated with living in cold homes.
- 59** There are cyclical programmes in place that respond to stock investment needs as well as health and safety requirements. This includes a £271,000 annual external painting programme delivered through a partnering agreement, which is performing beyond targets and has high levels of customer satisfaction. Other cyclical programmes address health and safety issues, such as electrical testing, water quality testing and the servicing of bath hoists. Regular maintenance offers greater cost effectiveness and helps to ensure homes are safe for customers.
- 60** SHA has high levels of customer satisfaction with planned and cyclical programmes. Customer satisfaction surveys are sent to all customers receiving maintenance work. In 2007/08, 90 per cent of customers having planned maintenance works were satisfied with the works and this rose to 97 per cent for cyclical programmes. Customer satisfaction can be broken down against programmes and contractors and is actively used to manage performance and address issues raised by customers at an early stage both formally and informally. This shows maintenance programmes are generally customer-focused.

- 61 SHA is effective in dealing with asbestos. The association has undertaken a comprehensive survey and the results are held on a register and linked to the housing IT system. Although the risk of asbestos is not actively promoted to customers, it is provided to contractors on the job card. Where possible, asbestos is removed during planned improvement works to minimise the risk of disruption and is removed immediately where it poses a direct health and safety risk to customers. This is helping to ensure that the health and safety risks to customers, staff, and contractors are minimised.
- 62 Customers do not currently fully influence the planned investment programme. Although customers are members of the maintenance service improvement panel and have been consulted on a range of issues such as the specification of new kitchens, they have not been involved in prioritising maintenance programmes, which are currently driven by the investment needs of the housing stock and do not fully reflect customer priorities.

Stock investment and asset management - responsive repairs

- 63 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. SHA performs reasonably well against challenging completion targets and there are high levels of customer satisfaction with the service. The range of ways to report a repair is promoted to customers. However, not all customers are offered a repairs appointment, inconsistencies and inefficiencies have not been addressed through contractor management meetings and there is a lack of a co-ordinated approach to increasing the number of repairs completed in one visit.
- 64 SHA performs reasonably well against challenging repair completion times. In 2007/08, 96.3 per cent of all responsive repairs were completed within challenging target times of three days for an urgent repair and ten days for routine repairs. The proportion of the different repair categories undertaken matches recommended best practice. This means that residents do not generally have to wait for long periods of time for their repairs to be completed.

Table 1 Repairs completion in target time

	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Emergency (completed within 24 hours)	100%	94%	98%
Urgent (completed within 3 working days)	96%	95%	95%
Routine (completed within 10 working days)	95%	96%	96%

Staffordshire Housing Association data

How good is the service?

- 65 There is high customer satisfaction with responsive repairs. It is regularly assessed and high at 98 per cent in 2007/08. SHA responds to feedback, which is publicised back to customers and used to address issues at regular performance review meetings with the maintenance contractors, such as ensuring the contractor staff wear ID badges at all times. This shows that the service is responding to the expectations of a majority of its customers.
- 66 The repairs service is promoted to customers. Although there is no dedicated repairs handbook or specific information on rechargeable repairs, a range of good quality leaflets cover information about the service including how to report repairs, categories and timescales. This information is also available on the website, and there is a regular 'maintenance news' section within the quarterly magazine to all customers. This helps to ensure that customers know about the repairs service and how to access it.
- 67 There is a range of ways for customers to report a repair. They can be reported using a freephone telephone number (with calls handled by dedicated repairs staff), in person at the main office, or through the website. The out-of-hours service is accessible by using the same daytime freephone repairs number, and these are answered promptly and effectively by the out of hours call handler. However, the handler does not have access to the repairs IT system so does not know the vulnerability or diverse needs of customers and their repairs history. This makes it easy for customers to report repairs and helps to maintain their home.
- 68 SHA is not effectively managing the responsive repairs contractors to deliver a consistent and efficient service. There is a positive relationship with individual contractors and regular formal contact on performance and individual case management issues, such as the outcomes from pre and post inspections and seeking authorisation on variations to works orders. However, formal liaison meetings with contractors are not used to address inconsistent service delivery between the various contractors or discuss continuous improvement. In addition, inefficiencies in the approach to responsive repairs remain and have not been addressed through contract management meetings, such as each contractor operating a different schedule of rates and the approach to repairs appointments are variable. Customers may experience an inconsistent repairs service that cannot demonstrate value for money.
- 69 The inconsistent approach to appointments is a weakness. Appointments have only been offered to customers in the last two years and the system used is on an interim basis prior to the procurement of a single contractor in January 2009. The current system does not allow for all appointments to be booked or performance against appointments to be monitored. The proportion of urgent and routine repairs booked by appointment has increased from 29 per cent in 2006/07 to 79 per cent in 2007/08 however, not all customers reporting a responsive repair will be offered an appointment.
- 70 The association is not focused on completing repairs in one visit. SHA does not monitor completions first time, although this information is available from contractors. There is no use of multi-skilled contractors and customers are not currently provided with diagnostic information. SHA is currently assessing a number of repairs diagnostic IT packages available to customers through the website; however this is not currently in place. Without this focus, customers may experience disruption and delay that could be avoidable.

