

Housing Association Inspection Report

September 2005

# **Inspection Report**

**Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association**

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## Housing Association Inspections

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

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

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003) and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

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

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

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

## Summary

- 1 Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association is an almshouse charity and a housing association. It was originally established in 1898 to provide housing for miners who had to vacate tied property on their retirement. It was registered as a housing association in 1981. The rules of the Association have been changed to allow people who were not the original beneficiaries to become tenants and around half of those housed in 2004/05 were from this group. Its lettings policy is to assist needy, aged, infirm or disabled people.
- 2 Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association operates primarily within the former County Durham coalfield. It has property within the boundaries of nine local authorities and works from a single office in Chester-le-Street. Its properties are in 90 locations and consist of 1,376 bungalows and 16 flats. It also has three sheltered housing schemes with 89 flats and a residential home for 27 people. There are 16 flats in two leasehold schemes for the elderly. It manages 72 homes on behalf of four other almshouse charities. It has a staff of 59.

## Scoring the service

- 3 We have assessed Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association 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.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**

		Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent				☀		'a good service that has excellent prospects for improvement'  A good service?
Promising						
Uncertain						
Poor						
		Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

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- 4 We judged that the organisation is providing a good service to its customers for the following reasons.
- The organisation has a strong customer focus and residents' views are listened to and acted on.
  - Services are easy to access, responsive to need and provide customer care. Staff are knowledgeable, considerate and well trained. There is a good website. Published information is clear and contains key information.
  - The profile of tenants' needs is understood well. Policies and practices recognise these and respond to them effectively. There is a clear leadership and commitment to promoting equality and diversity issues.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

- The overall approach to the repair and maintenance of the housing stock is effective. The aspirations of residents are addressed by the asset management strategy which will ensure that properties are well maintained and that new properties meet their needs now and in the future. Practically all properties already meet the decent homes standard. The management of empty properties and gas servicing arrangements are efficient. There is a supportive approach to the provision of adaptations to help those with disabilities.
  - There is a range of ways of paying rent and sensitive arrangements to help those who fall into arrears. Good benefit advice and signposting to other helpful agencies is a central part of the service. Effective systems are in use to ensure that tenants understand their account with the organisation.
  - Although anti-social behaviour is not currently a problem, policies are in place to deal with it should it become so. Clear information is available as to what the Association can do and how to get help.
  - There are long term and well known ways of involving residents through residents' representatives and they are involved in management through a subcommittee of the board.
  - There is a long-term commitment, which is delivered in practice, to provide high-quality and low-cost services.
- 5 However, there are areas of weakness that require further improvement and these include the following.
- The arrangements for resident involvement are undeveloped and do not give residents the chance to be involved at a level that suits them.
    - There is little involvement in the procurement process or in deciding the future of properties and the priorities for planned maintenance.
    - There is limited choice for residents in refurbishment and feedback arrangements in respect of gas servicing and repairs, appointments need further development.
    - There is a lack of measurement and reporting to residents on whether the organisation is meeting all of its service standards.
  - The composition of the executive committee is not fully representative of the local community.
  - The Association cannot be sure that the services it delivers consistently represent value for money as there is no overall strategy to achieve this.
  - There are specific value for money issues that have not been fully addressed including the high proportion of emergency and urgent repairs and the proportion of rent paid by the cheapest method.

- 6 We judged that the organisation has excellent prospects for improvement for the following reasons.
- There is a good track record of implementing recommendations from regulators and of implementing corporate and service improvement plans. There have been a wide range of service improvements over the last few years that will be recognised by residents and to which they have contributed. Performance indicators show that services are delivered at a high-level with none being below average and some being in the top performing quarter of housing associations. Continuous improvement is a feature of services although there have been some recent deviations from that in some elements of service. However, the quality of those services remains above average. The organisation can demonstrate that it has learnt from its own experience and that of others. However, benchmarking is still developing and there are weaknesses around the systematic involvement of residents. These issues have been recognised and are being acted on.
  - There are a range of well developed plans in place. These plans provide frameworks for service development in the short and medium-term. In addition, they provide a context for the organisation which reflects local, regional and national priorities. There is a realistic view of strengths and weaknesses which is reflected in action plans. The content of plans is generally robust although they are not wholly SMART. Many of the plans are of recent adoption but there is a demonstrable improvement of services prior to their adoption and clear action being taken to implement current plans. There is not yet an overarching plan on how to achieve value for money in the services provided, although the organisation is aware of this need.
  - The organisation has strong leadership and is effectively managed. There is a clear set of aims that are well understood and ambitions for the future that reflect housing needs and aspirations. Prioritisation is a structured process and the priorities of the organisation are understood by officers, board members and residents. The capacity of the organisation in people, skills, IT systems and decision making structures is sufficient to drive its aims and ambitions. There is evidence that capacity has been increased to deliver priorities. Partnership working is apparent in development programme and in regeneration schemes. Effective performance management frameworks are in place although these are not yet completely embedded and there is limited resident involvement.

## Recommendations

- 7 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations.

<b>Recommendations</b>	
<i>R1</i>	<i>Within the next twelve months develop a robust value for money strategy supported by an overall procurement strategy. As part of this work, establish activity based costings for internally delivered services and broaden the approach to benchmarking to include cost/quality considerations.</i>
<i>R2</i>	<i>Within the next three months initiate a programme of active promotion of the payment of rent by Direct Debit.</i>
<i>R3</i>	<i>Within the next six months establish service level agreements for the provision of out-of-hours repair services.</i>
<i>R4</i>	<i>Within the next six months review all actions plans to ensure that they are SMART, take an integrated view of resource availability and establish organisational priorities.</i>
<i>R5</i>	<i>Within the next three months review the programme of value management system (VMS) surveys to ensure that there is effective coverage of all principal areas of service.</i>
<i>R6</i>	<i>Within the next year explore the opportunities to reduce the level of emergency and urgent repairs.</i>
<i>R7</i>	<i>Within the next year review the resident involvement action plan to ensure that all residents are given a wide range of opportunities to be involved at a level that suits them, that resident involvement takes place at an early stage, that there is full involvement in the elements of the asset management strategy, that there is involvement with the development of the overall aims and objectives of the organisation and involvement in the regular monitoring of performance including that on meeting service standards.</i>
<i>R8</i>	<i>Within the next six months establish a process to independently audit the work of the gas servicing contractor.</i>
<i>R9</i>	<i>Within the next six months establish a formal review of the skills and training needs of executive committee members and draw up and implement an action plan to address any issues arising.</i>

- 9 We would like to thank the staff of Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 11 July to 15 July 2005

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 10 Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association (DAMHA) has its core operation within the former County Durham coalfield. It manages property within three metropolitan boroughs; Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland (26 per cent of stock) and six district councils; Chester-le-Street, Derwentside, Durham, Easington, Sedgfield and Wear Valley (74 per cent of stock). It operates from a single office in Chester-le-Street.
- 11 The North East has a population of some 2.5 million of which 2.4 per cent are from black and minority ethnic groups

### The Association

- 12 Technically, DAMHA is an un-incorporated almshouse charity governed by rules, as well as being a registered charity and a registered housing association.
- 13 It is the largest almshouse association in the country and was founded in 1898 as an independent charity to provide free housing for miners vacating tied housing.
- 14 Following the demise of the mining industry, charges were introduced in the 1960's. The organisation was registered as a housing association in 1981 and the modernisation of its stock using social housing grant was completed in 1998.
- 15 The historic involvement of the colliery unions continues and the majority of the 15 trustees (executive committee members) are ex-miners, although the professions are also represented. There are four subcommittees, one of which has resident members who are elected by residents' representatives, who are themselves elected by the residents.
- 16 There is a staff of 59 led by a management team of three, the director plus two heads of service. Nearly half of the staff (26) are associated with the residential care home.

### The service

- 17 The lettings policy, which is implemented through a points based prioritisation system, is to assist needy, aged, infirm or disabled people with particular regard to the original beneficiaries. Fifty per cent of allocations in 2004/05 were to non-beneficiaries. Of the 127 lets in 2003/04, 56 per cent of the new tenants were over 70 and 46 per cent were formerly owner occupiers.
- 18 There are 1900 tenants of whom 85 per cent are 65 or over. Only 1.5 per cent are under 50. Seventy-four per cent of tenants declare a limiting long term illness. There are no non-white tenants and six who are white but not British.

- 19 The housing stock is in 90 separate locations and consists of 1,376 bungalows, 16 flats and 16 units in two leasehold schemes for the elderly. In addition there are 89 flats in three sheltered housing schemes and a residential home for 27 people.
- 20 The Association manages 72 homes on behalf of four other almshouse charities and also acts as a corporate trustee for three other charities
- 21 There is a high demand for the Association's properties. There are currently 1,450 applicants.
- 22 Ninety-seven per cent of homes already reach the decent homes standard with the majority of those failing being a result of residents' choice to retain non-programmable solid fuel heating systems. There is no directly employed repair and maintenance service. Warden call services and out-of-hours repair services are provided by a variety of local authorities.
- 23 There is active involvement in regeneration projects in four areas providing older people's bungalows in collaboration with a development partner. The current social housing grant development programme is for 108 homes over two years.
- 24 At the heart of the asset management strategy is the commitment to sustainable lettings. As part of this, ten schemes have been declared redundant with 45 homes either sold or for sale. In addition, it is proposed to demolish 38 one-bedroom bungalows and redevelop the two sites with 30 two-bedroom bungalows.

## How good is the service?

### Access and customer care

- 25 This is an area of strength. DAMHA is providing responsive services that are easy to access and provide customer care. Staff are well trained, knowledgeable and considerate. A customer services team (CST) has been set up to provide a 'one-stop shop' approach to customer contact and to aid this approach a freephone number has been introduced. As a result, accessibility by telephone has improved. Appointments are made for repairs to be carried out, and customer satisfaction is measured regularly in a number of service areas. However, the Association has not yet identified how all of its customer service charter commitments will be measured, monitored and reported on. This means that residents as yet do not know whether the Association is keeping all the promises made.
- 26 Although there is only one office based in Chester-le-Street, DAMHA have sought to make their services as accessible as possible. Residents can access services via the telephone, the website, by visiting the office or through home visits from housing officers. However, residents, who are largely elderly, are dispersed over a wide area covering nine local authorities. The majority of transactions with the Association are therefore via the telephone and the Association has sought to update this key feature of its services.

