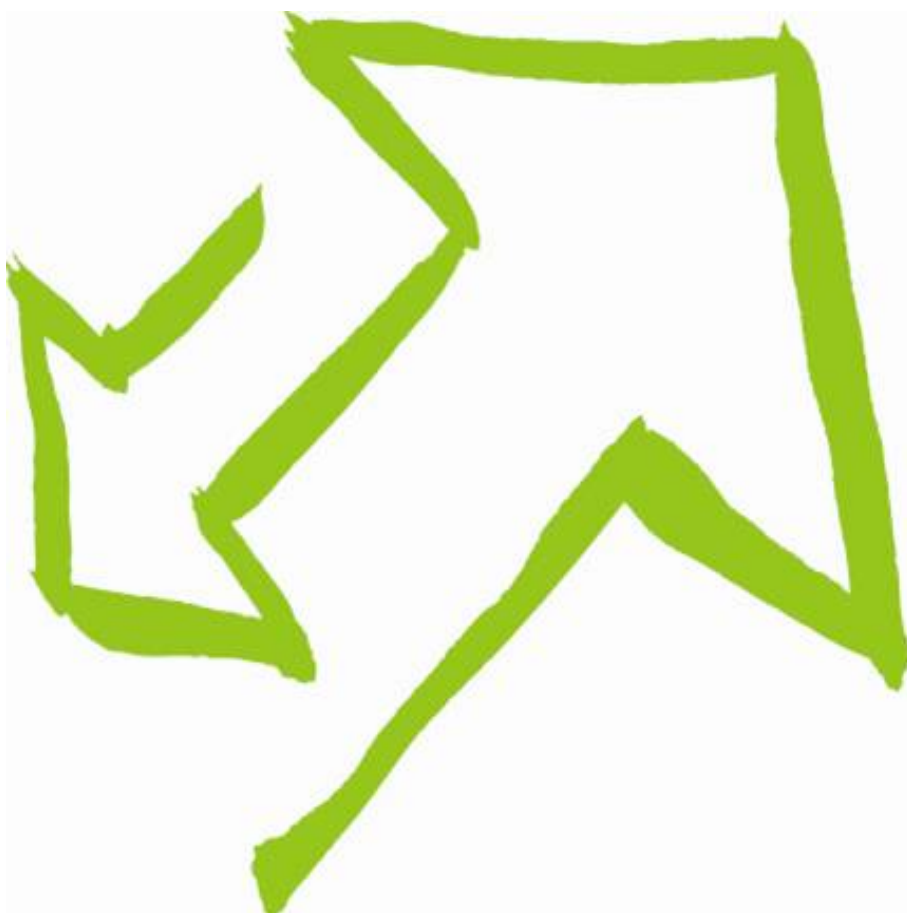


Dale and Valley Homes (ALMO) Re-inspection

Durham County Council

December 2009



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Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

Summary

- 1 Dale and Valley Homes (D&VH) is providing a good, two-star service, which has excellent prospects of improvement.
- 2 D&VH has made effective progress against recommendations from the previous inspection and services continue to improve for most areas. Customer satisfaction with the overall service is high and performance against service commitments is reported to ensure accountability.
- 3 Information to tenants is of a high standard and tenants have a say about how their homes are managed in a range of convenient ways and receive support to help them participate. Public access points are accessible for people with disabilities and vulnerable people are supported to sustain their tenancy. D&VH is also supporting people experiencing domestic abuse.
- 4 There is a sound understanding of the housing stock and property improvement works are effectively planned and delivered. The level of decent homes has significantly improved since the last inspection and tenants influence standards. Arrangements to manage asbestos are effective and partnership working is improving energy efficiency.
- 5 Repairs are completed by appointments and these are generally kept, and a reasonable relet standard agreed with tenants is being met. Gas servicing regulations are complied with and D&VH effectively works with partners to provide aids and adaptations to assist people to remain in their homes.
- 6 D&VH demonstrates strong performance for rent collection and tenants have access to effective welfare benefit and debt advice. Properties are allocated appropriately to people in need of housing and partnership working is extending housing options. Estates are maintained to a high standard in partnership with other agencies.
- 7 Annual efficiency targets are appropriate and being achieved, with most services market tested to deliver better value for money and more efficient working arrangements. Tenants are involved in procurement practices to ensure their expectations are met.
- 8 Although D&VH understands its customers it is not extensively shaping services around their needs. Customers are also not being widely consulted on how they want to access services to ensure current arrangements are convenient and inclusive. D&VH does not fully understand how individual tenants would like to have a say about its activities to involve them in ways that meet their needs.
- 9 Some information and services are not inclusive for customers requiring translation or who have a hearing impairment and there are no targets to ensure the local community has fair and equal access to properties being relet. File management for anti-social behaviour cases is particularly weak, since action taken to deal with allegations is not always evidenced. Appointments for responsive repairs are much longer than needed to complete most repairs and service charges, although small, have not been disaggregated. Some service costs are amongst the highest nationally when compared to similar organisations.

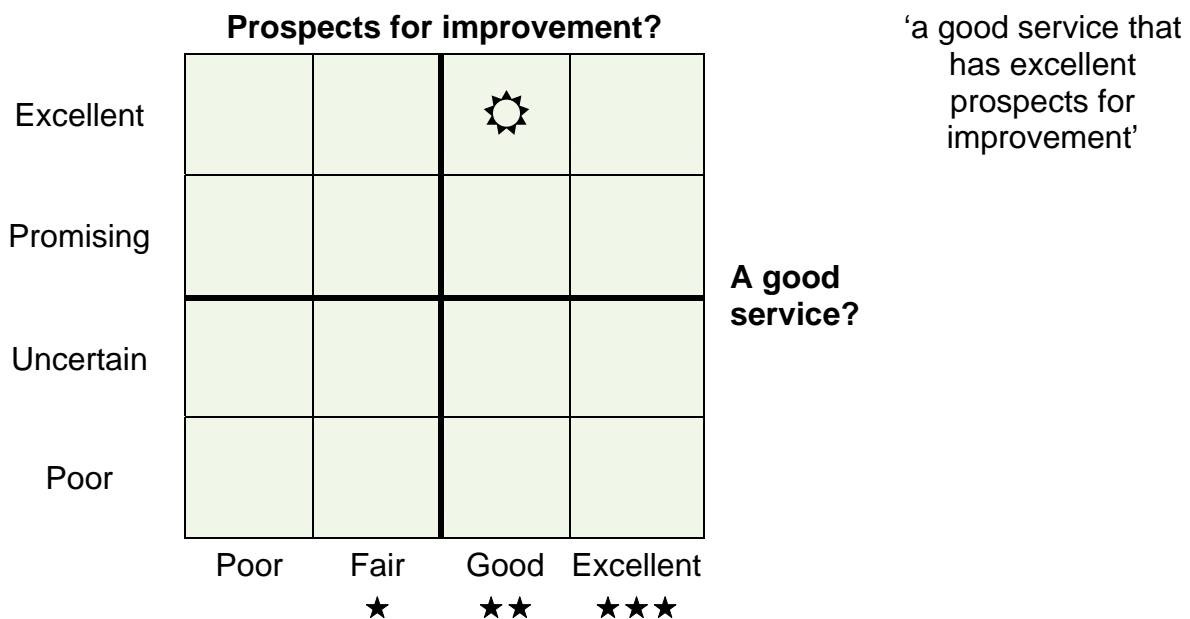
Summary

- 10 A robust business plan drives strategic objectives and performance management is effective and considers relevant indicators. Risks are understood and effectively managed. Outcomes for tenants are evident and D&VH is well positioned to represent tenant interests within the County of Durham. Staff and board members understand their roles and there are positive steps to attract a diverse workforce. However, some areas require improvement to ensure access and inclusion for all. IT systems are not always fit for purpose and strategic plans do not always explain how objectives will be delivered or monitored to ensure implementation.

Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed Dale and Valley Homes Ltd as providing a 'good', two-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 12 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:

- service standards are agreed with tenants and are regularly reviewed to ensure they remain relevant;
- tenants agree all customer information which is of a high standard and easy to understand;
- D&VH effectively monitors customer satisfaction for individual services and benchmarks this with other organisations providing similar services;
- the diversity profiles of most customers have been gathered;
- public access points are accessible for people with disabilities;
- vulnerable people, including young people, are supported to sustain their tenancy;
- D&VH has significantly improved the level of non decent homes since the last inspection and information on stock condition is comprehensive;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

Scoring the service

- arrangements to manage asbestos are effective with all properties surveyed;
- responsive repairs are carried out on time usually through appointments;
- a lettable standard has been agreed with tenants and is being met;
- gas servicing regulations are met and hard wired smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are fitted where required;
- specific appointment times for gas servicing are significantly improving levels of first time access;
- performance in rent collection is amongst the best nationally;
- D&VH promotes financial inclusion and tenants have access to welfare benefit and debt advice;
- the tenants' compact enables participation and involvement at a number of levels and tenants are supported to be involved;
- estates continue to be well maintained and estate walkabouts take place involving tenants;
- empty properties are appropriately allocated to people on the housing waiting list;
- there is some understanding of costs and targets have been set to examine and reduce high costs; and
- annual efficiency targets are appropriate and being met and D&VH attracts additional investment from external sources.

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

- ways to access services are not consistently publicised and customers have not been widely consulted on recent changes;
- opportunities for tenants to access services through D&VH's website are undeveloped;
- appointment times for responsive repairs are limited to office opening hours and may not be convenient for all tenants;
- service charges have not been disaggregated to ensure tenants only pay for services they receive;
- D&VH is not proactive at encouraging tenants to register their preferred method of involvement in its activities;
- D&VH can not be sure tenants having a say about services are representative;
- records managing anti-social behaviour cases are often incomplete and introductory tenancies are not effectively used; and
- D&VH does not fully understand why some service costs are high.

14 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- the business plan demonstrates financial capacity to deliver service aims;
- budget setting and financial management systems are robust;
- risks are effectively managed;

- board members and staff have appropriate skills to meet responsibilities;
- D&VH effectively represents tenant interests within the County of Durham;
- staff are positive about working for D&VH and have access to extensive training;
- D&VH is taking action to attract a diverse workforce that represent the locality; and
- D&VH takes advantage of opportunities to increase its capacity.

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

- some services require improvement to ensure they are accessible and inclusive for all tenants including hard to reach groups, such as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities;
- monitoring of key plans and anti-social behaviour cases is weak;
- not all IT systems are fit for purpose; and
- plans to develop key services are not always robust and do not always include resources needed to drive implementation.

Recommendations

16 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access and customer care by:

- consulting a wide range of tenants on current service delivery arrangements and ensuring services are delivered in ways that meet their needs;
- extending office/phone opening times;
- offering a greater range of responsive repairs appointment time slots;
- providing opportunity for tenants to access interactive services through D&VH's website; and
- ensuring people with disabilities and/or who need language translation are fully supported to access services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services can be accessed in convenient ways;
- potential service failures are addressed; and
- service requirements of tenants who require language translation or who have disabilities are met.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

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

Recommendation

- R2** Ensure services are inclusive for all sections of the community by:
- following up all actions identified in equality impact assessments;
 - using customer profiling information to inform service developments;
 - setting diversity targets in employment which are representative of the local population;
 - training staff in how to deal with complaints about domestic abuse and improving publicity on support available; and
 - setting targets to ensure lettings of empty properties to people on the housing waiting list are representative of the local community.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services are inclusive to all and are designed around customer needs; and
- people suffering domestic abuse are supported to make reports and take action against perpetrators.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2010.

Recommendation

- R3** Improve opportunities for tenants to be involved in the activities of D&VH by:
- better understanding individual tenant preferences for involvement so they can be involved in ways that meet their needs when opportunities arise;
 - defining how D&VH ensures inclusion for all in the area of resident involvement; and
 - ensuring tenants having a say are representative of the local community and targeting involvement initiatives where this is lacking.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants can have a say in how their homes are managed in ways that meet their needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2010.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R4 Improve allocations and lettings by:

- assessing the viability of incentives for people under-occupying homes to move to smaller properties; and
- agreeing local lettings policies for less popular properties.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants are helped to find housing solutions which meet their needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Improve financial capacity and value for money by:

- understanding why some services are high cost;
- disaggregating service charges¹;
- providing comprehensive guidance to staff on delivering value for money and making robust procurement decisions;
- market testing remaining services, such as gas servicing; and
- having a clearer strategic direction for managing assets, delivering value for money and carrying out procurement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- efficiencies are delivered with financial capacity maximised;
- tenants only pay for services they receive; and
- services are procured appropriately.

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

Recommendation

R6 Improve tenancy management by:

- carrying out regular tenancy checks;
- ensuring action taken to deal with anti-social behaviour and hate crime is clearly recorded in case files;
- carrying out quality assurance of anti-social behaviour and hate crime cases to make sure policies and procedures are being followed; and
- effectively managing introductory tenancies.