Stock investment and asset management - void repairs

- 71** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Prospective customers are provided with good quality information to allow them to make an informed choice about the property and the local area. Homes are re-let to a good standard and there is a high level of customer satisfaction with the condition of their new home, which reflects the choice customers are offered through the process. However, the time taken to re-let properties is below target. To date, few customers have influenced this service, although this is being addressed.
- 72** Customers are provided with good quality information on the condition of their new home. All prospective customers receive an accompanied viewing and are provided with a comprehensive range of information on the property. This includes a copy of the empty homes standard devised with customers, a check list on the work undertaken to meet the standard, and information about tenancy support available, the property and the area, including schools, healthcare and community facilities. This helps prospective customers make an informed choice on whether or not to accept the property.
- 73** Homes are let to a good standard, there is a high level of customer satisfaction with re-let properties, and average costs are low. The properties seen by inspectors that were ready to re-let met the empty homes standard, which was devised with customers, and all properties receive a post-inspection check by a Technical Officer from SHA against the standard. Feedback for 2007/08 shows all customers were satisfied with the condition of their new home, including the choice offered to customers, such as the retention of existing features, choice in the specification of new fixtures and a range of decoration options. Benchmarking on void costs per property showed these were just outside the lowest costing 25 per cent of the 37 comparative organisations at £987 per property. This ensures newly let properties meet customer expectations and provides value for money.
- 74** The overall time for the association to re-let properties is below target. It took an average of 30 calendar days in 2007/08 against a 21 calendar day target. The association is now focused on reducing the re-let time through a review of the process; however, customers have to wait longer than they might expect for their new home.
- 75** Customer involvement within the voids process is under-developed. Although this is being addressed through the maintenance SIP, this is a relatively new group with little impact at this stage. A one-off consultation focus day on voids was held in 2007 to discuss the empty homes standard and review the voids process, but only two customers attended. Therefore, customers have had little influence on the current voids process.

Stock investment and asset management - gas servicing

- 76** This is an area of strength. Performance on gas servicing is strong because of a rolling programme of checks and a focus on ensuring access, including to homes of vulnerable customers. The association takes the opportunity to address other health and safety issues during gas servicing visits.

How good is the service?

- 77** Performance on gas servicing is strong. A monthly rolling programme of checks is in place and 100 per cent of properties have a current gas safety certificate. There is a focus on ensuring access to properties, including the promotion of gas safety through information leaflets provided to all customers and the use of charges as an incentive to customers. Established procedures include stages for legal action, but the association has never had to use legal action to gain entry and uses a range of methods to maintain the profile of the programme, such as regular features in the newsletter. This helps to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning to customers.
- 78** The programme responds to the needs of vulnerable people. Vulnerability flags on the IT system are used to tailor access and communication accordingly, such as contacting social workers or support staff, sending text message reminders to deaf customers and sending a photo of the gas engineer prior to a visit. These help to reassure vulnerable customers of the validity of the person entering their home and reduce non-access.
- 79** The quality of inspection and repair work is checked effectively. The association employs an independent organisation with appropriately qualified inspectors to complete follow up checks on a sample of completed jobs. The results are shared with the association and its standby contractor through monthly performance reports. This provides independent assurance that gas safety risks to customers are minimised.
- 80** There are good links between the gas servicing programme and housing management where an access issue arises and with the voids process to ensure that gas safety checks are brought forward while the property is empty. This reduces disruption to new customers and ensures homes have safe gas appliances.
- 81** The association maximises the opportunity of access to check other health and safety issues during the gas safety visit. Checks are included to ensure customers do not sleep in a room with a gas appliance, solid fuel heating systems are swept on an annual basis, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are checked, un-vented hot water systems are working correctly, and flume testing of condensing boiler systems. The association also ensures all immersion heater tanks are fully supported and contain fail safe cut off systems in line with guidance from the Health and Safety Executive. This reduces potential risks to customers.

Stock investment and asset management - aids and adaptations

- 82** This is an area of weakness. There are key weaknesses with the approach to major adaptations, which mean that vulnerable customers are waiting an unacceptable length of time for adaptations to their home with little meaningful communication as to why. SHA has been slow to address these weaknesses, and many continue to exist although there is now a strong focus to resolve these. Minor adaptations are completed quickly and there are other strengths such as links to the planned maintenance and development programmes.