- 27 DAMHA set up the CST following a best value review in October 2004 and it became fully operational in February 2005. The CST has been trained to deal with a wide range of enquiries. Their target is to deal with 80 per cent of all enquiries received by telephone without referring them to anywhere else in the organisation. Figures for March and April 2005 showed that on average they were only achieving around 62 per cent. This was largely because they were unable to deal with complex rent enquiries due to the limitations of the rent accounting software. All such enquiries are therefore referred to an experienced member of staff in the finance team. The Association expects to have resolved this by October 2005 and staff will be trained to deal with all queries relating to the weekly charge.
- 28 Unfortunately, the Association has not discontinued the old repairs telephone number which some tenants are still using and incurring the expense of contacting the Association to report repairs. The Association is taking steps to address this; including publishing the new number in consecutive editions of the newsletter that will culminate with the re-issue of the residents' handbook, after which the number will be disconnected.
- 29 From our own reality checks we found that the telephone response times were good and the staff were courteous, patient and knowledgeable. Figures for March and April show that of the 7,554 calls made by residents only 72 (0.95 per cent) were 'lost' and 176 (2.3 per cent) were answered outside of the 15-second target. Calls that were answered within the target time were, on average, answered within 5.3 seconds. This is good performance. Officers are monitoring the service on a weekly basis, the monitoring categories have been published in the newsletter and there are plans to involve a focus group.
- 30 The team are valued by the rest of the organisation because of their ability to deal with most enquiries, and are thus freeing up staff time that can be used to improve service elsewhere (for example, increasing visits to vulnerable tenants).
- 31 Emergency out-of-hours repairs are reported via the community alarm system and from there passed either to the respective local authority direct labour organisation (DLO,) or to a large multi-skilled contractor. This is a process that residents understand. Residents who are not linked to the community alarm can access the DLO or contractor directly.

- 32 DAMHA have developed a good, informative and easily navigable website, with the capacity for complaints, compliments and enquiries to be communicated on line. It also allows residents to pay their weekly charges online by using a debit card and payment card issued by the Association. This is collected via their agent, Allpay, who also collect all the payment information for those paying at the Post Office or by Direct Debit. The Association is committed to making sure that everyone has access to their website and it was designed with accessibility guidelines in mind, that is:
- ensuring that navigation throughout the site works in a consistent way;
  - using a standard web font to make it easy for all to read. In most cases, the size of the font can be adjusted according to resident needs, using standard browser and operating system options;
  - all the images are given 'alt text' alternatives except those which are only decorative, the tags for these are left blank; and
  - colour is never used as the only way to convey information.
- 33 The Association has a variety of its publications on audiotape for the benefit of customers who suffer from impaired eyesight. It currently has audiotapes available on request for newsletters, the residents' handbook, lettings policy, annual report, complaints policy and the customer service charter. A list is kept of all those who have requested information in this way and this is used to ensure that they receive documents in this format.
- 34 The office has been refurbished to a high standard with particular emphasis on access for residents (and staff) with disabilities. It is compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. The building is wheelchair accessible, has parking for people with disabilities and has an audio loop system installed throughout the public areas of the building. The counter in the reception area is low and, therefore, suitable for dealing with someone in a wheelchair. The public toilet is suitable for use by disabled visitors and there are accessible and private interview facilities.
- 35 Published information made available for residents is easy to read and contains most key information. The residents' handbook is provided to all residents. It generally provides good information, particularly for new tenants. The handbook is being re-drafted to reflect changes in policy, procedure and practice, as there have been a number of changes since it was originally published. Residents' newsletters are produced quarterly, and contain information about a wide range of issues including community events, housing management issues such as antisocial behaviour, performance information and the personal milestones of tenants.

- 36 There are published service standards but these are not all available in one place, some are not capable of easy measurement and not all are routinely monitored. The customer service charter contains a wide-range of service standards. Residents commented on this while it was in draft form and it has subsequently been circulated. However, as a result of the introduction of new policies, it is not comprehensive. Standards for some services, for example, on anti social behaviour, are contained in separate leaflets and some of the standards adopted are subjective statements and are not capable of easy measurement. While some of the standards are routinely measured and reported, this is not the case generally.
- 37 The Association has good understanding of the profile of its tenants with detailed information being available on approximately 90 per cent of them. This is being used to provide a more sensitive service for residents, for example, informing contractors about communication difficulties, as well being able to target their most vulnerable tenants for visits. The information is collected in a variety of ways; through a bi-annual self-assessment form issued by the Association; referrals from a care manager/occupational therapist and from family and staff. The information is kept on a secure database and it helps staff to give a service that is responsive to the needs of the individual. For example, when repairs are reported, officers take account of a resident's vulnerability when deciding what priority to give the repair. This information is key element in DAMHA's strategy for vulnerable residents as it allows them to take reasonable steps to ensure that they receive appropriate visits, advice, help and support.
- 38 All visits to residents are made by appointments wherever possible, to ensure convenience both for the resident and visiting officer or contractor. All staff and contractors are required to wear identification badges.
- 39 DAMHAs approach to complaints is effective. Although responses that we viewed were not always within the prescribed timescales, they were clear, used plain English and, where appropriate, apologised for mistakes. One complaint that we looked at was dealt with without going through all the stages of the procedure because the Association clearly thought they were the responsible body (although the complaint dealt with the failures of a third party). They immediately offered the resident compensation.
- 40 Complaints also inform service improvements. Another complaint that did go all the way to the third stage of the process led to the complaints committee making a series of recommendations for service improvements as a result of what they perceived to be service failings. These were then implemented and resulted in the re-organisation of the waiting list and the provision of good and tailored information on prospects for re-housing depending on area(s) chosen. These examples demonstrate an open minded and positive approach to complaints

- 41 The recent tenant satisfaction survey showed that there are consistently high levels of satisfaction and this has been reinforced by the VMS surveys. These seek to establish customer satisfaction through a questionnaire, typically with ten questions about the service which the customer ranks on a scale of one (poor) to ten. The STATUS survey demonstrated satisfaction levels of 96 per cent with the overall service, 97 per cent with methods used to keep residents informed and 93 per cent with the repairs service.
- 42 The use of the VMS system is beginning to deliver positive outcomes for residents. For example, action taken as a result of only average scoring in the VMS survey of environmental maintenance included re-phasing the work to address residents concerns, an interview with the contractor to underline his responsibilities and a commitment to consult the residents again.
- 43 However, there has not yet been an evaluation of the CST and the use of VMS from the residents' point of view. As a result, the organisation does not as yet know how effective the introduction of these two initiatives has been. Further, the Association has not yet begun to monitor its performance against the entire customer service charter. Some elements of the charter are monitored by individual services, but the main body of it is not. In the absence of this monitoring it is not possible to demonstrate, to residents or the organisation, that commitments are being delivered.

## **Diversity**

- 44 In respect of understanding and responding to the needs of the existing tenants of the organisation this is an area of strength. The profile of tenants is accurately known and policies and practises recognise and respond to their needs. In a wider context, appropriate strategies and plans are in place and the Association is making efforts to ensure it delivers the housing needs of the community and that its workforce and governance structures reflect the composition of the local community. This work is at an early stage and a continued focus is necessary, but there is a clear commitment to make progress.
- 45 The historic role of the Association was to address a specific element of diverse needs, elderly mineworkers leaving tied housing. As a result of rule changes, this has been broadened to providing services and facilities for needy, aged, infirm or disabled persons, with particular regard to the needs of the original beneficiaries. In 2004/05 around 50 per cent of lettings were to non-miners. The average age of the organisation's tenants is 74 and the organisational vision reinforces the role of providing housing for elderly people: to be the best provider of retirement housing in the North East.
- 46 There is clear leadership for, and commitment to, the promotion and integration of diversity and equality throughout the Association. The executive committee recognises the importance of the issues and the Director, as the diversity champion, ensures that the profile of the issue is maintained and that action is driven forward. There is a commitment to changing the culture of the Association for the longer-term and a significant start has been made.

- 47 DAMHA has carried out a recent and comprehensive review of its equalities and diversity policies and practices. As a result of that, it has a comprehensive strategy and action plan in place. It has set diversity targets in key areas of its business that should see realistic and gradual improvements. The targets adopted are cautious, as they take account of the context of the organisation, but also aim to give sustained improvement. The strategy and plan provide the drivers that will result in the organisation reflecting the diversity of the community it serves, and wishes to serve.
- 48 DAMHA has also produced a new equality and diversity policy statement covering access, governance, human resources, monitoring and review. The Association has used contextual information well, by drawing on national and local information and talking to their local authority partners and local groups. This is good awareness and means that it is likely that the important issues are tackled.
- 49 Generic racial harassment and other harassment policies are in place although this has not yet been an issue for the organisation. It has adopted the Commission for Racial Equality and the McPherson definitions for harassment and racial harassment respectively. Specific leaflets are available that explain the service and service standards. Monitoring arrangements are in place.
- 50 DAMHA has a difficult task ahead of it with regard to its race equality targets. The client group that the Association serves, that is older people and ex-miners, is not one in which much ethnic diversity exists, information from the National Coal Board shows that the mining workforce was wholly white and very largely British, although there were some workers from Ireland and Poland. The area within which DAMHA works (the former County Durham coalfield) does not have a diverse population. The diversity of the North East is, in ethnicity terms, considerably less than in England as a whole. Around 2.4 per cent are from black and minority ethnic groups compared with nine per cent in England. The proportion in the over 50's population is around 1.5 per cent. The residents' survey conducted last year revealed that practically all of the residents who replied to the survey described themselves as white British, with only two residents describing themselves as white Irish.
- 51 DAMHA has accepted this challenge and is working to meet it. Steps taken in the past, for example, writing to black and minority ethnic community groups advertising their services have been unsuccessful. After reviewing all of the difficulties in attracting BME elders to the Association's existing stock, the executive committee has determined that a more achievable method of contributing to the region's needs would be to seek to develop a new housing project specifically for a BME community.
- 52 This approach takes into account general needs identified in the regional housing strategy and those of various local authorities. DAMHA is also assessing the needs more directly by engaging with BME communities together with their development partner and a local consultancy with expertise and experience in this area. This proposal will not only assist BME communities, but also be a positive business initiative for the Association.

