

# Housing Management Services

Green Vale Homes Limited

December 2008



---

# Contents

<b>Housing Association Inspections</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Scoring the service</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Performance indicators</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Appendix 3 – Positive practice</b>	<b>48</b>

# Housing Association Inspections

- 1 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.
- 2 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).
- 3 For housing associations our current inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41A and 41B of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003). Provisions contained in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 will amend our role and remit in due course, but are not yet in force. Our role 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.
- 4 We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) 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.
- 5 The Tenant Services Authority 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 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.

---

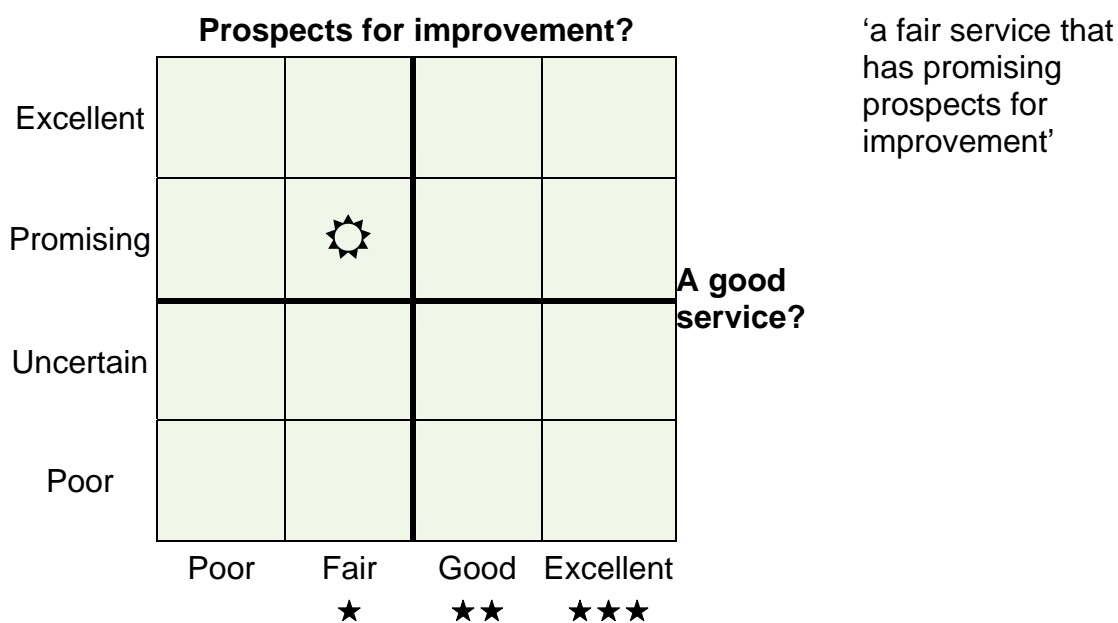
# Summary

- 6 Green Vale Homes provides a fair service with promising prospects for improvement. It has a customer focus and pays attention to the diverse needs of the community. It delivers the decent homes programme effectively, and ensures the safety of tenants through efficient gas appliance testing. Properties are re-let promptly, income management approaches balance firm actions with support and assistance and arrears levels are low. Anti-social behaviour is dealt effectively through a combination of preventative and enforcement measures.
- 7 However, there are some areas which require improvement. Green Vale Homes has not fully collected and used customer profile information to enable it to tailor its services effectively. Telephone answering services do not meet the standards set and not all offices are DDA compliant. Further work is required in assessing the value for money of services and the some tenants still wait too long for adaptations.
- 8 The service has promising prospects for improvement. Performance in customer facing areas has improved since transfer. Strong leadership is in place, improvement planning is robust and there is a willingness to learn from others. However, there is a need for improved performance monitoring and reporting to customers and the Board, and greater customer involvement in on going improvement processes.

# Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Green Vale Homes Limited as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined in Figure 1.

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



Source: Audit Commission

<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.