¹ In partnership with Durham County Council this is planned for April 2011.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants have confidence that anti-social behaviour and hate crime will be dealt with appropriately;
- there is clear understanding of tenancy management issues and whether these are being appropriately dealt with; and
- tenancy conditions are enforced.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2010.

Recommendation

R7 Improve performance management by:

- ensuring strategies are regularly reviewed with outcomes reported; and
- agreeing resources needed to deliver individual actions within strategies.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- D&VH ensures aims are being delivered in line with targets and timescales; and
- resources to deliver objectives are understood and planned.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2010.

- 17** We would like to thank the staff of Dale and Valley Homes Ltd who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 8 to 17 September 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 18 D&VH was established by Wear Valley District Council in April 2006 to manage, repair and improve its housing stock of 4,622 properties. On 1 April 2009, the councils in County Durham were reorganised. All councils, including Wear Valley District Council were replaced by a new unitary council, Durham County Council.
- 19 Wear Valley is one of the most deprived rural districts in England, ranking 33rd out of 354 authorities for deprivation. Unemployment stands at 4.6 per cent which is much higher than the national average. Unemployment is expected to rise further in 2009/10 because of a significant decline in local industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and the service sector. A high proportion of tenants, 76 per cent, are on a low income and in receipt of some form of welfare benefit.
- 20 Wear Valley is predominantly a rural area with urban conurbations mostly situated in the eastern part of the district. The area has a population of 62,300 and this is projected to increase to 71,300 by 2031. A demographic shift is expected, with an increase in the number of older residents and single person households. The area has a low Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population, 1.4 per cent¹, with the only prominent community being Gypsy, Traveller and Roma.
- 21 Around 19 per cent of households rent their home from the Council and receive housing management services from D&VH. This is higher than national and regional averages. Most of the stock is located in the towns of Crook and Bishop Auckland, but the Council also has homes in surrounding areas, including 285 properties in rural villages which equates to 6.7 per cent of the stock. There are also seven leaseholders.

The Council

- 22 Durham County Council has a cabinet of ten councillors and an Overview and Scrutiny Committee examines cabinet decisions. A full council of all 126 councillors ratifies decisions. This is made up of 67 Labour, 24 Liberal Democrats, 10 conservatives, 17 Durham Independent Group, 4 DCC Independent Group, 3 Independent Liberals and 1 vacancy. Durham County Council has a budget of £1.2 billion.

The service

- 23 D&VH has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services, receiving a management fee of £5.9 million for this service. It manages the council's £3 million budget for repairs and a £10 million capital programme. D&VH employs 79 staff members and has a board comprising of five tenants, five Councillors and five Independents.

¹ Source: 2001 Census

- 24 The functions delegated D&VH can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
 - rent collection, dealing with arrears and debt counselling;
 - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
 - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
 - similar functions for leaseholders;
 - managing the housing register, lettings, voids and under occupations; and
 - estate management, caretaking and housing related support services under the Supporting People programme.
- 25 Functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour, in consultation with D&VH, and rents;
 - managing the Supporting People programme; and
 - homelessness and general housing advice.
- 26 In January 2007, the Audit Commission inspected D&VH and judged it to provide a good, two-star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement. Where relevant we start each section of this report with a summary of what we said in 2007.
- 27 The successful outcome of the previous inspection resulted in the Council accessing Supported Borrowing. It has so far taken up £15.5 million to invest in decent homes property improvements.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

28 The Purpose of Dale & Valley Homes is to:

**“deliver decent homes and sustainable communities;
deliver high quality housing services to customers and potential customers;
help Durham County Council to meet the strategic needs of every community in Wear Valley; and
deliver value for money and efficiency.”**

29 The Vision of Dale & Valley Homes is:

“to provide homes and neighbourhoods that customers want to live in and are proud to live in.”

30 Dale & Valley Homes' core values are:

**“to be honest, fair and open in all we do;
to listen to customers and treat them as individuals;
to maximise the benefits to customers of all available resources;
to achieve excellence and continue to improve; and
to work with all partners to improve the lives of customers.”**

31 Dale & Valley Homes' strategic objectives are:

**“Delivering Excellent Services
Delivering Decent Homes
Running its Business Well
Contributing to the wider Community.”**

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

Access and customer care

32 The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a strong and genuine commitment to customer care throughout the organisation. Staff were customer focused. There was a wide range of ways to access services and customer information was of good quality. There was a range of customer feedback opportunities which were influencing improvements. The approach to service standards and seeking customer feedback was not fully developed.

- 33** This inspection found strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. Levels of customer satisfaction are some of the highest nationally. Tenants influence service standards and information to customers to ensure it meets their needs. The tenants' handbook is of a high standard and arrangements to monitor customer satisfaction are robust. Most tenants prefer to access services by phone and response times are prompt. Responses to customer complaints are comprehensive, however targets are not always met. D&VH does not consistently publicise how customers can access services and recent changes have not been widely consulted on to ensure they are convenient and inclusive. D&VH's website does not provide interactive services and office opening times are restrictive. Although there is some support to customers who require language translation or who have a hearing impairment, this is not extensive.
- 34** Service delivery is effective. The 2008 STATUS survey found 80 per cent of tenants are satisfied with the overall service and 72 per cent with the final outcome of their last query. D&VH is one of the highest performers for these indicators compared to other ALMOs nationally. Staff are trained on customer care to promote best practice in dealing with customers effectively and courteously. Frontline staff are knowledgeable in a variety of tenancy related issues and provide a responsive service.
- 35** Service standards are agreed with tenants and are regularly reviewed to ensure they continue to reflect tenant priorities. Targets are challenging and include relevant commitments, which explain how and when a wide range of services are delivered. Standards are widely publicised, enabling tenants to challenge D&VH if they are not met. Clear arrangements for monitoring and reporting performance demonstrate accountability for service commitments.
- 36** Tenant representatives agree all information to customers through an editorial panel and documents are branded to confirm tenants have approved content. This ensures information reflects areas of interest for tenants and is presented in a way which is easy to follow. The tenants' handbook is of a high standard, covering relevant areas concisely in a format which is easy to understand. Regular newsletters include local interest outcomes such as tenants benefiting from property improvements and action taken following estate inspections. They also promote key services such as debt advice and resident involvement initiatives. D&VH has contacted tenants reporting dissatisfaction with the newsletter through surveys and this feedback has influenced improvements.
- 37** D&VH effectively monitors customer satisfaction for individual services. An IT package enables this to be done consistently across D&VH. Departments have champions for the system and regular meetings analyse results to identify potential service improvements, best practice to be shared and cross cutting themes to be considered. Results are benchmarked with other organisations providing similar services who share the same approach. This gives some context for D&VH to assess how it is performing. Tenants who report high satisfaction are sent a thank you letter. This reassures that feedback is valued to encourage future involvement. The inclusion of a pen and pre-paid envelope with surveys encourages responses, which are generally high.

How good is the service?

- 38 Tenants may not understand how to access services, since publicity on options available is inconsistent. Customers have not been widely consulted on the decision to close public reception points and whether this has resulted in any new barriers to service delivery for some tenants has not been investigated. D&VH can not be sure arrangements are accessible to all.
- 39 D&VH has introduced a video facility for customers to communicate with head office from its former customer access point,¹ however, take up is low and there has been no assessment of whether customers want to access services in this way. Tenants can visit the head office, which is primarily a staff base, but the location is not on any public transport routes to ensure accessibility and so far few tenants have chosen this option.² D&VH has not robustly assessed whether new arrangements are convenient for customers or deliver value for money.
- 40 D&VH has upgraded its telephone system to ensure it can effectively deal with phone queries, the preferred method of contact for most customers, and most tenants can easily get through to D&VH by phone. Performance for answering repairs calls within five rings is effective at 97 per cent, and abandoned calls at 1.5 per cent are low. There is little or no charging to tenants accessing services by phone. There is a freephone number for landline calls and a low cost number and text messaging facility for people preferring to use mobile phones. Customers have access to direct dial numbers for staff they deal with regularly. This reduces the number of stages involved in accessing services. Opening times are limited to weekdays with relatively early closure between 4.30pm and 5pm. This may not be convenient for tenants with commitments during the day, such as child care and work responsibilities.
- 41 Opportunities for tenants to access services remotely through DVH's website are undeveloped. The website has up to date information including the tenant compact and service standards and navigation between pages is relatively easy through shortcuts and using the search engine. However, the website is dated. Tenants can pay rent and send enquiries by email through the website, but other online services are lacking. There is no facility to assist tenants to identify repairs and make repairs appointments or opportunities for tenants to participate in consultation initiatives.
- 42 Language translation is not fully accessible. Promotion of translation for written information does not say what the subject is about. Customers cannot see if it is of interest to them to make requests. D&VH's website does not have a translation facility for people who want to access services remotely who do not read English. D&VH has effective arrangements to provide translation over the phone and this is effectively publicised. This ensures access to translation when dealing with customers face to face.
- 43 D&VH provides some accessible information for people with a visually impairment but this is not extensive. Written information is available in a variety of formats, including large print, Braille and audio tape or CD. However, website text cannot be converted into sound and there are no shortcuts to easily convert content into large text. Some staff did not know how to use hearing loops to assist them to serve or interview customers. People with a hearing impairment may experience barriers to accessing services and information they need.

¹ Located in council offices in Crook.

² 57 per cent of customers do not have access to a vehicle

- 44 Customers from diverse backgrounds have some assistance to access services. Customer care kits are carried by all staff who visit or work with tenants. This includes D&VH's equalities statement and translation cards to promote diversity commitments and translation available. A magnifier and a pen assist customers with a visual impairment or suffering with arthritis to read and/or complete any necessary paperwork. Tenants can also choose to be interviewed by a same sex member of staff if this is more conformable when talking about their circumstances. Promotion by staff is checked through tenant surveys to ensure this service commitment is offered.
- 45 D&VH comprehensively responds to customer complaints but until recently over a quarter were responded to late¹ and customer satisfaction at 57 per cent is low. Customers are encouraged to give feedback on service delivery, and publicity explains when D&VH will respond and action that can be taken if the customer is dissatisfied with the outcome. Customers are informed of deadlines for responses and who is dealing with their query. Quarterly reports to board report types of complaints and whether they were dealt with appropriately. They also explain how this important tenant feedback is being used to identify service improvements.
- 46 An access strategy sets clear aims to develop customer care and outcomes of previous initiatives are reported, such as progress with customer profiling and reviewing service standards. It is however not always clear how new priorities will be delivered. Tenants influence plans through a working group leading on this area of service. This ensures customer priorities are reflected.

Diversity

- 47 The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. D&VH had clear and comprehensive strategies and policies to support its work in this area. There was a clear focus on the needs of vulnerable tenants. It could also demonstrate positive steps to meet the needs of a range of diverse groups. However, it had adopted the Council's target to achieve level two of the Equality Standard for Local Government which was not challenging and some aspects of diversity monitoring were undeveloped.
- 48 This inspection found strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. Services and employment practices are generally inclusive. D&VH assesses the impact of plans on the local community to ensure inclusion. It is progressed in profiling tenants to understand service needs and public access points are accessible for people with disabilities. D&VH is proactive at ensuring staff and the board are representative of the locality and training raises awareness of diversity. A range of initiatives meet the specific needs of tenants and vulnerable people are supported to sustain their tenancy. However, D&VH does not always meet its diversity commitments. Some action points from equality impact assessments still need to be delivered and profiling is not sufficiently used to ensure services meet customer preferences. There are appropriate arrangements for dealing with domestic abuse, but publicity to raise awareness of the issue and reporting arrangements are not extensive.

¹ 72 per cent were responded to on target in 2008/09.

How good is the service?