- 53 DAMHA has no BME staff working for it. The staff profile of the Association lacks diversity because of the nature of the business and the low staff turnover. Positive attempts to recruit from BME groups in the past have failed. It is seeking to address its BME employment target by supporting the open house project, a European Community initiative in the North East, by employing (and match funding up to 50 per cent) a BME member of staff. This is a positive step by the Association that has struggled to get applications from the BME community for its vacancies.
- 54 There have been positive efforts to ensure that the executive committee is more representative. The committee (of 15 members) had only one female member. This was increased to two since April 2004 and the proposed inclusion of residents is likely to increase this to four in September 2005. One long-standing member of the committee is white Irish.
- 55 There is up-to-date information about the specific characteristics of residents. A resident survey was carried out in 2004 and it is intended to update this on a two-yearly basis. The computer database records details of age, gender, ethnicity, vulnerability and disability, and people identified as vulnerable are visited regularly. Initially, priorities for this were set by age but there is now a greater focus on sensory impairment following analysis of the database. In addition to the visits by housing officers, there is regular contact with residents by the residents' representatives.
- 56 A specific and comprehensive strategy for vulnerable residents is in place that defines how the organisation will respond to the issue both in terms of provision and improvement of accommodation and help and support available to individuals. Policies and practises underline the need to signpost to or access other services where these are appropriate. A clear policy on the abuse and protection of vulnerable adults provides clarity and process for dealing with this issue. These are valuable contributions to the Association's comprehensive approach to its elderly tenants.
- 57 The arrangements for access to service reflect the specific needs of both current and potential future residents. Although the majority of residents use the telephone to access the organisation, home visits are a cornerstone of service delivery; an approach to service that reflects the nature of the organisation's tenants. Capacity has been increased in this respect by the creation of the customer service team that has freed time for housing officers to undertake more visits.
- 58 A range of provision supports the specific needs of residents. Language Line is available and there is an induction hearing loop in the office and a portable loop is available for home visits. A wide range of information is available on audiotape including the tenants' handbook and the regular newsletter. These are made available on a routine basis to those who have requested them and a list is maintained for this purpose. Other documents can be made available in this, other formats and in translation.

- 59 Diversity training is being rolled out to frontline staff to supplement training they received in 2002. The Association has targeted its diversity and equality training for staff, following an analysis of resident profiling data. The resultant training has focused on residents with sensory impairments and sought to raise awareness among staff and provide resources (Braille signs, visual smoke detectors, contact information for people who can use British Sign Language) to support them in providing a better service.
- 60 The housing stock of the organisation is appropriate for its residents. The large majority are purpose built bungalows and practically all meet the decent homes standard. The Association has 12 wheelchair units and 372 mobility units in its stock and now builds all of its new homes to mobility standards, making it easier to cater for residents who develop a disability. Wheelchair units are built to specification in consultation with their local authority partners.
- 61 The design of new properties has been informed by experience and feedback from customers. For example, to prevent wasteful adaptations to level access showers that are unpopular with subsequent residents the design now incorporates space for a shower to be provided in addition to the bath.
- 62 There is a liberal and supportive approach to adaptations to help people with disabilities. A specific budget has been established and low-level works are carried out without the need for an assessment by an occupational therapist. Some 430 adaptations have been carried out since 1991 and a register is maintained as to where these are and this helps inform the allocation process. In 2003/04, 21 cases were completed and three were pending at the year-end.

### **Stock investment and asset management**

- 63 DAMHA's overall approach to the repair and maintenance of its housing stock is good. Their asset management strategy (AMS), which is underpinned by a well maintained property database, is helping to provide good quality decent homes for residents in the neighbourhoods where they want to live. It aims to maintain and enhance the value of their assets and ensure their sustainability.
- 64 The primary objective of DAMHA's asset management strategy is to:
- manage a programme of planned works linked to the stock condition survey to improve the condition and the quality of the stock;
  - produce an investment plan, working in co-operation with resident groups, housing management and development staff;
  - achieve the decent homes standard by 2010;
  - renovate properties to a high standard;
  - implement the principles of the 'affordable warmth' strategy; and
  - deliver the programme within the stated time and within budget.

- 65 DAMHA is successfully implementing these elements of its strategy. The property database has annually updated information on all buildings components. These are assessed using National Housing Federation criteria and this allows DAMHA to make projections on the need for component replacement. Information from the capital and planned maintenance programmes and estate visits also contribute to the database. This information, plus additional criteria (pertinent to the Association), is used to determine the future use of its stock, which may include the disposal of properties considered no longer viable. Once a decision is made to dispose of properties, the Association 'manages the decline' of these properties effectively.
- 66 DAMHA's asset management strategy, therefore, provides a strategic framework upon which the Association makes informed decisions about investment, new developments, retention and disposals. It is annually reviewed by officers and the executive committee (EC). A residents' focus group was asked to comment on the strategy and although their response was favourable, there is little overall involvement of residents in deciding the future use of properties, or indeed deciding priorities for planned maintenance programme, until they are about to be affected by proposals.
- 67 During 2004/05 DAMHA disposed (sold) of 17 homes and identified two groups of homes for re-development (converting/rebuilding them into two bedroom bungalows) as a result of the implementation of their AMS. These are good examples of the operation of the AMS having taken account of property attributes and local and regional housing strategies and priorities.
- 68 Over the last ten years, the Association has invested approximately £5 million in maintaining its stock, resulting in homes that are well maintained. Because of this activity very few of its homes (3 per cent) fail to meet the decent home standard. Those that do fail the DHS do so because there are a few homes (40) that still use solid fuel and have back boilers (residents have chosen to continue using them). The Association does have more homes that fail the DHS (32), but these are being disposed of under their AMS.

### **Planned maintenance**

- 69 During 2004/05 DAMHA invested a total of £686,380 on planned maintenance and minor improvements. This included kitchen and bathroom improvements, central heating conversions, window replacements, boundary walls and railings replacement, external fabric repairs (chimneys) and external redecoration.
- 70 The planned maintenance programmed is approved annually, although it is projected up until 2010. The executive committee approves the programme after which residents are then informed. Residents are not yet involved in the decision making process with regard to any elements of the programme. The Association only has plans to provide three years advanced notice of planned works by February 2006. DAMHA is not, therefore, taking full account of resident preferences and improvement priorities.

- 71 Individual schemes are delivered to a high standard, on time and largely within budget. The Association employs a clerk of works and a senior technical officer to monitor the delivery of the programmes on the ground. The Association employs consultants to project manage the commissioning and management of each of the contracts. Resident satisfaction surveys, carried out at the end of each scheme, show a consistently high level of satisfaction with the standard of work.
- 72 Resident involvement in the service is not well developed and tenants have little opportunity to influence the service they receive. For example, the Association has embarked upon a kitchen and bathroom refurbishment programme. As part of the process, residents have been given a limited choice of fixture and finishings. However, as with other parts of the planned maintenance programme, the Association has not involved residents in the selection of contractors and kitchen designs prior to the scheme getting under way. This is particularly important because the Association has entered into a three-year 'partnering arrangement' with the kitchen installation contractor. It has also entered into a three-year term contract with the kitchen manufacturer. DAMHA did not involve residents or the installation contractor in the choice of kitchen manufacturer. Residents have not been given any choices (except at one scheme) in the bathroom refurbishment programme. Overall, this is an opportunity missed to effectively involve residents in key decisions affecting their homes. However, resident satisfaction remains high on the quality of the work carried out.
- 73 The Association has taken a flexible approach to procurement with regard to planned maintenance. It has entered into two partnering style arrangements with a contractor for kitchen refurbishments, as mentioned above, and for chimney stack maintenance. It has used the experience and advice of others in determining its approach and has generally been successful resulting in improved customer satisfaction, working arrangements and relationships with their contractors.
- 74 The external decorations programme has a four-year cycle, which helps to maintain well presented exteriors. The Association is keen to experiment with new products that will help maintain the appearance of its properties, as well extend the maintenance cycle, thereby saving money. It has recently adopted a product that will not only protect the exterior wood work of their properties, but also extend the decoration cycle by two to three years. Our reality checks confirm that the external decorations carried out were of a high quality.
- 75 Another key feature of the planned maintenance programme is the improvement in standard assessment procedure (SAP) rating. The Association's property is in the top quarter of associations nationally in this respect, with a figure of 71. The planned maintenance programme, over the last ten years, has helped to improve performance from 38 to 71. This was achieved through a programme of cavity wall and loft insulation, installation of central heating, installation of double-glazed windows and doors, the disposal of unviable properties and the increase in new build properties. This has resulted in more comfortable and energy efficient homes for residents. The Association intends to continue to increase its SAP rating, at a more modest rate, by installing new condensing boilers as part of its boiler replacement programme and by continuing to build new properties.

### Responsive repairs

- 76 DAMHA delivers a good responsive repair service. It is accessible, responsive and popular. It performs well against a comparator group of associations and, in a recent national independent benchmarking exercise with 13 other housing providers (both housing associations and local authorities), it came top in all categories. It does have areas for improvement, for example, the proportion of emergency and urgent repairs is too high, and the monitoring arrangements for appointments made and kept could be improved. However, customer satisfaction for the service is very high, reflecting a customer focused approach to the service.
- 77 Residents are able to report repairs in a variety of ways. For example, repair cards, letters, by telephone and by visit to the office. The vast majority of repairs reporting takes place via the telephone and are mostly dealt with by the CST who have been trained to deal with repair requests. Our reality checks confirm that these are dealt with quickly and courteously. There is a freephone number available for residents to use but, unfortunately, there are still a number of residents who use the old repairs hotline number and are, therefore, paying for their calls. The Association will be taking steps to address this, for instance, issuing fridge magnets with the new number on them and issuing the updated residents handbook.
- 78 For urgent and routine repairs residents are given appointments that they arrange directly with the contractors or with the CST. The contractors, with the permission of residents, are given their contact details by the CST and then contact the resident to arrange the appointment. Currently residents can have a morning or afternoon appointment. All the data we have seen tells us that this works well and this is confirmed by performance indicators that show above average achievement in the proportion of repairs carried out within target. Because of the, sometimes large, distances that they have to travel, contractors prefer to make appointments to prevent abortive visits. DAMHA encourages the practice of grouping jobs and appointments together to ensure that contractors are not doing unnecessary mileage and therefore are able to plan a more effective service.
- 79 Although repair appointments have been available for four years they have not been adequately promoted. DAMHA has recently begun (1 April 2005) to monitor themselves the number of appointments made and kept. They are doing this by getting the resident to confirm on the repair order documents issued to contractors whether the appointment was made and kept. Unfortunately, they have not had a good response from residents completing this section of the document. This is not good practice as experience elsewhere has shown that residents are less confident in completing such documents in the presence of the contractor, and this may explain the low response. A recent independent survey carried out by HouseMark saw DAMHA achieving the top score from a poll of 195 of its residents who had used the repairs service in respect of the arrangements made for carrying out the repair (including the making of appointments). Effective resident feedback will be central to maintaining this high level of satisfaction.