- 10 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- high levels of customer satisfaction;
  - a range of services to support vulnerable customers including the completion of adaptations within the decent homes programme;
  - a positive approach to tackling hate crime and domestic violence;
  - effective delivery of the decent homes programme;
  - a customer focused responsive repairs service, strong performance in re-letting empty homes, and effective gas servicing arrangements;
  - a supportive approach to rent collection and arrears recovery, complemented by an emphasis on income maximisation initiatives;
  - a firm partnership approach to tackling anti-social behaviour, with a wide range of supportive and diversionary work; and
  - an improving awareness of value for money, with efficiency savings reinvested into service delivery.
- 11 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the time taken to answer telephone calls which does not meet the targets set;
  - some service standards are not specific and none are reported to customers;
  - capturing the views of all customers and ensuring that there is complete information about the profile of customers;
  - offices and communal areas to sheltered schemes are not all DDA compliant and thus not accessible to people with limited mobility;
  - major adaptations required to ensure properties meet the needs of customers are not completed in a timely manner; and
  - service reviews are not well informed by service costs.

## Scoring the service

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a track record of delivering against a range of actions to improve services with clear customer benefits;
- effective and visible leadership is provided by the Board and senior staff;
- clear corporate objectives are well understood throughout the organisation;
- internal and external learning is used to improve services;
- business planning is well co-ordinated ; and
- performance management and financial management arrangements are mostly appropriate.

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

- low levels of customer involvement in improvement processes;
- the lack of a up to date and structured service review programme;
- inconsistency in information provided in performance reports; and
- an underdeveloped approach to procurement.

# Recommendations

14 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 costs<sup>2</sup> 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 tenants and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

## Recommendation

**R1** Strengthen the focus on customers by:

- ensuring that customer telephone enquires are answered within published timescales;
- understanding the profile of all tenants and using this information to tailor services to those needs;
- ensuring consistency in the measurement of customer satisfaction over time;
- ensuring all expressions of dissatisfaction are captured and used to improve services;
- ensuring all offices are accessible to people with a physical or sensory impairment;
- submitting a robust plan to the board to ensure all communal areas are accessible to people with a physical or sensory impairment;
- establishing an effective and reliable way of measuring responsive repairs completed 'right first time';
- ensuring that all service standards set clear and measurable expectations and reporting performance against these to customers; and
- ensuring greater customer involvement in the on going improvement of services.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

## Recommendations

### 15 Furthermore:

- people with a disability or sensory impairments will have equal access;
- services will be developed to meet the aspirations of customers;
- Green Vale Homes will ensure it can identify and meet a range of diverse customer needs; and
- customers will know whether they are receiving the publicised services.

16 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months of the publication of this report with the exception of the second recommendation which should be implemented within one year of the publication of this report and the seventh recommendation which should be implemented within nine months of the publication of this report.

### Recommendation

#### R2 Improve the focus on diversity by:

- ensuring that there is a monitored action plan for the completion of Equality Impact Assessments in all areas of operation; and
- improving the monitoring arrangements for contractors and suppliers to ensure they comply with contractual arrangements and Green Vale Homes' expectations.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- identification of improvements to services to ensure they meet the diverse needs of the community.

17 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months of the publication of this report.

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve performance on major adaptations by:

- ensuring clear end-to-end measures are in place that are meaningful and reflect the experience of users;
- ensuring that the maximum possible funding is directed to this area of work, reflecting current and future need;
- making efforts to reduce the backlog of outstanding major adaptations;
- working with Rossendale Borough Council to deliver service improvements, including by procuring to maximise savings/efficiencies
- forecasting the level of need for services and using this to plan future resource requirements ; and
- ensuring customer input into the development and monitoring of the service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- people with a disability will be able to live independently;
- people will not have to wait an unreasonably long time to have their home adapted; and
- services will be shaped to meet the needs of customers.

- 18** The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within nine months of the publication of this report.