- 83** There is poor performance on waiting time for major aids and adaptations costing over £1,000. SHA has acknowledged the key weaknesses with the approach to this service, such as a lack of effective management of the major adaptations programme, an absence of performance management and poor communication with customers. Aids and adaptation files are poorly maintained, with limited information available to assist staff in managing cases. This means that vulnerable customers receive a poor service and have to wait an unacceptable length of time, over three years in some cases, for approval and installation of measures to allow them to live with improved independence.
- 84** SHA has been slow to address weaknesses with the service. There are no performance indicators or targets covering aids and adaptations, poor performance was uncovered during an internal review of services in January 2007 and it took over a year for SHA to establish an internal improvement group to start to address these issues. Although the board has recently approved a revised policy and increased the budget for major adaptations, the key weaknesses, implications for customers and options to address this situation have yet to be reported to the board. This further lengthens the wait of vulnerable customers for much needed work to their homes and alleviates dependency.
- 85** Despite the recent focus on improving the service some key weaknesses remain. Although the budget for major adaptations was recently increased from £17,000 to £50,000, this is inadequate to meet existing works for customers on the waiting list. Although SHA are in discussion with the four North Staffordshire local authorities and a private Occupational Therapist to assess customer needs, there is still an inconsistent service provided to customers depending on where they live, and in one local authority there is no Occupational Therapist service currently available. Also, an information leaflet has recently been produced for customers that fails to mention waiting times as the association cannot currently make a meaningful estimate. This means some vulnerable customers will continue to have to wait for the adaptation to their home into 2009/10.
- 86** The delivery of minor adaptations costing up to £1,000 is effective. Customers can self refer and there is no separate independent assessment of need. Works are logged and undertaken as a routine repair with a target time of ten days. Ninety-seven per cent of routine repairs were completed within target time during 2007/08. This ensures that customers can quickly acquire the minor adaptation they require.
- 87** There are some strengths within the associations approach to aids and adaptations. There are links with the planned maintenance programme, for example, SHA is building in adaptations within the bathroom replacement programme. It has also made a commitment that all new build properties within the 2008-11 development programme will meet the lifetime homes standard. The association has a process in place with local authorities to re-cycle aids and adaptations where possible and an adapted property register is maintained and linked to the CBL scheme. This ensures the future needs of customers are built into new properties and existing adaptations benefit future customers.

How good is the service?

Housing income management

- 88** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. There is strong performance on income and arrears collection, a range of convenient ways for customers to pay and good quality information to inform customers about the service. SHA takes an appropriate approach to arrears management that balances support with recovery, and this is supported with effective IT and positive relationships with housing benefit teams. There is a developing approach to financial inclusion and rechargeable repairs are not fully recovered.
- 89** A high proportion of the rent due is collected and arrears collection performance is strong. At the end of 2005/06, 100.51 per cent of rent was collected, in 2006/07 this rose to 101.93 per cent and at the year ending 2007/08 the performance dipped slightly but remained high at 99.83 per cent. Performance on arrears as a proportion of annual debit at the end of 2005/06 was 4.88 per cent, this improved to in 2006/07 to 2.73 per cent and improved further in 2007/8 to 2.65 per cent. This is among the best performance in its peer group.
- 90** The level of former tenant arrears is low, at 0.62 per cent of annual debit and dealt with through a debt collection agency for all amounts exceeding £100 where either there is no contact with the former tenant or where former tenants are found but have not paid. In 2007/08, £32,042 was written-off as bad debt. This has stabilised and improved over the last eight years and helps to ensure the association has the resources to provide services to customers and to reduce the level of customer debt.
- 91** There is an effective approach to collecting other income. Leaseholders' accounts are integrated into the finance system and annual estimates are recovered throughout the year then adjusted against actual costs at the end of the financial year, with strong recovery performance and legal action taken against only one leaseholder in 2007/08. Other service charges, such as gardening and cleaning costs, are calculated accurately and charged on a fixed annual charge within the overall rent. Variable charges apply to the new extra care scheme to reflect the range of chargeable services to customers. This means that overall costs are being appropriately charged and recovered from customers.
- 92** Customers are offered a range of ways to pay. These include direct debit, which is the most cost effective and popular with 33 per cent of customers using this method, Allpay swipe cards at Payzone points is used by 21 per cent of customers, by telephone or online, as well as cash or cheque at the main office or at Bradeley Village. Direct Housing Benefit payments account for the remaining 46 per cent of customers. This makes it easy for customers to pay charges due.
- 93** A range of useful information is available to customers. Good quality written information is provided to customers on how to pay, the approach to arrears and how rent and service charges are calculated, and this mirrors what is included within the handbook for tenants and on the website. Customers receive quarterly rent and service charge statements, which include advice and support from SHA and relevant partners on benefits if arrears accrue. Customers in arrears also receive written information that signposts them to additional help from external agencies. This ensures customers understand what they are paying for and what assistance is available to them if they cannot pay.

- 94 The arrears policy and procedure reflects an appropriate balance between recovery actions and support, and have recently been reviewed and are effective. New customers receive comprehensive validation checks to ensure they can afford their new home and the need to pay is reinforced at sign-up and during the settling-in visit. There is a focus on early contact and preventative support from the Housing Officer, including benefits advice. An effective escalation approach, using IT prompts, helps staff manage arrears while allowing them adequate flexibility to take an individual approach to case management if required, such as adapting their communication with vulnerable customers. Personal visits and telephone calls are the main method of contact if letters have not elicited a response. The tenancy support team and external financial advice from the CAB is offered in cases of serious arrears and eviction is seen as the last resort. This ensures a consistent, flexible and supportive approach to arrears management.
- 95 There is an effective IT system in place to support income management. It provides staff with a user-friendly system that automatically prompts actions to monitor and manage arrears, and produces standard and bespoke performance data. It disaggregates rent from other charges, such as court costs. Vulnerability issues are flagged and enable staff to respond appropriately. This improves the efficiency of the service while maintaining a focus on customers and performance.
- 96 SHA has a positive relationship with local authority housing benefit teams. Regular meetings with all local authorities facilitate more effective IT integration, joint training and the ability to fast track cases when needed. This is supported by a service level agreement with Stoke-on-Trent City Council and a verification contract to support customer applications. SHA is currently seeking to develop this approach with the Staffordshire authorities. Current performance on housing benefit payments is between four to six weeks. This helps to minimise delays in payments of housing benefit, maximises income and allows customers to be free from worry about rent payment debts.
- 97 The approach to financial inclusion is developing. Although the overall approach is not yet co-ordinated within a financial inclusion strategy, a range of ad hoc measures, such as offering low cost home insurance, are in place. However, links with the local CAB are not formalised, although customers are signposted to this service. Access to low cost finance through a credit union is not currently available but is being explored, and SHA have not actively promoted benefit take-up to their customers. This represents a missed opportunity for the association to help maximise customers' income.
- 98 Rechargeable repairs are not being fully recovered. They are not currently integrated into the finance system, so rely on manual checks between the housing management and finance staff to co-ordinate recovery. In 2007/08 only 48 per cent of the £10,722 of rechargeable repairs was recovered. There are plans in place to review this approach, but this currently means that the association is missing out on this income.
- 99 Customer feedback is not shaping the service. There is no customer satisfaction captured and customers have not been involved in establishing payment methods. There are plans in place to establish a SIP for income management in November 2008; however SHA cannot currently demonstrate that the service is meeting the expectations of their customers.

