

St Georges Community Housing (ALMO)

Basildon District Council

**Audit Commission Inspection
outcome summary**

June 2008

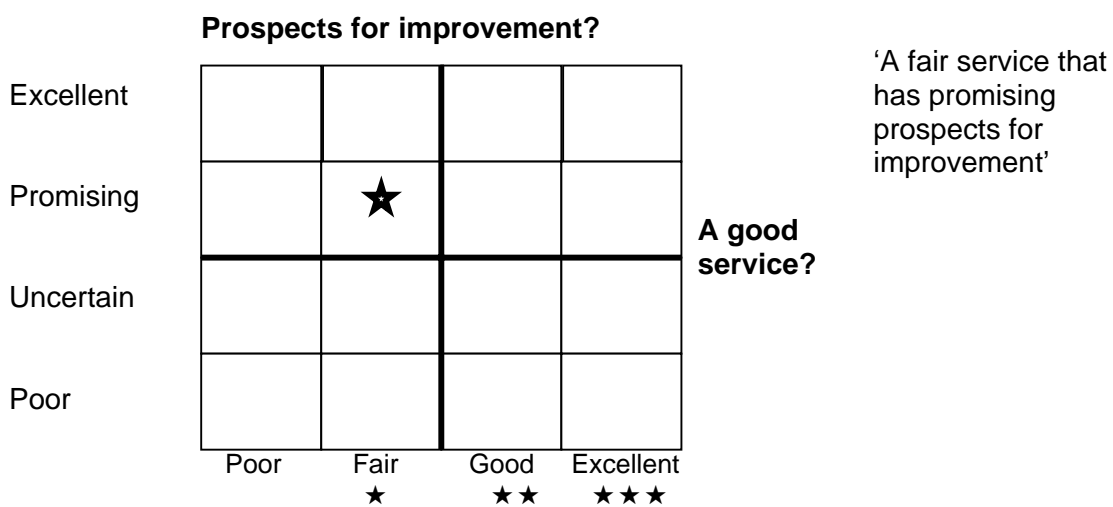
SUMMARY

- 1 St Georges Community Housing provides a fair service, which has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Satisfaction with services provided has improved markedly for tenants and leaseholders. Local housing offices and the Tenant Resource Centre provided a comfortable and welcoming environment for customers. The ALMO has created a distinct identity, which is reinforced through good quality publicity. SGCH works well with its partners, particularly in relation to antisocial behaviour. Sheltered housing is popular with residents. There is a corporate commitment to equalities and diversity, and the profiling of residents is making it possible to tailor services to individual needs through, for example, floating support services. Smaller aids and adaptations are provided quickly to those in need.
- 3 However, there are a number of areas, which require further improvement. The level of complaints, although reduced, remains high, and there are significant areas of dissatisfaction in terms of leasehold services, responsive repairs and major works. More than 90 per cent of telephone calls (excluding the repairs call centre) are answered within target times; however, telephone answering at the repairs call centre does not meet targets. Frontline staff are not always fully aware of policies and procedures. Residents are consulted, but not fully involved, in decision making, and the current structure of resident participation makes it difficult to engage the wider body of residents and hard-to-reach groups. The ALMO has been slow to take action against tenants who have not allowed access for gas servicing, and tenants wait a long time for major aids and adaptations. The quality of cleaning is variable, and residents are unsure what standard of cleaning to expect. Value for money considerations are not fully embedded in the operation or plans of the organisation. The proportion of rent collected has remained static.
- 4 There are promising prospects for further improvement in services. The ALMO has a constructive relationship with the Council. There have been measurable improvements since the ALMO was set up. Progress has been made against many key performance indicators, and against the aims of the improvement plan. The ALMO is developing the ways it learns from residents, and these are feeding into its service plans. Good capacity at management and board level are helping to drive these improvements.
- 5 However, there are some barriers to improvement. In some areas, performance has not improved. Not all plans are fully developed, and many do not address value for money to any significant extent. The Council and ALMO have a commitment to realising the benefits of procurement, partnering and improved information technology, but have not yet fully developed their approach to these areas.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed St Georges Community Housing as providing a service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the Inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring Chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- overall satisfaction with services among tenants is high;
 - residents have a wide range of ways to pay rent and otherwise contact the ALMO;
 - there is a generally welcoming and comfortable environment at local offices, and staff are helpful;
 - information provided to residents is generally of a good quality;
 - the process of profiling the needs of residents is progressing well, and floating support services are tailored towards individual needs;
 - there is a positive relationship with Housing Benefits and organisations providing welfare benefits services;
 - the Tenants Resource Centre provides useful services to local residents;

