

Communities Scotland
Inspection report

North Lanarkshire Council

August 2006

Contents

	Pages
1. Introduction	1-2
2. Context	3-6
3. Housing management	7-31
4. Property maintenance	32-49
5. Homelessness	50-74
6. Recommendations for improvement action	75-76
7. Next steps	77
Appendix 1 Sources of evidence	
Appendix 2 Examples of positive practice	
Appendix 3 Analysis of Homeless decisions by First Stop Shop	
Glossary	

1. Introduction

About this inspection

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

How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

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

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to tenants, staff and elected members of the council;
- asked other partner organisations for their views;
- visited homes and local areas;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
- examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
- analysed published performance and financial information.

1.4 We have awarded grades for the housing management, property maintenance and homelessness services. This is what our grades mean:

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

The inspection team

- 1.5 The inspection team was led by Tony Cain (Inspection Manager) and included Janet Buchanan, Roisin Harris, Dougie McIntyre, Lindsay Stother and Lynn Sweeney (Inspectors). Carolanne Quigley (Good Practice Co-ordinator) and Jean Harper (Inspector) assisted the inspection team as part of their training. We were on site between 23 May and 28 June 2005. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

Responding to this inspection

- 1.6 We expect all inspected bodies to make the summary of this report available to all their tenants, report our findings to other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

2. Context

Geography

- 2.1 North Lanarkshire covers an area of 183 square miles and is one of the largest Local Authorities in Scotland. It is located to the East of the City of Glasgow. The area covers a number of distinct communities. The main centres of population are Airdrie, Bellshill, Coatbridge, Cumbernauld, Motherwell and Wishaw. The area also includes a number of smaller settlements including Shotts, Kilsyth and Moodiesburn and a number of villages, more rural in character, many of which were former mining communities.
- 2.2 The unitary authority of North Lanarkshire was created in April 1996. This brought together three former District Councils of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, Monklands and Motherwell. Each of the previous Councils had its own distinct character and approach to service delivery. Creating one effective service delivery organisation has been a significant challenge for North Lanarkshire Council over the past nine years.

Population

- 2.3 The latest census figures indicate the population of North Lanarkshire to be 327,600.
- 2.4 The population is projected to decline to 314,400 by 2007. However the number of households has risen steeply over the last 15 years, there were 132,200 individual households in 2000. In common with the rest of Scotland this rise in households includes significant increases in pensioners and single person households.
- 2.5 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population in North Lanarkshire make up 1.3% of the population; this is lower than the figure for Scotland as a whole of 2%. The largest minority ethnic group is the Pakistani community which makes up 0.6% of the total population.

Economic Factors

- 2.6 North Lanarkshire has experienced significant inward investment and economic renewal in recent years including the creation of a number of enterprise zones and significant investment in new transport infrastructure. However the area continues to suffer from the legacy of the decline in iron, steel and coal industries. This has had an impact on

levels of employment and deprivation and have also left large areas of vacant and derelict land and areas of poor ground conditions impacting on development potential.

- 2.7 The unemployment rate for the area is 4.39%, 0.42% higher than for Scotland as a whole. In addition, 10.54% of the working age population are permanently sick or disabled, significantly higher than the 7.44% for Scotland as a whole. The area also has significantly lower levels of average earnings than for Scotland as a whole. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 places North Lanarkshire second behind Glasgow in terms of income and employment deprivation. Out of 70 Council wards, 31 contain areas that are ranked in the 10% worst deprived in Scotland.

Social Housing Supply

- 2.8 North Lanarkshire Council is the largest Council landlord in Scotland and in 2001 34.8% of all housing in the area was Council owned, this compared with an average of 25.8% for the rest of Scotland. Other social rented landlords supply only 4.4% of housing compared with 5.9% across the rest of Scotland.
- 2.9 There has been a significant decrease in the availability of social housing in the area since the introduction of right to buy¹. Over 14,000 properties have been sold by the Council since 1986.

Council Membership

- 2.10 Currently 70 elected members serve on the Council and its current political make up is as follows:
- 53 Labour
 - 12 Scottish National Party
 - 3 Independent
 - 1 Independent Scottish Nationalist
 - 1 Labour and Co-operative Party
- 2.11 The Council has a labour administration and is managed through a committee structure including seven service committees reporting to the full Council through a Policy and Resources Committee. The Council has also established two Scrutiny Panels to improve monitoring and service performance and policy administration.

Organisation of the Council

- 2.12 The Council delivers services through seven departments. Housing forms part of the Housing and Property Services Department. Over 520 staff deliver services through 10 First Stop Shops and 8 neighbourhood offices located in all the main population centres. In addition the Council has six specialist Tenancy Support Teams, and a dedicated Anti Social Behaviour Task Force and a team of Community Wardens. Specialist design and technical services are provided through a Design Services Division. The service has achieved and retained both Charter Mark² and Investors in People³ accreditation in recent years.
- 2.13 The Council has also entered into three innovative partnership agreements with the private sector for the provision of most of its response repairs and gas and heating maintenance work. These are major corporate initiatives delivering building works across a number of departments.
- 2.14 There are 20 Registered Tenants' Organisations (RTOs), with a further 32 recognised groups. The Council also funds a Development Support Project to work with the Coatbridge Federation of Tenant and Resident Associations and other tenants groups to support tenants participation and develop an area wide federation of tenants organisations.

Homelessness in North Lanarkshire

- 2.15 Homeless applications in North Lanarkshire have increased significantly over the last 4 years, with the Council receiving just over 4,000 applications in 2004/05. The scale of this increase, 60%, is greater than the general trend across Scotland, where the increase has been 18% over the same period. However, the number of individual households applying as a percentage of all households in North Lanarkshire Council for 2003/04 was 2.25% which is comparable to that for the whole of Scotland (2.29%).
- 2.16 In addition to an increasing number of applications there are other factors that affect the Council's provision of homelessness services:

¹ see glossary

² see glossary

³ see glossary

- In 2003 there was a reconfiguration of homelessness services with six Housing support teams introduced to work in partnership with the First Stop Shops to provide a range of homelessness services across North Lanarkshire Council.
- The proportion of applicants being assessed as in priority need has risen by around a quarter from a figure significantly below the rate for Scotland to one just under the level for the rest of Scotland.
- In line with Scotland, the greatest numbers of applications made in 2003/04 were from single homeless people, amounting to 63% of all applications in this period.

Key facts

	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005*
Houses owned	44,578	42,831	41,109
No of applicants on waiting list as at 31 March		16,576	19,714
Employees	630.5	551	555
HRA Gross Capital Expenditure (incl. Capital Funded from Revenue (CFCR))	24,500,000	24,600,000	38,700,000
Total possible rental income	91,108,000	90,878,000	91,319,000
% of Rental income from Housing Benefit (HB)	57.48%	57.86%	58.92%
% of tenants in receipt of HB	60%	62%	63%
% of Rent Arrears	5.2%	5.3%	5.14%
Average weekly rent	£39.29	£40.86	£42.49
Average rent increase	4%	4%	4%
Houses relet	4,775	4,484	3645
Responsive repairs ⁴ carried out	126,951	104,417	98,932
Maintenance spend per house Inc cost of service	£1,126.11	£1,192.18	£1,643.44
Supervision and management spend per house	£404	£431	£465
Right To Buy sales	1,792	1,308	1,256
Homeless Presentations	2,669	3,113	4,005
No. of Evictions	121	96	121

Sources: North Lanarkshire Council's Inspection Submission and SE Statistical Bulletins

*as at 30 June 2004

⁴ see glossary

3. Housing management

3.1 The grade awarded for housing management is:

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

How good is the service?

Access

Social landlords should provide open, fair and equal access to their housing lists⁵ and should work with partners to simplify and maximise access to housing.

3.2 North Lanarkshire Council operates an open housing list; anyone aged 16 and over can apply at any time.

3.3 The Council has 10 First Stop Shops (FSS) and 8 neighbourhood offices. These are well located and provide an excellent environment for the delivery of services to members of the public. All FSS have disabled access, hearing loops as standard and the use of text phones is also promoted. First Stop Shop staff and standby officers are trained in the use of language line⁶ and posters are on display in the reception areas. A number of staff have also been trained in sign language.

3.4 The Council promotes access to its housing service in a number of ways including:

- publishing a range of publicity material including a leaflet setting out its allocations policy;
- providing information on housing options through its website “Northweb” including taking requests for housing application forms;
- advertising services in a number of community languages;
- providing application forms and other information in different languages and font sizes on request; and
- “North Lanarkshire TV” information service relayed to FSS reception areas.

⁵ see glossary

⁶ see glossary

- 3.5 The Council is also working with 19 local registered social landlords (RSLs)⁷ to improve access through the introduction of a common housing register (CHR)⁸ by 2006. The CHR will also allow applicants to apply on line.
- 3.6 The Council includes applications in its general correspondence target of 10 working days. Applicants may not be aware of this. The Council does not systematically monitor or report on how quickly it is putting people onto its list. The Council operates a “date-based” housing list and the date of receipt of an application for housing is the date from which the application will become effective, regardless of the processing date.
- 3.7 The Council acknowledges applications and gives applicants an indication of their position in the housing list but does not have a formal process for carrying out “prospects” interviews following an application for housing, to help applicants understand how quickly they are likely to be offered a house or what other options may be available to them. However, staff are able to discuss these issues with applicants on request and the acknowledgement letter invites applicants to contact their FSS to discuss their application. Applicants appearing on the housing list for particular areas have also been invited to attend FSS open days at the weekends to generate interest in more difficult to let properties and to allow applicants an opportunity to discuss their housing applications outwith normal office hours. This is a good approach to promoting access to the service. However, because of the way the Council manages its allocations process it is not always possible to give applicants a realistic assessment of their prospects of being allocated a suitable house in their preferred area.
- 3.8 The Council is not currently monitoring the ethnicity of those applying for housing. The Council advised us that this was a temporary situation and that it would be addressed through work on the CHR. There are also gaps in its information on the ethnicity of people it has housed. The lack of ethnicity monitoring of new housing applicants means that the Council is not able to assess whether black and minority ethnic groups are getting equal access to housing and may impact on its ability to comply with the terms of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000.

⁷ see glossary

⁸ see glossary

- 3.9 The most recent review of housing lists was carried out in 2003. North Lanarkshire Council had intended to carry out a review of its housing list in May 2005; however, this work has been delayed because of ongoing work to review the allocations policy.
- 3.10 The Council's published allocation policy sets out its approach to suspending housing applications for antisocial behaviour, breaches of tenancy and rent arrears. Following a suspension, the policy is clear that date of application should be amended to the date the suspension was lifted, this has the effect of removing any date based priority an applicant has accrued and acts as a double penalty. The published policy does not allow for discretion on this procedure. The Council has recently reviewed its approach to suspensions and now monitors them on a monthly basis. It has a relatively low level of suspensions. The number of suspended applicants has reduced from 453 in 2003/04 to 127 in 2004/05. However, we reviewed all 177 suspended cases at the time of inspection and found a range of weaknesses in the Council's approach including:
- in one FSS over half the suspensions had been made in error;
 - two applications from minority ethnic applicants that had been suspended for over six months pending further information, which in one case had already been provided; and
 - the Council does not always apply its policy of amending the date of application when suspensions are lifted and does not record who makes these decisions and why.
- 3.11 North Lanarkshire Council also cancels applications for housing. Cancellations are not covered by the Council's allocations policy and there are no published rules for cancelling applications. Applicants have a statutory right to be placed on the housing list and good practice states that the Council should only exclude or cancel an application in a very limited set of circumstances:
- where the applicant has requested to be removed from the list;
 - the death of the applicant; and
 - repeated failure of the applicant to respond to correspondence, including during a review of the housing list.
- 3.12 We reviewed 277 cancelled applications and found a number of weaknesses in the Council's management of this aspect of the service including:

- when cancelling applications from those living care of friends or relatives or with no fixed abode, the Council is not always taking into account the difficulty such applicants may have in keeping in touch;
- little information is recorded as to why an application has been cancelled or what attempts were made to contact the applicant;
- some applications were cancelled on the basis of information provided by a third party; and
- practices varied across offices.

3.13 The Council writes to applicants to confirm that their application has been cancelled and advises them of their right to appeal. However it does not monitor or report on the number of appeals or their outcomes.

3.14 The Council is good at promoting access to its service and the availability of housing. However, it has weaknesses in the way it offers prospects advice to applicants and in its approach to suspensions and cancellations.

Meeting need and maximising choice

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

3.15 North Lanarkshire Council describes its allocations policy as based on “date and tenure⁹”. Applicants are prioritised on the basis of their date of application (as amended as a result of any suspensions) and divided into six categories reflecting the tenure of the housing applicant as follows:

- Waiting (any applicant who is not a tenant or home owner including tied tenants);
- Medical (tenants and owners only);
- Transfer (tenants of North Lanarkshire Council or any other social landlord);
- Statutory Homeless (homeless applicants who qualify under the relevant legislation);
- General Needs (Owner occupiers or tenants of private landlords); and
- HOMES¹⁰ (Tenants of any other council seeking to move to North Lanarkshire).

The Waiting and Transfer lists are further divided into sub groups related to household size and type. The Council’s policy also includes a quota of lets for each group other than homeless applicants who have a statutory priority for rehousing.

⁹ see glossary

- 3.16 The quota for each category varies between First Stop Shops and is based on housing list demand. In April 2005 the Council set an operational target across all FSS of 70% of allocations to statutory homeless applicants. The reasons behind this are discussed in more detail in Section 5 below.
- 3.17 The Council carried out an assessment of its policy in August 2004 and concluded that:
- the Council does not give priority to applicants in housing need;
 - the Council has not clearly defined housing need in the allocation policy;
 - the Council's definition of housing need is not supported by a robust analysis of the needs of tenants, applicants and potential applicants; and
 - the Council's definition of housing need does not fully accommodate the statutory definitions.
- 3.18 The Council is reviewing its approach to allocations with a view to having a revised policy in place by September 2006. We identified a number of more specific weaknesses including the fact that the Council does not undertake an assessment of housing needs reflecting the statutory reasonable preference categories. Whilst some of the groups used reflect aspects of housing need, there are some significant limitations on this. In addition:
- only existing tenants or owner occupiers can be placed on the medical list;
 - the definition of medical need is limited to physical disabilities;
 - where an applicant moves between categories, for example onto the medical list, their date of application will be updated to the date of the change;
 - the "transfer overcrowding" list can include applicants who are not overcrowded; and
 - applicants with the most pressing housing needs, outwith those who have been assessed by the Council as homeless, are not being identified within the categories and prioritised for housing.
- 3.19 North Lanarkshire Council's allocations policy contains a number of situations where officers can exercise discretion to make allocations to some one other than the longest standing qualifying applicant. These include:
- specified properties agreed by committee, for example all tower blocks in Motherwell;
 - any house that has been refused three times; and

¹⁰ see glossary

- situations where a let would allow “best use” of the housing stock. For example where moving an existing tenant would release a property needed by another applicant.
- 3.20 We reviewed 129 allocations selected from all 10 First Stop Shops. We found a number of significant weaknesses in the Council’s approach to administering the process of letting its houses. These include:
- the Council does not record any of the key decisions it makes in letting houses, why particular applicants have been allocated a property or why other applicants have been bypassed;
 - key elements of the allocations policy, including redating applications after suspension and redating applications where two offers have been refused, are not applied in all cases and the reasons for this are not recorded; and
 - the interpretation and application of the policy varies between First Stop Shops.
- 3.21 We found a significant number of allocations that might have been made to a different applicant had the Council’s policy been followed or if the administration of the housing list had been better. We also found one multi storey block of mainstream housing where the Council seeks to allocate flats to older applicants, in the first instance. In 2004/05 57% of allocations to this block were made to people over the age of 50. This approach is a breach of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 requirement that social landlords do not take account of the age of an applicant in the allocation of housing, except where the housing is specifically intended for older people.
- 3.22 In addition, where potential applicants attend a FSS open day, staff will assess their suitability for the properties available by interview. If they are considered suitable, officers can arrange an accompanied viewing, allocate and sign up the new tenant on the day. This approach has proved to be successful in letting a number of the Council’s difficult to let properties. However, we were advised that if staff believe that an applicant is unsuitable for a particular property they will not be housed through this initiative, despite having declared their interest. The Council does not inform the unsuccessful applicant of its reasons for not proceeding with an allocation or keep this information on its records and the assessment of suitability is entirely at the discretion of the interviewing officer.

- 3.23 There is no procedural guidance manual available to officers on how the policy should operate; how and in what circumstances discretion should be used or on the actions and decisions that should be recorded. We saw clear evidence of officers attempting to interpret the policy and exercise discretion to meet the particular needs of applicants whose needs they had been made aware of. However, we found no single understanding as to how the policy is intended to operate. As a result the Council can not demonstrate that it is treating all applicants fairly and equitably.
- 3.24 The Council's tenants' survey shows that 13% of respondents were unhappy with its allocations policy and practice. Around 8% of all complaints about the housing service related to allocation matters. A number of tenants, tenants' groups and third parties we spoke to were unclear about what the Council's allocations policy is and how allocations are made. They expressed concern about how the allocations process operates, how decisions are made in selecting new tenants and the extent to which it operates fairly.
- 3.25 The Council's allocations policy contains a number of limitations on the choices that applicants can make. These include:
- selecting only 6 of 170 allocations areas;
 - applicants will normally be offered flats or maisonettes in the first instance;
 - where an applicant changes any of their choices these will not be effective for 28 days and no further changes can be made for 3 months (though this is not always applied and this does not apply to cases where an applicant's circumstances have changed); and
 - applicants who refuse two offers will be redated from the date of the second refusal (though this is not always applied).
- 3.26 The Council has nomination agreements in place with local RSLs that give applicants a further range of housing options. The number of successful nominations has increased by 60% in 2003/04 to 78% in 2004/05. This is a positive way to meet need and widen choice.
- 3.27 The Council regularly gives elected members a list of the names and addresses of people to whom it has allocated a house, indicating the category from which the applicant has come, including homeless and medical groups. This practice breaches individuals' confidentiality.