How good is the service?

Anti-social behaviour

- 100** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. SHA has a comprehensive anti-social behaviour policy in place, which is well resourced and reflected in the customer-focused approach to preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour. This is supported by effective partnership working. SHA publicises its successes in resolving anti-social behaviour. However, the service is not being influenced by customers.
- 101** SHA has comprehensive anti-social behaviour and Respect policies in place. These were influenced by customers, focus on preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour, and have recently been revised to reflect the Respect Standard. They are linked to a range of other policies, such as the harassment policy, as well as other partnerships that help to address anti-social behaviour. This ensures a consistent service is provided to customers.
- 102** There is a clear focus on prevention of anti-social behaviour. The association explains to new customers how it expects them to behave before the tenancy, at sign-up and again at the settling-in visit and this is reinforced to all customers within the tenancy agreement, which has recently been strengthened with major inputs from customers. Starter tenancies are used and there have been four evictions since their introduction in 2005. Two Housing Officers are trained mediators, and resolution through visits and discussion resolves 80 per cent of cases. New build properties incorporate secure by design standards to build-out potential anti-social behaviour issues and existing schemes have received a crime and safety audit by the Police where additional security improvements have been installed. SHA works in partnership with the Police and other landlords on respect action days to target 'hot spot' areas for anti-social behaviour. These all help to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour.
- 103** The approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour is effectively resourced. Housing Officers receive regular internal and external training to deal with a range of anti-social behaviour issues. Independent specialist anti-social behaviour legal advisors work with SHA to support staff and witnesses in resolving serious cases of anti-social behaviour. Through its membership of an anti-social behaviour benchmarking group, the association receives best practice and legal updates. There is a budget available to Housing Officers to support their work on anti-social behaviour that has been used to purchase additional security measures and pay for diversionary tactics, such as sponge footballs where ball games are causing a nuisance in communal areas. In addition, anti-social behaviour is recorded, tracked and monitored through the integrated housing IT system with further improvements planned, which helps manage anti-social behaviour cases more efficiently.

- 104** The association works successfully with a range of partners and stakeholders to prevent and tackle anti-social behaviour. SHA works in partnership with the Police, local authorities and other housing associations through the North Staffordshire anti-social behaviour Partnership to co-ordinate action and monitoring. It is a member of local crime and disorder reduction partnerships and has a formal information sharing protocol in place with the Police, which are supplemented by regular informal contact to discuss cases where joint actions or interventions are required, such as ASBOs and respect action days. A wider area-based approach to anti-social behaviour is undertaken in the Fegg Hayes and Chell Heath area in partnership with RENEW North Staffordshire Housing Market Renewal programme. This approach enables the association and its partners to take appropriate action against those committing anti-social behaviour within the community.
- 105** There is a range of ways for customers to report anti-social behaviour. These include in person at the office, over the telephone and through the website. Anti-social behaviour can be reported through the out of hours telephone number and urgent action, such as the removal of offensive graffiti, is treated as an emergency repair. Reporting is also made by partner organisations, such as the Police. This may help to increase the reporting of anti-social behaviour to the association.
- 106** Appropriate remedies are available to resolve anti-social behaviour. These include mediation by trained Housing Officers or independently by Mediation North Staffordshire, a mutually agreed third party, demoted tenancies, professional witnesses, a range of interventions such as acceptable behaviour contracts, suspended possession orders and evictions. Although there has been no assessment of the effectiveness of each remedy, the association monitors and reports the actions it takes to resolve anti-social behaviour. This demonstrates SHA is using powers available to it to tackle anti-social behaviour.
- 107** The approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour is customer-focussed. Targets are in place for response times, with an acknowledgement within two days and a full response within ten days. Appropriate support is offered to victims and vulnerable perpetrators by housing management, tenancy support or from a relevant support agency, such as the local drug and alcohol dependency team or victim support. This involves agreeing with the victim on the regularity and type of contact, an action plan to resolve the situation and what constitutes case closure. SHA can provide additional security measures if appropriate. Should victims or witnesses be required to attend court, support is provided to them by the association's specialist legal advisors. These measures provide customers with confidence in the service.
- 108** SHA publicises its work to resolve anti-social behaviour. The association reports cases to the local press and the quarterly magazine to all customers. Individual cases of anti-social behaviour within a development have led to letters being sent to all residents when successful action on anti-social behaviour has been taken. Customers are reassured that anti-social behaviour is taken seriously and action will be taken to address it.