- 49** Comprehensive policies meet D&VH's statutory requirements to develop inclusive services for diverse communities¹. These are effectively co-ordinated and monitored to ensure a robust strategic approach. D&VH is progressing against criteria for fair and equal treatment in local government services and employment. It achieved level 2² of the Equality Standard for Local Government in April 2008, externally validated, and expects to achieve level 3³ of the new Equality Framework for Local Government⁴ by March 2010. The Statutory Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing is being met. This ensures a comprehensive approach to racial equality to avoid unlawful racial discrimination and harassment, promote equal opportunities for all and encourage good race relations. Equality impact assessments are taking place to understand the effect of plans and activities on the local community. However, some action points are still to be delivered to ensure inclusion and protection for all.
- 50** D&VH is raising awareness of equality and diversity. Diversity training is mandatory for all staff, board members and major contractors and attendance is monitored to ensure compliance. Staff understand diversity and how this should be considered when delivering services, such as meeting tenant contact requirements. Tenant representatives have access to training for diversity and safeguarding children. This raises awareness of recognising and valuing diversity and assists in the protection of vulnerable people.
- 51** D&VH is progressed in compiling a diversity profile of its tenants, but this information is not being extensively used to shape services. Tenants may not receive services in ways which meet their needs. Successes include providing information in large print for people who are visually impaired and introducing a reduced rate phone number for the increasing number of tenants stating they prefer to make enquiries by mobile phone. Generally however, other initiatives are incomplete. D&VH has analysed households refusing decent home improvements but has not yet developed initiatives to improve take up. It has also analysed tenants with rent arrears, but has not targeted income maximisation and debt advice to reduce or prevent arrears. D&VH is not monitoring take up of services to identify any barriers to access and taking action to address these.
- 52** D&VH is proactive at collecting tenant profiling data, initially through postal surveys followed up by visits and phone calls. This ensured accessibility for people with limited literacy skills or whose first language is not English. It has responses from 93 per cent of tenants⁵ and it knows the gender of all of its tenants, the age of 98 per cent and the ethnicity of 90 per cent. Other areas are improving with disability known for 75 per cent and religion or belief for 71 per cent. It has only recently started to record sexuality, and therefore has a low understanding having collected 15 per cent so far. In its daily contact with tenants DV&H continues to gather details. It is also considering how to complete gaps for some diversity strands and encourage tenants who refuse to provide information to participate. The purpose of profiling and its key role in designing services around the needs of tenants is widely promoted to encourage participation.

¹ Representing the six strands of diversity: age, disability, gender, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation

² Assessment and community engagement.

³ Under the new framework levels 1 and 2 will be treated as 'developing', level 3 will be treated as 'achieving'. Those at level 4 will be classified as 'moving towards excellence' and those at level 5 as 'excellent'.

⁴ This replaced the equality standard from September 2009.

⁵ Includes 19 per cent of tenants refusing to participate in profiling.

- 53** D&VH has a range of initiatives to meet the specific needs of tenants. It carries out aids and adaptations during decent homes improvements and provides strobe lights and vibrating smoke alarms for people with a hearing impairment to detect fire. The caretaking service has been expanded to include gardening for older people and support is in place to ensure all sections of the community can use the proposed Choice Based Lettings system. The promotion of affordable warmth schemes is alleviating fuel poverty for households on low incomes.
- 54** Public access points are accessible for people with disabilities. D&VH has assessed compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act and completed works where it is reasonable to improve access. Its head office is fully accessible, with level access and automatic doors, a low counter and disabled parking and toilet facilities. Works to schemes housing mainly older people include improvements to ensure access to the accommodation. This will provide some assistance while redevelopment plans to replace the scheme with more suitable housing are being progressed. D&VH is meeting statutory requirements to provide easy access for all.
- 55** D&VH works with partners to understand and respond to wider diversity issues. It is involved in partnerships in the County of Durham and North East region to share best practice and provide critical challenge for meeting statutory requirements. It is also part of a group championing Gypsy, Traveller and Roma interests, the largest Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group in the area. This has led to an understanding of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma priorities and improved traveller sites. Buddhism is identified as the areas second largest religion and all staff have been provided with a fact sheet to raise awareness. Working in partnership with other agencies helps to meet diverse needs in a more effective manner.
- 56** D&VH's has been slow to profile its workforce and board to ensure it is representative of the local community. Targets for levels of staff with a disability and/or who are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities have been achieved; however the target for disabled staff at five per cent is not challenging since it is not representative of the locality. Women in senior positions is generally on a par with men, but the gender split within the wider workforce leans heavily towards women who make up two thirds. Sexuality and faith is not recorded. Some progress has been made to ensure the board is representative, with the number of women recently increasing. Progress against diversity targets is regularly reported to the board. A representative workforce is more likely to understand and be responsive to the needs of the area. As a key local employer D&VH has a high profile and needs to ensure that it attracts all local people to become part of it when opportunities arise.

How good is the service?

- 57** D&VH is involved in initiatives to provide training and employment opportunities to the local community. D&VH participates in the modern apprenticeship scheme to offer training to improve employment prospects for young people, who seek to find permanent work following the completion of the scheme. D&VH has set targets for Black and Minority Ethnic and women employees within maintenance contracts, but there have so far been no recruitment opportunities to drive this. A number of externally accredited diversity standards have been secured. D&VH has been awarded 'two ticks' to recognise its commitment to good practice in employing people with disabilities and it has also received accreditation for its work in addressing homophobia¹. D&VH uses the 'Workable' service for ergonomic assessments and advice and training to help employees in their day to day duties. D&VH takes up advice and assistance available to ensure the employment opportunities it provides are inclusive.
- 58** Vulnerable people are supported to sustain their tenancy and maintain their homes in reasonable condition. D&VH delivers a tenancy support service to its tenants and the wider community. The service is successful with 92 per cent of people involved in the programme progressing to independent living. Where requests are made a wide range of support is available, some of which is through signposting to other agencies. This includes budgeting and debt advice; treatment for alcohol and/or substance misuse; training opportunities and developing life skills; and advice on personal and home safety including domestic abuse. D&VH also assists perpetrators of nuisance and anti-social behaviour to change their behaviour.
- 59** D&VH is proactive at working with young people to identify their priorities for housing and funding has been secured to respond to findings. This has resulted in additional caretakers to provide a handyperson service, furnished tenancies to enable tenants to move into their own home and life skills such as assembling flat pack furniture, applying for jobs and setting up bank accounts. The initiative involves an advocate with experience of working with young people. Young people are provided with the support they say they need and engage in ways that meet their preferences.
- 60** Arrangements for dealing with domestic abuse are generally satisfactory. D&VH is involved in a sanctuary scheme to provide additional home security to support people to remain safely in their home. It also participates in a county wide review of the tenancy agreement which will carry a clear message about a zero tolerance approach to both domestic abuse and hate crime. The tenants' newsletter promotes support available for people experiencing domestic abuse to encourage reporting and consequences for perpetrators, such as eviction or criminal charges, to act as a deterrent. D&VH's is reviewing its strategy for dealing with domestic abuse in consultation with stakeholders. This will ensure it reflects shared priorities and responds to local issues. The tenants' handbook does not make it clear what constitutes unreasonable behaviour or explain support available to encourage reporting of domestic abuse. However, it does contain clear information on hate crime and racial harassment, including options to make reports and access support available.

¹ Through Stonewall, a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) charity

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvements, planned and cyclical maintenance, major works

- 61** The previous inspection found strengths and weaknesses were balanced. The capital programme was well managed. Tenants had been closely involved in decision making and work programmes were delivered in a customer focused way. However, stock condition information was not sufficiently robust for future needs and the longer term approach to asset management had not yet been developed.
- 62** This inspection found strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. D&VH understands the housing stock and this informs property improvement works. Levels of decent homes have significantly improved and a decent homes plus standard is driving high quality improvements. Programmes have been competitively tendered to deliver better value for money and costs are reducing. Customers influence standards and service delivery arrangements. D&VH supports tenants to understand what works will take place and satisfaction with works is high. Arrangements to manage asbestos are effective and partnership working is improving energy efficiency. However, the asset management strategy is not robust. Although some commitments have been delivered, some key initiatives for effectively managing assets have not.
- 63** D&VH has significantly reduced the level of non decent homes since the last inspection from 42 per cent of the housing stock to 8.7 per cent. Property improvements are on schedule to ensure all homes are decent by 2012¹. Works have been competitively tendered in compliance with European Union procurement regulations to deliver value for money. Tenants have influenced contractor selection to ensure improvements and delivery arrangements meet their needs, and they are involved in contract monitoring to ensure agreed standards are met. The partnering arrangement includes incentives to deliver efficiencies. Savings are reinvested in emerging priorities identified by tenants, such as showers and minor adaptations.
- 64** D&VH collects accurate information on stock condition. A 2008 survey assessed all properties externally² and 83 per cent of properties internally. Data is validated as robust and there are clear arrangements to update the survey on a five year rolling programme. This ensures investment decisions are made on a sound understanding of stock condition. Surveys consider compliance against the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)³ to assess potential risks to occupants with remedial action taken as required.
- 65** IT facilities effectively and efficiently manage assets, inform investment decisions and plan property improvements. The stock condition database records property components and assesses decency standards for all properties. Ageing components and their impact on decency are monitored and used to plan future replacement programmes. D&VH can easily assess decency levels and a schedule of rates for component replacements provides a 30-year financial forecast of investment needed to sustain decent homes beyond 2012.

¹ Extended deadline beyond statutory requirements of 2010 agreed with CLG

² Where access was not restricted

³ A new health and safety risk assessment tool which looks at the likelihood of an incident arising from the condition of the property and the likely harmful outcome.

How good is the service?

- 66 D&VH is taking action to address some low demand stock. Plans are progressing to redevelop a scheme previously used as sheltered accommodation which is no longer fit for purpose. If funding is approved¹ supported housing for older people and two and three bedroom homes for single people or couples without children will be developed. This will better meet the housing need of local people.
- 67 The property improvement programme is delivering high quality homes. A decent homes plus standard agreed with tenants exceeds minimum standards set by government. This includes higher specification component replacements and additional works such as showers and renewable energy. Customer satisfaction with works is high at 96 per cent and feedback informs future programmes. Improvements to the appearance of properties, such as boxed in pipes and extended tiling in bathrooms, have been recently added to ensure standards continue to reflect tenant expectations.
- 68 Tenants are well informed of the decent homes programme. The programme is publicised in the tenants' newsletter and customer launch events which take place two months before works commence. Tenants are supported to attend through the provision of transport, but can request a home visit if this is more convenient. Tenants have an input into the design of improvements, such as the location of appliances, through a home visit six weeks prior to works. This gives a computer image of the improvements to assist tenants to understand what is involved and make any decisions required. A range of kitchen and bathroom replacement choices are available to tenants, reflecting modern standards and tastes.
- 69 Whole property decent homes works are completed on target and within a reasonable time, 20 working days. D&VH has liaison staff to support tenants to prepare for the improvements and a diary is regularly updated to explain when works will take place, what this involves and any preparations required. This is backed up by a handbook detailing improvement works, delivery standards and contact numbers if required. Reasonable arrangements are made to offer respite from works in local community centres and contractor bases. Where tenants are particularly vulnerable respite accommodation is arranged through social services. This minimises disruption to tenants and protects those who are vulnerable from additional stress.
- 70 D&VH carries out planned maintenance in addition to property improvements to meet the decent homes standard. This includes cyclical painting and pre-painting repairs to all homes on a seven year cycle and an annual programme of electrical testing to ensure homes are safe, with statutory regulations complied with. There are no communal heating systems, play equipment or lifts to service and maintain.

¹ A bid, supported by the Council, to the Homes and Communities Agency will be considered by the end of the year.

- 71** D&VH is improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock, but it is still below national averages. The SAP¹ rating, which assesses energy efficiency, is exceeding targets² but is still below average when compared to other ALMOs nationally. Partnership working is attracting £642,000 of investment in this area. This includes free assessments of energy saving measures and income maximisation for households. Renewable energy measures are also being provided in homes with solid fuel heating and no access to mains gas, including solar thermal panels and air source heat pumps. Energy efficiency measures help alleviate fuel poverty and improve the health of tenants.
- 72** D&VH has a good understanding of the presence of asbestos in the housing stock, with all properties surveyed³ and there are arrangements to safely remove asbestos as required. D&VH is about to complete its inputting of asbestos surveys on to the stock condition database. A manual asbestos register monitors the presence of asbestos in the interim. D&VH understands risks to tenants and operatives through the presence of asbestos. This ensures compliance with asbestos at work regulations. Staff visiting properties or taking tenant enquiries are trained to raise awareness of the risks and contractors are informed of the presence of asbestos on works orders for planned, responsive and empty property maintenance. Examples of asbestos in the home are explained in the tenants' handbook to raise awareness of potential risks and reassurance where it is not likely to be harmful.
- 73** Arrangements to compensate tenants for decorative damage following property improvements are inadequate. Decoration vouchers are provided, but the supplier is not conveniently located. A more favourable approach has been agreed and will soon be introduced which additionally offers a 20 per cent discount and a delivery service. Vulnerable tenants are not offered any assistance to redecorate effected areas. Tenants may be put off from accepting works if they are unable to restore their home to previous standards and the needs of vulnerable tenants are not recognised in this aspect of work to their homes.
- 74** There are weaknesses with the strategic direction of asset management. The asset management strategy considers all assets and decent homes expenditure, but there has been no formal monitoring to assess whether objectives are being met or to reflect emerging issues. A commitment to set up an Asset Management Steering Group to oversee delivery and ensure accountability has not been implemented. D&VH can not be sure it is meeting all its aims to effectively manage assets.

Responsive repairs

- 75** The previous inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The repairs service showed customer focus. Repairs work was well organised with appropriate arrangements for pre and post inspections. However, D&VH was purchasing the service from the Council and the contract was not being tightly managed. Responsive repair performance was variable and some aspects of the service did not reflect value for money principles.