3.28 The Council is poor at housing those in most need and providing choice to applicants, which is a significant weakness. The Council's published allocations policy does not fully reflect how houses are allocated, does not give significant priority to those in most housing need and is not well understood by tenants and third parties. The Council's administration of the lettings process is also poor. There is no procedural guidance manual available setting out how the policy should be operated, discretion is used frequently and inconsistently and we saw instances of the written rules not being applied. There is little or no recording of decisions relating to specific lets or the bypassing of applicants. Some applicants in housing need are being housed but it is not clear that houses are being let to those in the most need. The approach lacks transparency and the Council may not be able to demonstrate that it is treating all applicants fairly. The Council is aware of some of these issues and is currently reviewing its allocations policy.

Sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness

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

3.29 North Lanarkshire Council has achieved a sign up of 95% of its tenants to Scottish Secure Tenancy Agreements (SST)¹¹. The Council also has a small number of Short Scottish Secure Tenancies (SSST)¹², 17 in 2003/04, the majority of which are the result of the Council obtaining an Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)¹³ against one of its tenants. The Council has a good approach to identifying and implementing support in these instances and almost all of the SSSTs created in 2003/04 have subsequently reconverted to SSTs. Where appropriate support continues to be available to these tenants, reducing the risk of further difficulties.

3.30 The Council has a good tenancy sign up process. Sign up interviews are used to advise tenants of their rights and obligations and to provide a comprehensive tenant information pack. The Council has introduced settling in visits and new tenants are visited within 14 working days of their taking up a tenancy. In the period from April to December 2004 the Council achieved this target for 81% of its new tenancies.

¹¹ see glossary

¹² see glossary

¹³ see glossary

- 3.31 In 2004/05, 386 tenants abandoned their tenancies, this represent 10.7% of all tenancies terminated during that year. The numbers vary across the First Stop Shops from 1% to 36%. The Council has a good awareness of the issues that contribute to abandonments and the reasons for the variations across offices. It has introduced a range of measures to support and sustain tenancies. The number of abandoned tenancies has fallen by over 12% since 2003/04.
- 3.32 North Lanarkshire Council takes eviction action only as a last resort. The Council's approach to evictions was reviewed by a member led "Scrutiny Panel" leading to a number of improvements in approach. This review was a good example of action to address service weakness and the implementation and monitoring of service improvements.
- 3.33 In 2004/05 the Council issued 16,311 Notice of Proceedings (NOPs)¹⁴, initiated court action against 1,921 tenants, resulting in 856 eviction decrees and 121 evictions. A further 23 tenants abandoned their tenancy following the granting of a decree. The number of evictions shows a consistent pattern of about 121 in 2004/05 and 2002/03 apart from a dip to 96 in 2003/04.
- 3.34 The number of NOPs issued shows a slight increase from 16,188 in 2003/4 to 16,311 in 2004/05. A contributing factor to this high number is the unnecessary renewal of NOPs to tenants who are maintaining arrears repayment agreements. However, the number of cases proceeding to court has dropped by just over 25% from 2,582 in 2003/4 to 1,921 in 2004/05. Court cases resulting in an eviction decree have decreased by over 14.5% from 1,001 in 2002/3 to 856 in 2004/5, and post decree abandonments have fallen by over 45% from 42 in 2002/03 to 23 in 2004/05.
- 3.35 The Council's eviction rate for 2004/5 is 0.35%¹⁵ which is a slight rise from the 2003/04 figure of 0.29% but lower than the 0.37% of 2002/03. Although the eviction rate varies across offices, all show a consistent low level well below the 2003/04 Scottish figure of 0.59%¹⁶.

¹⁴ see glossary

¹⁵ The eviction rate is the number of evictions, including post-decree abandonments, as a percentage of total housing stock.

¹⁶ Updated statistical information provided by North Lanarkshire in the Inspection Submission was used to calculate the eviction rate

- 3.36 The Council makes good use of the alternatives to eviction. Short Scottish Secure Tenancies (SSSTs) have been used for both antisocial behaviour and arrears cases. Sixteen SSSTs for antisocial behaviour have successfully been restored to full tenancy status. The use of SSSTs in a small number of arrears cases has only recently been introduced and is too early to evaluate its effectiveness in this area.
- 3.37 The Council is not consistently offering new tenancies to those who remain in their property after a decree has been granted. This could mean that up to 700 tenants were left without a signed tenancy agreement¹⁷ in 2004/05. The Council is aware of this weakness but does not yet have firm plans to address it. The Council has, however, recently undertaken work to improve its understanding of who is being evicted, the costs involved and the final outcomes for former tenants including the number who subsequently make an application for housing under the homeless persons legislation.
- 3.38 North Lanarkshire Council has a good approach in helping tenants maintain their tenancy and avoiding eviction. Staff are aware of the issues which can put a tenancy at risk, and have developed a very effective response involving a wide range of internal and external services and agencies. The Council has improved its management of evictions but some weaknesses remain in the use of NOPs and the management of occupancy following the granting of a decree.

¹⁷ see glossary

Quality of neighbourhoods

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

- 3.39 North Lanarkshire covers a wide area with a range of diverse and distinct communities from high demand areas to areas requiring regeneration and investment, with problems ranging from less popular locations to house types with a high turnover. The neighbourhoods we visited during our inspection were generally well kept and had little graffiti or litter. In a small number we found evidence of vandalism in areas with recognised problems. The Council's 2004 tenant satisfaction survey indicated satisfaction levels with the condition of neighbourhoods had increased from 45% in 2003 to 56.9%, however levels of dissatisfaction also rose over the same period from 23.6% to 27.3%.
- 3.40 North Lanarkshire Council identified a need to improve the quality of its neighbourhoods following the analysis of the tenant satisfaction information and a Scottish Housing Best Value Network ¹⁸peer review¹⁹ of estate services. The Council consulted with tenants, tenant groups, staff and other key stakeholders to develop a strategic approach to estate management. This approach includes:
- a range of service standards and performance information;
 - tenant led estate inspections;
 - estate based initiatives;
 - estate services action plans; and
 - community wardens.
- 3.41 These service improvements are supported by a comprehensive "Your Estates Your Services" manual developed in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders including local members, front line staff and tenants. This reviewed approach to estate management is also complimented by regular liaison meetings and joint working with a range of organisations, agencies and other corporate services involved in North Lanarkshire's communities.

¹⁸ see glossary

¹⁹ Peer Review – A service assessment carried out by Housing Officers of other Councils

- 3.43 Discussions with tenants and tenants' groups highlighted high levels of satisfaction with the concierge²⁰, garden service and close cleaning services. However, the close cleaning service is not available to tenants in closes shared with owner occupied properties. Yet, in some closes where tenants purchased their home after the close cleaning service was introduced, owners receive this service with no service charge. This is an inequality in service provision. The Council is aware of this and established a review group in 2003 to consider the issues. The group was due to finalise its report shortly after our inspection.
- 3.44 There are 41 sheltered housing communities in North Lanarkshire providing a range of sheltered, amenity and wheelchair housing. Our discussions with tenants indicated high levels of satisfaction with the facilities, support, activities and warden services which the Council provides. The Council commissioned research into service users' views during 2004. This study highlighted similar findings to the inspection team in most areas but concluded that some service users were unclear about what level and type of service they can expect in this type of property.
- 3.45 North Lanarkshire has considerable experience in addressing low demand and other problems through community regeneration. It has had significant success in multi agency initiatives in areas like Old Monkland and Petersburn. This has recently been recognised through a UK Housing Award for the work in Old Monklands. However, in other areas including Forgewood and Gowkthrapple recent initiatives have proved less effective. The Council has sought to build on this experience by developing comprehensive turnover and demand assessments across its stock and carrying out detailed option appraisal studies in those areas prioritised for action. This is supported by a strong corporate approach to the development and implementation of its regeneration strategy including a consultation strategy based on early engagement and partnership with tenants and residents. The Council has also appointed six area regeneration managers to lead the process of community consultation and partnership working.
- 3.46 North Lanarkshire Council's commitment to tackling antisocial behaviour is demonstrated through its well developed and comprehensive approach including a strong focus on multi agency working. The Council has developed an excellent range of

²⁰ see glossary

services including the all tenure, area wide Anti Social Task Force (ASTF). This and other related initiatives will be supported by the allocation of over £8,000,000 over the next 4 years by the Scottish Executive. Current service provision includes preventative and enforcement action using a variety of approaches including:

- Good Neighbour Agreements for all tenants;
- a local office response using recently reviewed guidelines and procedures;
- referral to the ASTF for all RSL and private sector incidents in addition to the more complicated and serious cases involving Council tenants;
- strategies that include “hot spot” intervention;
- use of a wide range of mechanisms from Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), interim ASBOs and Unacceptable Behaviour Agreements (UBAs);
- a mediation service; and
- support service for witnesses and victims of antisocial behaviour.

3.47 In 2004/5 the Council received 1,860 complaints of antisocial behaviour covering the whole range and seriousness of antisocial behaviour. Local office referrals account for nearly half of the ASTF caseload of 1,497 in 2004; other referral sources include local housing associations, owner-occupiers, private tenants, the police and elected members. The Council recognised a variance in reporting levels across offices and put in place initiatives funded by the Scottish Executive Better Neighbourhood Services (BNSF) and Building Strong Safe and Attractive Communities (BSSAC) initiatives. The areas targeted for this funding were areas showing trends of either over or under reporting. The actions taken by local offices and ASTF in 2004/5 include 271 initial warnings, 65 NOPS, 142 ASBO interviews, 29 ASBOs, 10 SSSTs, 1 eviction decree and 12 mediation cases. The council has also received 213 referrals for support to victims and witnesses.

3.48 The cases we reviewed generally demonstrated a prompt response, appropriate action and escalation of action, access to, and use of, support and multi agency input. Liaison with local offices and multi agency working is a key aspect in the Council’s approach. This is promoted through service level agreements²¹ with corporate and service partners and the information protocol with Strathclyde Police. The Council also recognises the importance of tailoring the approach to an individual case and complainant’s needs.

²¹ see glossary

Service users showed an overall satisfaction rate of over 90% with the work of the ASTF.

- 3.49 Case reviews and discussions with staff highlight that although good contact was maintained with complainants' they did not always receive confirmation of any action that had been taken. The 2004 tenant survey highlights over 30% dissatisfaction with the response to antisocial complaints. This gap has been recognised and addressed at the area office level with the introduction of the new procedures and standard letters as part of the "Your Estates Your Services" manual. In addition, to compliment the introduction of the new antisocial behaviour reporting and case management system, a review of the ASTF guidelines and the development of a manual and standard letters is in progress.
- 3.50 The ASTF prepares a monthly report providing a clear profile of the types, categories, response and actions taken on cases across the authority. This information is used to identify trends and hot spot areas that require intervention. We saw excellent examples of multi agency initiatives working with communities to identify problems, define an action plan and provide feedback on progress via newsletters.
- 3.51 The Council has been successful in securing "Building Strong Safe and Attractive Communities" (BSSAC) funding for a range of projects including the Community Wardens and Support Workers to support victims and witnesses of antisocial behaviour. Tenants we spoke to and the case files reviewed highlighted early successes for both projects. Further funding has been secured for service developments including the recruitment of mobile wardens who will be involved in "hot spot" intervention and areas not currently covered by the warden service.
- 3.52 Part 1 of the Antisocial Behaviour Act (2004) places a duty upon Local Authorities and Chief Constables to prepare a joint antisocial behaviour strategy. The development of North Lanarkshire's strategy demonstrates a good example of strong corporate leadership; promoting and facilitating multi agency working and responding to wider issues including childrens' services, youth justice and the environment. The detailed information collated by the ASTF is a key aspect of the Housing Service's input into the strategy and the development of the outcome agreements.
- 3.53 North Lanarkshire Council has a good approach to managing the quality of its neighbourhoods. The Council has also made good progress in developing its approach

to community regeneration and has developed an excellent approach to responding to antisocial behaviour. The recently introduced “Your Estates, Your Services” manual should also provide a strong focus on improving the effectiveness of estates management services. However, overall satisfaction with the quality of neighbourhoods amongst tenants remains relatively low and levels of expressed dissatisfaction have risen in recent years.

Responsiveness to tenants

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

3.54 North Lanarkshire Council agreed its first tenant participation strategy in 2003 after extensive consultation with tenants and tenants’ groups. It has taken a measured approach to developing participation structures and has made good progress in implementing its strategy. The area wide strategy is supported by local action plans for each of the First Stop Shops. These include three core actions:

- monthly meetings with the chairs of local tenants and residents groups;
- two tenant led estate walkabouts in each area each year; and
- the publication of regular news letters.

In addition some local offices have included specific local actions agreed with tenants’ groups. The Council has also recently introduced joint staff/tenant training sessions in conjunction with the regular local office training sessions. This shows a strong commitment to building confidence and strengthening communication with tenants’ groups.

3.55 The implementation of the core actions in each area has had a significant impact on improving confidence in the Council’s commitment to participation and communication between staff and local tenant representatives. The Council is also in the process of agreeing a code of practice for tenant participation and consultation more generally.

3.56 North Lanarkshire Council uses a good range of consultation methods including an annual tenant conference, an annual tenants satisfaction survey; service user feedback and regular discussions with tenants’ and residents’ groups. The Council has also involved tenants’ representatives in a number of service development groups including those looking at allocations and antisocial behaviour policies.

- 3.57 The Council has in place a customer charter incorporating a good range of customer care standards, taking into account accessibility, equal opportunities and performance targets. These standards are published and advertised in local offices and on the Council's website. Staff have also undertaken diversity training and been involved in a training programme about race relations and the introduction of the Council's Race Equality Action Plan.
- 3.58 However, whilst consultation on some specific areas of the service including antisocial behaviour, the close cleaning and garden maintenance services have shown high levels of satisfaction overall levels of tenant satisfaction are low and levels of dissatisfaction have risen. The 2004 survey showed that 62% were satisfied with the service overall, similar to the level reported by the Council's 2003 survey. Reported dissatisfaction, however, rose from 14% to 20.3% over the same period. The Council is aware of these issues is in the process of preparing an action plan to address them.
- 3.59 The Council provides good practical and financial support to registered tenants' organisations and consults with them regularly. Tenants' representatives have been involved in a number of policy reviews including estate management and antisocial behaviour and have been invited to take part in the review of the allocations policy. The Council is also gathering the views of its housing list applicants as part of this process, which is positive. The development of a Council wide tenants' federation is also being promoted through the well established Coatbridge Tenants' Federation. This process and the overall development of tenant participation is supported by an independent support and advice service funded by the Council.
- 3.60 The Council has complied with its statutory obligation to consult tenants on proposed rent increases. The consultation with tenants is included in the annual budget briefing sessions, and tenants' conference. The annual tenant satisfaction survey also includes questions about tenants' views on priorities for service improvements that could be funded from increased rents. However, overall the tone of consultation on rents tends to be more about briefing on the budget and identifying priorities rather than the level of the increase.
- 3.61 The Council has a well publicised formal complaints procedure. Formal complaints are carefully monitored, classified and reviewed both on a local, divisional and Council wide

basis. The complaints are analysed to identify trends, gaps in service or problems that need to be addressed both in the short and long term. However, the Council does not record or monitor informal complaints. This gap was identified by the "Charter Mark" accreditation review in 2004. The Council was in the process of developing a recording and monitoring process at the time of our inspection with the intention that it should be implemented during 2005.

- 3.62 A significant number of tenants raise housing issues through their local elected member. Individual members adopt differing approaches to raising these with housing staff including using the Council's formal member enquiry system. Most, however, contact area offices direct seeking information or requesting action by staff. Staff are responsive to these requests but do not consistently record the details of the enquiry, the action taken or the information provided to members. As a result the Council is not able to use the information from member enquires to improve services and in some circumstances may not be able to demonstrate that it has handled confidential information relating to tenants and housing applicants appropriately.
- 3.63 A number of the tenants and tenants' groups we spoke to expressed some doubts about the strength of the Council's overall commitment to consultation and involvement and the extent to which their views were likely to impact on decision making within the Council. However, all the tenants' groups were of the view that the consultation and responsiveness to their views had improved over the past 18 months though some local offices were regarded as responding less positively than others. Some tenants and third parties also expressed concerns about the overall level of resources being provided to support the development of the participation strategy.
- 3.64 North Lanarkshire Council has a fair approach to responding to tenants. It has made good progress in implementing its tenant participation strategy and confidence in the process amongst tenants' groups has improved significantly. However, there are a number of gaps in the Council's overall approach to responding to tenants and the overall level of confidence that tenants have in the Council's commitment to participation is not high.

Is the service managed for improvement?