How good is the service?

109 Customer satisfaction is not systematically assessed. SHA does not know if customers are satisfied with the service, which limits its ability to ensure that its response to anti-social behaviour meets their needs and expectations. A one-off telephone survey of all customers who had reported nuisance in 2007/08 was recently completed and showed that 60 per cent were satisfied. The association has responded by putting plans in place to launch a specific SIP to bring customers and staff together to improve the service in August 2008. However, feedback from customers is not currently influencing this service.

Is the service delivering value for money?

110 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of value for money. SHA has an understanding of costs and benchmarking shows generally positive results. A range of procurement methods are used effectively and efficiency savings have been made and re-invested. However, the strategic approach to value for money is not robust and SHA cannot demonstrate that the responsive repairs service provides value for money.

How do costs compare?

111 The association has an understanding of its costs and actively uses this information to manage them. Operating and service level costs are assessed annually and provided for benchmarking purposes against 51 other housing associations through a national benchmarking club. This shows that costs are generally below the average. This information is scrutinised by managers and the board, and used to drive further analysis to understand and address higher cost services as well as continuous improvement. For example, SHA have recently commissioned an independent review of the cost of responsive repairs with recommendations included in the value for money action plan. The service is being re-tendered in January 2009.

112 There is generally a positive relationship between costs, performance and satisfaction. The costs of providing housing management services reduced between 2005/06 and 2006/07 from £428 to £424 per property, while performance and customer satisfaction remains generally strong.

How is value for money managed?

113 There is a positive focus on securing efficiency savings. Although SHA has not established an annual efficiency target, it has a £100,000 efficiency cost target to be achieved by 2011, which it has already achieved. This has not prevented an on-going focus on securing efficiency savings, which is co-ordinated through an internal group and actions to reduce costs are identified throughout the association, including within staff appraisals and captured on a register. On-going efficiency savings are being secured, such as £60,000 savings from renegotiated loans in 2007 and SHA has secured an additional 182 hours per year with no additional staff or detriment to service provision through a re-structure of the repairs administration team. This means that efficiency savings can be re-directed to the delivery of the corporate strategy.

- 114** SHA uses a range of procurement methods to secure value for money. This is guided by a procurement strategy and the method of procurement selected depends on the type and value of service or goods being procured and based on specialist external advice. These range from partnering agreements and procurement through consortia to locally procured goods, and all co-ordinated through an internal procurement group. This is resulting in cashable savings while improving services to customers, for example a 14 per cent saving in the first year of the external painting programme while delivering and maintaining high performance and customer satisfaction.
- 115** SHA has secured value for money savings through effective treasury management. It has actively reduced the proportion of its cost spent on repaying loans from 8.91 per cent in 1998 to 7.6 per cent in 2006/07, and secured a further £60,000 reduction in interest payments through renegotiated loans in 2007/08. A £90,000 saving was achieved in 2007/08 from the re-tendering of the associations insurance with no loss of cover. These financial savings help to support the delivery of services to customers.
- 116** The association successfully attracts external funding, generates income and invests with partners to support the delivery of its corporate priorities. It has been successful in competitive bids for regeneration funding through RENEW North Staffordshire, and has also contributed funding and services to support neighbourhood renewal. Through its BME housing forum with Stoke-on-Trent City Council, SHA has secured development grant funding for a range of BME housing projects in partnership with the Housing Corporation. The Rowan Village extra care scheme was joint-funded by a range of partners, including the local health trust. External funding also includes £141,000 of affordable warmth grants and £235,578 of Supporting People funding towards tenancy support was secured in 2007/08. The association also generates income from gardening services provided to other housing associations. This increases SHA's capacity to deliver more with the same resources.
- 117** The strategic approach to value for money is not robust. The value for money policy is not comprehensive or up to date. The policy is not linked to the action plan to improve value for money, which contains many ad hoc actions to secure savings and efficiencies throughout the association. In addition, board engagement and customer involvement with value for money is currently limited. This means that the association cannot demonstrate a systematic approach to securing value for money.
- 118** Responsive repairs costs are high and there are inefficiencies with the service. A recent independent review of responsive repairs costs demonstrated they were high in comparison with a sample of 22 similar organisations. Costs are not being actively managed by the association, as the four main contractors each charge against different schedule of rates that have not been recently updated and have the discretion to charge up to £50 per repair. The use of a number of small local contractors reduces opportunities for efficiency gains to be secured through integrated IT, appointments and administration systems. SHA cannot clearly demonstrate that the responsive repairs service offers value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 119** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in SHA's track record of delivering improvement. SHA has consistently performed well, costs generally compare well and customer satisfaction is consistently high. Customers notice the range of tangible improvements delivered. Improvements in SHA's approach to equality and diversity and customer involvement can be demonstrated. However, value for money cannot be demonstrated across all service areas.
- 120** There has been a positive direction of travel of performance and costs in most service areas over the last three years, and these generally compare well against others. This includes rent and arrears collection, rent loss due to empty properties, improvements in the time taken to complete all categories of responsive repairs, the number of homes that meet the decent homes standard, the energy efficiency of homes, and those with a gas safety certificate. Five key performance indicators are now in the best 25 per cent of comparative associations, which represents an improvement. Costs are comparable or better than the average for most services. The Housing Corporation has given SHA a full set of green lights for the four key areas of assessment. This reflects a track record of improving performance.
- 121** Customer satisfaction remains consistently high across most service areas. Satisfaction from the last STATUS survey in 2005 showed 91 per cent of customers responding were satisfied with the overall service they received, which was an increase from 88 per cent in 2002 and which places SHA among the best 25 per cent of comparative associations. Although there are some gaps in satisfaction monitoring of individual service areas, where this is collected it shows a consistently high level of customer satisfaction. This shows SHA has a track record of providing services that generally meets the expectation of its customers.
- 122** The association has a track record of delivering a range of improvements across all service areas that customers would notice. They include:
- improvements in the ways customers can access the service, through improved written information including the website, a free phone number to report repairs, more opportunities to participate, and a comprehensive introduction to new customers;
 - tangible service improvements such as a capital improvement programme that has delivered decent homes and that are warm and well insulated, access to tenancy support, and homes that are let to a high and consistent standard;
 - the use of vulnerability flags and guidance to staff now means services are being tailored to meet the identified needs of customers;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- increasing numbers of customers are offered a repairs appointment;
- properties are now re-let to a consistent empty homes standard that was agreed with customers;
- a range of health and safety checks are now undertaken at the same time as gas safety checks;
- customers now have a range of ways to pay their rent to suit their availability;
- additional security features have been installed to help reduce anti-social behaviour following Police crime and safety audits; and
- improvements in meeting the needs of all customers, such as building the first mixed tenure extra care scheme in Stoke-on-Trent, renewing neighbourhoods to promote social inclusion and building specific schemes that cater for specific BME communities.