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

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- effective partnership working to deal with ASB is producing measurable outcomes for residents;
- the Community Warden service provides a flexible and effective resource to improve tenancy enforcement and estate environments;
- the repairs handyperson provides a helpful and popular service for older residents;
- estate inspections are thorough;
- voids repairs are carried out to a standard agreed with residents, and satisfaction is high;
- sheltered housing services, including the emergency call-out line, is popular with residents.
- satisfaction with the Home Ownership Team is high;
- the review of Service Level Agreements has identified substantial savings;
- voids partnering has reduced costs;
- minor aids and adaptations are carried out quickly, and satisfaction is high once adaptations are fitted;
- residents have benefited from an active programme of installing new boilers and double glazing; and
- the ALMO has robust data to inform its improvement programmes.

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

- local offices have limited opening hours;
- the time taken to answer telephones at the repairs call centre does not meet targets;
- there are high levels of complaints;
- the proportion of rent collected has remained static;
- residents have to wait for some weeks for an appointment at the welfare benefits surgery;
- staff do not consistently have adequate knowledge of policies and procedures;
- the current resident participation structure does not encourage the involvement of hard-to-reach groups;
- the focus of participation is on consulting residents, rather than involving them in the decision-making process;
- legal action in cases of non-access for gas servicing is limited;
- the ALMO has not developed links between housing management and the gas/asbestos programmes to address issues of non-access and vulnerability;

- tenants wait for long periods for major aids and adaptations works;
- the level of post inspections is high;
- the level of planned works is declining, and is not focussed on resident priorities;
- satisfaction rates for major and planned works is not high;
- processes to deal with disputes with leaseholders are limited;
- examples of outcomes from partnering and joint procurement are limited;
- value for money is not fully embedded across the organisation;
- a complex system of estate cleaning has resulted in variable standards, and a lack of accountability;
- the level of responsive repairs relative to planned repairs is high;
- residents have not been actively involved in prioritising Decent Homes works; and
- the outcomes of equal opportunity and diversity policies are not fully developed.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there has been significant improvement in the satisfaction of tenants and leaseholders with overall services;
- there has been progress against key performance targets, particularly those relating to repairs;
- the organisation has developed a distinct identity, for example through revised and improved publications;
- public offices have been re-branded and improved;
- there is measurable progress against the aims of the annual improvement plan, including the introduction of mystery shopping, development of Equality Impact Assessments and customer profiling;
- a robust system of performance management allows the organisation to identify areas which need improvement;
- learning from complaints has improved;
- there is good capacity at management level, and within the Management Board;
- there is constructive relationship with the Council;
- the training plan is robust, and links well to organisational aims; and
- partnership working has improved capacity to achieve progress.