Resource management and efficiency

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

3.65 North Lanarkshire Council provides a good range of ways for tenants to pay their rent. This includes being able to pay in person at any First Stop Shop, Municipal Bank or local post office, online via the internet, post, direct debit, standing order and by telephone. Payment is accepted in cash, cheque or credit/debit card. Mandates for both standing order and direct debit are available and can be downloaded from the Council's website. Information on how and where tenants can pay their rent is provided through posters and a specific leaflet displayed in Council offices and on the website which gives locations of First Stop Shops and the nearest post office. Tenants also have the option of paying their rent on a weekly basis.

3.66 The table below summarises North Lanarkshire Council's performance in collecting rent arrears.

	At March 2003		At March 2004		At March 2005*
	North Lanarkshire	National	North Lanarkshire	National	North Lanarkshire
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	5.2%	7.4%	5.3%	7.9%	4.9%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	3.5%	4.8%	3.3%	4.9%	2.99%
Total former tenant arrears (£)	£1,961,467	n/a	£2,409,580	n/a	£2,412,837
Rent arrears written off (£)	£538,692	n/a	£767,515	n/a	£581,965

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

* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection

3.67 North Lanarkshire Council has been a consistently good performer in the collection of rent in recent years. The level of current tenant arrears has fallen from 5.5% in 2001/02 to 5.3% in 2003/04 and shows continued improvement to 4.9% in 2004/05. In 2003/04 North Lanarkshire Council was ranked 2nd within the urban group and 10th overall in Scotland and is well below the Scottish figure of 7.9%.

3.68 A similar improving performance is noted for serious arrears cases with an improvement from 3.6% in 2001/02 to 3.3% in 2003/04 and 2.99% in 2004/05. The Council's ranking

is 3rd in the urban group and 12th in Scotland. This good performance is well below the Scottish average of 4.9%.

- 3.69 Performance in both overall arrears levels and serious cases varies between offices, however, the Council has a good understanding of why these variations occur and all offices achieve a consistently good performance well below the Scottish figure for both current and serious arrears cases.
- 3.70 The Council's management of current arrears is well developed, responsive to tenants and effective. It is based on a clear and comprehensive policy and procedures manual, a good approach to target setting at all levels and strong management of performance against targets. The Council also provides a range of opportunities and services to maximise tenants' benefit income and access to support services. Joint working between benefits staff and those working on rent arrears is consistently strong and effective.
- 3.71 We found the Council has clear and comprehensive records of its arrears cases. Good practice is consistently applied with prompt early action being taken with an initial letter of an appropriate tone being issued within two weeks of the arrears arising. Regular and sustained contact is maintained with tenants through various means from office interviews, home visits, telephone and text calls and standard letters. In addition we also saw clear evidence of active case management and performance review against targets at all levels from front line staff to divisional managers ensuring a consistent approach across the Council area.
- 3.72 However, although there are a good range of referral mechanisms for Tenancy Support, Social Work and outside agencies, the Council acknowledges that it does not monitor their effectiveness. There is also an inconsistent approach across offices to the liaison and feedback between the services and agencies, from regular meetings recording the cases discussed to regular informal contact. Whilst we saw evidence that those tenants at risk of eviction by the Council were being identified and referred for support where appropriate, arrangements in respect of other vulnerable tenants were less well developed with limited sharing of information between support teams and FSS staff. The Council is aware of this issue and has plans to address it.

- 3.73 The level of former tenant arrears rose from £1,961,467 in 2002/03 to £2,409,580 in 2003/04. The figure for 2004/05 has remained close to this level. In addition to representing a substantial loss of income this is having a direct impact on the ability of former tenants with arrears to access the Council's housing as discussed in paragraph 3.10 above. The Council recognised this as an area of weakness and centralised the management of former tenant arrears to the Management Initiative Team (MIT) in 2004. Since this approach was adopted the recovery of former tenant arrears and write off procedures have been reviewed and targets for the reduction of former tenant arrears have been established. Early actions by the MIT has also resulted in greater consistency in the quality of tenancy termination information across offices and improved liaison with the specialist debt collection agency to profile and target cases for action.
- 3.74 It is too early to evaluate the long term impact and effectiveness of this approach but the Council has successfully reduced the level of write off from £767,515 in 2003/04 to £581,965 in 2004/05 and is in the process of finalising the majority of cases to conclusion or the initiation of court action.
- 3.75 The table below summarises North Lanarkshire Council's reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05*
	Council	National	Council	National	Council
Turnover (no. of new vacancies as % of total dwellings)	10.2%	10.8%	9.6%	11.6%	8.7%
Total no. of relets	4452	n/a	4054	n/a	3594
% relet in <2 weeks	5.6%	14.5%	11.1%	16.4%	11.5%
% relet in 2-4 weeks	29.3%	20.3%	40.3%	24.9%	39.5%
% relet in >4 weeks	65.1%	65.2%	48.6%	58.7%	49.6%
Average time to relet	51	76 days	45	73	44
% of total annual rental due lost due to voids ²²	1.77%	2.81%	1.70%	2.73%	1.56%

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

* Figures for March 2005 had not been validated by the Council's external auditor by the time of our inspection

- 3.76 Rent loss performance on void properties has showed consistent improvement in the last 3 years from 1.77% in 2003/04 to 1.56% in 2004/05. In comparison with other Councils for 2003/04, North Lanarkshire's performance is well below the median figure

of 2.1% for all Scottish authorities and is currently ranked 10th in Scotland and in the 2nd Quartile²³ for performance.

- 3.77 North Lanarkshire Council's void turnover performance for the percentage of properties relet within 4 weeks improved considerably between 2001 and 2004 from 34.4% to 51.4%. Using the most up to date comparative information, North Lanarkshire is currently ranked 7th in Scotland with a performance well above the 41.3% average, the 35.5% median and is in the upper quartile for performance in this category. The average number of days taking to relet properties is continuing to improve from 45 in 2003/04 to 44 days in 2004/05.
- 3.78 The Council has set targets and actively monitors performance across the key relet stages to highlight any delays and minimise rent loss. The approach includes:
- the early selection of prospective tenants;
 - a comprehensive and safety focused empty house standard;
 - reasons for refusal being monitored;
 - accompanied viewings with housing and maintenance officer; and
 - the Northlan homes initiative, where the Council actively markets low demand properties.
- 3.79 North Lanarkshire Council's costs for the supervision and management of its houses were £465 per unit for 2004/05. The Council was ranked 12th of 29 councils in 2004/05 in terms of management costs and its costs have risen in line with national trends. The Council carefully examines all costs and proposed budget increases taking into account staff, administration, changes in stock numbers, inflation, finance costs and service improvements as part of the budget and rent setting processes.
- 3.80 The Council has an excellent approach to maximising its rental income and reletting of its empty houses.

²² see glossary

²³ see glossary

Performance management

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

- 3.81 North Lanarkshire Council sets out its strategic objectives for its housing service in its Corporate Plan 2004-2008. Its key aims include achieving the national service standards for its housing and homelessness services, meeting housing need and the provision of high quality housing services. The Council has also made a commitment to developing a business plan for its housing service to assist in the targeting of resources. Raising the level of tenant satisfaction is identified as a key outcome. The Corporate plan is delivered through the departmental service improvement plans.
- 3.82 The Council's Housing and Property Service Plan demonstrates a logical breakdown of tasks, performance improvement and future development that reflect current government, legislative, corporate and departmental priorities set within a local context. It includes clear goals and SMART²⁴ objectives with targets for most but not all key service areas. The priority tasks set out in the service improvement plan are closely linked to the actions set out in the Corporate Strategy.
- 3.83 Area office management plans are prepared outlining performance targets for key areas such as rent arrears and voids, the implementation of service improvements such as the "Your Estates Your Services" manual and activity monitoring systems and local priorities, taking into account past performance.
- 3.84 The Council also promotes improving performance through the work of its two Scrutiny Panels and through the Management Initiative Team. The MIT approach has proved very successful for in improving its void performance and in former tenant arrears. In addition, in preparing for inspection the Council audited relevant service areas of the housing management service through three short term working groups looking at Allocations, Estate Management and Rents/Rent Recovery. These groups provided a strong focus on key areas and significant success has been achieved in identifying and implementing service improvements in some areas. As a result the Council has decided to retain the groups as part of its approach to continuous improvement.

²⁴ SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound

- 3.85 North Lanarkshire Council has a strong track record of improvement across many areas of its services. However, it has been slow to identify and address the weaknesses in its allocations policy and its administration of this policy.
- 3.86 The Council has also carried out an assessment of its allocations policy and identified a number of weaknesses including a limited focus on housing need and some areas where the policy may not comply with good practice or statutory requirements. A policy review working group including tenants and elected members has been established and consultants appointed to undertake an independent review of the policy. However, the Council has not as yet set out clear strategic objectives for its allocations policy nor has it identified the range of housing needs it is trying to meet.
- 3.87 Senior Managers receive a monthly performance briefing. The performance information and monitoring of void and arrears management are excellent and is used well at all levels of the service. Information relating to antisocial behaviour is less well developed despite the good performance monitoring of this work with in the service. However, there are some gaps in the overall level of performance information provided in relation to informal complaints, member enquiries, allocations and applications, estate management and ethnic monitoring.
- 3.88 Elected members receive a quarterly update on the progress of the service plan and a performance bulletin which includes information on arrears levels, rent loss and void turnover using the traffic light performance system to highlight which indicators are on target. But the overall picture of service performance provided is limited by the gaps in the performance management system identified above.
- 3.89 We found a number of areas of strength in the Council's approach to continuous improvement and a strong approach to setting targets and monitoring performance particularly in relation to rent arrears and voids. However, there are a number of gaps in the performance information being used and the Council has been slow to address significant weaknesses in its management of access to its housing lists and the implementation of its allocations policy.

Public reporting

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

3.90 The Council publishes and makes available a wide range of performance, service standard and activity information. This includes:

- the annual performance report;
- quarterly performance review;
- tenant newsletters;
- local office newsletters;
- North Lanarkshire news;
- rent increase letters and newsletter;
- annual corporate performance report; and
- area office management plans.

3.91 The information which includes the statutorily required performance information is available in First Stop Shops and other local access points. The Council's website provides access to the Council wide information but not the local performance information. First Stop Shops display a range of Council wide and local area performance information on the statutory performance areas such as voids and rent loss. In addition local office performance information on service activities such as correspondence response and formal complaint handling is also displayed. However, the Council has not provided all tenants with a single report that provides an overview of performance across the service.

3.92 Overall the Council has a fair approach to reporting its housing management service. It uses a wide range of approaches to publicising the local and area wide information that is available but a wider range of information is required to present a balance picture of overall performance across the service.

Grade and overall assessment of housing management

3.93 Our overall assessment of North Lanarkshire Council's housing management service is fair. We found a number of areas of major strength and some significant weaknesses that impact on the quality of the service tenants experience. We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.

3.94 North Lanarkshire Council has a number of strengths in areas that impact directly on the users of its housing management service. These include:

- the management of rent arrears;
- the management of void properties;
- its response to antisocial behaviour;
- an improving approach to managing its estates; and
- involving and responding to tenants.

3.95 The Council has a number of weaknesses that impact on users and which detract from the impact of the stronger areas of the service we have identified. These include:

- a failure to publish rules for the allocation of its houses that accurately and fully reflect its practices;
- a limited approach to the assessment of housing need in its allocations policy;
- an absence of ethnic monitoring of those applying for and being allocated houses;
- significant failings in its administration of its allocations policy including its management of suspensions and the process of letting houses; and
- low levels of satisfaction with significant areas of the service amongst tenants.

3.96 The weaknesses in the administration of the house letting process and the inconsistent application of the Council's allocations policy mean that it can not demonstrate that it is letting houses fairly. This is having a direct impact on the confidence tenants and third parties have in the way houses are let.

3.97 Whilst the Council is aware of some of these weaknesses and has a good record of continuous improvement in housing management it was not aware of the extent of the failings in its administration of its allocations policy. We also found some weaknesses in the Council's approach to performance management that could impact on its ability to improve in some areas.

4. Property maintenance

4.1 The grade awarded for property maintenance is:

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

How good is the service?

Access to the repairs service

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

- 4.2 North Lanarkshire Council has a large network of area offices which are well staffed and accessible. We set out our general view of the quality of the First Stop Shops (FSS) in paragraph 3.3. Most repairs are reported by phone on one of several numbers, service users can also contact the repairs service by calling the local offices, by letter, via the Council's web site or through the out of hours service. Elected members also take repairs requests at their surgeries and pass these on to local office staff. Repairs for gas and solid fuel heating are reported directly to the maintenance contractor, Saltire Facilities Management (Saltire). The Council is currently reviewing how it handles its phone contact from customers.
- 4.3 The Council's customer care charter states that when customers contact the Council on the wrong number they should be transferred rather than given information and asked to call the correct number. However, we observed some occasions where service users contacted the wrong office or where they phoned the wrong number and Council staff advised them of the correct phone number rather than following the approach set out in the customer charter.
- 4.4 Outwith office hours repairs are reported directly to a Council operated contact centre and to the gas maintenance contractors call centre in the case of heating repairs. These arrangements ensure tenants have access to services at all times.

- 4.5 Service users who report a repair covered by the Right to Repair²⁵ legislation receive a confirmation letter acknowledging that the repair has been ordered. Tenants reporting other types of repairs do not get notified that the repair has been ordered.
- 4.6 A repairs questionnaire is sent to around half of those people reporting repairs, the returns from this show that 38% of tenants responding to this survey said they had to report repairs more than once. In a number of cases tenants told us that repairs were often lost or not recorded after being reported. The Council has been aware of these problems for some time and has reviewed access arrangements for its repairs service. This process has resulted in a number of improvement proposals including reporting repairs to the Council's corporate contact centre. This proposal has not yet been taken forward but other arrangements have been put in place to ensure tenants are contacted by the contractor more quickly after reporting a repair. At the time of our inspection it was too early to assess the impact of these new arrangements.
- 4.7 Technical staff inspect repairs that cannot be ordered straight away. The Council allows three working days for the inspection to take place and customers can indicate a time for the inspection to take place. After the inspection, a form is left with the tenant that gives contact numbers and a job reference. These arrangements are effectively managed and reported performance against targets for completing these inspections is very good.
- 4.8 Tenants report gas and solid fuel heating repairs directly to the contractor. The Council does not monitor the number of repairs reported, the effectiveness of the contact arrangements or the contractor's response. Instead, it relies on the level of formal complaints received and limited information from a sample of repairs questionnaires to gauge the effectiveness of its arrangements.
- 4.9 North Lanarkshire Council's website and other publications provide a range of information about the responsive repairs service. Tenants reporting repairs by phone are given some information as to when to expect the repair to be carried out. The Council also publishes its full repairs procedures manual on its website. This is a good way of sharing information with service users who have access to the internet. However, some of the information that is available in the Council's advice leaflets and on the website does not accurately reflect the way the repairs service is being operated at

²⁵ see glossary

present. In particular the recently revised “repairs by appointment system” is not referred to in most documents and the published target times for carrying out repairs do not make it clear that the targets do not include the time taken to pre-inspect²⁶ the works and pass the order to the contractor. As a result tenants may not get works done within the timescales they expect. The annual tenants’ survey shows that 26.4% of tenants responding consider that information on the repairs service is poor or very poor.

- 4.10 North Lanarkshire Council provides fair access to its repairs service. The Council’s tenants get basic information on the repairs service and are able to report repairs in a wide variety of ways. However, information available relating to how quickly repairs will be done is unclear and tenants often have to contact the Council on more than one occasion before a repair is carried out. The Council does not have a good understanding of the effectiveness of its arrangements for contacting the maintenance contractor responsible for gas and solid fuel heating.

Speed and quality of response repairs service

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

- 4.11 North Lanarkshire Council completes around 150,000 responsive repairs each year. The majority of these repairs are carried out by its main maintenance partner MPC (Maintenance Property Care). All gas and solid fuel servicing and day to day maintenance work is carried out by Saltire.

- 4.12 The Council’s published performance figures for the past three years are set out in the table below.

	Target response time	Performance			
		North Lanarkshire Council			National median 2003/04
		2002/03	2003/04	2004/05*	
Emergency	3 hours to attend	97.5	98.3	98.1	
Priority	3 days	86.4	93.3	98.9	
Priority	7 days	81.7	92.8	98.24	
Routine	20 working days	90.2	94.3	97.23	
% of repairs due to be completed within 24 hours completed within target		97.5%	98.3%	98.23%	95.1%
% of all repairs completed in target		93.3%	96%	97.61%	85.9%

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

²⁶ see glossary

- 4.13 The Council has reported improved performance against its own targets for each of the reported categories over the last three years and is the fourth best performing local authority in Scotland, when comparing itself to others using the Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI)²⁷ shown above. However, the way the Council reports its performance means that these figures cannot be relied upon to provide an accurate measure of the service experienced by tenants. These include:
- the time that it takes to pre-inspect repairs is not included;
 - for emergency repairs the Council uses the time the contractor arrives on site rather than the time the contractor completes the repair to calculate performance;
 - not all priority categories for repairs are included in the reports; and
 - works to scatter flats used by the homeless service are not included.
- 4.14 This means that the Council's actual performance at completing repairs against its target will be lower than reported. We asked the Council to recalculate its performance figures from the time the repair is reported to the completion of the work. The Council did so for routine (20 day) repairs carried out by MPC during August 2005. The results showed that 79.46% of these repairs were completed on time. This is significantly worse than the published performance. The Council has already taken steps to ensure that pre-inspection time is able to be included in future performance reports; performance reporting based on this more accurate approach was planned to begin from July 2005.
- 4.15 From our case reviews of a limited sample of recently completed works orders across all repair categories we found a similar level of performance. In our sample the main reasons for this poorer than reported performance was the non-inclusion of pre-inspection time, holding of works orders prior to issue and contractor failure. In 16% of the cases we reviewed works had been held prior to issuing a works order to the contractor. The Council's procedures are clear that where works are held, tenants should be advised by letter. We found no records of these letters being sent. These weaknesses mean that the Council does not have a good understanding of the overall service that tenants are receiving; this will limit the Council's ability to improve the service.
- 4.16 From the Council's individual repairs questionnaire 22.3% of respondents were unhappy with the speed at which repairs were completed. The annual tenants' survey shows

²⁷ see glossary

31.6% of those responding were dissatisfied with the time taken to complete repairs. This response from a large section of customers shows that the performance service users are experiencing is not as good as the Council's own figures would indicate.