- 80 Repairs are carried out by locally based contractors who are all on the Association's approved list. They have a good relationship with the Association and the residents, both of whom are complimentary about their attitude and the quality of work. The Association's officers produce an annual report to the executive committee giving details of the contractors' performance over the year. Unsatisfactory performance results in the contractor being removed from the approved list.
- 81 The CST staff are aware of the need to use the correct repairs category and are making informed decisions when they decide to deviate from them. We paid particular attention to this because of the number of repairs that were being diagnosed as being in the emergency and urgent categories. We considered these to be too high, compared with the good practice combined figure of 30 per cent. However DAMHA is making gradual improvements as the table below indicates. It is also trying to balance this progress with the needs of its tenants, who are often vulnerable and require a more responsive service. Staff are aware of who they are or are able ascertain quite quickly (from asking appropriate questions) whether a quicker response is required. This is a further example of the customer focused approach to service delivery.

**Table 2 Proportion of repairs by category 2002/03 to 2004/05**

Category	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Emergency – response within 24 hours	25% (982)	22% (918)	16% (741)
Urgent – response within 4 days	39% (1,559)	38% (1,597)	36% (1,513)
Routine – response within 21 days	36% (1,441)	40% (1,673)	48% (1,768)

- 82 During 2004/05 over one third (36 per cent) of emergency repairs were done out-of-hours at an approximate cost of £15,000 (28 per cent of the spend on emergency repairs). These were carried out by seven different local authority direct labour organisations and one multi-trade contractor, depending on where the properties were located. Residents are linked to these services through the warden alarm service (where the resident subscribes), and the Association considers the service that it receives to be a good and responsive one. However, there are no service level agreements in place to enable this to be demonstrated unequivocally.
- 83 The current resident handbook provides the appropriate information about repairs reporting and the different categories along with relevant response times. The repair categories used by the Association are:
- emergency – response within 24 hours;
  - urgent – response within four days; and
  - routine – response within 21 days.

- 84 Performance against these categories is good with performance above average for 2003/04, but with performance falling back slightly in 2004/05. Targets for 2005/06 have been set at achieving performance at the level of the 25 per cent of best performing associations.

**Table 3 Repair performance by category 2003/04 to 2005/06**

Category	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06 target
Emergency – response within 24 hours	97.7% Second quartile	99.06%	99.6%
Urgent – response within 4 days	96.8% Second quartile	96.56%	97.6%
Routine – response within 21 days	99.3% Top quartile	98.5%	99%

- 85 Regular satisfaction surveys are carried out and they are showing high levels of satisfaction for all aspects of the service. A recently released national benchmarking exercise undertaken by HouseMark found that DAMHA was the best performer across all ten categories that the 14 participants were measured against. The overall satisfaction with the service score that they received was an impressive 9.21 out of 10.
- 86 The Association considers the quality of work carried out by its contractors to be good, as assessed through its post-inspection regime. It post-inspects all works in excess of £150 and 10 per cent of the rest. Overall 13 per cent of jobs were post inspected which is within good practice guidelines. During 2004/05 only three jobs were found to be deficient. DAMHA has good working relationships with its repairs contractors. The contractors consider them to be fair employers, who pay invoices promptly, provide fair feedback on performance and treat them respectfully. This relationship enables DAMHA to get good performance from their contractors.
- 87 The Association has taken appropriate steps to mitigate the risks posed by having asbestos in their properties. All their properties have been independently surveyed and the locations of asbestos have been identified and notified to all staff, contractors and residents together with appropriate advice. Repair orders raised for property identified as having asbestos in it have a sticker placed on it identifying the presence and location of asbestos. This will be automated at the end of August, further reducing the risks to contractors.
- 88 The responsive repair budget for 2004/05 was £535,600 and was overspent by £40,000 (7 per cent) due to the additional cost of repairing voids. The budget has been increased for 2005/06 to £660,500 to take account of the additional expenditure on voids and the additional cost of electrical installation testing.

### **Empty (void) properties**

- 89 DAMHA, with the active involvement of residents, has adopted a high standard for ready to let properties and our reality checks confirmed that this was delivered in practice. DAMHA spent £111,521 on voids during 2004/05. New residents are given the choice of ready decorated properties or vouchers (to the value of £300). Whilst being prepared for reoccupation, the properties are secured discretely by having net curtains installed. The Association has a target time of 21 days within which to turn around its voids. For 2004/05, 98.87 per cent of their void properties met this target. It achieved above average performance during 2003/04 (27 days) and has subsequently improved upon this.
- 90 However, the void process could be improved by setting subsidiary targets within the overall process and by improving the way that contractors have to work with one another to ensure the works can be completed on time. For example, housing officers do not have a target period by which they must visit the property and specify what repairs need to be carried out. If this were the case the Association could potentially improve performance even further.
- 91 The Association is now in the process of tendering for a packaged voids contract where it is envisaged that one contractor will be responsible for all void repair works. The aim is to improve the timescale in which repairs are completed (including gas and electrical testing) while maintaining standards.

### **Gas servicing**

- 92 Performance in this area is good. The Association manages to service 97.89 per cent of all gas appliances at the first visit and achieved 99.86 per cent within a 12 month period.
- 93 The CST begins sending out appointments three to four weeks before the 12 month anniversary of the last service. Appointments are batched where possible to take account of similar appointment dates and locations, which may mean some servicing is brought forward to accommodate this.
- 94 Gas servicing appointments are made either for morning or afternoon visit or between 9.00am and 2.00pm. Tenants are able to change these easily if they are not convenient. The CST and gas contractor are very accommodating and flexible allowing them to provide a customer-focused service.
- 95 From June this year, as part of the current gas servicing cycle, the gas contractor was awarded the contract to service the hard-wired smoke detectors. This is an efficient way of working and is more convenient for residents. The Association has devised a very practical checklist (based on the British Gas three-star service checklist) as a guideline for the contractor who has to sign it to confirm they have completed work according to the checklist.
- 96 DAMHA does not currently have the work of the gas contractor quality checked by an independent source. Nor does it test resident satisfaction with the service. Although the service provided is good it can still be improved and doing these additional things could help the Association move towards excellence.

### **Aids and adaptations**

- 97 The Association is proactive in its approach to disabled adaptations. It has a good understanding of demand and has sought to prioritise their limited resources in consultation with the County Council social services department, the executive committee and with tenant representatives. In doing this they have sought to ensure that the most urgent cases are dealt with first.
- 98 In order to implement an effective approach, the Association works in partnership with local authorities. It funds and carries out minor adaptations immediately, help residents apply for DFG for larger adaptations works (for example, over-bath or level access showers), and where means testing necessitates a financial contribution towards the cost of the works, this is met by the Association. The effect of this is to reduce waiting times for residents and enhance the quality of their lives.
- 99 The Association funds from its own resources adaptations which relate to:
- hospital discharge where someone is blocking a hospital bed as a result of the need for adaptation work to their home;
  - toileting; and
  - mobility and access problems within the home or externally.
- 100 The Association has advertised its policy through the residents' forum and representatives and in the newsletter. The new resident handbook will also have the policy in it. The Association plans to review the first year's operation of this new policy in November 2005. In the meantime, the Association has not yet begun to monitor satisfaction levels amongst their residents who have received this service, in order to see where the service could be improved. This would also contribute to the review to be carried out later in the year. Service standards and target timescales are not in place but a review of the workload for 2003/04 shows only three cases not completed against 21 that were.

### **Housing income management**

- 101 We found this generally to be a strong service area. There are a range of payment methods available with an increasing proportion being paid by the cheapest option. Good benefit advice and signposting is in place. There is a strong focus on arrears prevention and further IT developments which are in hand will assist further in this area. Rent collection is at a high level although declining slightly over the last two years. Arrears are at a low level as is rent loss due to empty properties.

- 102** Almshouse residents do not hold tenancies nor do they pay rent. This issue was confirmed by the Court of Appeal in 1998 (Gray and Others v Taylor). While rent is not payable, in respect of DAMHA a maintenance contribution is. This charge is established in the same way that other housing associations set rent. In law the relationship between the resident and DAMHA is that they are a licensee appointed by the organisation and have permission to live in their home as a result of that. Throughout this report, we have referred to 'rent' and 'tenant' while understanding the different relationship in law between the resident and the Association.
- 103** The original financial ethos of the organisation has undergone major change. Originally established to provide decent accommodation for miners and their families coming out of tied accommodation, costs for individuals were kept at as low a level as possible. As a result of land being provided by mine owners, a levy on working miners and practical support provided through miners' lodges it was initially possible to provide rent free accommodation. Charges were first made in the 1960s during the decline of the mining industry and as a housing association, the organisation is now bringing its rents into line with other social landlords as part of the convergence agenda.
- 104** Published information on the performance in rent collection for 2002/03 and 2003/04 is incorrect due to the calculation not having been carried out in the proper way. The data presented below has been recalculated by the Association in the correct way and includes data for 2004/05 which has not yet been published.

**Table 4 Rent collection 2002/03 to 2004/05**

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
100.05%	100.15%	98.71%

- 105** These figures are confusing because the level of rent collected is masked by an element of overpayment by residents for services being funded through Supporting People – an issue which the Association has in hand.
- 106** Internally calculated figures which relate only to rent rather than service charges and water rates (which are included in housing corporation statistics) show that the proportion of rent collected over the last two years is slightly less than in 2002/03. The achievement for 2004/05 at 99.53 per cent is, however, significantly better than both the comparative group mean and median at 98.8 per cent and 99.2 per cent respectively.

**Table 5 Rent collection 2002/03 to 2004/05 (rent only)**

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
98.96%	99.68%	99.53%

- 107** Arrears recovery is not a major issue for the organisation. The Association describes its tenants as 'conscientious payers who carefully balance their budgets and rarely get into debt'. No possession action for arrears has been required in more than two decades.
- 108** Similarly, rent written off is at a very low level. All rent written off of over £100 is agreed through the executive committee. Analysis of the cases proposed for the current year shows that of 17 cases, 12 related to residents who had died and whose families had not responded to correspondence.

**Table 6 Rent arrears and rent written off 2002/03 to 2004/05**

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Arrears	0.54%	0.32%	0.38%
Written off	0.05%	0.07%	-0.01%

- 109** Rent loss, due to properties being empty, was 0.6 per cent in 2003/04. This compares with the comparison group median of 1.8 per cent and puts the organisation in the top-achieving quarter of the group.
- 110** There is a wide range of ways for tenants to pay their rent. Cash or cheque payments are taken at the office (although this is rarely done) and the organisation is contracted to Allpay. Swipe card payments can be made at Post Offices, paypoints or payzones. Payment by debit card, through an internet connection to Allpay, has recently been introduced. A significant proportion (40 per cent in 2004/05) is collected through Direct Debit.
- 111** Tenants think that their rent offers good value for money. There has been substantial rent increase in recent years as a result of convergence. The average weekly gross rent for a two-bedroom property has risen from £47.62 in 2001/02 to £54.01 in 2003/04. Over the same period the overall average rent has gone from £40.93 to £46.04. Despite this, the STATUS survey showed that 93 per cent of those responding felt that the rent represented very or fairly good value for money. None thought that it was very poor value for money.
- 112** Tenants are given clear information about rents and service charges. The tenants' handbook, which is given to all tenants, contains easily understood explanations of how rent and service charges are arrived at, the policies for setting these, the collection arrangements and the approach to arrears. This is positive practice.
- 113** There are good systems in place to ensure that tenants know and understand their account with the organisation. Quarterly statements of account are supplied to all tenants. These cover not only rent but service charges and break down charges to their component elements. Annual increases in weekly charges are notified to residents four weeks in advance and are timed to coincide with the annual state pension rise. Local authorities are informed of increases at the same time as residents to ensure coordinated action and a single notification of housing benefit payable.

