

Landlord services

Warwick District Council
September 2010



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Local authority housing inspections

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

Within the Audit Commission, housing inspections are completed of the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, arms length management organisations and housing associations.

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) is the regulator of social housing. Under powers in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, the TSA commissions inspections from the Audit Commission to assess performance against elements of the regulatory standards. In due course, a public consultation will be undertaken to identify how inspections against the regulatory standards should be implemented and what they should incorporate.

From April 2010 until a new inspection approach is in place the Audit Commission will use elements of the existing key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) that are relevant to the regulatory standards.

The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

Summary

- 1 Warwick District Council provides poor landlord services in the inspected areas and prospects for improvement are uncertain.
- 2 It is difficult to access services by telephone with long waits for some calls to be answered and limited information available from contact centre call operatives. There is little engagement of residents in designing services and a weak approach to measuring satisfaction. Service standards are not clearly identified and complaints are not well managed. Knowledge about residents is very limited and is not being used to tailor services to meet diverse needs.
- 3 Stock condition information has not been effectively developed and there are some weaknesses in the programming of works. The approach to asbestos and electrical testing is also underdeveloped. The appointment system for repairs is not sufficiently customer focused, performance on completing emergency and urgent repairs in timescale is weak and the number of repairs completed in one visit low. It takes too long to re-let empty homes and there are weaknesses in the void repair and lettings process. Performance on completing gas servicing within target timescales is weak and arrangements for dealing with persistent access problems are underdeveloped. The approach to gas servicing for leaseholders is not effective. There are delays in delivering major adaptations, insufficient investigation of best ways to meet current and future demand and the service is not well promoted.
- 4 Performance in collecting rent, recovering rent arrears and recovering former tenant arrears is weak as a result of limitations in processes and performance management. Partnership working on arrears prevention and recovery is not comprehensive and activities to improve financial inclusion are limited. The strategic approach to value for money, including comparison of costs is significantly underdeveloped. There has been insufficient evaluation of different approaches in the procurement of stock investment works and there are indicators of inefficiency in a number of service areas.
- 5 There are some strengths. These include the Council's offices which are well located and offer effective facilities for customers. There has been consistent investment in the housing stock including work on providing affordable warmth and there is positive customer focus in aspects of works delivery. Minor adaptations, are dealt with effectively. There is choice in the lettings process and action is taken to address hard to let homes. There is a range of accessible ways to pay rent and a positive approach to making agreements to repay arrears.