¹ The Government's Standard Assessment Procedure for Energy Rating of Dwellings

² At 67.4 is above the 60 achieved in 2003/04

³ 143 require validation

How good is the service?

- 76** This inspection found strengths outweigh weaknesses. D&VH is generally carrying out repairs on time and in one visit. Appointments are made for most repairs and these are usually kept. Tenants can report repairs in convenient ways and satisfaction with the service is high. The responsive repairs budget is being managed effectively, with expenditure in line with targets. The service has now been market tested to ensure better value for money and more efficient working arrangements. However, there is limited guidance to tenants on how to diagnose repairs and appointments times are restrictive.
- 77** D&VH has competitively tendered the responsive repairs service to deliver better value for money and more efficient ways of working. Operatives have access to extensive training and new equipment, including vehicles, materials and uniforms. Handheld computers enable orders to be managed remotely, considering the access and vulnerability needs of tenants. This facilitates effective delivery arrangements and helps develop tenant confidence in the service. Average sickness levels for operatives have significantly reduced from 18 to three days in 2008/09. Service disruption due to capacity issues is minimised.
- 78** Operatives are multi-skilled to reduce the need for other operatives with different trade skills to attend appointments. They also carry out new repairs identified during appointments to avoid the need for follow up visits. Most orders, 87.5 per cent, are completed in one visit. This reduces the time tenants have to allow access and ensures repairs are delivered efficiently. Caretakers provide a mix of routine maintenance, such as fencing, and urgent maintenance, including security features. This gives additional capacity to meet maintenance needs.
- 79** D&VH was a strong performer for responsive repairs in 2008/09 compared to other ALMOs nationally with over 99 per cent of emergency, urgent and routine repairs completed on time. Performance has further improved for emergencies at 100 per cent, resolving potentially serious and distressing concerns for tenants. Urgent and routine repairs are on average taking slightly longer to complete in 2009/10, however service deliver issues have now been addressed with performance restored to high levels¹. D&VH monitors the deadline for completing repairs from the time of reporting. This includes repairs that require a pre inspection prior to works being ordered. This accurately monitors whether repairs are completed in time with publicised commitments.
- 80** Tenant satisfaction with the responsive repairs service is high and improving at 98 per cent. A quarterly postal survey assesses general satisfaction of over 300 tenants who have had repairs. The selection covers a range of trades and values to understand customer perceptions of the whole service. D&VH is proactive at following up low satisfaction by contacting tenants for details of their experience. Tenants have been involved on contract procurement and monitoring to ensure their expectations are being met. An additional phone survey of 10 per cent of recently completed repairs is discussed at contract monitoring meetings with the contractor to identify potential improvements to service delivery.

¹ Relating to plastering orders.

- 81** Tenants can report repairs in a range of convenient ways. This is usually through the call centre, but there are options to also make reports by text messaging, which reduces call charges for tenants without a landline. The tenants' handbook and D&VH's website clearly explain how repairs can be ordered, including outside office hours, how they are prioritised, targets for completion, the right to repair and the repair responsibilities of D&VH and tenants.
- 82** A confirmation letter reassures tenants that repairs have been ordered and specifies agreed access requirements. Tenants are sent a text message reminder the day before the appointment. This improves the likelihood of access for operatives and prevents costs being incurred through the need for repeat visits. There is no repairs handbook to assist tenants to diagnose and report repairs accurately. Ordering through D&VH's website is limited to leaving a message with no facility to make appointments and agree a convenient time for when the service should be delivered.
- 83** Appointments for responsive repairs are limited, being restricted to morning or afternoon time slots. Tenants need to allow access longer than the time required to complete repairs. Appointment times for responsive repairs are also limited to office hours. This does not offer tenants much flexibility to arrange repairs around other commitments. D&VH gives appointments for most repairs, the only exception being guttering and roofing. Tenants are given clear commitments for when repairs will be carried out. D&VH is delivering against commitments with 98 per cent of appointments kept.
- 84** The responsive repairs budget is appropriate and effectively managed. Actual spend against the budget is on target and a slight under spend of 2.4 per cent was achieved in 2008/09.
- 85** More efficient ways of working under the new contract are reducing costs but these are still high. The average cost of a repair at £107 for 2008/09 is significantly above the £80 target set to match the best performing ALMOs nationally. Targets aim to improve performance to mid range by 2010/11 through additional efficiencies already identified within the contract. This includes reducing overheads by sharing depots with other contractors and supply chain improvements. However, D&VH does not analyse why costs are high to inform service delivery improvements and drive additional cost reductions. D&VH carries out a high level of emergency repairs at 20.5 per cent, which are less efficient to deliver than planned repairs, but D&VH's analysis confirms these are justified as right to repair or having increased priority due to tenant vulnerability.
- 86** The level of pre inspections needed to assess repair works required meets Audit Commission recommended levels,¹ nationally recognised as best practice. Minimising pre inspections ensures works are ordered as soon as possible. D&VH does not have a track record of carrying out post inspections of repairs. It has therefore not been assessing service delivery including the quality of work. Additional resources have been brought in to address this. Recent inspections target a range of trades and values to ensure all areas of the service are understood.

¹ Ten per cent

How good is the service?

Empty (void) property management

- 87** The previous inspection found strengths slightly outweighed weaknesses. Vacant homes were repaired promptly and the process was customer focused. However, levels of new tenants' satisfaction was low and the service could not demonstrate effective value for money.
- 88** This inspection found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Turnaround times are better than the national average and tenant satisfaction is now high. A reasonable relet standard has been agreed with tenants and inspections of properties show acceptable standards. The service has now been market tested to assess value for money and costs are reducing.
- 89** Empty properties are repaired reasonably quickly, although turnaround times fluctuate from D&VH's best performance of 22 days in 2007/08 to 33 days¹ currently. This range is above average, with occasional strong performance, when compared with other ALMOs. Quickly letting properties helps to meet the housing needs of people on the waiting list and maximises rent revenue.²
- 90** An effective relationship has been established with the repairs contractor. Turnaround targets reflect the quantity of work and properties are often returned more quickly than contractually required. The contractor attends weekly meetings with D&VH to discuss performance and properties where the tenant is particularly anxious to move in are advanced. The time properties are empty is reduced.
- 91** A lettable standard has been agreed with tenants. The standard is reasonable with a good emphasis on the property being clean and in a 'move in' condition. Fixtures which bring properties up to a standard expected by most people such as plumbing for a washing machine are included and gardens are cut back and left in a tidy and maintainable condition. Property standards continue to improve with the introduction of hot washes following tenant feedback. Inspections of properties show an acceptable standard of cleanliness, with the lettable standard being met. All viewings of properties are accompanied and tenants are generally signed up for their new home on the same day to reduce relet times. Satisfaction levels with new homes are high at 90 per cent.
- 92** The reletting process has a customer focus. Prospective tenants have opportunity to negotiate with the previous tenants around buying fixtures and fittings. If the property is to be included within a property improvement programme within the next 12 months, works are completed whilst the property is empty. This is more efficient and avoids disruption to tenants at a later date. Metal sheeting is only used to secure empty properties at particular risk. Limiting security reduces its unsightly impact on the appearance of estates. Appropriate decoration allowances enable tenants to improve properties and reflect their own tastes.

¹ Does not include time to carry out property improvement works

² Void property numbers have varied over the last three years from a low of 387 in 2006/07 to a high of 454 in 2007/08, standing at 408 in 2008/09.

- 93 The service has been competitively tendered considering both cost and quality in an open book process to assess value for money. There is a downward pressure on costs, which have reduced from £1,536¹ at the time of the last inspection to £1,200, but which are still high compared to similar organisations nationally. Pre tenancy termination visits identify any damage above normal wear and tear for recharge to the tenant. Maintenance costs are reduced.

Gas servicing

- 94 The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. Gas and solid fuel appliance servicing was well organised with positive steps taken to encourage tenants to allow access for work to be done. However, there was no reporting of steps taken to address non-access for servicing and non-hard wired smoke detectors were not covered by servicing arrangements.
- 95 This inspection found strengths now significantly outweigh weaknesses. Gas servicing regulations are being complied with and servicing is being delivered at convenient times to tenants, who are satisfied with the service. Smoke detectors are now being fitted to ensure the early detection of fire. The cost of delivering the service is high cost, but strong performance indicates value for money is being delivered. However, D&VH has not market tested the service to confirm this.
- 96 D&VH complies with gas servicing regulations, with all properties having a valid gas servicing certificate. All solid fuel appliances are serviced and smoke alarms are now tested. Where homes do not have hard wired smoke alarms they are fitted. Carbon monoxide detectors are installed where the tenant has converted a communal room into a sleeping area. Property improvement programmes also install hard wired smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. This supports the health and safety of tenants through early detection of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning.
- 97 The service is customer focused. The programme and its importance are well publicised in tenants' newsletters and the tenants' handbook. All tenants are offered an appointment time for the service and out of hours appointments are available on request and their availability is widely advertised. Appointment times reduce the amount of time tenants have to allow access and will enable them to plan servicing around other commitments. D&VH also shares any specific tenant needs with the contractor and these inform service delivery. Tenant satisfaction is high at 97.6 per cent for 2008/09.
- 98 D&VH issues copies of gas certificates to tenants. This provides reassurance that appliances are safe and acts as a record for when the next service is due. D&VH stores certificates electronically and this provides a clear audit trail that regulations are being met. A procedure setting out arrangements to gain access to properties is in place², but options to use legal means are limited to applying for a possession order. Performance for gas servicing is reported to the board to ensure accountability for this high risk area. In addition to internal quality assurance measures, 10 per cent of services are checked by an external contractor. Appropriate steps are taken to ensure tenants and their households are safe.

¹ This does not include works carried out within decent homes programmes.

² D&VH has not had to use the procedure to date.

How good is the service?

- 99** The service is expensive to deliver, but effective performance and high levels of tenant satisfaction indicate value for money. The service is delivered through Durham County Council under a three-star repair and servicing programme. Annual costs fall significantly with each year of the contract. The contract has not been market tested and benchmarking indicates that costs are above average at £132 per unit. Presently the company is paying more for its servicing than other similar housing providers.
- 100** The introduction of specific appointment times for gas servicing has seen a significant improvement in the level of first time accesses. Effective performance in gaining access means D&VH is able to extend programme delivery from 10 to 12 months¹. This will reduce the frequency of visits to reduce costs.

Aids and adaptations

- 101** The previous inspection found that the Council's aids and adaptations service had been passed to the newly formed Durham Dales Home Improvement Agency. D&VH did not have any role in providing the service, either directly or through a service level agreement. However, it was effectively promoting the service.
- 102** This inspection found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Although D&VH still has no responsibility to deliver aids and adaptations within its management agreement, it effectively works with the County Council and the Home Improvement Agency to facilitate this on behalf of its tenants and is now investing some of its own resources to meet demand for minor adaptations.
- 103** The Home Improvement Agency has a budget specifically for major adaptations within D&VH properties of £270,000 and this is sufficient to meet demand, with no waiting list at the end of 2008/09. The tenants' handbook promotes support available and how to make an application. This raises awareness of the service and encourages requests.
- 104** D&VH makes referrals to the Home Improvement Agency which it meets monthly to assess progress and consider cost implications. Works are market tested to ensure value for money. Service standards are in place so that customers understand the level of service they can expect. The average time to complete major adaptations is reasonable, being 74 calendar days from assessment to completion. Tenants can quickly access aids and adaptations needed to remain in their home.
- 105** D&VH is increasing its capacity to carry out aids and adaptations. Property improvement programmes are used as an opportunity to provide installations more suitable for tenants with restricted mobility. Occupational Therapists assess need to inform programmes and the Home Improvement Agency meets any extra costs incurred.

¹ Servicing should take place annually, but by scheduling servicing after 10 months, D&VH has more time to arrange access if there are problems. In most cases where access is granted on the first contact appliances are serviced 2 months early, which overtime is more expensive than the annual servicing required by law.

- 106** D&VH has attracted £100,000 from the Council to undertake small scale adaptation works, such as ramps and door widening, in a scheme of bungalows. This is delivering lifetime homes. D&VH reinvests efficiencies from the decent homes programme in minor aids, such as hand rails and lever taps, and this is sufficient to meet demand¹. The decent homes plus standard also offers grab rails and the repositioning of light switches and electrical sockets at a more accessible height. D&VH is proactive at supporting vulnerable people to remain in their home.
- 107** D&VH has an understanding of aids and adaptations in the housing stock. Major aids and adaptations are recorded on the stock condition database and the Home Improvement Agency provides D&VH with a monthly list of completed works to ensure the database is up to date. These attributes are identified when the property is empty so that the property is allocated to people on the waiting list who may need them.