123 SHA has improved its approach to equality and diversity. It is a key corporate priority and the approach has been strengthened by BMHA. The customer census is helping the association to deliver services to meet the range of needs identified. Effective partnership working with its strategic partners and a focus on meeting diverse local needs has resulted in new developments and services to the old, the young, people from diverse communities and those who are vulnerable. This shows a clear focus on issues that benefit customers.

124 Opportunities to participate have increased. The customer involvement strategy has guided the development of a range of opportunities that are now available to customers to become involved in influencing services at a local and service level. This has been strengthened by the recruitment of a dedicated member of staff to support these participatory activities and training to build capacity. This means that customers have a growing influence on the services they receive.

125 SHA cannot demonstrate a track record of delivering value for money across all service areas. The strategic approach to value for money is weak, and although this has not stopped SHA delivering a range of cost and efficiency savings, it has meant a lack of focus on securing value for money in key services. For example, the responsive repairs service has high costs and inefficiencies that will not be addressed until a re-tendered service is in place from 2009/10.

How well does the service manage performance?

126 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The association has clear objectives set out within its corporate strategy, which are translated into action. Risk is effectively managed and there are a range of tools to support continuous improvement. However, performance is not effectively managed and the approach to improvement planning is inconsistent. There is also limited involvement of customers in scrutinising performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 127** There is a clear vision set out within the corporate strategy, which is supported by effective leadership and translated into delivery plans. Objectives agreed and reviewed annually within the corporate strategy are supported by strong financial management within the 30-year business plan. They are also translated through the Chief Executive, Executive Team and managers with staff input into improvement, operational, team and staff plans for the coming year, through team and staff awaydays as well as breakfast briefings and the association's intranet. Delivery against the range of service plans is monitored through team meetings, quarterly and annual staff appraisals. This provides an effective framework to deliver the association's vision and objectives.
- 128** Risk is effectively managed. A risk assessment matrix is in place for the key risks of not delivering against the objectives within the corporate strategy, which is informed by internal and external auditors and reviewed regularly by the Board. A variety of operational risks are identified, managed and reviewed within policies and procedures, such as business continuity and disaster recovery. This helps to mitigate against identified risks, aids delivery against objectives, and maintains services to customers.
- 129** A range of tools are used to support continuous improvement. An annual self assessment against KLOEs and a programme of service reviews are undertaken, such as the current review of services to older people. Other improvements are identified through internal and external audits, independent assessments of specific service areas for example on diversity, Quality Assessment Framework self assessments for the Supporting People programmes of Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire County, as well as through training, partnership working, sharing best practice and specific visits. This ensures the association is self aware, learns from others and is focused on improving services to customers.
- 130** The association actively seeks customer feedback and is now involving customers in improving services. Customer feedback through satisfaction surveys is regularly reviewed and informs improvements. In addition, feedback is received from suggestion cards and complaints. SHA participates in a mystery shopping club to inform service improvement work and is seeking to bring this in-house to gain more influence on services of choice. Prior to the service improvement panels, four customer improvement groups have been delivering improvements since 2006 that include improvements to the website, the tenants' handbook and range of leaflets. The move to the development of service improvement panels in early 2008 reflects an increase in formal involvement of customers at an operational and strategic level as these service reviews now including customer representatives. This ensures the views of customers are helping to direct and influence service improvements.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 131** Performance management is not wholly effective. Although there are arrangements for monitoring and reporting performance that are supported by effective IT, performance is not externally validated. Key performance indicators are reported to the Board on a quarterly basis; however commentary provided within performance reports is light touch and there is incomplete benchmarking information included. Although performance targets are in place and challenging, there is limited exception reporting to show how the association is tackling weaker or reducing performance against targets. It is a weakness that there are no performance indicators in place for the aids and adaptations process. Board members have not received training on performance issues relevant to specific service areas. This means that performance is not being fully scrutinised and weaker performance not being systematically tackled.
- 132** The approach to improvement planning is inconsistent. There are insufficient links between strategic documents, performance monitoring and improvement plans. The numerous improvement plans do not follow a consistent template, are not all SMART⁴ or fully populated and outcomes for customers are not always clear, although SHA has purchased a new IT package to overcome these issues and integrate actions into a single improvement plan. In addition, neither the board nor customers currently monitor improvement plans beyond an annual review. These inconsistencies make it difficult to monitor the delivery of improvement plans.
- 133** There is limited involvement of customers in scrutinising performance. Apart from an annual performance report to customers, which contains few explanations to assist customers in understanding the information provided, customers are not involved in any formal scrutinising of performance or establishing performance targets. This represents a missed opportunity for customers to monitor service delivery.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 134** This is an area of strength. There is effective leadership of the association, with a focus on delivering effective human resources and training to support corporate objectives. IT is supporting service delivery and planned improvements should add more capacity. Strong financial management is supported by a positive approach to procurement and efficiencies. Partnership working and external challenge is being used to lever in expertise and resources to support and improve service delivery. There is a positive focus on securing external resources to improve services to customers. Staff sickness is being effectively managed.
- 135** There is effective leadership of the association. The Chair and Chief Executive have played a key role in developing the board and the association over the last three years. They work closely to provide a clear vision and priorities, which has focused on fully exploiting the capacity of the organisation to meet local housing need. This has assisted the association to diversify and to move from a risk adverse organisation to one where risks are managed. The Chair and Chief Executive have also championed partnership working, which is adding capacity through shared best practice, influence on local priorities and attracting external funding.