- 4.17 Pre- and post inspections²⁸ are important tools for ensuring repairs are identified accurately and carried out to a high standard. North Lanarkshire Council carries out a large number of both pre- and post inspections. Post inspections are randomly generated by the computer system against targets for each category of repair. Performance against targets are regularly monitored and reported on.
- 4.18 The Council has recently introduced a new system of additional post inspections where its main maintenance partner MPC and Council staff carry out joint inspections of completed works. These inspections are targeted at specific types of work that are seen as causing complaints. These inspections are working well and improvements in quality are already being seen in the areas that have been inspected.
- 4.19 Where works are identified as substandard through post inspection or where tenants report dissatisfaction (directly or through the service satisfaction questionnaire), the Council takes prompt action to remedy the situation in most cases. These failures are monitored at local office level and the information is discussed regularly at joint meetings with the maintenance contractors.
- 4.20 Tenants we spoke to were generally happy with the quality of repair works being carried out and were clear that where poor quality work was reported, the Council usually acts quickly to correct it. Some tenants in tower blocks reported more problems with the quality of work where water penetration or windows were concerned. Feedback from the Council's repairs questionnaire shows that 88.5% of service users were satisfied with the quality of works carried out.
- 4.21 North Lanarkshire Council operates a Right to Repair system for qualifying repairs²⁹ covered by the legislation. We found that the scheme was not being operated as intended with tenants not being informed of the scheme at the point they reported the repair. When the Council was made aware of this it acted quickly to amend and reinforce the guidance to staff to ensure that most tenants are informed of their rights at

²⁸ see glossary

the point of ordering a repair. These changes do not apply to the arrangements that are in place for the reporting of repairs to Saltire; the Council is not complying with the regulations in respect of these repairs. The Council has acknowledged this weakness and has begun the process of putting in place separate measures to address this.

- 4.22 North Lanarkshire Council's performance in respect of speed and quality of repairs is fair. The service has some strengths, however we found weaknesses in some significant areas of the service. The Council has good systems in place to manage the quality of repairs that are carried out by its main maintenance contractor and tenant satisfaction levels with this aspect of the service are good. However, the Council is not good at completing repairs within its published timescales and tenants report significant levels of dissatisfaction with this aspect of the service. In addition the Council does not have a good understanding of how well its day to day gas and solid fuel maintenance (heating) activities are being delivered by its maintenance partner.

Physical quality of houses

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

- 4.23 North Lanarkshire Council has invested significant sums in its housing stock since it was built. The Council's use of the prudential borrowing regime has already seen substantial increases in the investment available to improve its housing stock. In the latest annual survey of tenants 62.5% of respondents were satisfied with the condition of their home.
- 4.24 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)³⁰ by 2015. Landlords were required to prepare a plan showing how they will achieve this by April 2005. The Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland will assess each local authority's plan. The Council has submitted its standard delivery plan and expects that most of its houses will meet the SHQS by 2015. The Council has recently updated its financial planning models to incorporate the requirements of the SHQS. It used a range of historical information to carry out this desktop assessment. The Council shows a good understanding about how much it requires to spend to achieve the standard. The Council is awaiting the response to its delivery plan.

²⁹ see glossary

- 4.25 North Lanarkshire Council currently manages stock condition data and other maintenance records in a number of different databases. Information generated from a wide range of technical inspections each year such as void visits, response repairs inspections and visits prior to planned maintenance³¹ works, is not currently being used to assist in building up a more detailed record of the condition of the housing stock. However, the Council plans to carry out a new stock condition survey in 2006 and a number of improvements to the ICT systems³² are planned to bring together the information into a single record. This will provide better information to ensure that it can demonstrate compliance with the SHQS and improve the planning and targeting of its investment programmes.
- 4.26 North Lanarkshire Council has significant planned and cyclical maintenance programmes in place which ensure that its houses are maintained and improved over time. As well as planning to meet the SHQS the Council has also developed its own higher, "North Lanarkshire Standard" and is directing its investment programmes to achieve this. Tenants are given clear information prior to works commencing. A range of techniques are used that give tenants the opportunity to become involved if they choose to, this can be anything from public meetings to one to one visits. Properties are prioritised for investment based on their age or investment history. This approach is well understood and supported by tenants. Maintenance programmes are well managed with good supervision on site.
- 4.27 The Council actively seeks feedback on its planned maintenance programme. For the bigger types of work such as kitchen replacements, rewiring and rendering, tenants are issued with a questionnaire on completion of the works. The results are recorded and any issues are dealt with appropriately. The Council does not analyse satisfaction across its planned maintenance programme, but tenants' satisfaction contract by contract is generally good.
- 4.28 North Lanarkshire Council has taken a number of positive steps to ensure the safety of its tenants. It has fitted all its properties with smoke detectors and where necessary fits

³⁰ see glossary

³¹ see glossary

³² see glossary

carbon monoxide detectors. The Council services these detectors regularly as part of the annual gas maintenance programme.

- 4.29 The Council has significant programmes of upgrading for common areas including the installation of door entry systems. Where owner occupiers in mixed tenure developments are involved they are encouraged to participate in the upgrading scheme. The Council also makes good use of the private grants scheme to encourage owner occupiers. However, a number of properties do not have door entry systems installed because owners have refused to participate in the works.
- 4.30 Social landlords are required to carry out safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues which it provides for its tenants use. The Council has 34,521 houses with gas appliances that are covered by this requirement. We requested details of the Council's performance at carrying out safety checks at the start of the inspection process, however, the Council was unable to produce all the required information. To assess the Council's performance we reviewed the service records of 149 properties with gas heating systems.
- 4.31 The Council's assessment of its performance is that 96.5% of its properties have a valid gas safety certificate in place; from our file checks we found that 89% of properties had a current certificate. The Council's gas maintenance partner takes full responsibility for programming and arranging the annual safety check, this means the Council does not become aware that the safety check has been missed until after the 12 month target. In some cases we looked at the Council was not made aware of the failure for many months. Where the Council is made aware of the failure there are sound procedures in place to encourage access and, where appropriate enforce access to carry out the safety check.
- 4.32 Landlords are meant to carry out these safety checks within 12 months of the previous safety check, although from our review of the service records only 68% were serviced within this period. The Council was not aware of the extent of these delays nor does it have an accurate picture of its performance in relation to gas safety.
- 4.33 Quality control is very important to ensure that works are being carried out to a high standard and to ensure compliance with the regulations. The Council's own non-technical inspections of annual servicing show that over half of annual services fail to be

completed to the standards expected. This is a significant failing on the part of the contractor. Up to the time of our inspection there had been no competent post inspection of any any responsive repairs carried out to gas appliances. This is a significant weakness. However, the Council has recently awarded a contract for the independent inspection of a sample of all gas maintenance works. This will be enable the Council to demonstrate compliance with some of the statutory requirements and to address some of these issues.

- 4.34 North Lanarkshire Council appointed consultants to carry out a review of its management arrangements for gas maintenance in 2004. This identified a number of significant weaknesses within the service. Whilst progress has been made to address a number of the issues that were identified, our inspection found that some of the most important recommendations identified in the 2004 report had not been fully implemented.
- 4.35 The Council's management of gas maintenance is poor. We found significant levels of errors and omissions in the Council's records that show adequate systems are not in place to ensure it is safely managing its responsibilities under the Gas Safety and Use Regulations 1998. In addition, whilst the Council has made some improvements to its systems in the last year it has still to fully implement the most important recommendations made following an independent assessment of its gas safety systems. Plans to develop an integrated system to manage information between the Council and Saltire Facilities Management were not well developed at the time of the inspection. The Council's poor performance is a significant weakness in its property maintenance service.
- 4.36 From May 2004 social landlords have had a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties. The Council has not met the statutory timescale to prepare a written asbestos management plan. It has a well developed plan to survey its properties for asbestos and has already undertaken work in tower blocks and sheltered housing complexes. However, it has prioritised surveys to those properties more likely to contain asbestos internally, rather than the common areas required by the legislation.
- 4.37 The Council has a good approach to ensuring the safety of maintenance operatives and tenants. All maintenance staff have had asbestos awareness training and where

suspected asbestos containing materials are found, the materials are tested before any work is allowed to proceed.

- 4.38 However, we found that the Council had not followed up on recommendations in previous surveys to annually inspect the condition of asbestos where it had been found in a tower block. The system used to record information on known asbestos did not allow easy access. Therefore repairs staff were not always checking if asbestos has been found prior to issuing works orders.
- 4.39 The Council has set out clear quality standards to be achieved before empty houses are relet. Officers carry out a detailed inspection of the whole property and compare the results against the void standard. Where asbestos is suspected all works are stopped until samples are tested. While this may slow down the void turnaround it ensures the safety of staff and of the new tenants.
- 4.40 North Lanarkshire Council has a fair approach to ensuring the quality of its houses. The Council understands the condition and investment needs of the stock and delivers improvements well. It also has well developed investment plans in place for the long term maintenance of its properties; however, more effective use could be made of available information and resources to build up a more complete picture of its housing stock. Whilst tenant satisfaction with the condition of their homes is low, tenants have a good understanding of the Council's plans to improve them. The Council's management of gas safety is a significant weakness. Whilst there are good systems in place to manage risks from suspected asbestos the Council does not yet have fully effective systems in place to comply with the current asbestos management regulations.

Responsiveness to tenants

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

- 4.41 North Lanarkshire Council actively seeks tenants' views on a range of issues about its repairs services. The Council has a long history of carrying out tenant surveys in response to repair requests and through annual surveys of service users. More recently the range of feedback has been increased; most tenants who get day to day repairs and planned maintenance works carried out now get an opportunity to feedback through a repairs questionnaire. When service users report problems directly to the Council either at the First Stop Shops or through the formal feedback and complaints systems their

problems are usually dealt with promptly and effectively. The Council has effective systems in place to manage and monitor this process.

4.42 A number of improvements have been made to both the response repairs service and the planned improvement programme directly in response to feedback from tenants.

These include:

- the recent introduction of the repairs by appointment system;
- the introduction of a comprehensive kitchen and bathroom replacement programme including tenants choice in the kitchen fittings;
- the development of the “North Lanarkshire Standard”; and
- the publication of the repairs procedure manual on the intranet.

4.43 The Council has effective systems to follow up individual complaints made through its repairs satisfaction mailer or its formal complaints procedure. However, the Council does not record or analyse problems reported through informal complaints or issues raised through elected members. This means that the Council does not have a full picture of tenants’ experiences of the service and this information is not available to assist in improving the service. Where elected members have received a number of similar complaints, for example about the quality of work from a particular contractor, they have acted to bring this to the attention of managers and the issues have been addressed. More comprehensive monitoring of all complaints would ensure issues are identified and solutions put in place when problems arise. The Council is aware of the need to introduce a system for recording and monitoring informal complaints and plans to do this during 2005.

4.44 However, the results of both the response repairs satisfaction survey and the annual tenants’ satisfaction survey show low levels of tenant satisfaction and high levels of dissatisfaction with significant areas of the repairs and maintenance services over a number of years. The Council has recently put in place a range of measures to address these issues but at the time of our inspection it was too early to assess their overall impact on tenant satisfaction.

4.45 North Lanarkshire Council is good at responding to tenants when it is delivering its property maintenance services. The Council is generally good at responding to individual tenant complaints and has made good use of feedback to improve some

aspects of its repairs and maintenance services. However, the recording of significant elements of tenant feedback is not well developed and the Council has yet to effectively address low levels of satisfaction with key areas of the service that it has been aware of for a number of years.

Is the service managed for improvement?

Resource management and efficiency

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

- 4.46 North Lanarkshire Council spent £1,643.44 per house on repairs and maintenance in 2004/05. This figure represents a significant increase on the previous two years. This is due to the increases in the capital programme³³ budget put in place in response to the prudential borrowing regime. The Council has effective arrangements in place to manage its responsive and planned maintenance budgets. Spend against budget is closely monitored through a range of budget monitoring reports. Sound financial control is shown in the management of the main response maintenance partnership with MPC. There are limited numbers of day works³⁴ issued and few variations³⁵ used, this shows good control over the repairs ordering process.
- 4.47 The Council cancelled 21,179 works orders in 2004/05. This is a substantial number; however, the reasons for these cancellations are being recorded and reported regularly. The council is aware of this and is carrying out a range of initiatives which are reducing the number of cancellations each year.
- 4.48 North Lanarkshire Council does not always raise recharges for works that tenants should pay for themselves in accordance with its policy. The Council's success in recovering the costs of rechargeable repairs is not good. In 2004/05 only 537 recharges were invoiced, this is a low number compared to the total number of works orders being carried out. The Council updated the guidance available to staff on when recharges should be raised during 2005 however, we found that staff were not clear on when to recharge repairs and were not always following the guidance available. The differences

³³ see glossary

³⁴ see glossary

³⁵ see glossary

between the ICT systems that works orders are created on and the finance systems used, mean there are no checks to ensure all appropriate works are recharged.

- 4.49 The Council has set up factoring agreements with its owner occupiers in its high flats, however, there are no formal arrangements in place for its other properties in joint ownership. A working group was established in 2003 to review all recharges to tenants and owners, however, this group has yet to report on its findings. As a result the Council does not have fully effective arrangements in place for recharging repairs to owners in its walk up flats and four in a block flatted properties. The Council does not always recharge owners for the costs of responsive repairs to these types of properties where there is a common responsibility. This means that, in some instances, owner occupiers are being subsidised by tenants.
- 4.50 The Council's direct labour organisation (DLO)³⁶ was closed down in 2000 and the work transferred to three new "partnership" organisations, Walkers, MPC and Saltire, owned jointly between the Council and the private sector. The process of establishing the partnerships was the subject of rigorous internal and external scrutiny to ensure that they delivered best value to the Council. Each of the partnerships is to run for 10 years. The main partner, MPC, also carries out a range of non-housing work. The housing repairs service is based on the competitively tendered contract won by the former DLO in 1997. The pricing of response repair works by MPC is based on the 1997 contract schedule of rates³⁷ updated to account for inflation in building costs since 1997.
- 4.51 The partnership contracts also include contractual requirements for improvements in efficiency year on year and a discount to the original contract rates. The savings from these elements do not accrue directly to the housing service through lower costs but are returned to the Council as part of a profit sharing arrangement. The Council has received around £4,500,000 through this arrangement since 2003, including £1,600,000 attributable to MPC. Of this, £100,000 has been returned to the Housing Revenue Account³⁸. Whilst the Council has gone to some lengths to ensure that its partnerships provide value for money to the Council as a whole, including contractual requirements to increase efficiency and to reduce the risk of financial loss, it has not carried out any

³⁶ see glossary

³⁷ see glossary

³⁸ see glossary

specific assessment of the extent to which these arrangements provide best value to tenants.

- 4.52 North Lanarkshire Council uses a range of procurement³⁹ methods for its planned maintenance works. These include selective tendering, partnering⁴⁰ or extending contracts by negotiation based on successful compliance with performance criteria. The decisions on which procurement routes to use are based on a range of factors from contractor availability, past performance of possible contractors to consideration of national patterns in contracting capability. These decisions are made by a team of senior staff for each project. Price/quality models are used in many cases as part of the selection process. The Council has moved towards the use of measured term contracts for the main parts of its planned maintenance programme, to give flexibility for itself and to tie in contractors over the longer term.
- 4.53 North Lanarkshire Council is good at managing its maintenance budgets. The recent substantial increases to its planned maintenance budgets have been well managed with spend being achieved. The Council makes good use of a range of procurement methods for works not covered by its partnership agreements. However, there are some weaknesses in the way the Council recharges owners and other service users. The Council has yet to carry out a full assessment of the extent to which its partnerships provide best value to tenants.

Performance management

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

- 4.54 The Council sets out its strategic objectives for the improvement of its houses in its Corporate Plan 2004-08. These include developing an investment plan for the service and substantial new investment in improving the quality and energy efficiency of its homes. The “Service Improvement Plan for Housing and Property services” is a key document for identifying the issues that will affect the management of the service over the coming years. This is a comprehensive document that identifies the strategic issues the Council faces.