- 10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- some performance targets have not been achieved, and performance in some areas worsened;
 - there are significant issues of dissatisfaction in terms of leasehold services and repairs;
 - not all plans are SMART²;
 - plans are not integrated with VFM targets;
 - there has been limited progress in procurement and partnering; and
 - there is no ICT strategy in place

² specific, measurable, achievable, resourced, time-bound

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs³ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

R1 Develop strategic approach to achieving value for money. SGCH should:

- *embed awareness of VFM issues across the organisation and its plans;*
- *widen the impact of partnering and joint procurement;*
- *identify and address areas of high spending through the ALMO benchmarking process;*
- *ensure that there is early personal intervention in arrears cases;*
- *encourage residents to maximise their incomes through welfare benefits campaigns, and through early access to welfare benefits advice;*
- *reduce the period for reletting of empty properties;*
- *set realistic but challenging targets for the collection of service charges;*
- *develop and publicise a range of payment options for leaseholders; and*
- *increase the proportion of planned works in relation to responsive repairs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the benefits of partnering and joint procurement will be realised across the organisation;
- officers will understand their role in achieving value for money services;
- there will be a planned approach to addressing high cost areas of operation based on best performing landlords; and
- leaseholders will be better placed to meet the costs of major works.

³ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by August 2008.

Recommendation 2

R2 Improve processes for identifying and supporting vulnerable residents, and addressing cases where residents are not allowing access by:

- *systematically updating IT systems to include accurate and up-to-date information on vulnerable residents;*
- *sharing information with contractors about vulnerability and access;*
- *progressing legal action to deal with non-access issues around gas servicing, and publicising this action;*
- *carrying out a tenancy audit to identify unauthorised occupation;*
- *addressing extended waiting periods for the installation of aids and adaptations, in the light of best practice; and*
- *developing a separate hate crime and harassment policy and procedure.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- *frontline staff and contractors will be better placed to address the needs of vulnerable tenants, and to ensure that staff safety issues are addressed;*
- *residents will be made aware of the serious safety implications of not allowing access to their properties; and*
- *the ALMO will be able to maximise use of its stock.*

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by August 2008.

Recommendation 3

R3 Steps should be taken to fully involve all residents in decision making. SGCH should:

- *develop a strategic approach to involving hard-to-reach groups in decision making;*
- *involve residents in setting priorities for the organisation – for example in major works and Decent Homes works, and in other areas of business;*
- *offer a menu of involvement, so that the wider body of residents can, for example, contribute to decisions regarding the Environmental Improvement Budget; and*
- *improve and standardise the way in which surveys are carried out.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- decisions taken by the ALMO are more likely to reflect the wishes and priorities of the wider body of tenants and leaseholders.

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

Recommendation 4

R4 Frontline services should be improved to meet the needs and aspirations of customers. SGCH should:

- *improve offices procedures to allow issues to be discussed confidentially;*
- *improve answering times for telephones at the repairs call centre;*
- *improve correspondence to ensure that it is clear and comprehensive;*
- *develop a culture of learning from complaints; and*
- *develop a user-friendly dispute resolution procedure and leaseholders.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved customer satisfaction

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

Recommendation 5

R5 Processes and outcomes should be improved for responsive and planned repairs by:

- *addressing the use of numerous Schedule of Rates categories;*
- *reviewing the high level of post inspections;*
- *measuring and increasing the proportion of repairs completed right first time;*
- *providing systematic repairs and maintenance training for call centre staff; and*
- *resolving issues affecting the interface between different IT systems.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- residents, staff and contractors will be clearer about the level and type of responsive repairs that is required; and

- staff time will be prioritised into providing services rather than monitoring them.

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

Recommendation 6

R6 Cleaning and maintenance of the estate environment should be improved by:

- *developing a quality standard for estates with customers and other stakeholders, and the publicising this fully; and*
- *completing and implementing the recommendations of the cleaning review in conjunction with customers.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- residents will be involved in improving cleaning, and will be aware of the cleaning standards they can expect.

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

Recommendation 7

R7 Improvement planning should be reviewed, ensuring that:

- *service and team planning are SMART;*
- *VFM considerations are integrated into planning; and*
- *an ICT strategy, setting out of the long term vision of the organisation, is developed.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- service planning will benefit from clear outcomes, resourcing information and timescales, and plans will be informed by VFM and ICT considerations.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by August 2008.

12 We would like to thank the staff at St Georges Community Housing who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 14 to 25 January 2008.