⁴ Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 136** There is a capable board in place with a strategic focus. Board members possess a range of appropriate skills, provide an effective and appropriate challenge to managers and are well supported in their strategic role. Difficult decisions have been made by the board. They are customer-focused and regularly meet customers, but seek to be aware of the potential risks faced by the association and manage it appropriately. In addition, the board is continually developing its capacity to lead the organisation. A stronger role in the management of performance and improvement planning was identified during the recent appraisal process, which is being addressed through training and mentoring. As a result, the board is continually developing its skills and focus to make effective decisions.
- 137** SHA has robust human resource arrangements in place to support its staff. The lack of a human resource strategy is a weakness however; the approach supports the delivery of the corporate strategy objectives and is clear within the staff handbook. Human resource issues are reviewed annually by the board, where priorities such as reducing sickness levels, responding to the staff survey, and reviewing the approach to recruitment to ensure staff are more representative are agreed. Along side the range of HR policies, staff receive regular performance and development reviews. These are supplemented by one-to-ones with line managers to review progress informally and highlight training needs. This helps to ensure staff are supported in their role.
- 138** Staff are well motivated, customer-focused and are positive about training opportunities available to them. This is reinforced by positive results from the recent annual staff survey. Staff benefits and pay compare well against relevant local employers. Staff are kept well informed about strategic and operational issues through regular team meetings, briefings, breakfast meetings and comprehensive sharepoint information on the intranet. The training budget is high at £1,300 per head in 2007/08, which is linked to delivering the corporate objectives and improved performance, with opportunities for personal development encouraged that complement compulsory training on customer care and equality and diversity. A development programme for managers has recently commenced and has already started to improve skills. Having well motivated and trained staff helps increase the capacity of the association.
- 139** Service delivery and improvements are generally supported by effective IT systems. An established, integrated housing IT system is used to facilitate the sharing of customer information. It is regularly updated and a specialist consultant supports best use of this system. The asset management software is exploited to model future planned maintenance programmes. SHA's performance management IT system interrogates the other systems for monitoring purposes. A comprehensive and user-friendly intranet allows for the sharing of policies and procedures to all staff. The association has a dedicated IT team and IT champions within teams to maintain the systems and support users, while interrogating systems to produce bespoke performance information and actively delivering a programme of efficiencies and system improvements set out within the IT strategy and action plan. These include improved remote working, along with the increased use of text messaging and customer interaction through the website. This increases efficiency and improves the availability of management information.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 140** SHA has a strong focus on financial management. There is a robust business plan in place, which is fully funded and supported by funders. Assumptions and implications of policy decisions are modelled to test the potential impact on the business plan and this information supports senior managers and the board in the decision-making process. Various reviews of services contribute towards an overall understanding of the financial position of the association. Budgets and expenditure are monitored and reviewed with managers on a monthly basis. This helps to ensure that adequate resources are available to meet corporate objectives, investment needs, service provision, and fund improvements.
- 141** Procurement activity is delivering efficiency gains and more effective ways of working. The association's approach has released cashable savings of approximately £155,000 in 2007/08 through procuring insurance and electricity, with further efficiencies secured through planned maintenance, such as seven per cent savings on building materials procured through a national consortium. A partnering arrangement for external painting is also leading to more efficient and effective ways of working. This is adding to the association's capacity to deliver improved services.
- 142** Partnership working is adding to the capacity of the association. It is a well respected partner and feedback received from local authorities, contractors and other partners is extremely positive. SHA is focused on meeting a range of local housing needs, which supports the strategic housing priorities of its local authority partners as well as those of its customers and is delivered through joint funding. Within the RENEW North Staffordshire housing market renewal programme, SHA has become lead partner on a number of projects and has demonstrated it is a pro-active partner, is customer-focused during difficult negotiations with residents, makes a positive contribution and compares well against other programme housing association partners. Overall, joint funding and partnership working increase the impact of the association's work for customers and communities.
- 143** SHA makes effective use of external advice and challenge. It regularly liaises with a range of local partners to ensure improved service delivery. For example, it attends housing benefit meetings and a regional customer involvement network. Internal audit arrangements are used to challenge service delivery and to qualify data. SHA is a member of a national benchmarking organisation, although it has been slow to exploit the potential for learning through this membership. During the development of new business areas, such as extra care housing, staff attended fact finding visits to existing providers. In addition, SHA uses external expertise to challenge performance and review service delivery. These offer the association additional and flexible capacity where needed.
- 144** There is a positive focus on seeking out external funding when there is a business case for it and where it helps to meet the strategic priorities of the association and improve services to customers. In 2007/08, this included £141,000 of grants towards the cost of insulation measures, £235,578 of Supporting People funding to pay for tenancy support, £171,273 towards regeneration costs from RENEW North Staffordshire and £4.23 million from the Housing Corporation, local authorities and the health authority towards building new homes meeting a range of needs. These increase the association's capacity to meet the needs of new and existing customers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