³⁹ see glossary

⁴⁰ see glossary

- 4.55 Individual management plans for the area offices and for the design services divisions contain specific targets for performance in key areas and identify tasks to achieve the strategic aims. There are a number of service related issues that have been identified but have not been included in these service planning documents. In addition a number of planned service improvements are dependent of the development of the Council's ICT system. These developments are not fully covered by the service improvement plans and there is a lack of clarity about which improvements will be prioritised. This has led to delays in planned improvements. In preparation for inspection the Council also established a short life group to review some areas of the service. This provided a useful focus on key areas of the service and the Council has decided to retain it as part of its overall approach to continuous improvement.
- 4.56 Key planning documents contain few explicit targets for frontline staff delivering services. Performance reports focus on specific management objectives such as contractor performance and/or staff performance and do not provided a customer focused view of the service, this is of particular significance in respect to repairs completion targets where overall performance is assessed largely on the basis of contractor performance rather than an "end to end" measure based on the tenants' experience of the service. In addition, in some areas the targets have not been adjusted to take account of improved performance to ensure that they continue to provide a focus for improvement. The Council does not have good performance information relating to its gas maintenance service or other aspects of the service provided by Saltire.
- 4.57 The Housing and Technical Services sub-committee receives performance management reports on the responsive repairs and the planned maintenance services regularly. These reports include detailed information and are a good basis for informing the committee of past performance and progress on the performance of selected contractors. However, in common with other areas of performance reporting these reports do not provide a full picture of the service as experienced by tenants.
- 4.58 North Lanarkshire Council considers health and safety a key concern when awarding contracts and considering how it carries out maintenance projects. This safety-focused approach to working with suspected asbestos is a good example of how the Council manages specific risks. The ongoing monitoring and control of health and safety issues is less obvious, few references are made to health and safety issues in the management

of the main maintenance contracts we looked at. When the Council was made aware of this during the on site phase of our inspection they took action to address the issue.

- 4.59 North Lanarkshire Council's approach to performance management is fair. Where performance information is collected it is used well. However, there are significant gaps in the availability of performance information relating to gas maintenance and the performance of Saltire Facilities Management and the inclusion of only a limited range of tenant satisfaction information in the formal performance management system. Performance management of response repairs is focused primarily on contractor performance rather than an "end to end" measure of the service experienced by tenants. These gaps have had an impact on the Council's ability to improve the overall service from the customer's perspective.

Public reporting

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

- 4.60 The Council publishes performance information about its repairs service at both the Council wide and area office level. It uses the annual report and the website for reporting performance against targets for response repairs and for repair inspection targets. Local performance reports are available in the public areas in each office.
- 4.61 Members of the public can access many documents including committee reports by asking staff at access points and many of these documents are available on the Council's website. However, the Council has made only limited use of its newsletters and other documents to publicise the repairs service or the performance that the Council has achieved and has not provided all tenants with a single report that provides an overview of performance across the service. The Council has published statutory performance indicators for its repairs service as required by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. However, the published figures have not been calculated according to the guidance set out by Audit Scotland and, as a result, the Council has over reported its performance in completing repairs on time.
- 4.62 North Lanarkshire Council has fair approach to reporting its performance and plans. However, the information that is reported is not always accurate nor does it fully reflect the services that are being delivered.

Grade and overall assessment of property maintenance

- 4.63 Our overall assessment is that North Lanarkshire Council's property maintenance service is fair. We found a number of areas of strength and some significant weaknesses that impact on the quality of the service tenants experience and the Council's ability to improve. We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.
- 4.64 North Lanarkshire Council has a number of strengths in areas that impact directly on the users of its property maintenance service particularly in its increased investment in its houses and the management of its planned maintenance programme; its good approach to managing costs and the procurement of building contracts; its approach to managing quality in its response repairs service; the safety focused approach it adopts to managing asbestos within its properties and its improving approach to the quality of its stock information and responsiveness to tenants.
- 4.65 The Council has a number of weaknesses that impact on users and which detract from the impact of the stronger areas of the service we have identified. These include:
- performance at completing response repairs on time is poor when considered from a service user perspective;
 - the Council has very limited understanding about what service its gas maintenance contractor is delivering;
 - poor performance in carrying out gas safety checks and controlling the quality of work to gas appliances; and
 - the Council is not fully complying with the requirements of the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations.
- 4.66 Tenant satisfaction with key areas of the service is low. Tenants we spoke to individually and tenants' groups we met also consistently identified the repairs service as the one area of the housing service most in need of improvement.
- 4.67 The Council is aware of some of these weaknesses and has a good record of improvement in key areas of the service. Its performance management system is well developed, however, there are significant weaknesses in the quality and range of

performance information used by the Council that has had an impact on its ability to identify and respond to key weaknesses in the service. In addition, the Council's ability to manage its maintenance service is heavily reliant on the development of information technology. A range of proposed developments to improve and develop the service rely on improvements to the ICT systems that the Council uses. Delays and uncertainty about which projects are to be prioritised mean that these service improvements are already falling behind schedule.

5. Homelessness services

5.1 The grade awarded for homelessness services is:

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

How good is the service?

Access to homelessness services

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

- 5.2 North Lanarkshire Council delivers its homelessness services as an integral part of its wider housing service through each of the 10 First Stop Shop teams and 6 Tenancy Support Teams based throughout the area. We set out our general view of the quality of the First Stop Shops (FSS) in paragraph 3.3. Homeless people can apply at any of the First Stop Shops. There is also an emergency standby service, which is discussed in paragraph 5.10.
- 5.3 The Council received 4,005 applications for assistance in 2004/05, an increase of nearly 30% on the previous year. The total number of presentations have increased 105.5% since 2001/02. However, in 2004/05 the number of homeless applications equates to 2.4% of all households in North Lanarkshire, which is in line with a national figure for the previous year of 2.3%.
- 5.4 The homeless service is publicised on the Council's website and through booklets and leaflets at their offices and in a range of locations where people facing homelessness are likely to see them. The First Stop Shops display a range of homelessness information providing information on how to contact the service. The distribution of publications to other locations, for example local libraries or advice agency offices, is not recorded or monitored consistently. We found that in some areas it was good but others we checked had no homelessness services information available.

- 5.5 The Council also publishes a useful booklet for homeless people who are under 21 years old, in conjunction with the Scottish Council for Single Homeless. This offers a range of advice, on who to speak to, where to find accommodation, tips for homeless interviews, and how to get help with rent and furniture.
- 5.6 Publications relating to the homeless services are available in other formats and languages on request. This is clearly advertised in the First Stop Shops. However, this service is only noted in some of the publications and advertised in English. When accessing material in locations other than the First Stop Shops, it may be difficult for people to know this service is available.
- 5.7 The Council is developing some innovative information schemes including touch screen information kiosks in First Stop Shops and plastic bags displaying homelessness service information for use in libraries. The Council has also produced a DVD, including advice on the homeless services available in five languages for housing officers to distribute, however this was not available for distribution at the time of our inspection.
- 5.8 Every applicant is given the “Homeless? A Guide to Services for Homeless People” booklet during their application interview. If a person does not want an interview, reception staff will give them this booklet. The guide covers a wide range of issues including:
- how and where to make a homeless application;
 - the process involved and some of the key timescales involved for example, when to expect a decision, when an Assessment and Case Manager will be in contact and the timescales for making appeals;
 - accommodation and information and advice duties of the Council according to the decision; and
 - contact information for independent agencies that may be able to assist.

There is limited detail on what investigations are carried out and there is no information on the length of time an appeal might take. The Council is aware of the need to publicise the freephone number for emergency standby service and has plans to address this.

- 5.9 Reception staff in the First Stop Shops have useful written guidance on how to deal with potentially homeless applicants. The guidance sets out that people should be

encouraged to take up an interview with a housing officer to discuss options or at the very least provide them with the “Homeless? A Guide to Services for Homeless People” booklet. The guidance requires that staff should ask people the circumstances leading to their homelessness. This could lead to private information being discussed inappropriately within earshot of members of the public.

- 5.10 North Lanarkshire Council operates an emergency standby service between 16:45 and 08:45 Monday to Friday and over weekends and public holidays. It can be accessed by contacting any police station or through a recently introduced freephone number, which is directed to a supported accommodation unit. Publicity for the new freephone number is not well distributed and applicants are not always told about the service. Applicants contacting the standby service are usually asked to attend at a local police office. This may disadvantage or discourage some people who are not comfortable with presenting at police stations. Several third parties we spoke to confirmed that some of their clients are unhappy about presenting at police stations. However, for those clients who know about the standby service and are happy to go to a police station it is working well. The Council is aware of the areas for improvement in the standby service and is working to address them.
- 5.11 The Council has a wide range of referral arrangements with other agencies working with homeless people, although some are informal. Formal arrangements are in place to take applications from those leaving prison and hospital and these are working well, with an increasing number of applicants accessing the service through them. Agencies we spoke to felt that referral arrangements are working, and that they have good relationships with the local teams, although some felt better communication may improve the services that homeless people receive.
- 5.12 The Council collects ethnicity information about applicants as part of their homeless application. In its inspection submission the Council identified that the overall level of applicants from minority ethnic groups is low. Applications from households describing themselves as either Asian Scottish or British Pakistani have doubled since 2003/04 whilst those from Black British or British African have fallen significantly in the same period. At the time of our inspection the Council was not routinely analysing this information, and could not be sure that minority ethnic applicants were getting equal access to the service. Regular monitoring has since been introduced.

- 5.13 Most homeless interviews are carried out within the interview rooms in the First Stop Shops; however, they can take place at a person's home or other location if necessary. Most interviews are carried out on the same day an applicant makes first contact with the Council and applicants are offered an interview with an officer of the same sex. However, due to the limited resources in relation to the number of presentations in Cumbernauld, only roofless applicants are interviewed the same day, while others are offered an appointment later that week. This delays the start of the process for these applicants and the Council does not monitor how many people do not turn up for appointments made in this way.
- 5.14 Third parties we spoke to said that access to homeless services has improved over the last two years. Service users we spoke to felt happy with the level of information they had received and understood the process, however when questioned, some did not know the standby service existed. Service users found all staff friendly and helpful.
- 5.15 North Lanarkshire Council provides good access to its homelessness service. Service users are happy with access and third parties feel it has improved. There is a good range of publications, including some targeted at young people, but distribution is not monitored consistently. Publications need some updating and their availability in other formats is not widely publicised. Service users find staff friendly and helpful. The Council are able to offer same gender interviews 24 hours a day. The standby service generally works well; however, some service users do not like presenting at police stations.

Assessing homeless applications

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

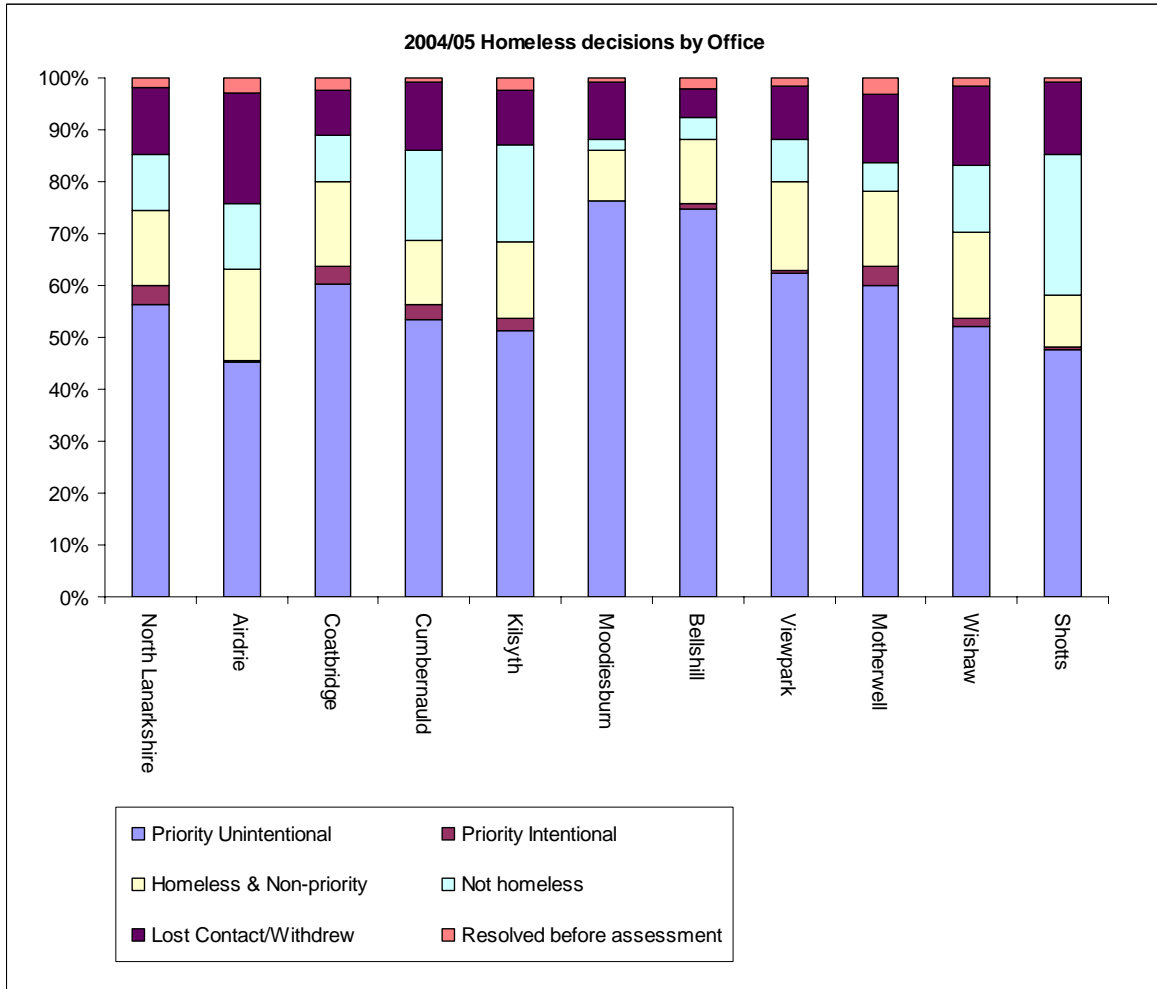
- 5.16 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself as to whether people who apply for accommodation, or for assistance in obtaining accommodation, are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. North Lanarkshire Council assessed 3,928 applications in 2004/05. The table below provides an overview of North Lanarkshire Council's assessment decisions of people who applied to it for assistance over the period 2002/03 to 2004/05.

	2002-03		2003-04		2004-05
	Council	Scotland	Council	Scotland	Council
Total number of applications assessed in period	2,628	47,740	3,042	49,937	2,928
Priority unintentional	40.79%	54%	39.9%	54%	53.5%
Priority Intentional	1.83%	3%	1.48%	2%	1.7%
Non-priority	19.75%	21%	21.04%	21%	13.9%
Not homeless	11.11%	9%	11.34%	8%	11.1%
Lost contact/withdrew before assessment	15.9%	9%	16.76%	9%	13%
Resolved prior to assessment	5.33%	4%	3.68%	6%	1.9%

Source: Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins and North Lanarkshire Council submission

- 5.17 The proportion of applicants assessed by the Council as in priority need and unintentionally homeless has risen significantly during this period, and is now close to the Scottish average. Over the same period, the levels of lost contact/withdrew before assessment, non-priority decisions and those applicants regarded as having resolved their homelessness before assessment have all decreased. The proportion of applicants the Council considers to be not homeless has remained constant around 11%. This is significantly higher than the Scottish average.
- 5.18 However, we found significant differences in the proportions of decisions of each type across the 10 FSS as illustrated in figure 1 below (see Appendix 3 for further detail). An applicant is 10 times more likely to be considered not homeless in Shotts than in Moodiesburn and the levels of unintentionally homeless and in priority need decisions range from 45.15% in Airdrie to 76.3% in Moodiesburn. Although the Council published an office by office analysis of decisions in its 2000/01 homelessness strategy which showed similar variations, it does not monitor these figures and was unaware of the extent of these variations or their significance for service users.

Figure 1



Source: North Lanarkshire Council

5.19 Initial homeless interviews are carried out by 56 different individuals in 16 different teams (including standby) with 38 officers investigating and making decisions on homeless applications. During the interview, officers are sensitive to the needs of people who apply for assistance and homeless people we spoke to were happy with the quality of information provided at their interview and felt they had been treated well by staff. However, the quality of initial assessment interviews varies between offices and officers. We shadowed a number of interviews and saw different levels of information being asked of, and provided to, the applicant, especially about the decision making process and housing options available. The Council has recognised this and prior to our inspection introduced an interview checklist to improve consistency of approach.

- 5.20 We reviewed 105 Homeless applications and found that the quality of audit trails and the recording of the decision making process was poor. In addition, in 28.57% of these cases there was a lack of recorded investigation into whether applicants were homeless before considering their applicants' priority need status. All officers making homeless assessment decisions have received training and have access to the Scottish Executive's Code of Guidance on Homelessness (Code of Guidance). The Council has also recently introduced a checklist listing the questions that should be asked when making an assessment. Assessments are also checked and approved by a senior officer. However, weaknesses in investigations and the recording of evidence were not always being identified. As a result the Council cannot be sure that its assessments are always fair and consistent. This is a significant weakness. The Council is aware of this and is considering the introduction of a more formal process for auditing decision making.
- 5.21 The percentage of people the Council loses contact with or who withdrew their application before their assessment was completed reduced slightly from 15.9% in 2002/03 to 13% in 2004/05. However the percentage remains above the national figure of 9%. Since 2000/01, the levels of lost contacts have reduced in all offices except Shotts where there has been a slight increase. As with the overall pattern of outcomes, the proportion of applicants that the Council loses contact with varies significantly across offices from 5.54% in Bellshill to 21.46% in Airdrie. The Council is aware of these variations and has begun work to improve its understanding of why they occur.
- 5.22 The Code of Guidance recommends that councils should notify people of the outcome of their application as quickly as possible and suggests a target of 28 days to complete inquiries. North Lanarkshire Council has adopted this as its target for making decisions and monitors performance against this target both at local office level and across the service. The proportion of cases where the Council meets this target has fallen from 79.6% in 2002/03 to 68% in 2004/05. This figure varies significantly across offices from 55% in the Cumbernauld and Wishaw offices to 85% in Shotts.
- 5.23 The Council has identified this as an area for improvement and has recently improved the quality of its monitoring of this aspect of the service. However, we found weaknesses in the Council's performance in this area including delays in decision making caused by the decision authorisation procedure and mistakes in recording the

date of decisions that the Council was not aware of. These are limiting the Council's ability to improve performance in this area.