- 114** There are clear and explicit standards for income management. A specific section within the customer service charter lays out service standards covering a range of issues including the provision of quarterly statement of account, four weeks notice of changes to charges and a commitment to consultation about services for which there is a service charge.
- 115** The organisation cannot easily distinguish between arrears due to benefit payments and personal default. While there is a regular review of arrears cases, the payment of housing benefit four weeks in arrears makes it difficult to identify true arrears at an early stage. Action is being taken to deal with this.
- 116** There is a frequent, regular and high-level review of rent arrears on an individual case basis. Weekly arrears reports are drawn down and prioritised for visits by housing officers. Currently this is done by a senior officer, but a report recently agreed by the executive committee will allow this to be delegated as part of a more holistic approach to debt prevention.
- 117** Where tenants do fall into arrears there is a clear and sensitive policy and procedure to guide staff. This gives a detailed chronology for action and is triggered by arrears exceeding a weeks rent. The rent arrears recovery policy promotes early action against arrears and has arrangements for rent arrears agreements where they do arise. These are set in the overall assessment of an individual's income and expenditure and run in parallel to the policy to avoid protracted delay following possible default.
- 118** There is a proactive approach to the maximisation of benefits. Staff are well trained in benefits issues and have access to an IT system which allows the calculation of entitlement to housing benefit, council tax and pension credit. Benefit advice is given at the time of tenancy establishment and subsequently. There is signposting to other helpful agencies as necessary and the active promotion of benefits through the meetings of the residents' representatives and the newsletter.
- 119** There is effective liaison with housing benefit services. A named officer within the finance section maintains close contact with the housing benefit offices and facilitates coordinated action to minimise confusion to residents.
- 120** There has been active promotion of cheaper ways of paying rent. Direct debit is the cheapest way of paying rent under the current contractual arrangement. In addition, since there are fewer transactions a year, the savings associated with this system are disproportionately greater. The use of Direct Debits as a payment route has increased from 30 per cent of tenants in 2004/04 to 40 per cent in 2004/05. This 40 per cent amounted to only 13 per cent of all transactions. While a proportion of this move to Direct Debit will be attributable to the Association's active promotion some will parallel the greater general likelihood for residents to have bank accounts. Some constraints to the growth of Direct Debit payments are imposed by certain basic accounts such as those provided by the Post Office which do not allow this kind of payment.

- 121 There are effective arrangements for recovering costs from leaseholders. The Association has 16 leasehold homes in two leasehold schemes for the elderly. Leaseholders receive account statements in the same way as tenants. There is no issue relating to the recovery of improvement costs since these are covered by specific arrangements. Previously residents paid into a sinking fund for these, but following consultation this has been discontinued and the costs 'rolled up' to be deducted from the eventual sale proceeds.

### **Anti-social behaviour**

- 122 Anti-social behaviour is not an area where there are major problems or where significant action is required. Following government expectations, policies and practices have recently been put in place together with publicity about those policies and appropriate recording and monitoring arrangements. There has been limited resident involvement in policy formulation and the practical arrangements to allow the policies to be implemented fully are not wholly in place.
- 123 Anti-social behaviour (ASB) by DAMHA residents is not a significant issue for the organisation. There has only been one recorded case where this has occurred. Anti-social behaviour perpetrated by others and affecting the Association's residents is similarly at a very low-level, although, there has been one case where injury was sustained.
- 124 The response to small difficulties that have arisen has been effective and sympathetic. Minor damage to residents' properties, through vandalism or graffiti, has been dealt with through the maintenance arrangements. Where there has been perceived nuisance as a result of youths congregating around properties a helpful building response has been implemented. For example, making it difficult for them to sit on a front boundary wall. In one case, where there was a clash of two perfectly acceptable lifestyles, this was resolved to mutual satisfaction by re-housing one of the residents.
- 125 Residents have a high level of satisfaction with the neighbourhood where they live and a generally low concern about anti-social behaviour. The tenants' satisfaction survey showed that none of those responding were dissatisfied with their neighbourhood. No problems were identified by a very high proportion of respondents in respect of a range of anti social behaviour issues. These included people damaging homes (96 per cent), trouble with neighbours (95 per cent), drug dealing (94 per cent) and noise (91 per cent). Serious concern was expressed about these issues by between 1 and 3 per cent. Only in the case of vandalism was there widespread concern, with 23 per cent identifying this as a slight problem - and this in respect of the neighbourhood rather than their home.
- 126 DAMHA has recently adopted appropriate ASB policies and procedures. These lay out a three-stage process with specified timescales and require an action plan to be drawn up and agreed with the victim. They stress the need to ensure that the complainant has a clear understanding of what is happening and indicate mediation by Age Concern (AIMS) in appropriate cases. They reflect that age related illness (eg dementia) may be the cause and the need to involve appropriate people and agencies if this is thought to be the case. The documentation contains a toolkit and good practice guidance.

- 127** As part of the ASB policies, there are comprehensive harassment policies and racial harassment procedures in place. These are victim centred, time bound for actions; provide for temporary accommodation or transfer and additional security measures. They cover the situation where the perpetrator is not a tenant of the Association.
- 128** Despite the fact that ASB by the Association's residents has historically been practically non-existent, these are prudent arrangements that also reflect the particular nature of the client group.
- 129** However, the adoptions of policies relating to ASB have been reactive rather than proactive. The existing policy was only finalised in December 2004 and was in response to governmental requirements rather than being at the initiative of the organisation. This means that elements of the service are still under development and that the policy, while adopted, is not fully operational.
- 130** For example, the liaison arrangements with local authorities around ASB are currently not well developed. While there is active involvement with action in one area of high deprivation, contact has been made with all the authorities where the Association has properties only within the last month. The response so far has been limited. Similarly, DAMHA is not part of any regional or overarching bodies considering this issue. The capacity of the organisation to enter into a dialogue on potential specific issues or be aware of wider experience is, therefore, limited.
- 131** There is no technical capacity to gather evidence other than personal statements. The Association told us that they would collaborate with the local authority in whose area the problem was arising if there was a need for noise monitoring, for example.
- 132** There has also been limited involvement of tenants in the formulation of the ASB policy. While a tenants' focus group has considered the policy, they made no positive contribution to it. Given the limited breadth of experience of focus group members, their capacity to bring other than a parochial view was small.
- 133** There is good publicity for the new ASB and harassment policies. Specific leaflets have been produced that cover policies, objectives, what to do and service standards. The residents' handbook is currently being comprehensively updated and sections have been drafted to cover these areas.
- 134** The letter of appointment (a parallel to a tenancy agreement) is brief, clear and easy to understand. It is explicit that nuisance or annoyance to neighbours, or members of the public, is unacceptable. The sanctions available to the Association are made plain. It is standard practice as part of the creation of the new tenancy and the follow-up meeting to draw attention to the ASB policy. As part of our reality checks we have seen that this is the case.
- 135** The organisation promotes community safety and has undertaken proactive work to protect its residents from ASB. New build projects are secure by design and on existing properties high security doors and windows have been installed, together with dusk until dawn lighting. Warden call equipment is available in all homes.

- 136 DAMHA has sought to foster a sense of community involvement amongst young people towards their homes. Local school children have been involved in burying time capsules in new build schemes. This demonstrates an awareness of the wider context of housing for older people.
- 137 Policies envisage a wide range of remedies to address ASB. These include mediation, injunctions, acceptable behaviour contracts, anti-social behaviour orders and possession proceedings. Staff have not been trained on mediation issues because the organisation that would provide mediation services is not currently in a position to provide that training
- 138 Although ASB is an insignificant feature of DAMHA tenancies and the policies are new, action consistent with the policy has already been taken. We reviewed one case where a visitor to one of the organisation's tenants had caused nuisance to neighbours. In response to that, the tenant had entered into an acceptable behaviour contract.
- 139 There are good arrangements in place for recording ASB and monitoring action. A unified database has been established which is in use. This brings together complaints with ASB and specifically racial harassment. Staff have received training in the policy and the use of the associated database. A positive approach of 'nothing is too trivial to record' has been adopted. In practice, the adoption of the database has been very recent and there is insufficient data to draw out any potential patterns of activity.

### **Resident involvement**

- 140 Resident involvement has not been developed sufficiently in recent years. The organisation has been customer focused and receptive to the views of residents in the long-term, but the structural and informal arrangements for their involvement has become limited and undeveloped compared with current good practice. Over the last year action has been taken to improve the situation and more is planned but there is still much to do.
- 141 The organisation seeks to be customer focused. One of the core aims of the corporate plan is 'to place residents at the heart of everything we do'
- 142 We found that this was reflected in practice. Staff demonstrate a clear customer focus. Residents told us that staff were well informed, friendly and routinely had a 'can do' attitude. A high level of customer care was apparent throughout the organisation, from members of the executive committee to officers dealing with residents in their homes.
- 143 The environment in which DAMHA operates makes it difficult to promote resident involvement through conventional processes. There is a legacy of caring support which is paralleled by the current arrangements of resident representatives. Its properties are on 123 separate sites in 90 locations in nine local authority areas - with an average of 16 in each location. Eighty-five per cent of residents are 65 or over with less than 2 per cent being under 50. The average age is 74, and 74 per cent of all tenants declare a long term limiting illness. Many residents are unwilling or unable to be involved. In these circumstances, innovative approaches are required to involve residents in the business of the organisation.