Income management

- 108** The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. D&VH was successfully collecting housing income from a range of sources. Its approach to rent arrears was effective and customer focused. Customers were proactively involved in service improvement. However, some information provided was not easy to understand and there was no analysis of whether there was adequate provision of money advice to meet need.
- 109** This inspection found strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. D&VH is a strong performer for rent collection and tenant satisfaction with the service is high. Tenants can pay rent in a range of convenient ways and they are well informed of how rents are set. D&VH is promoting initiatives to deliver financial inclusion and evictions only take place as a last resort. Tenants have access to welfare benefit and debt advice, and D&VH supports initiatives to promptly process housing benefit claims. Former tenancy arrears are being effectively collected and the amount of debts written off is reducing. There are few weaknesses in this area. Some tenants pay a small charge for services they don't receive.
- 110** Clear rent restructuring plans comply with government proposals to deliver rents which are affordable, fair and less confusing for tenants. Tenants are informed about how rents are set and receive quarterly rent statements which are easy to understand. Tenants understand rent obligations and are reassured that payments have been allocated to their account.
- 111** Service charges for communal services, such as cleaning and caretaking, have not been disaggregated, with charges split equally between all tenants². Although charges are slight a substantial number of tenants are paying for services they do not receive.

¹ £10,000

² £31,200 needs to be disaggregated.

How good is the service?

- 112** There are a number of payment options that make it easy for tenants to pay rent, service charges and other debts. Payment methods are widely publicised and include the facility to pay through a wide range of public and private sector businesses. Tenants can pay outside of office opening hours through these or by using an online facility on D&VH's website. Options to pay by direct debit are extensive and actively promoted. This is effective, increasing take up to around 20 per cent of all payments. This is a reliable way to ensure rent obligations are met on time and reduces the cost of collection.
- 113** Rent accounts are set up when tenancies commence. This enables tenants to pay rent and prevents arrears accruing. D&VH has offered incentives for tenants to pay current and former tenancy arrears, such as prize draws or discounts, but is now focusing on seasonal arrears collection campaigns to target tenants at times of the year where collection rates fall, such as Christmas. This is improving arrears recovery to ensure debts are reduced.
- 114** D&VH is one of the strongest performing ALMOs nationally for rent collection. Rent collection levels have consistently improved since 2004/05 from 97.1 per cent to 98.5 per cent in 2008/09. A realistic target of 98.9 per cent drives further improvement and present performance at 98.7 per cent is working towards this. Tenants are prevented from getting into debt and D&VH maximises rental income for investment in services. The average cost of collection at around £9.22 per tenant per year provides value for money in comparison with other ALMOs. Customer satisfaction with the service is high at 88.3 per cent and tenant feedback has resulted in improvements to rent statement content and extended direct debit options. Services are more likely to meet tenant needs.
- 115** The collection of former tenancy arrears is well managed and produces effective results. Performance has remained consistent for the last three years at around 29 per cent. Positively, D&VH is writing off fewer debts which have fallen considerably from £97,259 in 2006/07 to £12,827 in 2008/09. These are reinstated should the location of the debtor be identified at a later date. D&VH has tried a range of initiatives to collect former tenant arrears including external agencies, but has found most success delivering this in house. Former tenancy arrears provide additional income to assist D&VH to achieve its objectives.
- 116** Evictions for rent arrears are only used as a last resort and the number of evictions is reducing, to 0.4 per cent, whilst the arrears collection rate is rising. D&VH works in partnership with Council homeless and housing advice staff to visit tenants where eviction proceedings are taking place. Tenants are helped to retain their home where possible, but otherwise have access to advice on housing options.
- 117** There is a clear protocol for working with Durham County Council for processing housing benefit claims. D&VH verifies housing benefit applications to ensure they are processed quickly, preventing arrears accruing. Performance is generally effective with applications being processed in an average of two weeks. D&VH staff carry out benefit calculations so tenants are aware of how much they should pay before their claim has been processed.

- 118** Tenants have access to welfare benefit and debt advice. D&VH works in partnership with the Citizen's Advice Bureau and high standards in service delivery have been agreed, with most referrals seen within five working days. D&VH is informed when incomes are maximised. This gives a sound understanding of the income and expenditure of tenants in arrears to negotiate repayment arrangements.
- 119** D&VH provides advice on financial issues to promote financial inclusion.¹ The dangers of borrowing from door step loan companies is stressed with tenants encouraged to use credit unions as an ethical and affordable savings and lending service and D&VH has part funded a facility for tenants to pay into the credit union more easily through paypoint. Tenants are advised on how to save money. This includes energy efficiency schemes to reduce energy bills and raising awareness of cheaper means of paying for energy by avoiding card or coin meters. Tenants are helped to understand financial commitments and budget effectively to meet obligations.
- 120** D&VH has an effective policy for recharging repairs resulting from misuse or negligence by tenants. This involves around 294 repairs every year and collection rates are rising with 35 per cent in 2007/08 to 47 per cent currently. This compares well with other housing providers. A clear message is sent to tenants that damage to property will not be tolerated and that recharges will be made.

Resident involvement

- 121** The previous inspection found this was an area of strength for D&VH. There was strong and genuine commitment to resident involvement which was well embedded in all aspects of D&VH's work. A range of widely promoted involvement opportunities allowed a high proportion of tenants to engage with clear outcomes in terms of service delivery and improvement. However, young people were under-represented and the value for money of resident involvement had not been fully considered.
- 122** This inspection found that strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses. Tenants have a range of ways to have a say about how their homes are managed and these have been evaluated to ensure value for money. Outcomes from resident involvement are evident and publicised, so tenants are reassured their views are valued. Tenants receive sufficient training, funding and support to participate and tenant representatives influence the strategic direction of D&VH and champion local issues. Outcomes for involving some hard to reach groups, particularly young people are improving, but the compact does not promote how barriers to involvement will be identified and addressed. D&VH is not proactive at encouraging tenants to register their preferred method of involvement, so it can involve tenants in ways that meet their preferences.

¹ The award winning 'pocket sense' initiative.

How good is the service?

- 123** The tenants' compact enables participation and involvement at a number of levels. It is easy to understand and includes standards for activities. A working group involving tenants has accountability for developing and delivering proposals. This ensures customer views are reflected. Options include tenant representation through the customer panel and tenant groups, postal surveys for a wide range of services, phone surveys for responsive repairs, mystery shopping to assess service standards and working groups for priority areas such as value for money and maintenance. Options enable tenants to choose how they want to have a say depending on their interests and availability.
- 124** Outcomes from resident involvement are evident. Tenants work with the responsive repairs contractor to improve service delivery, including developing more secure access arrangements for tenants. They also have an active role in the procurement and monitoring of contracts. They continue to influence standards for empty property maintenance and delivering decent homes. Outcomes of involvement are publicised. Tenants recognise their views are valued and have influence to encourage wider tenant engagement in future initiatives.
- 125** Tenants are involved in decision making with equal representation on the board to independent and Council members, however recruitment arrangements have not been formalised to ensure they are robust and equitable. Tenant board member vacancies are widely publicised and attract a high level of interest. The customer panel influences strategies and plans before they go to board to ensure proposals reflect tenant priorities. Monthly panel meetings are well attended and inclusive, being widely advertised and open to all tenants and their representatives. The customer panel is independent, delivering successful conferences and newsletters. Members are well informed of housing issues, including options for resident involvement which they actively promote to encourage other tenants to participate.
- 126** Tenant groups are constituted to ensure they are representative and operate appropriately. Groups receive funding to meet running costs and to support the development of involvement initiatives. D&VH is taking involvement out to tenants' homes through open meetings in areas where there are no tenant groups. It has also worked with tenants and partners to agree a neighbourhood agreement in one area. These arrangements confirm how partnership working will deliver local solutions to local issues, such as fly-tipping, estate improvements and public safety. Tenants have a strong role in monitoring the delivery of these commitments.
- 127** Tenants have access to a wide range of training to support them to be involved in the activities of D&VH. Training includes running and participating in tenant groups; procurement; life skills such as applying for work; welfare benefits and safeguarding children; and service specific briefing such as decent homes and anti-social behaviour. Tenants are consulted on training needs to ensure the publicised programme meets skill gaps and assists them to effectively participate. External training, some accredited, informs tenants of national housing issues to champion locally.

- 128** There are significant resources to support tenant involvement. Four staff and a budget of £70,000¹ support this area of work. D&VH is one of the highest investors in tenant involvement in the North East and a robust evaluation of the costs and outcomes has assessed value for money involving tenants. D&VH is beginning to benchmark the service with other ALMOs nationally. This will further assess whether investment is delivering value for money and potentially identify best practice to share and drive further improvements.
- 129** Tenant involvement is supported through the reimbursement of travelling expenses, child and other care costs and the provision of translation, hearing loop and signers if required. Tenants are not prevented from being involved due to other commitments, low incomes, translation requirements or disability.
- 130** D&VH involves some hard to reach groups, but initiatives are not extensive. The tenants' compact and involvement strategy do not publicise how D&VH ensures inclusion or any initiatives being developed to address barriers to involvement. Young people have influenced the tenants' handbook to ensure it is relevant and easy to understand, a disability working group shapes and reviews the disability equality scheme and tenants from Black and Minority Ethnic communities have been involved in a focus group on anti-social behaviour. However, D&VH has not used the consultation initiatives to find out how these groups want to be involved, and although young people have been consulted on their housing priorities, this is not the case for tenants with disabilities and/or those from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities (BME). Hard to reach groups may not have sufficient opportunity to influence services.
- 131** There are some weaknesses in resident involvement. The role of tenants on the board is not promoted within the compact, even though this is the highest level of influence in D&VH's activities. D&VH does not offer the internet as an option for tenants to get involved. This increasingly popular low cost method of communication enables tenants to participate remotely and outside office hours. D&VH is however about to implement text messaging as a means for tenants to vote or complete surveys. This may be preferred by tenants with limited time who want to have a say.
- 132** D&VH is not proactive at encouraging tenants to register their preferred method of involvement, resulting in a modest take up of 11 per cent, 489 homes. Although there is a limited understanding of how most tenants want to be involved D&VH is appropriately involving registered tenants as opportunities arise to ensure preferences are met. Profiling of tenants involved in mystery shopping and tenant groups requires completion. D&VH can not be sure participants reflect the local community or that involvement initiatives are targeting gaps in representation.

¹ Which includes £18,500 for customer panel activities

How good is the service?

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 133** The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. The approach to anti-social behaviour and nuisance was effective and the tenancy enforcement service was well managed with partners and tenants noting a marked improvement in the local environment on estates. There was positive support to enable vulnerable perpetrators to sustain their tenancies and good multi-agency working. However, the service level agreement for the Council's tenancy enforcement was not finalised and it was unclear if the service was providing value for money.
- 134** This inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. D&VH has revised structures to deal with anti-social behaviour in a way that reflects tenant preferences. It is generally delivering against the Respect Standard and the anti-social behaviour procedure includes appropriate service standards. Partnership working is delivering diversionary activities and designing out crime on estates. Hot spots are intensively managed and there is high tenant satisfaction with the service. A range of remedies deal with complaints, with legal action as a last resort. It is a serious weakness that files do not accurately record what action has taken place to deal with complaints and evidence this is robust. Regular tenancy checks are not carried out to ensure compliance with tenancy conditions and introductory tenancies are not always effectively managed.
- 135** The tenancy agreement reminds tenants that they and people living or visiting them should not cause a nuisance to others. This is also publicised in a leaflet which defines anti-social behaviour and hate crime, and explains how D&VH supports victims and takes action against perpetrators. The tenancy agreement also confirms domestic abuse will not be tolerated. D&VH informs tenants of the requirement to act responsibly and raises awareness of unacceptable behaviour to encourage reporting.
- 136** Anti-social behaviour is not a significant problem¹ in the area and this is reflected in D&VH's strategies and tactics for dealing with problems. Successes in dealing with anti-social behaviour are not routinely reported in the local press. D&VH understandably does not want to create a false impression that it is a significant problem in the area and create a fear of crime.
- 137** D&VH has structures in place to deal with anti-social behaviour in a way which reflects tenant preferences. After careful consideration of the quality and cost of the service the Tenancy Enforcement Team has been transferred to D&VH to deliver the service in house. Although this has resource implications the increased control is delivering a more responsive service which meets tenant concerns and expressed wants.

¹ In 2008/09 256 complaints were dealt with, with noise nuisance the most common complaint, 20 per cent of cases.