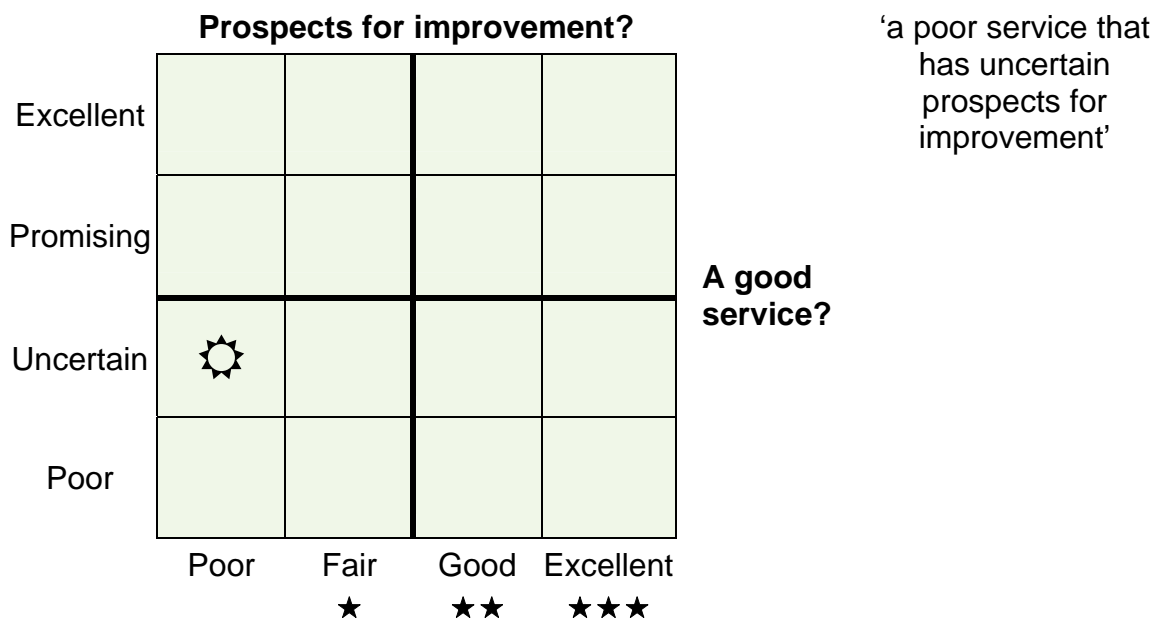
Summary

- 6 Prospects for improvement are uncertain. The track record of delivering improvement is limited. There is no clear vision for the service and a lack of supporting strategies in some key areas. There is also no agreed comprehensive improvement plan and performance management arrangements are underdeveloped. However, there is an increasing focus on key issues that need to be addressed to ensure effective improvement planning and performance management, including ongoing work to develop the strategic vision and a comprehensive improvement plan. A range of improvements are being planned or are ongoing which address some key issues for the service. Leadership capacity is improving and overall financial capacity is relatively strong.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Warwick District Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chartⁱ



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 We found the service to be poor because it has a range of weaknesses including:
- weak performance on telephone answering and inadequate systems to ensure contact centre staff can provide a comprehensive response to residents;
 - limited engagement of residents to inform design of services and a weak approach to measuring satisfaction;
 - underdeveloped access to services through the Council's website and mixed coverage and quality of written information;
 - a lack of clearly identified service standards which have been agreed with residents and weaknesses in complaints management;
 - an underdeveloped strategic approach to diversity including a weak approach to Equality Impact Assessments and compliance with recognised national codes and standards;

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

Scoring the service

- very limited knowledge about customers and use of this to tailor services;
 - a low level of stock condition information which is not effectively managed, some weaknesses in the programming of works and insufficient resident involvement in shaping the stock investment programme;
 - an underdeveloped approach to dealing with asbestos and electrical testing;
 - an appointment system for repairs is which is not sufficiently customer focused and high levels of repair pre-inspections;
 - weak performance on completing emergency and urgent repairs in timescale, unclear performance completing routine repairs and too many repairs requiring more than one visit;
 - limited quality assurance processes in repairs, empty property management, gas servicing and adaptations;
 - high average re-let times for empty homes and weaknesses in void repair and letting processes;
 - weak performance on completing gas servicing within target timescales, on dealing with persistent access problems and in the approach to gas servicing for leaseholders;
 - limited promotion of the aids and adaptation service, delays in delivering major adaptations and inadequate information for residents awaiting adaptations, weak understanding of the demand for adaptation and focus making best use of adapted stock;
 - weak performance in collecting rent, recovering rent arrears and recovering former tenant arrears;
 - limited activities to improve financial inclusion and underdeveloped partnership working on arrears prevention and recovery;
 - an underdeveloped strategic approach to value for money, including a weak approach to comparison of costs, insufficient evaluation of different approaches in the procurement and weaknesses in the use information technology; and
 - value for money cannot be demonstrated in aspects of repairs service and in arrears possession actions.
- 9 However, there are some strengths. These include:
- Council offices that are well located and offer effective facilities for customers;
 - consistent investment in the housing stock over a number of years including a positive focus on affordable warmth, a regular programme of cyclical decorations and positive aspects to customer care in works delivery;
 - choice in the letting process, action taken to address hard to let homes and below average void loss;
 - a recent comprehensive audit of properties to ensure gas servicing and regular promotion of gas safety issues;

- effective processing of minor adaptations; and
- a range of accessible ways to pay rent and a positive approach to making agreements to repay arrears.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is a limited track record of delivery improvement;
- there is no clear vision for the service, a lack of supporting strategies in some key areas and no agreed comprehensive improvement plan;
- learning from others is not embedded and customer involvement in identifying improvements is limited;
- performance management arrangements are underdeveloped, the approach to staff appraisal and supervision is mixed and the approach to managing risk is not comprehensive;
- the current approach to staff training is mixed; and
- IT and some aspects of procurement are not maximising capacity.

11 However, there are a number of drivers for improvement. These include:

- there is an increasing focus on key issues that need to be addressed to ensure effective improvement planning and performance management;
- a range of improvements are being planned or are ongoing which address some key issues for the service;
- leadership capacity is improving and there is consistent political support for the service;
- financial capacity is relatively strong; and
- the Council has processes in place to help ensure that its workforce is made up of the right people with the appropriate skills and capability.