- 144 There is no effective or comprehensive compact. A brief strategy for resident involvement has been produced. However, given the currently limited involvement of residents, this is only an outline which has yet to be developed. Its aspiration '... to let residents choose the level they want to be involved in', is not yet being delivered
- 145 A residents' handbook has been provided to all tenants that gives a wide range of useful information, but is largely silent on resident involvement. There is brief information on how residents will be kept informed and about tenant representatives, but nothing on how tenants can be involved and influence service delivery. There are proposals to produce a specific leaflet, but this has not yet happened.
- 146 There is a regular newsletter but residents are not involved in its production. A well produced, informative newsletter is circulated three times a year. Residents have expressed satisfaction with it but are not involved in the editorial process.
- 147 The arrangements for residents to interact with the organisation are exclusive rather than inclusive. These are based on a system of residents' representatives which has been in place for more than 15 years and is patterned on the support historically offered by colliery unions. Representatives elected within localities serve on a resident's forum which meets quarterly. The representatives also form the membership of focus groups who, with officers, look at particular issues.
- 148 However, both residents and the organisation show commitment to these arrangements. The resident forum meetings are attended by a wide range of officers and members of the executive committee. In addition to the formal business, there are opportunities for representatives to raise issues with the officers. Resident attendance at the last three meetings averaged 65.
- 149 Residents' representatives make a significant contribution and are paid an honorarium to reflect that. They hold keys for empty properties, distribute circular letters and advise residents on contact arrangements for DAMHA. They also act as the 'eyes and ears' of the organisation. Where they are not resident they are expected to visit all residents at least once every two weeks and to facilitate and encourage social activity by accessing funds from the Association.
- 150 They also speak on behalf of other residents, represent local views within the forum, canvas opinion on issues discussed there and feed back to the residents. Our experience indicates that they are not fully supported in this role. At the meeting of the residents' forum we attended, there were six presentations on aspects of the work of the organisation, but no printed or other material was made available to assist them in this process.
- 151 While it builds on the traditions of community involvement and commitment, there are also difficulties in sustaining resident involvement through this approach. Historically, it has worked well but difficulties are developing. Some schemes have no representatives, over time the numbers of representatives is decreasing and few are prepared to be involved in focus groups.

- 152** It is also the case that residents' representatives are not in a position to contribute effectively to the organisation. Given the dispersed nature of the housing stock, few have a broad understanding of the organisation's housing beyond their own schemes. They also lack any knowledge of developments, policies and practices in the wider social housing field. No action has been taken to address this issue. This lack of experience limits the usefulness of resident's contributions. These arrangements also fail to maximise the opportunities for resident involvement.
- 153** These arrangements do not demonstrate a commitment to the effective involvement of residents. They severely constrain the extent to which residents can contribute to the organisation and the development of policy and practice in particular. There is no reflection that residents may wish to contribute at a variety of levels, consultation is largely limited to commenting on existing practices and processes and residents are not involved at an early stage in the development of proposals.
- 154** We also found that there was limited involvement of residents in the procurement processes, in defining their priorities for investment and in the appointment of contractors. The elected residents' representatives are involved through the housing and development subcommittee in establishing tender lists and the annual review of contractors. Residents have also recently been involved in annual inspections of housing schemes to define investment needs. While these are positive practises, resident involvement is not yet an embedded part of the process.
- 155** In addition to the limited opportunities for resident involvement, the existing arrangements do not empower those who are involved. Neither the forum nor focus groups are chaired by residents and the business is largely dictated by officers.
- 156** There are very limited opportunities for residents to receive training to develop their skills and abilities. Some training has been made available for the residents' representatives who serve on the housing and development subcommittee, but otherwise there is none.
- 157** There are no dedicated staff resources in place to create effective resident involvement. The approach being adopted is one of mainstreaming the activity within general service delivery. It is unclear, at this early stage in the development of a new approach, whether sufficient focus can be maintained through these arrangements.
- 158** Although the arrangements for resident involvement are generally undeveloped, there are positive aspects and plans to bring about improvements.
- 159** There are some limited examples of where the whole tenant body has been involved in decision making. Although the principal route of consultation is through the residents' representatives, some decisions have been put to the whole tenant body. These have included the issues around warden call alarms and personal gardens/equipment within schemes. Although limited in extent this is good practice.

- 160** Over the last year, arrangements have been put in place to canvas resident's views on services. Although limited to residents' representatives, focus groups have begun to consider a range of areas including customer care. The VMS surveys have sampled the opinions of a sample of residents about repairs, landscape maintenance, planned maintenance and new build. A further eight such surveys are planned. Action has been taken to remedy the residents' perceived dissatisfaction with landscape maintenance following the survey. It is planned to open up the focus groups to a wider range of residents and work has started on this. These are good practices, but late in implementation.
- 161** Resident involvement in governance and performance review is limited although the Association has involved residents despite legal difficulties in doing this. Three elected members of the residents' forum serve on the housing and development subcommittee which scrutinises performance information before this goes forward to the executive committee. There is not as yet resident representation on the executive committee. This is as a result of charity law which, until recently, meant that an individual could not be a member of a governing body as well as being a beneficiary. Following changes in the law this is now possible and the issue will be considered by the executive committee later this year. However, there is not as yet any work being done to prepare potential committee members for this role.
- 162** Support is available to allow people with specific needs to be involved. Travel expenses are routinely paid to residents attending meetings with the organisation and travel by taxi is available where this will facilitate attendance. Where a carer or relative is in support of a resident, their travelling expenses will also be paid.
- 163** There is now funding in place to facilitate resident involvement. A budget of £10,000 has been established for the current financial year to support this work. In the first place, this is intended to fund an induction process for the proposed development of the knowledge and skills of a panel of residents who will take part in an expanded programme of focus groups, which are to be opened to a wider membership.
- 164** Although the arrangements for resident involvement have been very limited, it is also the case that the views of residents have been taken into account. There are a range of examples where this is clearly the case. However, this comes about more as a result of a customer-focused ethos, than a reflection of the opportunities for residents to contribute fully.
- 165** There are clear links between resident involvement and community development. The organisation recognises the importance of social interaction for its client group and actively supports this. Resident representatives are expected to facilitate the use of DAMHA funding to encourage social activity, specific funding is available and formal meetings of the residents representatives have a social dimension. Residents also identified to us that the whole ethos and operation of the business was supportive of community development and the maintenance of existing communities.

- 166** Residents report a high-level of satisfaction with their opportunities to be involved. The satisfaction survey showed that 76 per cent were satisfied with their opportunities for participation in management and decision making. Only 2 per cent felt that their views were not taken into account. This is a high-level of satisfaction compared to many housing organisations, but is in contrast to the relatively low level of resident involvement.
- 167** DAMHA recognises that action is necessary to develop resident involvement, although action has been relatively recent. An action plan has been drawn up which seeks to expand the base of involvement and develop skills and knowledge by training, shadowing and providing wider experience of the organisation. These proposals have not yet impacted.

### **Value for money**

- 168** There is a long-term and high-level commitment to delivering low cost, high quality services. Comparative data shows that costs are amongst the lowest nationally and the inspection demonstrated well-developed services that are well thought of by residents. However value for money has not been approached in a structured way and is not supported by an overarching procurement strategy. Resident involvement in defining priorities and procurement processes is limited.
- 169** Organisational culture derives from the historical situation of minimising costs to keep charges to residents as low as possible. There is a focus on value for money, both at officer and executive committee level, associated with a measured and prudent approach to change that looks to ensure that decisions are made in the round including impact and cost.
- 170** The core aims of the organisation include a commitment to maintaining best value. As part of that, the Association wide performance plan shows forward reviews of services and policies are to be carried out in a framework of cost effectiveness. However, there is no published value for money strategy that demonstrates how this commitment will be taken forward.
- 171** There is good information on the costs of services provided by others but not of internally provided services. A wide range of information is available on the costs of repairs, planned maintenance, new developments, rent collection and community alarms but none on activity based costing within the organisation. In this context, it is not possible to demonstrate a clear relationship between costs and the quality of services.
- 172** Although there is no systematic approach to achieving value for money, services are efficient and effective. Our inspection demonstrated that a good range of services were delivered with a high-level of customer care. Residents valued those services. The residents' satisfaction survey showed 96 per cent satisfaction with the overall service and 97 per cent satisfaction with homes. Operating costs are low and amongst the lowest in the country. On the Housing Corporations operating cost index, DAMHA is rated tenth of 460 housing associations if major repairs are taken into account and 14th if they are not.

- 173** Resource allocations reflect policy decisions. Increased income as a result of rent restructuring is applied directly to service improvements for existing customers and to accelerate the investment programme. Sales income from homes declared redundant and sold are reapplied to new build developments
- 174** Although resources are applied to priorities, the involvement of residents in determining those priorities is only now developing through work with focus groups. The proposed inclusion of residents on the executive committee will bring them to the centre of decision-making, but resident involvement in this area is currently undeveloped.
- 175** Our work showed few examples of unintended high spending. Financial performance is subject to regular review by officers and a subcommittee and is reported to the executive committee. We found overspending in the budget for empty homes which came about from an upgrading of the standard to be achieved. Appropriate budget adjustments had been made to contain expenditure in both the short and long-term.
- 176** There is effective financial control of capital expenditure. Capital spending on new build projects is subject to specified checks on viability and sustainability at bid stage. The appraisal is subject to scrutiny and review by subcommittee and the executive committee. Individual schemes may proceed outside of these criteria, but only if overall organisational viability is not compromised.
- 177** There is active benchmarking of the costs of some services although this is not applied systematically across all services and outdated data is being used. The annual performance plan benchmarks some costs where these are available as published performance indicators, as does the regular monitoring statement. However, these latter were being benchmarked against national data for 2002 which do not give meaningful comparisons.
- 178** There is no overarching procurement strategy. There is a guide for contractors as to how to do business with the organisation, but no systematic framework to guide individual decisions on the procurement of goods and services, or lay out a plan of action. While there are discussions about the outsourcing of some services, market testing others and considering joint procurement, the current approach is piecemeal and not strategic.
- 179** Although there is no explicit procurement strategy, the organisation has started to embrace modern methods of procurement. A partnering agreement is in place with the Nomad group for all new developments and three-year partnered arrangements are in place for some elements of the planned maintenance programme - chimney stacks and kitchen and bathroom refurbishment. A three-year term agreement is also in place with a kitchen manufacturer. There is significant scope for the approach to be extended further.

- 180** The nature and costs of services provided by others to residents varies widely. The out-of-hours repair service is delivered by seven different local authorities. Although annual expenditure is relatively low (£15,000) and the Association considers the service to be a good one, there are no service level agreements in place to define the service. Costs for community alarm services to residents vary widely although, in some cases, they are associated with additional services. Costs range from £1.89 to £4.64. The Association is actively involved in planning the rationalisation of these services and costs through a value improvement programme run by the Supporting People team with government funding.
- 181** Our inspection, of the planned and responsive repair services identified that there was an ongoing need to focus on the proportion of emergency and urgent repairs. Although this had decreased from 64 per cent in 2002/03 to 52 per cent in 2004/05, this is still nearly double the good practice figure of 30 per cent. In working to reduce the proportion further, the Association is mindful of the needs of its residents who have an average age of 74 and for whom swift action may be important in maintaining a safe home environment.
- 182** There are, and have been, clear and resourced plans to deliver key priorities. Ninety-seven per cent of the stock already meets the government's decent homes standard and has a high degree of thermal efficiency. Forward financial plans reflect the investment needs of the stock. For example, the planned maintenance programme budget is projected to rise from £640,000 in 2005/06 to £1,152,000 in 2009/10 to accommodate the need for boiler replacement.
- 183** There is active work to ensure that investment is associated with sustainable properties. The annually reviewed asset management plan seeks to ensure that properties continue to meet the aspirations of current and future residents. Those properties which are in poor demand, in less desirable locations and/or in need of substantial investment are declared redundant and sold. The majority of these are one-bedroom properties. Stock continues to expand to meet need through redevelopment on existing sites and new developments.