145 Staff sickness is effectively managed. Sickness levels averaged at ten days in 2006/07 and 2007/08, which is in line with the overall average for housing associations. However, the association remains focused on reducing this through assistance with stress, flu inoculations for staff, as well as early assistance and intervention by an Occupational Therapist and a visiting counsellor. In addition, SHA is introducing a new absentee policy with learning from best performers through the human resources staff group attended by the Human Resources Manager. This sustained focus helps to reduce the potential loss of capacity from staff being absent, which is important in a small organisation like SHA.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2006/07 Comparison Group Mean	2006/07 Comparison Group Median	2006/07 Quartile Position in Comparison Group
Stock Failing Decent Home Standard	0.9%	0.7%	1.2%	3.4%	2.0%	1
Average GN SAP rating	60	60	62	72	71	4
Routine repairs completed in target	94.7%	96.0%	94.7%	95.9%	96.7%	4
Vacant Dwellings	-	-	1.9%	1.4%	1.3%	3
Vacant General Needs Dwellings	-	-	1.4%	1.0%	0.9%	4
Re-let time (all managed stock)	-	-	34.3 days	33.3 days	31.2 days	3
GN Re-let time (for managed stock)	-	36 days	44.0 days	36.4 days	32.1 days	3
Current tenant arrears at FYE	-	-	3.1%	5.3%	5.1%	1
Tenant satisfaction overall	88%	91%	91%	80%	81%	1
Tenant satisfaction with participation	62%	62%	62%	62%	61%	2
Tenants satisfied with repairs and maintenance	-	-	90%	76%	80%	1
Shared owner satisfaction overall	-	-	-	68%	-	-

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 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:
 - interviews with SHA officers, Blue Mountain Housing Association staff and board members;
 - interviews with a representative from Renew North Staffordshire;
 - shadowing of frontline staff on void inspections, responsive repairs contractors;
 - focus groups of tenants & leaseholders, board members, frontline staff, contractors and local authorities;
 - file and system checks covering tenancy files, rent account system, anti-social behaviour files, responsive repairs system, voids, gas servicing certificates, aids and adaptations files, and complaint files;
 - stock tour;
 - visit to a sheltered and extra care housing scheme and Bradeley Retirement Village;
 - visit to a regeneration scheme in partnership with Renew North Staffordshire;
 - inspection of capital works, void properties, adaptations and a new build development; and
 - examination of SHA's website.

Appendix 3 – 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)

Eco-terrace

- 1 SHA, in partnership with RENEW North Staffordshire, Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, the Housing Corporation and Axis Design Architects, are using a menu of options to improve the energy efficiency of six terraced houses through refurbishment to level 4/5 of the code for sustainable homes. It is designed to test how these popular homes in North Staffordshire, which are traditionally energy inefficient, can be made energy efficient and meet customer aspirations. Measures include energy preservation, a green approach to building materials and water conservation. The first two properties have been completed and used as show homes and been visited by many local people and housing organisations. More information is available at www.ecoterrace.co.uk.

Health and safety checks

- 2 SHA maximises the opportunity of access to check other health and safety issues during the gas safety visit. Checks are included to ensure customers do not sleep in a room with a gas appliance, solid fuel heating systems are swept on an annual basis, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are checked, un-vented hot water systems are working correctly, and flume testing of condensing boiler systems. In addition, SHA ensures all immersion heater tanks are fully supported and contain fail safe cut off systems in line with guidance from the Health and Safety Executive.

The Audit Commission

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, covering the £180 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.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