- 138** D&VH has signed up to the Respect Standard¹ and this is generally being met, although there are some gaps, for example D&VH does not routinely agree courses of action with complainants. Tenants are made aware of the standard and can judge responses to any complaints alongside this. The anti-social behaviour procedure reflects best practice on combating problems and there are clear standards for service delivery. The speed of response appropriately varies according to the severity of the complaint.²
- 139** Legal action is regarded as a last resort and there is an emphasis on 'quasi legal' means of controlling behaviour, including demoted tenancies³ and acceptable behaviour contracts. D&VH also provides tenancy support to assist perpetrators to improve their behaviour. If necessary legal action is used. An anti social behaviour injunction was recently successfully pursued to the Court of Appeal and has now become widely quoted case law. The approach ensures tenants are not unnecessarily put through the Courts.
- 140** D&VH works with partner agencies to prevent and/or tackle anti-social behaviour and is involved in a variety of regional forums dealing with crime and disorder. This includes the Management Support Group where attendees have the authority and empowerment to make decisions and commit resources on behalf of the organisation they represent and the Local Multi Agency Problem Solving Group (LMAP) which considers cases with a criminal element requiring multi agency action. Outcomes include family intervention initiatives, financial support to events and initiatives to divert people from causing anti-social behaviour and measures to design out crime such as the installation of fencing. Some estates have benefited from the construction of multi use games areas and alley gating at the request of residents and tenant associations. Incidences of anti social behaviour have reduced.
- 141** The County Council's street wardens service intensively manage areas identified as hot spots for anti-social behaviour. D&VH part funds the scheme and provides a staff base. The wardens provide a service up to 9pm, with complaints after this time dealt with by the Police. Residents can access advice and support outside of office hours. A joined up approach is more productive than agencies working in isolation.
- 142** Resident engagement is identifying local solutions to local issues. Public consultation in response to anti-social behaviour complaints resulted in the 'not in my neighbourhood' initiative. This led to the fencing off of obscure access points to local garages and using the same approach a congregation point used by youths was rendered inaccessible. This has had a positive impact for residents as reports of anti social behaviour have largely reduced. Most tenants, 82 per cent, complaining about anti-social behaviour are satisfied with how their complaint was dealt. Gathering tenant feedback helps improve the service.

¹ This involves joint working between central government, local agencies, local communities and the public to build a society of mutual respect where anti-social behaviour is rare and tackled effectively, and communities live together in peace.

² Complaints which involve violence or the threat of it are responded to within 24 hours. Less serious complaints still have a prompt response time four days.

³ Demoted Tenancies came into effect in 2005 to help deal with anti-social behaviour among tenants. They allow the landlord to place tenancy of tenants found guilty of anti-social behaviour on 'probation' for a year.

How good is the service?

- 143** Records of anti-social behaviour show significant weaknesses. Most notable D&VH does not always evidence how it investigates allegations and takes action against perpetrators. Records are paper based and some are poor with unclear handwriting and lacking strategies to manage more complex cases. This makes it difficult to follow the case history and provide any evidence needed for legal action if required. In some cases tenants get repeated warnings with no escalation in action by D&VH to effectively deal with persistent anti-social behaviour. The language used in letters is not always easy to follow to enable tenants and perpetrators to understand allegations made, action agreed and responsibilities to behave appropriately. Outcomes from involvement of other agencies, such as the Police and the Council, are not recorded to evidence a joined up approach to dealing with incidents. Diary sheets are issued, but how they are used to assist complainants to record evidence to support allegations is not always clear. Cases have been closed without clear agreement with the complainant that issues have been appropriately dealt with and resolved where possible.
- 144** Introductory tenancies are generally not effectively managed. All new tenants are given introductory tenancies, but there are no records of visits to ensure that the tenancy is being maintained in an appropriate manner. At least one introductory tenancy has been allowed to lapse into a secure tenancy whilst being the subject of a series of serious complaints about anti-social behaviour. There appears to be little liaison between various sections within housing management around the conduct of tenants with introductory tenancies as a means to address poor behaviour. It is more difficult to take legal action against secure tenants.
- 145** D&VH does not carry out regular tenancy checks. This is a missed opportunity to confirm the tenant is in residence and complying with tenancy conditions. It would also give tenants the option to raise any queries about their home or neighbourhood.
- 146** D&VH recognises allegations of hate crime and is working with local partnerships to promote support available to deal with this specific type of harassment. This helps tenants and the local community to recognise hate crime and encourages them to seek support. However, D&VH's tenancy agreement does not reflect all forms of hate crime, although this is currently being addressed. This will raise awareness of unacceptable behaviour and how this is dealt with by D&VH and its partners.

Estate management

- 147** The previous inspection found this was an area of strength. The overall appearance of estates was positive. There were well embedded arrangements in place for estate inspections with evidence that this was leading to positive outcomes which customers recognise.¹
- 148** This inspection found strengths continue to significantly outweigh weaknesses, with high standards of estate management and maintenance sustained. A tour of estates and common areas found good levels of cleaning and maintenance. A number of small budgets are available for tenants and other groups to fund estate improvements and partnership working is attracting investment to improve the appearance of some estates. A popular estate caretaking service has recently been expanded.

¹ The Council continues to have responsibility for grounds maintenance, the warden service and street cleaning.

- 149** Estates continue to be well maintained, being clean and tidy. STATUS results confirm tenant satisfaction with neighbourhoods as a place to live has risen to 82 per cent in 2008 from 78 per cent in 2006. A good environment is a strong incentive for tenants to remain in their homes and tenancy turnovers have fallen from 13.5 per cent in 2003/04 to 9.5 per cent in 2008/09. Tenant satisfaction with their environment is gathered in an effective manner and results from a small proportion of tenants are encouraging. When asked about the overall condition of their estate, if they felt safe on the estate and the condition of the common areas most gave a positive response. Tenants live in a safe and attractive environment.
- 150** D&VH has responded to tenant preferences and invested in estate based caretakers.¹ The caretakers ensure a presence on estates wearing D&VH uniforms and driving branded vans. They act as 'eyes and ears' on the estate and are popular with staff and tenants. The service assists in the clearance of rubbish, tidying and emptying gardens, and carrying out fencing and minor repairs. Response times are prompt and the appearance of homes and estates is maintained and improved.
- 151** Tenants have opportunity to influence the condition of their estates. Estate walkabouts are widely advertised and tenants and other interested agencies attend. Tours identify and put plans in place to address any problematic areas and generally ensure that high standards are maintained. A number of small budgets are available for estate improvements, such as fencing. This gives tenants a sense of 'ownership' of their local environment.
- 152** Resources are targeted to meet greatest need. The condition of an estate is scored using a traffic light system on such things as the extent of litter or graffiti and this influences the frequency of inspection. The poorer scoring estates are inspected more often and may attract greater spending on environmental features and regular visits from estate caretakers. This is an effective means of ensuring that all tenants enjoy the same high standards and prevents estates falling into disrepair.
- 153** Partnership arrangements and the neighbourhood renewal investment have improved the appearance of some estates. Residents are consulted on initiatives, including landscaping and access points within estates. This will have a positive impression on residents who will take ownership and pride in the areas where they live.

Allocations and lettings

- 154** The previous inspection found strengths slightly outweighed weaknesses. There was good quality information for customers and housing applications were processed effectively. The offer process was customer focused and there were systems to ensure homes were allocated fairly. However, while effort was made to offer choice to customers, there was no formal choice based lettings scheme. Arrangements for reviewing the housing register were not fully effective.

¹ Following the success of a Neighbourhood Renewal funded scheme for estate caretakers D&VH has taken over the service and employs three caretakers.

How good is the service?

- 155** This inspection found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Properties are allocated appropriately to people in housing need and D&VH participates in partnerships to extend housing options and meet statutory requirements for homeless households. It is easy for applicants to access the waiting list and they are informed of their housing prospects. Properties are allocated quickly and tenant satisfaction with lettings is high. The tenancy sign up assists tenants to understand tenancy conditions and support is available to help tenants meet their responsibilities. Some weaknesses are evident. Applicants still have limited housing options until the planned Choice Based Letting Scheme is introduced and there are no targets to ensure lettings are representative of the local community. There are no local lettings policies to promote community cohesion amongst households with different lifestyles in more difficult to let homes.
- 156** D&VH's allocations policy is widely publicised and easy to understand. The points based system appropriately prioritises people in housing need and additional priority is awarded to address wider housing issues, such as releasing under occupied properties or relocating tenants to enable regeneration initiatives. Properties are allocated in an appropriate manner with clear audit trails confirming offers are equitable. Applicants who do not qualify for accommodation¹ are dealt with appropriately and a publicised appeals process ensures a swift and fair response.
- 157** D&VH works well with the County Council and other housing organisations to secure permanent accommodation for people in housing need. It is involved in developing the regional choice based lettings scheme which replaces its current policy in October 2009. This offers applicants greater choice and mobility across the county. D&VH also assists the County Council to fulfil duties for homeless households with a fifth of its properties allocated to statutory homeless applicants. Nomination agreements are in place with housing associations to ensure people on the waiting list have access to a range of social housing, extending housing options. D&VH is also involved in partnerships working with ex-offenders, some of whom are high risk, to access housing and related support and ensure public protection. People living in the most acute housing need are assisted to receive appropriate offers of accommodation.
- 158** The allocations waiting list is accessible. Application forms are easy to complete and they are processed quickly, so applicants are promptly considered for vacant homes. Applicants are advised of rehousing prospects and points qualifying for recently let properties are widely advertised. This gives transparency as to how people in housing need are prioritised and assists applicants to understand the likelihood of being rehoused in areas of choice.
- 159** Applicants receive accompanied viewings of offered properties so they can raise queries around condition and affordability. Properties are allocated quickly, on average taking less than two offers over 11.6 days, compared to 16.8 days three years ago. This minimises the time much needed homes are unoccupied. Applicants can refuse offers without penalty. Housing preferences are more likely to be met and tenancies sustained.

¹ For example exclusions due to rent arrears and or anti-social behaviour.

- 160** Reasons for offers of accommodation being refused are regularly reviewed. This informs initiatives to improve acceptance rates. The most common reason for refusals is a change in circumstances prior to allocation. An annual review of applications has been introduced to check circumstances and needs. This improves the likelihood of suitable offers being made to people still in housing need. D&VH has successfully reduced the level of difficult to let properties, which is now relatively low at 0.9 per cent.¹ Tenant satisfaction with the lettings process including their new home is high at 94 per cent. Tenants are being offered properties that meet their preferences.
- 161** New tenants have a comprehensive interview which explains tenancy conditions. Tenants are given copies of safety information for heating appliances and asbestos and details of the lettable standard. Tenants are assured they are safe in their home and can assess property condition against published standards. Tenants are assisted to complete housing benefit forms and understand options for paying rent and accessing debt advice. Additional support is available to vulnerable tenants and other tenants who may be at risk of tenancy failure. This supports tenants to understand responsibilities and services available to support them to sustain tenancies.
- 162** Vulnerable applicants are supported to participate in the forthcoming choice based lettings scheme. Inactive applicants are contacted to ensure they understand the system and how to access it. Close links with agencies supporting vulnerable people ensure all sections of the community have access to independent advice on maximising their housing options. A furnished tenancy scheme is also planned and a grants scheme has already helped 39 customers access a total of £44,177 for additional furniture. This enables people on low incomes to access housing without incurring high set up costs or becoming dependent on loans.
- 163** The service lacks some initiatives to allocate properties to people in housing need. There are no targets to ensure lettings are representative of the local community. This would identify whether initiatives are needed to ensure equal access to accommodation for all people in housing need. No incentives are offered to people to move to smaller properties despite a high demand for larger properties. Mutual exchanges are not promoted to enable applicants to find their own housing solutions and D&VH still operates a manual system to match tenants wishing to exchange. This is inefficient and will not be addressed until the introduction of choice based lettings.
- 164** There is no local lettings policy to clarify how vacancies in a scheme previously providing sheltered accommodation will be filled². This would agree qualification for the scheme while its long term use is being confirmed. There are currently no measures in place to ensure lifestyles are compatible between established tenants, some of whom are accessing housing support and care packages provided by the County Council, and new tenants with limited or no support needs, some of whom have chaotic lifestyles. The quality of life for some vulnerable tenants may be reducing.

¹ From 5.2per cent to 0.9 per cent between 2005-08.

² There is currently no alternative sheltered accommodation in the area to re-house these tenants.

How good is the service?

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 165** The previous inspection found weaknesses slightly outweighed strengths. Customers influenced procurement decisions. A range of efficiency savings had been achieved and resources had been increased through improved income management performance. Substantial external funding had been accessed for energy efficiency measures with positive outcomes for tenants. However, the D&VH was not able to demonstrate a clear relationship between service costs and quality and comparisons with others was limited. The benefits of modern procurement methods had not yet been fully realised and understanding of service costs was limited.
- 166** This inspection found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Efficiency savings are targeted at high cost services, identified by comparing costs with other ALMOs. D&VH is able to analyse how costs impact on customer satisfaction to inform value for money assessments. Annual efficiency targets are appropriate and met through market testing of contracts and introducing more efficient working arrangements. Tenants are involved in procurement decisions and subsequent contract monitoring to ensure their expectations are met. Budgeting is effective and there are clear plans for reinvesting resources to deliver emerging priorities. Service level agreements are regularly reviewed and D&VH is increasing capacity at no additional cost by bringing some services in house and attracting inward investment. However, plans to deliver value for money and best practice in procurement are not robust and D&VH does not fully understand why responsive repair costs are some of the highest nationally.