## Summary

- 184** We judged that DAMHA is providing a good service for the following reasons:
- there is a commitment to providing customer focused services that is delivered in practice;
  - services are high quality and low cost;
  - there is a very high level of satisfaction with services and homes;
  - the needs of tenants are known and this is reflected in the way services are delivered and in the services themselves;
  - there is active work to address broader diversity issues through the development of housing that meets the needs of black and ethnic minority groups;

- the Association is working effectively to ensure that its homes meet the aspirations and needs of current and future residents - in the kind of properties available, their repair and amenity levels and their adaptation to meet specific needs;
- there are effective and responsive repair and gas servicing arrangements;
- empty homes are dealt with quickly and brought to a good standard before they are re-let;
- a high proportion of rent is collected and rent arrears and write off of debts are at a low level;
- there is good and proactive advice to residents on maximising benefits and preventing debt; and
- there are clear and resourced plans for delivering key priorities.

**185** However, there are areas of weakness:

- resident involvement is substantially underdeveloped;
- there is no overarching approach to value for money;
- the workforce and governance structures are unrepresentative of the local community; and
- arrangements for dealing with ASB are not yet embedded.

## **What are the prospects for improvement to the service?**

### **What is the evidence of service improvement?**

- 186** The recommendations from previous recent inspections have been implemented. We reviewed the actions following two of a number of recent inspections of the organisation. These were by the Charity Commission and the Housing Corporation. In both cases the recommendations had been implemented promptly.
- 187** There is considerable evidence that the organisation has implemented its own corporate and service improvement plans. Although the organisation is small and communication straightforward as a result, a more structured approach to policy making, performance management and service development has been developed and is being implemented.

- 188** The evidence of these changes is apparent in a range of recent and ongoing actions, for example:
- the implementation of the new performance review framework with associated officer structures and reporting arrangements;
  - the introduction of comprehensive performance planning to enhance the 'plan, do, monitor and review' cycle;
  - the establishment of the customer service team with free phone access and additional staffing;
  - the formalisation of a wide range of strategies and policies; and
  - progress on specific action plans for customer involvement and equality and diversity – the widening base of focus groups and work on a BME elders scheme.
- 189** The context of improving service user benefits by service changes and developments is a high level of satisfaction with existing services. The recent tenant satisfaction survey showed that there are consistently high levels of satisfaction and this has been reinforced by the finer grained VMS surveys. The STATUS survey demonstrated satisfaction levels of 96 per cent with the overall service (national mean 78 per cent), 97 per cent with accommodation, 97 per cent with methods used to keep residents informed and 93 per cent with the repairs service. The last figure is exactly paralleled by the VMS surveys on repairs which have been carried out monthly over the last year.
- 190** Performance indicator data shows that some services have consistently been improving in the medium-term. The proportion of urgent and routine repairs completed within target timescales have improved year-on-year since 2000/01. For routine repairs, performance at 99.3 per cent is amongst the best performing quarter of housing associations nationally. There has been a consistent fall in the proportion of houses failing the decent homes standard as a result of the investment strategy.
- 191** For other services a consistent improvement in service has not been maintained, although outcomes were still better than the mean achievement of comparable associations. The time taken to re-let empty properties reduced significantly between 2000/01 and 2002/03 but increased (probably as a result of increasing standards) in 2003/04. Performance at 27 days was, however, still better than in 2001/02 and significantly better than the national mean performance of 40 days and nearly half the time taken by comparable organisations. There was a similar pattern for emergency repairs completed within target timescales.
- 192** The Association continues to focus on ensuring that the nature of its properties meets the aspirations of applicants. The asset management strategy seeks to dispose of redundant properties and replace one-bedroom property with two-bedroom ones as well as continuing to invest in popular homes. In addition, new properties are being developed to meet the needs of local communities. For a small organisation there is a significant development programme. Thirty-three new homes were completed in 2003/04, 26 in 2004/05 and the forward programme for the next two years is 108.

- 193** Over the last few years there have been a range of service improvements that tenants will have recognised, these include:
- continuing investment in and improvements to homes;
  - the development of 'one stop' customer services with freephone access;
  - increased capacity for home visits as a result of re-organisation;
  - the development of a vulnerable people's strategy with practical outcomes for example contractor sensitivity and systematic visiting by staff;
  - a focus on affordable warmth, with a standard assessment rating in the best quarter of organisations nationally and with all double glazing work completed by 2001/02;
  - an improved standard of homes to be let;
  - increased levels of consultation that is taken seriously;
  - changes to service as a result of consultation for example choice in warden call, provision of parking and charging facilities for electric scooters, design for new properties; and
  - review of the waiting list with the development of a clearer view for applicants of the chances of re-housing/likely waiting time.
- 194** The Association has taken a proactive stance to learning from others although the approach to benchmarking is still developing. The continuous improvement team was specifically charged with generating potential improvements by learning from the good practice of others and a range of improvements implemented as a result. There is a good level of network learning and some limited specific benchmarking with similar organisations. The general approach to benchmarking has largely been concerned with comparative achievement levels but this is now maturing into a more considered approach.
- 195** Although the organisation is small, it is still investing in sharing knowledge and experience. An intranet has been developed and the continuous improvement group is structured so as to be able to take an overview of all services. In addition, a database has been established that seeks to capture not only complaints and compliments but also a range of informal comments made by residents. These are all positive contributions to ensuring that the organisation continues to learn from its corporate experience.

### **How good are the current improvement plans?**

- 196** The organisation has comprehensively reviewed its management practices and systems in the recent past. There has been recognition that, while the organisation was effective and delivered good quality services that were valued by residents, change was necessary. In particular, there was historically a reliance on the knowledge of individuals and there was a low level of documentation of practices and procedures that had been developed.

- 197 There has also been a focus on continuous improvement. This process was driven through the continuous improvement group that drew down best practice from a range of sources.
- 198 Major change has followed these processes. As a result, during 2004/05 alone, ten policies were introduced, two action plans were published, the customer care team introduced, the performance management framework reformulated and a comprehensive process of annual performance planning introduced.
- 199 The objectives of the organisation have been contextualised to give it an ongoing and developing role with regional relevance. Originally conceived to provide a personal benefit to retired miners this has been broadened by rule changes to encompass other elderly people who now form around a half of newly established tenancies. In addition this role has been located within the broader regeneration framework for former coalfield communities and within the wider field of social housing through nomination agreements. There is an acceptance of, and contribution to, the wider aims of the regional housing strategy and the modernising agenda for housing associations including that for collaboration and partnerships.
- 200 Service reviews have provided an effective challenge. We have seen evidence, particularly in respect of the review of customer service and equality and diversity, that a robust challenge has been applied. In these cases, a consultant and outside agency respectively were actively involved in the process. Staff have contributed fully to reviews but residents were not central to the process.
- 201 A more systematic and rigorous approach has recently been adopted for service reviews, although there are not yet any outcomes from this. The approach of individual best value service reviews is to be replaced with a rolling three-year programme of service reviews conducted by project teams and with specified consultation arrangements through focus groups.
- 202 There is a well developed planning and improvement framework. This is represented by a number of key documents:
- the housing strategy which responds to national housing priorities and the regional housing strategy;
  - the asset management strategy which seeks to ensure the long term sustainability of the Association's homes;
  - the annually reviewed corporate (business) plan that links a three year rolling programme of investment to corporate, regional and national objectives; and
  - the annual performance report and plan.
- 203 Officer arrangements underline a focus on learning, performance management and continuous improvement. The continuous improvement group is central to improvement, while the newly established departmental review teams provide a focused review of particular service areas.

- 204** Planning is based on a realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. The preparation of plans, while lacking significant resident input, has been rigorous. It has not shied away from major issues such as the long-term future of the organisation or from weaknesses in particular services. We found the self assessment to be an honest appraisal of the organisation.
- 205** In addition to the principal plans there is effective service planning. A range of subsidiary plans deal with improvements and development of particular service areas. These include specific plans such as the resident involvement action plan which addresses major weaknesses in this area, the equality and diversity action plan and the 14 service specific plans contained within the annual performance plan. These lay out actions in the medium-term with objectives over a two to three-year period. The overall business plan and the asset management strategy provide a long term framework.
- 206** Plans are generally robust and will drive improvement but are not wholly SMART. The framework of plans provides for development in the short and medium-term. There are clear and challenging objectives that relate clearly to identified weaknesses, targets, timescales for action, attributed responsibilities and consultation arrangements. However, the number and scale of activities proposed by the plans indicate that some degree of prioritisation will be necessary for the plans to be achievable. The Association recognises this. Linked to this is the lack of resource considerations alongside proposals. There is also a need to develop more detailed milestones to enable effective project management.
- 207** While many of the current plans have only recently been adopted, there is clear evidence of service improvement in the long term and of implementation of the current plans.

### **Will improvements be delivered?**

- 208** The organisation has strong leadership and is effectively managed. It continues to maintain a high profile for housing provision, its contribution to former coalfield communities and as the provider of high quality and people centred services. The executive committee continue to underline the founding ethos of the organisation. The management and governance structures of the organisation have formulated a business plan that reflects rising aspiration contributes to former coalfield regeneration and has adapted to a changing environment.
- 209** The aims of the Association are clear, explicit and provide a challenging context for the future development of the organisation and its services. The six core aims address key issues including sustainability, viability, a contribution to wider agendas and high quality, well managed people centred services. It is clear that these aims are real drivers for the organisation and inform planning and action.
- 210** There is a well developed housing strategy. The Association operates within the boundaries of nine local authorities. In reflection of this, it is based around good regional and local contextual information and provides a considered contribution to the regional housing strategy and the regeneration frameworks of individual authorities.