- 5.24 The Council's decision letters all outline the reason for the Council's decision and detail the applicant's right to appeal. In addition, where the Council considers they have lost contact with an applicant, they write to the last known address, detailing the action taken and why this reason has been reached. However, decision letters are not always issued quickly and contact details and phone numbers of independent advice agencies are not always consistently provided. Some offices also provide applicants with an appointment to discuss their housing options with the officer who carried out their homeless assessment; but other offices give tenancy support workers or co-ordinators as the main contact for any further assistance. On being made aware of this the Council began a review of the contents of all its decision letters.
- 5.25 North Lanarkshire Council's performance in assessing homeless applicants is poor. Officers treat people well when they conduct homeless assessment interviews, but do not always follow the correct sequence of inquiries or carry out sufficient investigations into assessments. The recording of evidence and the decision making process is also weak. The Council's approach to ensuring consistency in decision making is not fully effective and decisions vary significantly between offices. This is a significant weakness. The Council loses contact with a significant number of applicants. We also found that the Council performs poorly against its own target to make decisions within 28 days and does not advise applicants of their decision quickly enough in all cases.

Temporary accommodation

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

- 5.26 North Lanarkshire Council uses a range of temporary accommodation including:
- supported accommodation units, comprising of 105 flats;
 - 228 scatter flats; and
 - 26 private sector leases.
- 5.27 In addition the Council has formal referral arrangements for seven specialist supported accommodation projects managed by Blue Triangle Housing Association and SAMH⁴¹.

⁴¹ The Scottish Association for Mental Health

It also uses eight bed and breakfast establishments in Glasgow. Cumbernauld YMCA also provide 44 places for single homeless people, which can be accessed directly by those at risk of homelessness or through a placement by the Council, but there are no formal referral arrangements in place between the YMCA and the Council.

- 5.28 The Council has set a target of 50 units of temporary accommodation in each of the 6 tenancy support teams' areas. The Council has also reviewed and improved their quality, reduced the size of some supported accommodation units and converted some shared accommodation to self contained flats. We viewed a number of scatter flats and found that they were of a good quality, however only a limited number of places are available for applicants with physical disabilities. Service users and third parties we spoke to were also clear that the quality of temporary accommodation is generally good. Service users also receive an excellent information pack when they are booked into temporary accommodation. The pack is available in other formats and this is advertised in community languages and large print.
- 5.29 The Council is aware of those units in need of further investment and is developing plans to address this including working with local housing associations to provide temporary accommodation accessible to those with disabilities. However, there are a number of weaknesses in the Council's current range of accommodation including:
- high concentrations of scatter flats in some low demand areas and in particular multi storey blocks;
 - some areas have little or no temporary accommodation; and
 - the Council makes regular use of eight bed and breakfast establishments in Glasgow.
- 5.30 As a result significant numbers of applicants are placed in temporary accommodation outwith their area of connection. For some vulnerable applicants this creates significant problems in maintaining access to health services or other support networks and makes access to work, training and school difficult. Young single applicants in particular face problems of isolation and a risk of bullying and intimidation. These problems are particularly significant for those placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in Glasgow.
- 5.31 The Council is aware of the risks associated with using out of area bed and breakfast accommodation and has recently reviewed the quality of the bed and breakfast establishments it uses. Two that were considered to be sub standard were removed

from its list. However, the problems for service users placed out of area, and in Glasgow in particular, are a major source of dissatisfaction for those affected. This is a weakness in the overall provision of temporary accommodation, which the Council have recognised. They are currently looking to set a target to stop using bed and breakfast establishments for temporary accommodation by December 2006.

- 5.32 The Council does not monitor or report the number of placements outwith their area of connection, however it is aware of this gap in its monitoring arrangements and is in the process of developing its ICT system to address it. Tenancy support teams review individual out of area placements at local office level, including those in Glasgow, regularly and act quickly to move applicants back to their area of connection as soon as possible. In addition the Council provides transport to school for children placed in temporary accommodation outwith their area. At the time of our inspection children from 12 families were being transported to school by the Council.
- 5.33 The Council is aware of the need to improve its provision of temporary accommodation and a major review of its approach to temporary accommodation is under way. This work is being led by the multi-agency Temporary Accommodation Sub Group, which will report later this year to the Homeless Strategy Group and the Homeless Operations Group with recommendations for the provision of future supply.
- 5.34 Temporary accommodation is allocated by the six Tenancy Support Teams on receiving a referral from the First Stop Shops. We observed that allocation of accommodation was based on availability and suitability. However, in areas that have limited temporary accommodation, such as Cumbernauld, availability is not meeting need. We also saw evidence from third parties and research commissioned by the Council that a small number of clients may have been refused temporary accommodation inappropriately. Key figures on the use of temporary accommodation by the Council are set out in the table below.

	2002/03		2003/04	2004/05
	National	North Lanarkshire	North Lanarkshire	North Lanarkshire
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	n/a	195	264	464
As % of total	36.7%	7.0%	5.8%	21.0%
Average length of stay (days)	26	7	5	9
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	n/a	1,306	1,489	1,573
As % of total	25.6%	85.2%	85.1%	71.4%
Average length of stay (days)	142	75	72	75
Number accommodated in hostel accommodation	n/a	124	88	91
As % of total	32.4%	4.3%	6.0%	4.1%
Average length of stay (days)	53	45	85	77

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

- 5.35 The Council placed 71.4% of people in supported accommodation and scatter flats during 2004/05. The Council uses hostels for some individuals and 4.1% of people were placed in hostels during 2004/05. Although the overall aim is to minimise the use of bed and breakfast establishments, there has been an increase during 2004/05 to 21.0%. However the use of hostels and bed and breakfasts is much less than national figures and the use of self contained flats are far greater than nationally. The stay in hostels is longer than national figures, however the length of time in bed and breakfast accommodation is decreasing and the average length of stay in the Council's own accommodation remains consistent with previous years and is significantly shorter than the national figure.
- 5.36 We found that North Lanarkshire Council is meeting the terms of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004, and achieved this well before the regulations came into force in December 2004. The Council will only place families or pregnant women in bed and breakfast accommodation if there is nothing else available and after consultation with those involved. This is monitored daily by the Supported Accommodation Manager.
- 5.37 Third parties we contacted reported that their clients usually get access to temporary accommodation but identified a range of problems similar to those we have set out in this section. They also advised that in some cases the cost of temporary accommodation can be a barrier to those in work.

5.38 North Lanarkshire Council has a fair approach to the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people. The Council is currently reviewing this service. The quality of accommodation is generally good, however, the Council is not always able to place people in their area of connection and the use of bed and breakfast establishments in Glasgow has increased. In addition a significant number of temporary lets are concentrated in low demand areas. For some clients this creates real risks and is a source of dissatisfaction. The Council is meeting the terms of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004.

Permanent accommodation

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

5.39 The Council has a statutory obligation to provide unintentionally homeless applicants in priority need with permanent accommodation, and has a target to make an offer of suitable housing within 3 months or 90 days of their homeless decision. This target is monitored through area office management plans and in 2003/04 the success rate of individual offices ranged from 20% in Wishaw FSS to 88.41% in Motherwell. In addition, the numbers of statutory homeless cases awaiting rehousing are reported for each of the 10 First Stop Shops to operational and senior management on a fortnightly basis and discussed at divisional meetings. Homeless applicants housed in 2004/05 waited an average of 231 days; however those that were still awaiting rehousing had been on the list for an average of 304 days. These times are significantly higher than the Council's 90 day target.

5.40 The Council made 15% of its lets to priority unintentionally homeless applicants in 2003/04. The Council monitors the numbers of homeless applications awaiting rehousing and the numbers housed outwith its 90 day target. In the light of increases in both these figures, the Council took a decision in March 2004 to increase allocations to homeless applications substantially to address the back log and then to put in place an operational target of 25% of lets to homeless applicants, once the back log had been addressed. This resulted in the proportion of homeless lets rising to 37% in 2004/05. However, in April 2005 the Council recognised that it had a backlog of over 800 homeless applicants awaiting rehousing and increased its operational target to 70%. At this rate the Council estimated that it would take a year to clear this backlog. At 20 June 2005, although increasing, the number of lets to homeless applicants was 45% and the

figure varied between First Stop Shops from 33.33% in Shotts to 69.23% in Viewpark. The Council is aware of these differences and is monitoring performance closely.

- 5.41 North Lanarkshire Council treats homeless people the same as those on the general waiting list in providing them with 2 offers and the same choice of 6 areas out of 170 where they are offered accommodation. However, the Council indicates in its published leaflet "Homeless? A guide to services for Homeless applicants", that offers will be suitable for an applicant's needs and may be in or near their areas of choice. This is not covered by the Council's published allocation policy and no written guidance is available to applicants as to when an offer outwith their areas of choice may be considered reasonable. A number of third parties and service users we spoke to were confused about how decisions were made about what area an applicant might be offered.
- 5.42 We asked the Council to provide information on the level of refusals and appeals against offers of permanent accommodation by homeless applicants but it was unable to do so. As a result, at the time of our inspection the Council was unable to effectively monitor the effectiveness of current practice in offering permanent housing. On being made aware of this, the Council acted to improve its monitoring arrangements. An initial report indicated that 70% of applicants accepted the first offer that the Council made but further information on the grounds for refusing offers or the outcomes for these applicants was not available.
- 5.43 Homeless applicants receive offers of permanent accommodation in low, medium and high demand areas and, unlike waiting list applicants, may be offered all property types. Third party views about the offers clients received was mixed but those working with young people expressed particular concerns that such applicants were more likely to be offered accommodation in less popular estates. Some third parties and service users also expressed concerns about the time taken to make a permanent offer and the ability of the Council to provide individuals with accommodation in an area that was suitable, with reference to support networks, schools and travel to work. The Council is aware of these issues and looking to take action to address them. The Council has only recently started to monitor time to first offer for homeless applicants following improvements to its ICT system.

- 5.44 North Lanarkshire Council's approach to accessing accommodation from other providers is developing. In 2003/04, the Council reported making 34 Section 5 referrals⁴² of which only 32% of these were successful. However the number of referrals made during 2004/05 increased to 157 with a success rate of 73%. The level of Section 5 referrals is monitored and included in the fortnightly report at divisional meetings. The Council is also starting to meet local RSLs to discuss issues relating to its use of Section 5 referrals.
- 5.45 The Council has a duty to those applicants that it considers to be either intentionally homeless or not in priority need to provide advice and assistance and temporary accommodation for a reasonable period to assist them in finding permanent accommodation. These groups made up 46.5% of homeless applicants in 2004/05.
- 5.46 The Council does not know the final outcomes for many applicants in this group. In 2004/05 it lost contact or recorded the outcome as 'not known' for just over half of these applicants. The Council is unable to demonstrate that it has met its statutory obligations to these clients. This is a significant failing.
- 5.47 Advice and assistance is provided by staff in the First Stop Shops and the Tenancy Support teams. However, it was not clear that the Council is adequately recording details of the advice and assistance provided to applicants as suggested by the Code of Guidance. Case reviews and shadowing⁴³ also highlighted that the quality of information and advice provided at initial interview, which may be the only interview an applicant attends, varies in quality and detail across officers and offices. The interview and decision checklists include sections on advice and housing options but the level of detail in these was limited and officers had no further guidance on what should be covered.
- 5.48 North Lanarkshire Council's performance in providing permanent accommodation to homeless people is fair. The proportion of lets the Council makes to homeless applicants has risen significantly in recent years, however it is still significantly below the operational target of 70% and the Council estimates that it will take at least a year to house the substantial number of applicants currently awaiting an offer. Those still awaiting rehousing at the end of 2004/05 had on average, waited 304 days, which is well

⁴² see glossary

⁴³ see glossary

in excess of the Council's target of 90 days. In addition the Council has not published all the rules it uses to allocate houses to this group. Recorded outcomes for other homeless applicants are poor, with just over half of these applicants having an outcome of either 'not known' or 'lost contact'. This is a significant weakness.

Preventing homelessness

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

- 5.49 North Lanarkshire Council sets out its approach to preventing homelessness and repeat presentations through its homelessness strategy which was reviewed for the second time in April 2005. The Corporate Plan sets out a target to reduce the number of homeless people applying for housing to 1.2% of total households by 2008. The Council is developing a prevention strategy to be incorporated into a revised homelessness strategy in 2006. The draft is based on the work of the Cumbernauld prevention pilot project currently underway.
- 5.50 The Council works well with a wide range of agencies and has made good progress on a number of key objectives set out in its prevention strategy. It has also identified further objectives to be achieved in 2005/06, which include:
- better liaison with local landlords;
 - topic presentations in schools;
 - link with local furniture recycling programmes;
 - making draft arrangements for hospital and prison discharges formal;
 - develop personal housing plans for vulnerable clients, to complement personal care plans; and
 - review allocation and housing benefit policies to reduce intentionally homeless presentations.
- 5.51 North Lanarkshire Council is good at identifying vulnerable tenants and offering advice and support across a wide range of issues including health, debt, childcare and training and employment. The Council has reduced the number of its tenants being evicted or abandoning their homes in recent years. In addition, it has established a pilot prevention team in the Cumbernauld area to address some of the particular problems arising from the high level of homeless presentations and the shortage of social rented housing in that area. At the time of our inspection the pilot was being extended to three further First

Stop Shop areas and will be fully evaluated in 2006. The Council has also successfully helped nine families to remain in their own homes through participation in the national Mortgage to Rent scheme.

5.52 The Council has a structured programme of training to attain HomePoint⁴⁴ accreditation for staff providing type II advice, and a range of other initiatives which will contribute to prevention. These include:

- a rent deposit scheme;
- furniture grants;
- Tartan Tower – a pilot in Motherwell, which targets offenders, offering advice, support and accommodation;
- Street League – a football league for homeless people;
- close work with local schools;
- funding a post in the Citizens Advice Bureau, to provide housing information and advice to volunteers;
- funding Shelter to provide advocacy services; and
- the Access Project - an employability project for young people.

5.53 The availability of support services has led to 90% of those households rehoused in 2003/04 successfully sustaining their tenancies in the first year. However, the number of repeat homeless applications is a significant issue in North Lanarkshire, and the Council has identified this as a challenge and an area for improvement. Repeat applications have increased over the past three years and are consistently higher than Scottish figures. During 2004/05, 760 people or 17.5% of households applying had done so more than once that year; an increase of 108% on the previous year. It is also significantly higher than the Scottish figure of 8.45% for the previous year. During 2004/05 the numbers of repeat applications ranged from 8.63% to 27.75% at the 10 First Stop Shops. The Council has identified the Homeless Continuous Improvement Group to take forward the work required to understand and address the high and increasing levels of repeat homelessness. It believes that weaknesses in gathering the statistics may be leading to an over-reporting of the issue. It has also commissioned research into repeat homelessness amongst rough sleepers and begun to develop its ICT systems to provide better monitoring information.

⁴⁴ see glossary

5.54 North Lanarkshire Council has a fair approach to preventing homelessness and reducing repeat applications. The Council has made progress with a number of initiatives designed to prevent homelessness including good joint working to avoid homelessness for those leaving prison or hospital. The Council is good at identifying and supporting tenants at risk of homelessness and has well developed plans to improve the quality of advice available and has already made progress on this. However, many of these initiatives are at an early stage and the level of repeat presentations remains high.

Responsiveness to homeless people

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

5.55 North Lanarkshire Council has published a “Charter for people who are homeless” which is prominently displayed in all First Stop Shops. This clearly sets out what applicants can expect and what the service standards are, including the right to:

- a private interview;
- an interview with an officer of the same sex;
- help in making an application;
- seek independent advice; and
- the assistance of an interpreter or independent advisor.

5.56 The charter also details how to make a complaint. Some of the information on service standards is also repeated in the Tenancy Support leaflet. Apart from monitoring the provision of permanent accommodation within 90 days, the Council does not monitor its compliance to these standards.

5.57 The existing arrangements within the First Stop Shops and Tenancy Services Teams means that individuals have a homeless interview and are assessed for support quickly. In addition, the information on the reasons behind the decision in decision letters is tailored to the individual applicant. However, some service users and third parties find the different roles of the First Stop Shops and Tenancy Services Teams and the number of officers applicants may have contact with confusing. This sometimes makes it difficult to identify who to speak to about a problem or specific issue. However, the Council is aware of this and has recently started issuing contact cards with details of the standby

officer to those presenting out of hours to ensure they have a contact until the case is passed to the FSS for assessment.