How do costs compare?

- 167** D&VH has some understanding of costs, which it compares with other ALMOs through a national benchmarking club. Comparisons highlight high cost services for investigation and inform efficiency targets. Costs are variable compared to other ALMOs. They are low for housing management functions and average for major and cyclical maintenance. D&VH has some of the highest costs nationally for empty property and responsive repairs. D&VH uses benchmarking to identify high performers and is proactive at contacting them to understand other ways of working to drive improvements.
- 168** D&VH does not fully understand why responsive repair costs are high, but sets targets to examine and reduce these. It has also tested the market to assess whether arrangements delivered value for money and the new contract will reduce responsive repair costs by an average of 26 per cent by 2010/11. There are targets to achieve above average performance compared with other ALMOs by 2013 and opportunities to deliver these efficiencies are already being identified. D&VH is participating in additional benchmarking to assess value for money of responsive repairs. This will provide more information as to why costs are high.

169 D&VH is also comparing costs and service delivery arrangements through local benchmarking clubs. This has delivered mystery shopping peer assessments to improve customer access arrangements and is beginning to scrutinise how to effectively and efficiently deliver maintenance services. D&VH benchmarks customer satisfaction of key services with other organisations using the same methodology and IT system. D&VH can assess whether costs represent value for money in the context of customer expectations being met.

How is value for money managed?

170 D&VH agrees appropriate annual efficiency targets of three per cent and has a track record of exceeding these, averaging four per cent. Significant efficiencies have been delivered by testing the market to ensure contracts deliver better value for money and agree more efficient working arrangements, including in partnership with contractors. A medium term, five year, business plan projects 13 per cent efficiency savings. This releases resources for investment in other priorities. D&VH has met its reserve target to ensure capacity to deal with unforeseen risks to service delivery.

171 Modern methods of procurement have secured value for money in the decent homes programme. A partnered approach using open book accounting has ensured a full understanding of costs which have reduced from £11,000 to £7,300 per property through supply chain savings and overhead reductions. There are incentives and sanctions within the contract to support performance, including profit sharing which delivered £300,000 for both the contractor and D&VH in 2008/09. This is being invested in emerging priorities agreed with tenants.

172 Tenants are trained in procurement processes to fully participate in procurement decisions and the monitoring of contracts. This ensures services meet their needs. Reports to board on procurement decisions are comprehensive and easy to understand. This ensures decisions are transparent and equitable and contractors have a range of relevant performance indicators, some of which are customer focused, to measure programme delivery. Clear standards in delivery are set.

173 Zero based budgeting techniques have been used to ensure all costs are justified. There are regular reports to budget holders, who receive support from finance staff as required. Budgets are also available online as a tool for managers to assess budgets as and when required to manage resources. There is no formal guide to staff on budget setting and management to promote best practice and ensure roles and responsibilities are fully understood.

174 D&VH has clear plans for reinvesting resources, involving staff at all levels and tenants. This has committed funding for caretaking, money and debt advice and planned maintenance in 2009/10. D&VH reviews resources and redistributes where required. This is evident in the reorganisation of staff from high performing services which need less intensive management to develop choice based lettings an emerging priority for delivery.

How good is the service?

- 175** D&VH regularly reviews service level agreements to confirm whether arrangements deliver value for money. Some services¹ have been market tested and this identified alternative options for delivering services at more competitive rates. Support services have been generally low cost, but D&VH has achieved added value through bringing most of these in house to increase capacity without incurring additional costs.
- 176** D&VH has been successful in attracting inward investment with £1 million attracted in the last two years. This includes renewable energy grants and energy efficiency schemes, commissions for water rates and insurance, and grants to provide housing related support for vulnerable people, youth participation and furniture for new tenants. This improves capacity to deliver services and demonstrates a commitment to delivering government priorities.
- 177** D&VH is aware of and has taken advantage of opportunities to increase its capacity to deliver decent homes improvements. It has drawn down £1 million of decent home funding a year early and this is reducing the waiting time of some tenants for works and creating local employment opportunities.
- 178** Arrangements to develop and deliver value for money are not robust. Although a range of initiatives are delivering outcomes it is unclear how these are co-ordinated to ensure value for money is maximised and embedded. There is no corporate group leading on this area and procurement and value for money strategies are not formally reviewed and reported to ensure objectives are being delivered. Although value for money is a consistent theme throughout most plans within D&VH, how this will be achieved is not explained to ensure delivery. Guidance does not sufficiently promote best practice for achieving value for money or explain procurement regulations to be considered. Staff are not empowered to consider these areas when making decisions about service delivery and developments.

¹ Responsive repairs and internal audit

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 179** The previous inspection found a number of improvements had delivered positive outcomes which customers had noticed. There had been sustained improvement in performance in some key areas and good progress had been made against the 2005 report recommendations. However, the speed of completing urgent and non-urgent repairs was variable. Investment in homes had not maximised decent homes standard compliance and the ALMO could not demonstrate a track record of achieving value for money over time.
- 180** This inspection found strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. D&VH has made effective progress against recommendations and services continue to improve for most areas, with positive outcomes for tenants. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is high compared to similar organisations nationally. There is a strong track record of achieving efficiencies and improving service delivery through procurement. However, not all services meet the needs of tenants and D&VH can not be sure services are accessible and inclusive for all.
- 181** Services continue to improve for most areas. Weaker services evident at the last inspection, capital improvements and responsive repairs, have particularly improved. Some services, resident involvement, gas servicing, estate management and income management, were previously recognised as performing well and these have further improved to demonstrate strong performance when compared to other ALMOs nationally. One service, tenancy management, has not improved with weaknesses in file management evident. Tenants generally receive an effective and responsive service, although some areas require improvement.
- 182** D&VH has made effective progress against recommendations, detailed in Appendix 4. Most of the recommendations have been delivered or partly delivered but one remains outstanding. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is an improving trend from 76 per cent to 80 per cent between 2006 and 2008.
- 183** D&VH has a strong track record of achieving efficiencies, averaging four per cent annually. Particular progress has been made through competitive tendering of services, some for the first time. Modern methods of procurement have secured value for money and open book accounting ensures a full understanding of costs which are reducing. Resources have been re-invested in additional priorities identified jointly with tenants, such as providing aids and adaptations.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

184 Improvements since the last inspection are evident and many have positive outcomes for tenants. These include:

- 90 per cent of the housing stock meeting decency standards, with additional funding drawn down early to improve standards for more tenants;
- performance for completing responsive repairs on time is strong and most repairs are delivered through appointments agreed with tenants;
- information to tenants has been improved so it contains relevant things and is easy to understand;
- tenant satisfaction with services is gathered and dissatisfied tenants are contacted to see if service improvements can be identified from their experience;
- a range of key services have been market tested, reducing costs and identifying efficiencies, releasing resources for investment in emerging priorities;
- D&VH has a good understanding of the difficulties facing young people and is delivering a series of tenancy support initiatives to help them live fulfilling lives and maintain their tenancies;
- options of tenants to have a say about services have been reviewed to ensure a range of convenient ways;
- D&VH is working in partnership to meet demand for aids and adaptations to assist people to remain in their home;
- the introduction of specific appointment times for gas servicing has seen a significant improvement to first time access levels;
- tenant representatives take an increasing role in promoting tenant involvement, and information they provide and conferences they organise are well received by tenants; and
- neighbourhood wardens and estate based caretakers provide a presence on estates to deter anti-social behaviour and provide a prompt response to maintaining estates and tenant homes.