- 211 The involvement of residents, in developing the aims of the organisation, has been limited. However, the principal direction of the asset management strategy derives from customer aspiration as expressed through the allocation process. There is active involvement with stakeholders and the development partner as part of regeneration schemes.
- 212 There is a structured approach to the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources. This follows a cyclical process and the outcomes are reflected in two key documents: the annual corporate business plan and the annual performance report and plan. Individual best value service reviews are to be replaced with a rolling three year programme of service reviews that will feed this cyclical process. Members of the executive committee, and involved residents that we spoke to, were clear about the strategic direction of the organisation. There is a clear understanding of the need to separate strategic and operational activities.
- 213 The organisation is aware of its capacity and has acted to ensure that it can deliver its priorities. Additional staff have been recruited to fulfil critical roles. In the recent past, the aspiration to establish a customer service team to drive improvements led to the appointment of two additional posts. There is no culture of routine use of consultants although they are used to add capacity where necessary.
- 214 Training is used to enhance the knowledge and skills in the organisation. In addition to the annual appraisal of staff and the associated training plan, we have come across a range of circumstances where, outside of these arrangements specific briefing/training has been delivered to increase the effectiveness of staff.
- 215 There is recognition of the need for high quality and well trained staff. Staff turnover in the organisation is low, although within the next few years some principal members of staff will leave. There is a clear understanding of the need for succession planning in these circumstances.
- 216 Members of the executive committee are clear about their roles and are strong and confident. The rules of the organisation require that the membership of the executive committee includes members who have special skills or experience in the professional disciplines required. Our discussions with board members demonstrated that this was the case. We found wide ranging skills and abilities amongst those we spoke to, including housing management, finance, surveying, social work and representational work at a high level. Members manifested a strong sense of corporate ownership of issues, an understanding of roles and responsibilities and independence of spirit and commitment. The board has substantial capacity although a lack of formal appraisal of skills and training needs may lead to this not being maximised.
- 217 There are effective decision-making structures in place. The system of executive committee and subcommittees works well. The subcommittees consider their subject areas in detail, essentially undertaking a scrutiny role allowing the board to address more strategic issues. Both officers and members describe the conduct of business as robust and challenging in the interests of the organisation and residents. The day to day business of the organisation is delegated to the director and the two principal officers.

- 218** There is effective partnership working through the development partnership with the Nomad group for new build schemes and partnering arrangements for planned maintenance. There is also a clear understanding among board members that the future direction of the Association involves partnership working with agencies that provide expertise and resources, in recognition of the fact that DAMHA alone cannot do it all.
- 219** There is ongoing investment in up-to-date IT systems. Although the systems were established in 1997/98 major updating is taking place in addition to minor systems upgrades. A document management system is in the process of being installed and work is continuing to develop the entitlement system which will facilitate a more effective approach to debt prevention
- 220** Financial planning is robust. The corporate plan 2005/10 demonstrates that the organisation is financially sound. Only some 50 per cent of the stock is used as security for loan finance. Net assets have increased from £23.6 million in 2000 to £28.7 million in 2005. Financial planning is informed by careful analysis of likely expenditure patterns for example the near doubling of planned maintenance expenditure between 2005/06 and 2009/10. The plan also reflects the strategic direction of the organisation, in particular the asset management strategy, and lays out accountabilities both in terms of governance and individuals.
- 221** There is a substantial track record of providing quality services and driving forward a programme of continuous improvement. Performance indicators show above average performance in the medium term in all areas with outcomes in the top quarter of associations for a number of activities. DAMHA has recognised that a more structured approach was necessary to sustain ongoing improvement and has acted accordingly.
- 222** It has comprehensively reviewed its performance management framework in the recent past. Described as having been an evolutionary process, the new arrangements were adopted in the autumn of 2004. The main impact of the changes has been a wider ownership of the process amongst staff, the production of more objective (and less anecdotal) data, the expansion of the range of indicators and more benchmarking which seeks to understand the reason for differences.
- 223** There are strong systems in place to manage performance and these are currently being developed further. At an officer level departmental performance review teams review a wide range of data while the continuous improvement group overviews the business as a whole. A new appointment, the service improvement officer, monitors complaints, comments and anti social behaviour on a newly established data base and feeds this into the decision making process. There is evidence that the complaints procedure has contributed to improved service. There are regular performance reports to sub and executive committees. There is a recognition that reports to the executive committee need to focus more on exception reporting and strategic overview. These are robust arrangements and although not yet fully embedded, build upon an already successful base.

- 224 There is limited tenant involvement in monitoring performance and none in setting targets. Tenants are involved in monitoring through the two elected resident representatives on the housing and development subcommittee which regularly scrutinises performance data. Targets, although agreed by the subcommittee are essentially established through officer working groups.
- 225 Risk management is embedded within the organisation. Risks are formally reassessed on an annual basis by a range of functional teams. The outcomes are reported to the audit subcommittee and the executive committee in the form a comprehensive schedule of risks, likelihood and impact together with existing and proposed control mechanisms. Principal officers we spoke to were clear about the critical risks to the business and kept these in constant view.
- 226 The corporate plan (business plan) is routinely remodelled on a rolling five year basis. This takes account of the fluctuating nature of some elements of the business. For example. new developments and planned expenditure. A consistent driver for the plan is the asset management strategy which seeks to ensure the long term viability of the organisation.
- 227 There is a rigorous approach to audit. Separate suppliers have been appointed for internal and external audit. The audit subcommittee is in the process of considering the recent Housing Corporation publication 'Improving the Effectiveness of Audit Committees' and board members take the opportunity to discuss issues with the auditors annually without the officers being present.

## Summary

**228** We judged that the organisation has excellent prospects for improvement for the following reasons.

- There is a good track record of implementing recommendations from regulators and of implementing corporate and service improvement plans. There have been a wide range of service improvements over the last few years that will be recognised by residents and to which they have contributed. Performance indicators show that services are delivered at a high level with none being below average and some being in the top performing quarter of housing associations. Continuous improvement is a feature of services although there have been some recent deviations from that in some elements of service. However, the quality of those services remains above average. The organisation can demonstrate that it has learnt from its own experience and that of others and is continuing to develop this. There are weaknesses around the systematic involvement of residents, but this has been recognised and is being acted on.
- There is a range of well developed plans in place. These plans provide frameworks for service development in the short and medium term and in the case of the asset management strategy, the long term. In addition they provide a context for the organisation that reflects local, regional and national priorities. There is a realistic view of strengths and weaknesses which is reflected in action plans. The content of current plans is generally robust and addresses key weaknesses although they are not wholly SMART. They form a sound basis for the ongoing improvement of services. Many of the plans are of recent adoption but there is a demonstrable improvement of services prior to their adoption and clear action being taken to implement current plans.
- The organisation has strong leadership and is effectively managed. There is a clear set of aims that are well understood and ambitions for the future that reflect housing needs and aspirations. Prioritisation is a structured process and the priorities of the organisation understood by officers, board members and residents. The capacity of the organisation in people, skills, IT systems and decision making structures is sufficient to drive its aims and ambitions. There is evidence that capacity has been increased in line with priorities. Partnership working is apparent in its development programme and in regeneration schemes. Effective performance management frameworks are in place and these are being further developed.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2003/04 national mean	2003/04 national median	2003/04 quartile position
<b>General needs rent</b>							
Average weekly gross rent	£39.51	£40.93	£42.30	£46.05	£61.28	£62.46	-
<b>Vacant dwellings and lettings</b>							
Dwellings vacant and available to let	1.2%	0.8%	0.4%	0.7%	1.2%	0.8%	2
Dwellings vacant and not available to let	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%	1.4%	0.5%	3
Re-let time	34 days	32 days	24 days	27 days	40 days	32 days	2
Lettings to BME households (new)	0.0%	-	1.6%	0.8%	14.4%	-	-
<b>Stock condition</b>							
Average SAP rating	69	69	69	71	64	63	1
Failing decent homes standard	-	8.7%	0.0%	6.4%	19.7%	9.9%	2
<b>Repairs performance</b>							
Emergency repairs completed in target	97%	98%	98.7%	97.7%	95.7%	97.1%	2

Performance indicator	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2003/04 national mean	2003/04 national median	2003/04 quartile position
Urgent repairs completed in target	92%	94%	96.5%	96.8%	91.7%	94.4%	2
Routine repairs completed in target	95%	98%	99.0%	99.3%	92.2%	94.3%	1
Appointments made and kept	-	-	-	-	94.3%	96.9%	-
<b>Service to tenants</b>							
Tenant satisfaction overall	94%	94%	94%	94%	78%	80%	1
Tenant satisfaction with participation	69%	94%	69%	69%	62%	61%	2
<b>General needs financial performance</b>							
Average GN weekly operating cost	-	-	£35.94	£32.75	£48.09	£46.20	1
GN operating cost as a percentage of turnover	-	-	78.5%	70.2%	78.5%	72.9%	2
Weekly investment per GN unit	-	-	£15.19	£12.54	£31.91	-	-
Rent collected for GN	-	-	100.05%	100.15%	99.2%	99.3%	4

<b>Performance indicator</b>	<b>2000/01</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2003/04 national mean</b>	<b>2003/04 national median</b>	<b>2003/04 quartile position</b>
Rent arrears at year end for GN	-	-	1.4%	1.2%	7.0%	6.7%	1
Rent lost due to GN voids	-	-	0.5%	0.6%	2.1%	1.4%	1

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - corporate plan;
  - housing strategy;
  - annual performance plan;
  - asset management strategy;
  - performance management policy;
  - residents handbook;
  - annual report;
  - strategy for vulnerable residents;
  - tenants satisfaction survey; and
  - a range of policy documents and minutes of meetings.

## Appendix 3 – 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:
  - discussions with a range of residents;
  - discussions with members of the executive committee;
  - visits to ready to let homes;
  - visits to view repairs;
  - visits to housing schemes;
  - shadowing a post tenancy visit;
  - visits to two sheltered housing schemes;
  - observation of the customer service team;
  - observation of a residents forum meeting; and
  - file checks.

## Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

### Strategy for vulnerable residents

- 1 The Association has a published strategy that covers issues such as how vulnerable residents can be identified, what help can be offered and what to do when the tenancy agreement is breached. The strategy is informed by a detailed tenant profile that enhances decision making in service delivery, for example, in helping to define the priority to be given to a particular repair. In addition, detailed analysis of the data has identified that sensory deprivation is a significant issue and this finding is driving service improvements that respond to this.

### Housing strategy

- 2 The strategy contextualises the work of the Association within national, regional and local housing priorities and strategies. It lays out the strategic context, the characteristics of the areas in which it operates, the strategic aims of the regional housing strategy and the direction and operation of the Association, including its development strategy, within that context.

### Asset management

- 3 The asset management strategy seeks to achieve the long term desirability and sustainability of the Association's housing stock. Using information on location, the suitability of property for the client group, demand, condition and likely future investment needs, property is allocated to a series of categories. This categorisation is driving an active programme of disposals, demolition and redevelopment and stock investment