- 5.58 The Council recognised the need to develop ways to take account of service users' views in its Homelessness Strategy 2003-2006. The Council has taken a number of steps to address this including:
- commissioning research into service users' views;
 - establishing a multi-agency implementation group;
 - consulting service users in the preparation of its booklet for those under 21;
 - developing service user forums for those using Tenancy Support Services; and
 - developing exit surveys and other feedback mechanisms.
- 5.59 Service users housed over a 12 month period were surveyed in March 2004 but the response rate was low and responses have not yet been analysed. A service users' day is also being planned for later this year with service users being invited along with speakers to consider future services.
- 5.60 Local Authorities have a statutory duty to review homelessness decisions and offers of temporary and permanent accommodation if requested by the applicant. The Council's approach to reviews or appeals against homeless decisions meets statutory requirements and the Council's homeless charter. Published material and decision letters all advise applicants of their right to appeal against a homeless decision. However there is no information on the right to appeal against an offer of temporary or permanent accommodation in these documents. We asked the Council to provide information on the number of appeals, the reasons and the outcomes but they were unable to do so. It does not currently have systems in place to monitor appeals made by homeless applicants. This is a weakness that limits the Council's ability to respond to service users and improve services.
- 5.61 The council has a good, well-publicised set of service standards for homeless people and it operates a homeless appeals process that meets legislative requirements. Its approach to getting and using feedback from service users is underdeveloped but improving.

Working with partners

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

- 5.62 North Lanarkshire Council works with a wide range of partner organisations both in planning and delivering services to homeless people. The Homeless Strategy Implementation and Monitoring Group now includes representation from a wide range of internal and external partners including Shelter, the Glasgow Simon Community, the two health boards and five RSLs. The Council has also established a multi-Agency forum to advise on service development options.
- 5.63 The Council has developed a range of joint projects including:
- The provision of specific temporary accommodation and support developed to meet particular needs (partners include SAMH, Blue Triangle Housing Association and Cumbernauld YMCA).
 - The development of specialist sport services for women experiencing domestic abuse in partnership with Women's Aid and the EVA project⁴⁵.
 - The establishment of a Shelter Housing Advocacy Worker for agencies to be able to contact to ask for housing advice.
 - The establishment of a Citizens' Advice Bureaux Housing Advice Network Manager.
 - Funding three posts within the local health board's Health and Homeless Team.
 - Working with private sector landlords to develop temporary accommodation provision within North Lanarkshire Council and for opportunities to enable applicants to access the private sector.
- 5.64 For many third parties, support workers in Tenancy Services are their main point of daily contact rather than officers in the First Stop Shops or the strategic working groups. Overall, the majority of partner organisations we spoke to were fairly content with their relationship with the housing service although they identified some aspects which were working less well than others. Joint working around the recently agreed Sex Offenders protocol was identified as particularly effectively. However, not all third parties felt that all aspects and protocols were working well. In particular, those working with formerly looked after children and young people with offending or drug and alcohol abuse problems were more likely to express concern about inconsistent responses and service

⁴⁵ see glossary

quality between local teams and offices. The Council is aware of this and is working with Throughcare staff to address this. Communication between Tenancy Services or the FSS and the agencies were sometimes described as problematic around specific issues, for example including agencies in discussions around permanent accommodation requirements and offers.

- 5.65 The Council is good at working with its internal and external partners in planning and delivering services for homeless people. Partners were broadly positive with their involvement in strategic planning groups and this is developing. Whilst we found some evidence of inconsistent approaches or communication problems, overall, these did not have an impact on the effectiveness of joint working in service delivery or planning.

Is the service managed for improvement?

Performance management

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

- 5.66 The Council's Corporate Plan 2004-2008 includes a commitment to meet housing need and help people with particular needs. One of the key actions identified is to reduce the number of homeless people applying for housing to 1.2% of households by 2008. The Council has also published a homelessness strategy 2003-2006 including an action plan. These have been reviewed and updated in each of the two annual reviews in 2004 and 2005. The homeless charter and homeless booklet set out what services and standards homeless applicants can expect.
- 5.67 The homelessness strategy action plan covers a wide range of issues including health, benefits, employment and training, support and temporary accommodation. The Council has made good progress on a number of these commitments including:
- developing joint working with Lanarkshire Health Board's Health and Homelessness Team;
 - reviewing current provision and increasing the supply of temporary accommodation;
 - establishing six housing support teams; and
 - developing a number of joint working and referral agreements with partner organisations.

- 5.68 The Council also recognises the need to improve their monitoring and evaluation framework for services to homeless people. The Homeless Strategy and Implementation Group has set out an approach to collecting baseline data as the first stage in this process. The Council has recently developed their integrated ICT system to improve the Council's ability to report service delivery related information but is at an early stage in developing its use of this information. The Council also established a short life group to review areas of the homeless service in preparation for inspection and intends to retain this group as part of its overall approach to continuous improvement.
- 5.69 The planning framework for homelessness service is generally well developed. However, there are a number of significant weaknesses in the Council's overall approach to the management and monitoring of performance of the homelessness service.
- 5.70 All staff have undertaken training on relevant issues and have access to the Code of Guidance. In addition, decision and interview checklists have been introduced together with some measures to quality assure the decision making process. However, there is a lack of any clear policy and procedural framework to assist staff in carrying out thorough investigations into homeless applicants' circumstances consistently.
- 5.71 We also found significant weaknesses in the Council's strategic management of performance and service delivery. In particular the Council does not adequately monitor or report on:
- assessment decisions and outcomes including lost contacts across offices or teams;
 - out of area placements in temporary accommodation;
 - outcomes for applicants other than those considered unintentionally homeless and in priority need;
 - appeals and reviews;
 - performance against its service standards and charter; and
 - the quality of information and advice provided and whether this had achieved a positive outcome for the applicant concerned.
- 5.72 As a result the Council does not have an accurate picture of the overall effectiveness of its service from an applicant's perspective; cannot be certain that it is meeting the needs of all homeless applicants and cannot measure the effectiveness of its strategies for the

prevention of homelessness or reducing repeat homelessness. This is a significant weakness and impacts on the capacity of the Council to improve services. The Council is aware of some of these weaknesses and has begun to take action to address them.

- 5.73 North Lanarkshire Council's approach to performance management is poor. Whilst the planning framework is well developed and the Council has made good progress on a range of actions and objectives there are a number of significant areas of weakness in the Council's approach to performance management of service delivery. In particular, the limited guidance available for staff, the ineffective quality assurance process for assessment decisions and the lack of monitoring of key areas of the service. The Council does not have a good strategic understanding of the outcomes or impact of its own services. This is likely to limit its ability to improve.

Resource management and efficiency

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

- 5.74 North Lanarkshire Council's expenditure on its homelessness services for the last three years is set out in the table below.

	('000's)		
	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05*
Expenditure on delivery of the homelessness service (inc provision of temp. accommodation)	3,197	2,755	3,300
Income received in the year	4,024	3,283	3,609
Net cost to the Council of providing the homelessness service	(827)	(528)	(309)
Cost for bed and breakfast provision (gross)	48	42	159
Cost for other temporary accommodation (gross)	2,927	2,566	2,987
Cost of provision of out-of-hours service	43	38	33

Source: North Lanarkshire Council submission document

* date of this information 31 March 2005

- 5.75 The overall cost of providing homelessness services has risen over the last three years. In particular the Council has seen a significant rise in the cost of bed and breakfast provision in 2004/05 due to an increase in the numbers of applicants presenting and requiring temporary accommodation. The Council is aware of these costs and in particular of the problems of controlling the cost and quality of bed and breakfast accommodation and is developing plans to reduce and eventually eliminate the use of this type of accommodation.

- 5.76 The Council is effective at collecting rent for all its directly provided temporary accommodation and in particular it ensures that applicants who are eligible for housing benefit make claims on the day they are placed in temporary accommodation.
- 5.77 However, the Council has not carried out a best value review of its homelessness services nor has it been subject to any assessment by internal auditors in the recent past. The Council is aware of this and the services are included in the internal audit programme for 2005/06.
- 5.78 North Lanarkshire Council's approach to resource management and efficiency is good with a focus on ensuring value for money and quality services for service users.

Public reporting

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

- 5.79 North Lanarkshire Council's Corporate Plan 2004-2008, homelessness strategy, "Charter for people who are homeless" and customer charter set out a range of aims, objectives and performance targets for the homelessness service. Whilst the Council has published two reviews of its homelessness strategy, including updates on progress with the associated action plan, it has published only limited service related performance information.
- 5.80 Within the Housing and Property Services annual performance report 2003-04 there are two performance indicators covering the average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation and Council furnished dwellings. Within the First Stop Shops, the quarterly performance report also has information on homelessness; the number of homeless presentations and the quarterly performance on reaching decisions within 28 days.
- 5.81 The Council publishes limited information on its performance against the homelessness targets within its homeless strategy and service standards outlined in their homeless charter. The annual performance report for 2003-2004, "Housing Key Facts and Figures" and homeless strategy reviews are available on the Council's website and in First Stop Shops and although key priorities for the year ahead are identified, there is limited performance information available.

5.82 North Lanarkshire Council's approach to public reporting on homelessness services is poor. Only a very limited range of information is published. Specific targets are identified in a number of corporate and service documents, but information on performance against these is not published or made available to stakeholders, or service users.

Grade and overall assessment of homelessness services

5.83 Our overall assessment of North Lanarkshire Council's homelessness services is fair. We found a number of strengths and a range of weaknesses that impact to varying degrees on the quality and consistency of the service and the Council's ability to improve. We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.

5.84 The Council provides good access to the service; it provides good information and homeless people can apply at one of a number of locations. The out of hours standby system works well for most applicants. Staff are responsive to the needs of applicants, the quality of temporary accommodation is good and where applicants are placed outside their area of connection, the Council is quick to move them to a more appropriate location as soon as possible. The Council also works well with its partners and is making good progress in implementing its homelessness strategy action plan.

5.85 The Council has a number of weaknesses that impact on service users and limit the Council's ability to improve. These are, at least in part, undermining the stronger areas of the service. They include:

- high concentrations of temporary accommodation in lower demand areas and the use of out of area bed and breakfast establishments;
- high and increasing repeat homeless presentations;
- inconsistencies in decision making and inadequate recording of evidence and outcomes;
- failure to publish all the rules for the allocation of houses to homeless applicants;
- the time taken to complete assessments and provide permanent accommodation;
- limited information on outcomes for many applicants not accepted for housing and high levels of lost contacts; and
- limited public reporting of the service.

5.86 We also found limited strategic management of the service and significant gaps in the performance monitoring system. The Council does not have a good overall picture of the performance of the service or key areas of weakness. This is having a significant impact on the Council's ability to improve service delivery and focus its strategic planning for service development.

6. Areas for Improvement Action

These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority within each of the key service areas.

Across all of its landlord and homelessness activities North Lanarkshire Council should:

- Review all areas of performance management to ensure that they cover all aspects of service delivery and that they provide a client focused view of the service and include performance against published service standards and service user satisfaction indicators and targets.
- Improve its approach to monitoring and reporting access and outcomes for minority ethnic communities.
- Put in place effective arrangements for recording informal complaints and monitoring enquiries from local members including the recording of personal information provided to them.
- Put in place effective arrangements for the recording of all appeals against all decisions including monitoring and reporting by service area and outcome.
- Develop a comprehensive plan for the development of its ICT systems to support the process of continuous improvement.
- Improve public reporting to ensure that it provides tenants, service users and stakeholders with an accurate picture of performance in each service area and across the service as a whole.

In housing management, the Council should:

- Review all aspects of its approach to allocating empty houses including the strategic objectives of the allocations policy, the publication of all the rules applied, the recording and management of decisions and the monitoring and reporting of outcomes and ensure that the administration of its policy and procedures is fair, consistent and transparent.
- Put in place guidance for the management of occupancy following the granting of a decree for possession including arrangements for issuing a new tenancy agreement.
- Ensure that the management of outcomes including out come letters are reviewed as part of the overall review of procedures for the Anti Social Task Force.

In property maintenance, the Council should:

- Improve the quality of information available to tenants relating to the response repairs service and ensure that it accurately reflects the service and service standards that the Council seeks to achieve.
- Put in place effective arrangements for the management and reporting of all services provided by Saltire Facilities Management including compliance of gas safety regulations and the Right to Repair legislation.
- Improve its performance in carrying out repairs within published timescales.
- Make better use of all the available sources of information on stock condition to ensure that it builds up a more accurate picture of the condition of its stock and compliance with both the SHQS and the “North Lanarkshire Standard”.
- Assess the extent to which current partnership contracts provide best value to tenants when the partnerships are reviewed and ensure that all decisions relating to procurement are recorded.

In homelessness, the Council should:

- Put in place detailed guidance for investigations and decision making including effective quality assurance arrangements and ensure that decisions on applications are made within target timescales and to a consistent standard across the service.
- Develop an effective approach to the strategic management of the service including the effective monitoring and management of outcomes for all applicants.
- Ensure temporary accommodation is available throughout North Lanarkshire, enabling homeless people to be placed within their area of connection.
- Address the high and increasing levels of repeat homeless presentations.

7. Next Steps

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

Mr Thomas McKenzie
Director of Housing and Property Services
Municipal buildings
Kildonan street
Coatbridge
ML5 3NG

Telephone: 01236 812 506
Email: McKenzieT@northlan.gov.uk
Website: www.northlan.gov.uk

Sources of Evidence

Groups and third parties consulted

- Tenants and Residents Association
- Tenants and Residents Association
- Tenants and Residents Association
- Community Association
- Tenants Association
- Housing Association
- Housing Association
- (Scotland) Housing Association
- Margaret Blackwood Housing Association
- Trust Housing Association
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Shelter
- Women's Aid
- Homeless Strategy Working Group
- Blue Triangle Housing Association
- Stay Project
- Health and Homelessness team
- Cumbernauld YMCA

Public Agencies consulted

- Glasgow City Council
- South Lanarkshire Council
- Greater Glasgow Health Board
- Ombudsman
- HomePoint
- Communities Scotland Area Investment Team
- Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Development Team
- Communities Scotland Mortgage to Rent Team
- Scottish Executive Antisocial Behaviour Unit
- Audit Scotland
- Scottish Executive Homelessness Team

Meetings with Tenants Groups (Total of 94 Tenants attended)

Kilsyth Tenants and residents organisation

Craigneuk and old Petersburn Tenants and Residents Association- Airdrie

Clifton and Coatdyke Tenants and Residents Association Coatbridge

Holehills Tenants and Residents Association- Airdrie

Salsburgh tenants and Residents Association (Salsburgh)

Coatbridge Tenants Federation

Tenants and Residents of Uist Road Petersburn (TROUP) Airdrie

Glassford Tower Tenants and Residents Association Motherwell

Allershaw Tower Tenants and Residents Group Wishaw

Milton Court tenants association Coatbridge

Gowkthrapple Tenants and Residents Group Wishaw

Forge Tower Tenants and Residents Group Motherwell

Inspection staff also met with officers employed by the Tenancy Information Service (TIS) working under contract to North Lanarkshire Council providing support and development services to tenants groups.

Interviews/meetings

Councillors

Cllr Hogg
Cllr McCabe
Cllr Valentine
Cllr Brooks
Cllr McLaughlin
Cllr Jones
Cllr Lunny

Inspection staff also observed a meeting of the Council's Housing and Technical Services Committee and a Meeting of a Scrutiny Panel convened to consider issues relating to the implementation of the Homeless Persons Legislation.