185 Not all services meet the needs of tenants. Key weaknesses include:

- arrangements for customers to access services may not be convenient and/or inclusive;
- a lack of understanding as to whom is accessing services and barriers preventing access; and
- evidence for anti-social behaviour cases is not always accurately recorded or kept up to date.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 186** The previous inspection found strengths and weaknesses were in balance. Key strategies were in place. D&VH and the Council had shown openness to external challenge which had led to service improvements. D&VH's board was working effectively and there was a framework for performance management. Customer feedback was informing service improvement. However, D&VH did not have a business plan. Performance monitoring and management was undeveloped with gaps in monitoring activity including value for money. There was a lack of ownership or robust challenge of responsive repairs performance and insufficient operational separation between D&VH and the Council in this service area. The approach to risk was undeveloped.
- 187** This inspection found strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a robust business plan which is regularly reviewed to remain relevant and assess outcomes. This informs other plans to deliver strategic objectives. Performance management arrangements are robust, with clear guidance on developing strategies and action plans. Performance indicators are relevant and performance is compared with others. Service standards are agreed with tenants and customer satisfaction is canvassed. D&VH learns from customer complaints and other organisations delivering similar services. There are plans in place to target high costs and D&VH is maximising financial capacity. There is an understanding of business risks, which are being managed appropriately. A medium term business plan demonstrates financial capacity to deliver service aims, however some plans do not identify resources needed to ensure implementation and all are not being reviewed to evaluate progress. Monitoring of anti-social behaviour cases is weak.
- 188** D&VH now has a comprehensive business plan, agreed with staff and tenants. This gives clear leadership on organisational priorities and is synchronised with budget and financial processes to plan resources needed. The business plan is reviewed annually to assess outcomes. It also identifies emerging priorities and potential efficiencies and services where performance needs to improve. The business plan is supported by a range of strategies to deliver key areas such as access and customer care, value for money and diversity.
- 189** Directorate plans include relevant priorities linked to DVH's strategic objectives, and review achievements in the previous year. Expected outcomes are explained and actions are delegated to lead officers with a deadline for delivery to ensure accountability. These influence individual staff plans with performance assessed through regular one to ones and annual appraisals. Annual awards recognise staff for good performance. Staff have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and their contribution to delivering strategic objectives.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 190** Overall performance management arrangements are robust, with clear guidelines on how to develop policies and strategies, and timetables for reporting performance. How plans link together is explained to promote joint working and avoid duplication. A range of relevant national and local performance indicators are used to assess priority areas of service. D&VH participates in the HouseMark initiative to agree and submit data on a set of shared indicators. This enables D&VH to compare performance with similar organisations. Effective performance and areas for improvement are identified. Performance reports focus on the key points and are easy to understand. Current performance is compared with D&VH's targets, performance in the previous year and top performance for ALMOs nationally. This encourages D&VH to aspire to be one of the best performers. Codes identify whether an area needs attention, if it is above or below 10 per cent of the target.
- 191** There is a sound understanding of performance, with regular reports to senior management, the board and the customer panel. Performance champions in each department have clear responsibility to input into these and a Corporate Performance Officer attends all monthly team meetings to give advice on performance and ensure a consistent approach. Remedial action is identified as required to meet targets.
- 192** The board works effectively with staff and there are a number of examples of intervention to address poor performance, such as empty property control and rent arrears. Board papers are received with sufficient time to consider content and are in any easy to understand format. Most board members consider they have a reasonable understanding of the tenant experience of living in D&VH homes, although admit there could be more sophisticated reporting of this.
- 193** Clear standards in delivery have been agreed with tenants, and performance against service standards are regularly monitored and reported to assess delivery against commitments. Customer satisfaction is consistently canvassed and comparisons with similar organisations using the same approach gives an understanding of performance and informs contract monitoring meetings. A range of working groups involving customers are monitoring service delivery and identifying service developments and improvements.
- 194** D&VH is a learning organisation. It has worked with other organisations recognised as being best performers or who are more advanced in developing specific initiatives. Learning lessons from their experiences has influenced D&VH's approach to customer profiling, money advice, carrying out equality impact assessments and self-assessing against the RESPECT standard. This enables D&VH to deliver proven initiatives more quickly and effectively. D&VH is involved in benchmarking clubs, consortia and regional partnerships to work with others and compare performance, costs and identify best practice. A member of staff works as a 'peer reviewer', going into under performing organisations and sharing expertise and addressing areas of weakness. Sharing expertise in this manner will help raise standards in the industry generally.
- 195** D&VH uses customer complaints and customer feedback to identify service improvements. These are shared within the organisation and tenants through a six monthly publication 'You Said, We Did'. This includes using hot washes to improve the cleanliness of empty properties to let and extending the freephone number for customers reporting repairs to enquiries for all services. Tenants can understand how their feedback has influenced services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 196** D&VH has an understanding of the condition of its stock and this ensures investment needs are understood to deliver and sustain decent homes. There are also clear plans to redevelop a low demand scheme to better meet housing need. Income is maximised by reducing costs through competitive tendering, maximising rental income, attracting inward investment and delivering efficiencies. D&VH has assessed risks to set a financial reserves target and this has been met. This ensures capacity to deal with unexpected expenditure to sustain service delivery to tenants and meet business plans. Service level agreements are regularly reviewed to confirm whether arrangements deliver value for money and service needs. D&VH has some understanding of costs and is benchmarking to assess whether these represent value for money. It does not fully understand why some costs are high, such as responsive repairs, but has set targets to examine and reduce these.
- 197** There are some weaknesses in strategies and plans. Key areas such as asset management and value for money have not been reviewed to assess whether aims are being achieved and identify whether any remedial action is required where there are issues. Guidance for developing action plans advises on considering costs, staff time and risks to the company, but generally strategies do not include details of resources required to ensure capacity to deliver objectives. It is unclear how value for money is co-ordinated to ensure principles are embedded. There is no corporate guidance on how aims will be achieved to ensure delivery. D&VH does not sufficiently promote best practice for achieving value for money.
- 198** Monitoring of anti-social behaviour is weak. Tenancies are allowed to move from introductory to secure without following stated procedures and action taken to deal with anti-social behaviour complaints is not effectively recorded. There is no evidence of quality assurance of cases to ensure procedures are followed. Appropriate checks are necessary to drive up standards in service delivery and clear evidence is required to support legal action should complaints continue to escalate.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 199** The previous inspection found that D&VH had been successful in securing resources and IT systems were assisting service delivery. Sickness absence was well managed and frontline staff were knowledgeable and enthusiastic. D&VH was investing in developing staff and board members. Work was underway in a number of areas which would increase capacity. However, the approach to identify and meet training needs was not systematic. Middle managers had not been fully recognised as change agents and D&VH lacked a medium term financial plan.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 200** This inspection found strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Financial management is robust and the risk register is effective. The medium term business plan gives financial capacity to deliver strategic objectives and resources are redistributed to delivery new priorities. The relationship with Durham County Council is appropriately arms length and D&VH is well positioned to represent tenant interests at County level. Staff and board members understand responsibilities and training is extensive. Staff feel valued and turnover and sickness levels are low. There are positive steps to attract a diverse workforce representative of the locality and D&VH provides employment opportunities to local people and contributes to the local economy. Efficiency targets are exceeded and D&VH successfully attracts inward investment. However, IT systems are not always fit for purpose, although plans are in place to address this, and job evaluation is not in place.
- 201** Budget setting and financial management systems are robust. Zero based budgeting techniques justify costs, and there are appropriate tools to enable managers to manage budgets, with regular reports and support from financial specialists. This encourages prudent budget management and ensures a focus on organisational goals set out in the business plan.
- 202** The risk register is effective, scoring risks by likelihood and impact. Actions are agreed to prevent risks happening or consider options to address these if they do. A reserve target ensures capacity to deal with unforeseen risks to service delivery.
- 203** A medium term, five year, business plan demonstrates financial capacity to deliver strategic objectives and there are clear plans for reinvesting resources. D&VH reviews resources in consultation with tenants and redistributes where required to delivery new priorities, such as introducing choice based lettings and extending estate caretaking. D&VH has addressed a financial shortfall of £1.1 million to meet decent homes commitments without impacting on its capacity to deliver other services.
- 204** The relationship between D&VH and Durham County Council is appropriately arms length. There are clear arrangements in place for discussion and agreement of priorities and performance indicators. There are regular meetings with the Council lead contact for D&VH and the relevant portfolio holder meets with the D&VH's Chief Executive and Chair of the board. The Council receives regular performance reports and has an understanding of areas of positive performance and those where improvement is needed. D&VH role in meeting local housing need is valued.
- 205** Board members are clear about their responsibilities and accountabilities, and have an understanding of wider strategic housing issues in the County. Local government reorganisation may present a number of issues and opportunities for D&VH and this has been discussed at board level. The reorganisation of councils in County Durham into a single County Council involves the creation of a single housing revenue account into which all rents paid in the County will flow. A separate housing revenue board has been created to manage the account and the Chair of D&VH sits on this board. D&VH is well positioned to represent its interests at County level.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 206** There is effective planning of human resources. D&VH takes human resource issues seriously and has recently created its own section to lead and develop this area. A series of improvements have already been delivered. D&VH has achieved 'two ticks' accreditation, which recognises commitment to good practice in employing people with disabilities. It has also reduced staff sickness to good practice levels, averaging five days per year per member of staff. This improves capacity to deliver services.
- 207** All staff and board members have personal development reviews when objectives, targets and training needs for the coming year are set. This sets staff responsibilities and aids staff understanding of how they contribute to corporate aims. A large training budget is in place which is three times higher than the public sector average. D&VH has a training programme linked to long term business strategies and workforce planning. This ensures that both personal and D&VH's development needs are met.
- 208** Staff are positive about working for D&VH, feeling part of the company and that their work is valued. Communication arrangements are good with an employee forum for formal consultation with staff, regular team meetings, an 'intranet' and a monthly staff newsletter. This has helped secure a low staff turnover rate and avoid the cost and uncertainty of recruitment.
- 209** D&VH is taking positive steps to attract a diverse workforce and a SMART¹ action plan should lead to improvements. The plan addresses major weaknesses such as an under representation of women in senior levels in a practical manner such as flexible working patterns and monitoring success rates of applications by gender. The lack of awareness of the sexuality of the workforce is to be addressed by a confidential questionnaire to all staff which will be administered by an external agency. Such an approach will help improve D&VH's diversity profile.
- 210** D&VH provides employment opportunities to local people and contributes to the local economy. The responsive repairs contract buys 70 per cent of supplies from local companies and 99 per cent of the workforce are from the local community. D&VH is involved in Job Centre Plus schemes to get unemployed people into work, and the Future Jobs Fund supporting the creation of jobs for long term unemployed, young people and others who face significant disadvantage in the work place. A modern apprentice scheme offers training in a number of different disciplines such as building trades and business administration. Apprentices are paid above government recommended rates and to date all have found permanent work placements following the completion of their apprenticeships. In an area of high youth unemployment it is a valuable resource and contributes to the local economy.
- 211** D&VH is involved in local and regional partnerships to deliver local services to meet the needs of local people. This includes crime and disorder partnerships, the Local Government Review, the Total Place Board, the three Area Action Partnerships in Wear Valley, and the housing forum leading on the County housing strategy. D&VH is well placed to champion Wear Valley issues and work with partners to understand and respond to emerging housing issues. This also provides opportunities to combine resources to meet shared priorities.

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 212** D&VH has clear targets to deliver efficiencies, and these are being exceeded. D&VH has plans to continue working with partners to make savings, and profit sharing incentives within contracts support this. Open book accounting ensures a full understanding of costs and plans are in place to reduce costs through supply chain efficiencies and overhead reductions. D&VH is successful at attracting investment from external sources, with £1 million attracted in the last two years. This improves capacity to improve energy efficiency and support vulnerable people. D&VH takes advantage of opportunities to increase its capacity. It has drawn down decent homes funding early to reduce waiting times of some tenants for property improvements.
- 213** There are a number of weaknesses in D&VH's approach to human resources. D&VH is yet to secure Investors in People status, and flexible working arrangements are not as extensive as industry leaders. Job evaluation has yet to be agreed and it is unlikely this will happen until March 2010. D&VH is not meeting best practice in all areas for human resources.
- 214** IT systems are of variable quality. Some systems such as that for income management, recording stock condition and the soon to be introduced choice based letting system are fit for purpose. However other areas of service such as anti-social behaviour are not computerised. IT systems are still administered by County Council staff and therefore D&VH is very dependant on the Council. An in house IT Manager has been appointed to manage the service level agreement and to strategically manage the implementation of modules and IT improvements. This should address some capacity issues. D&VH has clear plans to address website weaknesses. This should improve access for all and enable tenants to access more service remotely.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Dale and Valley Homes performance 2005/06 to 2007/08

Performance indicator (BVPI)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	District Councils 25% 2007/08
63 Average SAP rating	63	65	66	72.8
66a Percentage rent collected	98.38	98.61	98.51	99
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	3.45	3	2.81	3.3
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	32.44	31.04	34.74	14
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.69	0.78	0.44	0.1
74 Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	72	76	76	84.9
75 Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	65	65	71
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	37	37*	30	7
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	12.7	21.4	-21.3	38.3
212 Average re-let time (days)	39	20	22	24

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - a review of key documents including the business delivery plan;
 - a review of performance reports;
 - a review of information available to tenants on services;
 - a review of D&VH's website;
 - interviews with a cross-section of staff;
 - interviews with key managers including the Chief Executive;
 - interview with the board of management representatives including the Chair;
 - interviews with maintenance contractors delivering services on behalf of D&VH;
 - focus groups with tenant representatives;
 - focus groups of partners providing money and debt advice or dealing with anti-social behaviour;
 - reality checks of customer access points, both in person and by telephone;
 - visits to tenants whose homes had received property improvements;
 - visits to empty properties for let;
 - visits to schemes with communal areas;
 - visits to the area with estate based staff such as caretakers;
 - review of anti-social behaviour case files; and
 - review of IT systems for delivering services.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Aids and adaptations

- 1 Although D&VH has no responsibility to deliver aids and adaptations within its management agreement, it is investing savings from property improvement works to provide minor adaptations. It is also including minor adaptations as an option within its decent homes plus standard. Tenants are supported to live independently in their homes.

Promoting customer profiling

- 2 The tenants' handbook and newsletter effectively promotes customer profiling and explains why it may be used. This will assist tenants to understand why this personal information is being used and will encourage them to participate. This is particularly important since some circumstances may have caused tenants' discrimination and/or harassment in the past.

Customer care kits

- 3 All staff dealing with tenants carry customer care kits. These include the equalities statement, language translation cards, a magnifier and a special pen for customers suffering with arthritis. This enables tenants to access services and promotes D&VH's equality and diversity commitments.

Credit union payments

- 4 D&VH has made a financial contribution to support the credit union to offer a paypoint facility. This addresses a lack of collection points for customers wishing to make payments into their credit union account. Customers can use the facility free of charge. This is particularly important for customers living in rural areas where transport options are limited and expensive.

Appendix 4 – Progress with recommendation from previous inspection

Recommendation 1 - Meet landlord responsibilities and ensure tenants' health and safety is protected by:	
Immediately establishing appropriate reporting mechanisms for action taken to ensure access for gas servicing.	Delivered
Establishing a robust asbestos register.	Delivered
Ensuring that both hard-wired and battery operated smoke detectors are serviced at appropriate intervals.	Delivered

Recommendation 2 - Improve access and customer focus by:	
Ensuring that published service standards are in place for all service areas inspected, which have been developed with service users and are measurable and monitored, with performance against them reported to service users and stakeholders.	Delivered
Putting regular satisfaction surveys in place for all service areas, with results analysed, reported and acted upon and with outcomes fed back to service users.	Delivered
Gathering comprehensive customer profile information for all tenants and ensuring that it is accessible to all staff.	Partly delivered. Use of profiling to shape services is not extensive, and the option to use profiling in this way is not embedded.
Identifying which, if any, groups of service users are not accessing services with a view to identifying and addressing barriers.	Not delivered. This is partly planned through a recently agreed vulnerability strategy.
Assessing the availability of and ease of access to all available sources of money advice services in the District and, with Wear Valley District Council, identifying how any shortfalls in provision may be met.	Delivered

Appendix 4 – Progress with recommendation from previous inspection

Recommendation 2 - Improve access and customer focus by:	
Reviewing the rent statement and rent arrears letters with service users to ensure that they are clear and easy to understand.	Delivered

Recommendation 3 - Strengthen the approach to diversity by:	
Carrying out surveys of all communal areas in housing for older people to ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and develop and implement an action plan to address any non-compliance.	Delivered. Works completed are reasonable in the context of the future of some schemes being uncertain.
Completing equality impact assessments of all ALMO policies and strategies and act on the findings by January 2008.	Partly delivered. This have recently been completed and not all actions identified in assessments have been delivered.

Recommendation 4 - Integrate value for money and performance management into working practices by:	
Establishing the relationship between the cost of services and the quality of outcomes delivered and take action on the findings.	Partly delivered. There is a clearer understanding of costs, and tenants satisfaction is being canvassed. High cost services have been targeted for investigation.
More extensive use of benchmarking including comparisons on cost and quality.	Delivered
Ensuring that gaps in performance monitoring and management activity identified in this report, particularly those relating to the responsive repairs contract are addressed.	Delivered
Improving performance management, monitoring and reporting by incorporating value for money assessments against performance indicators.	Partly delivered. Some weaknesses in value for money assessments and inclusion in performance framework and strategies generally eg access.
Identifying all potential risks to the ALMO and developing a risk register which is reviewed and reported upon at regular intervals.	Delivered

Appendix 4 – Progress with recommendation from previous inspection

Recommendation 4 - Integrate value for money and performance management into working practices by:	
Within 12 months, developing a long term asset management strategy which reflects the findings of the recently commissioned stock condition survey and which sets a clear vision for the service beyond 2012.	Partly delivered. This was agreed, and has given some direction, but it has not been monitored and some aims are overdue.

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