Recommendations

12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. These recommendations reflect the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) standards. They are intended to give organisations some guidance on how they may best be able to deliver the outcomes required in the Standards. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costsⁱ 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 Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to services and customer care by:

- ensuring that residents receive a prompt response to telephone calls and that contact centre staff have access to appropriate information to ensure a comprehensive response to residents;
- actively engaging residents in a variety of ways to ensure their views shape the delivery of services at all levels;
- developing a robust and consistent approach to measuring satisfaction across all service areas;
- improving access to services through the Council's website and ensuring comprehensive and accurate use of written information;
- agreeing with residents clear measurable service standards, widely publicising these and reporting performance back to residents;
- ensuring a consistently prompt and effective response to complaints; and
- increasing activities to improve financial inclusion and developing partnership working on arrears prevention.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased access to services;
- increased satisfaction with services;
- services that better meet the needs of residents; and
- assisting the Council deliver outcomes set out in the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard.

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

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

Recommendation

- R2** Improve the approach to meeting the diverse needs of residents by:
- strengthening the strategic approach including delivery of a comprehensive programme of Equality Impact Assessments and ensuring compliance with recognised national codes and standards;
 - significantly developing the level of resident profile information and using this to tailor services to meet the needs of customers;
 - ensuring that there is a consistent and comprehensive approach to translation and interpretation requirements;
 - addressing delays in delivering major adaptations and ensuring regular information for applicants; and
 - analysing demand for the adaptation service and focusing on making best use of adapted stock.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased assurance that services are not negatively impacting on sections of the community;
- services that better meet the needs of residents; and
- assisting the Council deliver outcomes set out in the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R3** Improve the approach to stock investment, repairs, gas servicing and empty property management by:
- increasing the level of stock condition information and analysing this using appropriate asset management software to ensure robust programming of works;
 - increasing the level of information on the location of asbestos and ensure this is proactively shared with residents and contractors;
 - developing the management of electrical testing information and delivering a programme of testing which ensures all homes have a test at least every ten years;
 - developing a repairs appointment system which is customer focused and ensuring performance is effectively monitored;
 - reducing the high level of repair pre-inspections and increasing the number of repairs completed in one visit;
 - ensuring emergency repairs are completed in target timescales or at a time agreed with the resident and that routine repairs are carried out at residents convenience and that this is effectively monitored;
 - ensuring robust quality assurance processes for repairs, empty property management, gas servicing and adaptations;
 - reducing average re-let times for empty homes and addressing weaknesses in void repair and lettings processes; and
 - ensuring that gas servicing is consistently completed in timescales and that procedures are delivered to ensure effective action to deal with persistent access problems and in the approach to gas servicing for leaseholders.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- timely delivery of key services;
- increased assurance of the effectiveness of services and the safety of residents;
- services which better meet customer needs; and
- assisting the Council deliver outcomes set out in the Home and Tenancy standards.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve value for money by:

- increasing rent collection levels, reducing rent arrears and recovering more former tenant arrears;
- ensuring comprehensive comparison of costs to assess and drive value for money;
- ensuring a robust value for money evaluation of different approaches in the procurement services;
- addressing weaknesses in the use information technology; and
- addressing identified value for money issues in aspects of the repairs service and in arrears possession actions.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased efficiency of services;
- increased resources for service improvement; and
- assisting the Council deliver outcomes set out in the value for money standard.

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

Recommendation

R5 Improve planning and performance management by:

- agreeing a clear vision for the service with stakeholders and ensuring this is effectively publicised (by July 2011);
- assessing areas where supporting strategies are required and developing these to support service improvement;
- completing the development of a comprehensive service improvement plan and establishing effective monitoring arrangements;
- ensuring a systematic approach to learning and benchmarking to inform service improvement plans;
- ensuring performance management arrangements provide key indicators for all service areas and that comprehensive operational indicators are established for all service areas;
- ensuring a consistent approach to staff appraisal and supervision; and
- ensuring a comprehensive approach to managing risk.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- more effective delivery of service improvement.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2010 unless otherwise stated above.

Recommendations

- 13 We would like to thank the staff of Warwick District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 21 to 25 July 2010