Chief Officers

- Chief Executive
- Assistant Chief Executive (Community Regeneration)
- Assistant Chief Executive (corporate and performance)
- Director of Housing and Property Services
- Head of Housing Services

Housing Division Staff

- Divisional Managers
- Development Manager
- Tenancy Operations Manager
- Finance and administration manager
- Tenancy Services and Accommodation Manager
- Head of Design Services
- Supported Accommodation Manager
- Divisional Support Managers
- Area Housing Managers
- Service Managers
- Assistant Service Managers
- Senior Housing Officers Estates/Arrears/Allocations/Homelessness/Prevention
- Housing Officers Arrears/Estates/Allocations/Homelessness
- Property services Manager
- Client Services Manager
- Repairs Inspectors
- Customer Service Assistants
- Senior Community Warden
- Community Wardens
- Tower Caretaker
- Concierge
- Sheltered Housing Wardens
- Principal Investigator ASTF
- Senior Investigators ASTF
- Senior Housing Officer Mediation/Tenancy Support ASTF

- Tenancy Support Officers ASTF
- Management Initiative Team
- Tenancy Support Co-ordinators
- Assessment Case Managers
- Tenancy Support Officers
- Out of hours Homelessness staff
- Supported Accommodation Supervisors
- Tenant Participation Officer
- Senior Strategy Officer
- Homelessness Resources Officer

Staff in Other Council Departments

- Audit Manager
- Criminal Justice Teams
- Addiction Teams
- Social Work Services Throughcare
- Social Work Addiction Housing Support worker

Reality checks

- Observation of homeless staff interviewing and managing presentations
- Observation of housing management staff managing arrears, estate management issues and allocations
- Observation of repairs staff, taking and ordering response repairs, managing enquiries and carrying out pre and post inspections
- Observing front desk staff at access points
- Case reviews of applications, allocations, tenancy management, antisocial behaviour, evictions, arrears, homelessness, void property management, response and planned maintenance works
- Discussion and observation with staff managing sheltered and temporary accommodation, carrying out estate visits with Community Wardens
- Visits to a wide range of properties spread across the council area with staff
- Visits to a wide range of temporary accommodation properties across the council area
- Attendance at case conferences and appeals

Key documents reviewed

- Inspection Submission
- Corporate Plan 2004-2008
- Housing and Property Services Service Improvement Plan 2004/05-2006/07
- Local Housing Strategy 2004-2009
- Tenant participation strategy
- Customer Charter
- Charter for people who are Homeless
- North Lanarkshire Council Performance Report 2003-2004
- Performance Management in Local Authority Housing Services: An Empirical View. Including the North Lanarkshire Case Study Report
- Annual Performance Reports 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04
- Area office management plans
- Report to Housing and Technical Services Committee – Results of NLC tenant Questionnaire 2004, 3 August 2005
- Report to Housing and Technical Services Committee Housing Allocation Policy 24 August 2004

- North Lanarkshire Homelessness Strategy 2003-2006 and annual review reports
- Better Understanding Housing Support Service users views (May 2005)
- Improving Homelessness Services and service user involvement Report (February 2004)
- Assessment of Homelessness Service – North Lanarkshire Council (June 2002)
- Acknowledgement Letter for Applicants

Policies and Procedures: Housing Management

- Sheltered Housing Revised Policy (draft)
- Allocation Policy
- Internal Audit Report - Council House Allocation Arrangements and Lettings Procedures - 22/11/2003
- Void Procedure Note
- Estate Management Procedures
- Antisocial behaviour procedures and policy
- Draft antisocial behaviour strategy
- Racial Harassment Policy and procedures
- Policy and management of evictions and arrears

Publicity/Public Material for Housing Management

- Tenant newsletters and leaflets
- Rent increase newsletter
- Local area news letters
- Publicity poster for housing
- ASTF leaflets
- North Lanarkshire Council website

Outcome Reports: Housing Management

- Reports and analysis of tenant satisfaction work and other feedback exercises relating to housing management services in the last 2 years
- Best Value reports
- Outcome report and most recently updated action plan from service reviews, Best Value reviews and internal audit reports relating to housing management undertaken in the last two years
- Scrutiny Panel- Strategy and policy implementation: Review of Rent Arrears, Homelessness and Evictions Policy
- Annual Budget setting and rent increase reports
- Revenue Budget monitoring reports
- Former Tenant Arrears Write off reports
- Joint antisocial behaviour strategy – North Lanarkshire Council / Strathclyde Police
- Anti Social Task Force – One Year On
- Debt Managers Ltd Report Performance Report on Former Tenant Arrears Sundry Debt and Trace and Collect
- Craigforth Report on Sheltered Housing Support Services
- Weekly void reports
- Rent Arrear monitoring prints by area, ward, amount and action

Policies and Procedures: Property Maintenance

- Repairs and Maintenance manual
- void procedures and VFM reports
- Corporate Procurement Strategy 2004-2006 and Procedures
- Current planned and cyclical maintenance programmes

- Option appraisal :stock condition report
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard: standard delivery plan
- Asbestos management – action plan and associated policies
- CORGI - gas maintenance report and associated paperwork

Publicity/Public Material: Property Maintenance

- leaflets available in public offices
- advice leaflets for planned maintenance works

Outcome Reports: Property Maintenance

- Reports and analysis of tenant satisfaction work and other feedback exercises relating to property management services in the last 2 years
- budgetary and performance monitoring reports for responsive and planned maintenance activity
- publicly available performance reports
- Reports on tenders

Policies and Procedures: Homelessness

- Updated homelessness strategy (including the action plan)
- Draft prevention strategy
- Temporary Accommodation Sub Group report June 2005
- Service delivery plan(s) for the homelessness service, including statement of the Council's objectives and key targets for the homeless service
- Homelessness appeals policy and procedures
- Copy of homeless assessment form
- Procedural guidance for staff on the allocation of temporary accommodation
- Procedural guidance for customer service assistants
- Homeless referral protocols in place with partner organisations, including Section 5 protocols
- Discharge protocols with other partner organisations (hospitals, Children's Services, prisons etc
- Service level agreements with key partners
- Information and advice strategy (draft)
- Decision guide and Interview checklist

Publicity/Public Material: Homelessness

- Examples of publicity for homeless service, out of hours service and translation/interpreting service available to households presenting as homeless
- Leaflets providing housing information and advice to homeless people
- Guide to services for homeless people booklet
- Homeless persons charter
- North Lanarkshire Council Website – Homelessness pages

Outcome Reports: Homelessness

- List of all lets in most recent full financial year showing source of applicant (homeless, transfer, housing list), property type and letting area
- Outcome report for non priority decisions in temporary accommodation
- Reports provided for divisional meetings

Policy and Publicity Material: General

- Policy and Financial Plan 2004-07
- Policy and Financial Plan Guidelines

- Tenants Handbook
- Tenant participation strategy
- Statement on customer care standards in housing management, property maintenance and homelessness, and associated publicity material
- Publicly available reports, newsletters, etc. published in the last two years on the performance of housing management, property maintenance and homelessness services

Performance Reports

- Tenancies granted (e.g. SSTs, short SSTs)
- Responsive repairs service (including response times, pre and post inspections, right to repair)
- Repairs 2004/2005
- Performance of planned and cyclical maintenance programmes
- Performance in achieving customer care standards for housing management and property maintenance services
- Analysis of complaints / appeals in your housing management and property maintenance services
- Outcomes for homeless applicants
- Progress against the homelessness strategy action plan
- Reports and minutes for most recent budget-setting exercise (including budget papers)
- Maintenance budgets and spend against targets for last two years and future spending plans

Performance - Additional reports/items

- Guidelines for Policy Review Committee Involvement in Best Value Reviews
- Best Value review of Homelessness, Allocations and Void Management
- Reports on Review of Service Standards
- Report on Internal Audit of Homelessness 2004
- North Lanarkshire Housing Best Value Achievement Report for 2002
- Progress Report on Corporate Strategy Year 1
- Service Standards Annual Overview Report 2004
- Statutory Performance Indicators Performance Report 2004
- Management Reports – Property Services
- Management Reports – Tenancy Services
- Management Reports – Finance
- Benchmarking⁴⁶ Data – 2002/2003, 2003/2004, Q1 2004/2005
- Final Report 2003/2004

Organisational and Service Profile Information

- North Lanarkshire's Community Plan
- "Making a difference in North Lanarkshire" North Lanarkshire Council's corporate strategy 2003
- North Lanarkshire Local Housing Strategy (LHS) 2004
- LHS Needs Assessment 2004
- North Lanarkshire Council's Political Management Structure
- Housing Advisory Group – council report establishing the group, group's constitution and working arrangements
- Decentralisation Review Report
- Council Report on the future of the Department of Housing and Commercial Operations
- Departmental Structure Charts

⁴⁶ see glossary

Performance Management and Planning Framework

- Performance Overview Report
- Policy and Financial Plan 2004-07
- Policy and Financial Plan Guidelines
- Performance Profile Reports and Guidelines
- Guidelines for Strategic Best Value Reviews
- Internal Audit Plan
- Service Standards Booklet
- Editions of ER Council Magazine

Resource Management

- Service Level Agreements
- Budget preparation guidelines
- Council's Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders
- Corporate Risk Management Strategy
- Corporate Employee Training and Development Strategy
- Training Plan 2004/05
- Staff newsletters
- Employee code of conduct

Housing Stock Profile

- Stock1 Return to the Scottish Executive
- Housing Stock Report 2002/03

Housing Service Profile

- Description of Staff duties in Housing Service

Context Information

- Transitional Regeneration Plan for North Lanarkshire 2004/05
- North Lanarkshire Socio Economic Profile and Deprivation Analysis May 2004
- North Lanarkshire Joint Community Care Plan
- "Understanding the Housing Needs of the Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in North Lanarkshire" Report for the council by ODS Consultants
- Report on Mapping of Fuel Poverty in North Lanarkshire 2004 by Alembic Research
- Researching the Housing Needs of Older People in North Lanarkshire 2003

Housing Management Additional Evidence

- Young Tenants Pack
- Tenants Newsletters
- DTZ Report on Social Housing Needs Requirement Jan 2004
- Tenant Participation - Report on Staff Training Seminar
- Partnership in Practice Agreement
- Minutes of allocation team meetings

Property Management Additional Evidence

- Stock condition database - screenshots

Homelessness Additional Evidence

- Housing Options Guide
- Joint Futures Training Seminar Pack

Examples of Positive Practice

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

Housing management

"Your Estates Your Services" Manual

The Council has developed a strategic and planned approach to estate management which includes the introduction of the "Your Estates Your Services" manual. Consultation and awareness sessions involving elected members, staff at all levels, tenants and tenant groups demonstrates an inclusive and pro active approach to policy development.

The manual is provides comprehensive and user friendly guidance and information with good indexing and cross referencing features. It incorporates:

- up to date policies and procedures;
- standard letters;
- service standards; and
- performance and monitoring systems.

The system is in the final stages of implementation, and once fully operational will track and demonstrate active estate management across the Council area. The information collated and the feedback from tenant led estate inspections is already being used to determine projects for Estate Based Initiatives and the Estate Services Action Plans.

Tenant Participation

The tenant participation strategy has three key elements which are having a positive impact in tenant involvement and perception in North Lanarkshire. These are:

- monthly meeting with the chairs of local tenants organisations;
- at least one tenant led estate walk about in each area every year; and
- the publication of regular local news letters.

The Council has also started to hold joint staff/tenant training sessions as part of its regular programme of local office training closures. The tenant led estate inspections introduced as part of the tenant participation strategy and the "Your Estates Your Services" review and is very popular with tenants. The importance of formal and regular feedback or updates has been

highlighted and was incorporated into the practice after some tenants and tenant groups had raised concerns regarding the lack of formal feedback or progress on the issues raised. In addition tenants are taking this opportunity to highlight issues and responsibilities of other Corporate services, such as road and street lighting repairs and open space maintenance are being raised requiring action and feedback.

Liaison with Housing Benefits

Arrears staff have a proactive service liaison with Housing Benefits. This is promoted through a comprehensive service level agreement which encourages improved service and performance opportunities for both services. There are regular meetings between the services, reports highlighting outstanding claims or breaks in benefit entitlement and benefit and verification training allowing front line housing staff to give advice and complete verification protocols. This approach promotes benefit claim processing, minimises the possibility of arrears accruing and prompt follow up action.

Antisocial Behaviour Strategy

The development of the anti social behaviour strategy is a good example of a strong corporate lead driving the agenda, and promoting and facilitating multi agency working. The impact and influence of a much wider agenda including children's services, youth justice and community and environmental factors are recognised. It is demonstrated in the aims and objectives outlined in both the Corporate and Housing Service Plans. While it will be delivered by the proactive multi agency links, service level agreements, protocols and working group. Partners include Strathclyde Police, Authority Reporter, Chair of the Children's Panel, Procurator Fiscal Depute, various Council services including Chief Executive, Community Safety, Education, Planning and Environment, Social Work, Housing and Legal services.

Tenancy Support

The tenancy support services are available and impact on the quality of service and support received by tenants in arrears or facing eviction and for victims of and witnesses to antisocial behaviour. The service provided by the various dispersed and specialist teams across North Lanarkshire give a person centred approach to needs assessment and an advocate to access, follow up and support the individual through either the financial or social difficulties.

Property maintenance

Joint Quality Audits

The recently introduced joint post inspections of a selection of responsive repairs allow the client and the contractor to highlight problems and sort out issues in a structured way. The reporting of the results of these inspections through the regular management meetings allow strategic issues to be sorted out along with the practical resolution of problems at an area level.

Asbestos management at void turnaround

North Lanarkshire Council has given asbestos awareness training to all its repairs staff, where staff suspect asbestos is present all works are stopped until test results are obtained.

Appendix 3

Analysis of Homeless decisions by First Stop Shop

First Stop Shop	Priority Unintentional	Priority Intentional	Homeless and Non-priority	Not homeless	Lost Contact/ Withdrew	Resolved before assessment
North Lanarkshire	57.30%	3.70%	14.80%	11.10%	13.00%	1.90%
Airdrie	45.15%	0.37%	17.72%	12.50%	21.46%	2.80%
Coatbridge	60.35%	3.29%	16.25%	9.09%	8.70%	2.32%
Cumbernauld	53.42%	2.77%	12.54%	17.26%	13.19%	0.81%
Kilsyth	51.22%	2.44%	14.63%	18.70%	10.57%	2.44%
Moodiesburn	76.30%	0.00%	9.63%	2.22%	11.11%	0.74%
Bellshill	74.72%	1.11%	12.20%	4.43%	5.54%	2.00%
Viewpark	62.37%	0.52%	17.01%	8.25%	10.31%	1.55%
Motherwell	59.89%	3.78%	14.39%	5.58%	13.31%	3.06%
Wishaw	51.98%	1.67%	16.72%	12.92%	15.20%	1.52%
Shotts	47.55%	0.70%	9.79%	27.27%	13.99%	0.70%

Glossary

Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO)	ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further antisocial behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.
Benchmarking	A process used by organisations to systematically compare service processes and performance to identify best practice.
Capital Programme	Major repair schemes funded mostly from borrowing.
Charter Mark	Charter Mark is a Government award scheme which recognises and encourages excellence in public service delivery.
Common housing register (CHR)	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
Concierge service	A high level security and caretaking service provided in some tower blocks.
Day works	Repair works that are ordered and paid for using an hourly rate and a charge for the materials used.
Direct Labour Organisation (DLO)	Internal organisation which carries out work on behalf of housing departments.
EVA project	A North Lanarkshire wide specialist project providing services for women who have experienced violence or abuse at any time in their lives.
HomePoint	<p>A department of Communities Scotland that supports providers of housing information and advice services.</p> <p>HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.• Type II casework• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.
HOMES	A national scheme to assist tenants of both local authorities and registered social landlords to move between local authority areas.
Housing list	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
Housing Revenue Account (HRA)	The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services.
ICT system	Information and communication system.

Investors In People (IIP)	The Investors in People Standard is a business improvement tool designed to improve an organisation's performance through its people.
Language line	A telephone translation service.
Notice of Proceedings (NOP)	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
Partnering	A structured contract management approach to improve efficiency and reduce confrontation between the RSL and its consultants and contractors. Partnering requires formalised objectives, agreed problem solving methods and an active search for continued measurable improvements.
Planned maintenance	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
Pre-inspections	Inspections undertaken to ascertain the nature of the repair required.
Post inspections	Inspections undertaken following work to check the suitability and quality of repairs.
Procurement	The way an organisation obtains services or materials from other organisations or agents.
Qualifying Repair	Repairs which qualify for inclusion in the Right to Repair scheme.
Quartile	The range represented by one quarter of the ordered performance of all Scottish Local Authorities. So for example, the upper quartile is the top 25% of Local Authorities.
Registered social landlord (RSL)	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland.
Responsive repairs	Day to day repairs carried out on a reactive basis, distinguishable from planned, capital or cyclical maintenance.
Right to buy	Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy.
Right to Repair	Statutory scheme which sets out timescales for some repairs and actions which can be taken if timescales exceeded.
Schedule of Rates	List of costs for repair items, usually organised by trade.
Scottish Housing Best Value Network (SHBVN)	A formal group for local authority members to benchmark their performance and share good practice.

Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)	All property managed by registered social landlords must be brought up to a certain standard by 2015.
Scottish secure tenancy (SST)	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish Secure Tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
& Short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST)	Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a Short Scottish Secure Tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST.
Section 5 referral	Under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 a local authority can request a registered social landlord which has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people. This request is known as a Section 5 referral.
Service level agreement (SLA)	An agreement between departments within an organisation or between partner organisations that defines the type and level of service they will provide.
Shadowing	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI)	Indicators of local authorities' performance that are published by the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
Tenancy agreement	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
Tenure	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner-occupier.
Variations	A term used to refer to the practice of changing a repair works order on site where the contractor feels additional or alternative work to that specified is required.
Void	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

Regulation and Inspection is a separate division within Communities Scotland (the Scottish Executive's housing and regeneration agency) that regulates and inspects social housing and homelessness services. We operate independently and impartially, while remaining accountable to Scottish Ministers for the standard of our work and for inspecting and reporting within the overall context of Scottish Ministers' strategic objectives for the social housing sector and tackling homelessness. A code of practice sets out what Ministers expect from us in delegating their regulatory powers to us. Our independence is further safeguarded by a Regulation Board that oversees our work.

Our two core objectives are:

- to promote improvements in the quality of housing and homelessness services delivered by registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities and, by doing this, to help improve people's lives; and
- to make sure RSLs are well governed and financially viable, so that we can safeguard the interests of tenants and funders and maintain their confidence in the sector. RSLs are housing organisations registered with Communities Scotland. They include housing associations, housing co-operatives and companies limited by guarantee.

In order to meet these two core objectives we have five priority activities. We:

- undertake rigorous independent inspections and thematic studies of housing and homelessness services and promote public accountability by publishing our findings in clear, concise reports that provide practical recommendations for change and spread good practice;
- have a successful strategy in place (which may involve exercising our statutory powers of intervention) with regulated bodies that need our support to improve services or to deal with governance and financial viability problems;
- register new landlords and grant statutory consents in line with our regulatory criteria and standards;
- provide information and advice to Scottish Ministers, relevant departments of the Scottish Executive, landlords, key national bodies, funders and other regulators; and
- minimise the regulatory burden on regulated and inspected bodies by taking account of the principles of good regulation and working with other scrutiny bodies, while maximising the benefits of our work.

Regulation & Inspection

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