### Recommendation

**R4** Improve value for money by:

- strengthening benchmarking assessments to cover cost, quality and the effectiveness of service delivery;
- addressing the levels of variation orders raised in the responsive repair service;
- making full use of procurement options to deliver the best value for money;
- setting and monitoring performance against challenging and progressive targets and quantifying improvements; and
- developing a comprehensive programme of works for years 6 to 10 of the programme, including consideration of sustainability issues.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services will deliver better value for money;
- Green Vale Homes and customers will have key information to make informed decisions on value for money; and
- customers will receive better services compared to the cost involved.

## Recommendations

- 19 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months of the publication of this report with the exception of the second recommendation which should be completed within nine months of the publication of this report.

### Recommendation

- R5** Strengthen the management of performance by:
- introducing measures to ensure services are delivered consistently by all areas of the business to meet the needs of all customers;
  - reporting comprehensively on performance to customers;
  - ensuring involvement of customers in service development;
  - ensuring involvement groups more closely reflect the make up of the local community;
  - improving the use of benchmarking information and historical data to inform performance management; and
  - developing and implementing a revised programme of service reviews with customer involvement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved ability to track the progress of Green Vale Homes;
  - improving services for all customers; and
  - the ability of all customers to influence the development of services.
- 20 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within nine months of the publication of this report.

### Recommendations

- R6** Take action to address all other identified weaknesses in this report.
- R7** Report and publicise the key findings of this report to customers, the Board stakeholders and staff.

- 21 We would like to thank the staff of Green Vale Homes Limited who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 13 to 17 October 2008.

---

# Report

---

## Context

- 22** The borough of Rossendale in south-east Lancashire covers 137 square kilometres, made up of valleys cutting through fells and moors. Rossendale has a total of 27,112 households, almost a third of which are single-person households and just under half of these are lone pensioner households. Housing tenure is skewed towards owner-occupation at 72 per cent, with 18 per cent of homes in the social rented sector. The main communities are based in the towns of Rawtenstall, Bacup, Whitworth and Haslingden.<sup>3</sup>
- 23** The population of the borough is approximately 65,000, with 3.8 per cent from ethnic minority backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> This is below the county and national averages of 9.7 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.
- 24** Rossendale is ranked 92 of 354 local authorities on the government's index of deprivation 2004 (where 1 is the most deprived)<sup>5</sup>, with three wards within the poorest 15 per cent nationally. There are higher than average levels of economic activity but lower than average wages. Average wages and salaries per head are lower than regional and UK figures, at £19,040 compared to £23,510 and £24,340 respectively.<sup>6</sup>
- 25** Rossendale has a lower percentage of people who are economically inactive than regional and national averages<sup>7</sup>. Rossendale has a strong labour market with 3 per cent more economically active people and 4 per cent more people in employment than the regional averages, with the unemployment figure almost 1.5 per cent lower than the national average.

## The Association

- 26** Green Vale Homes is a not-for-profit Local Housing Company and Industrial and Provident Society registered with the Housing Corporation. It was established in March 2006 to receive approximately 3,800 homes from Rossendale Borough Council, following a positive transfer ballot in November 2005. Green Vale Homes is part of the Trans Pennine Housing Group, also formed in March 2006. Trans Pennine Housing is a company limited by guarantee, registered with the Housing Corporation, and is the parent organisation for Green Vale Homes and Pennine Housing 2000.
- 27** Green Vale Homes has a Board comprising twelve members, made up of six tenant representatives, four independents and two nominees from the local council, with arrangements for representation on the Trans-Pennine Housing group Board.

---

<sup>3</sup> Census area statistics 2001

<sup>4</sup> Census area statistics 2001

<sup>5</sup> ODPM, 2004; LCC

<sup>6</sup> Annual population survey 2004/05 NOMIS

<sup>7</sup> Annual population survey and economic activity

## Report

- 28 Green Vale Homes owns and manages 3693 properties of which 652 (18 per cent) are sheltered housing. Within the general needs stock there are larger numbers of small homes, with 35 per cent of stock having one bedroom and 43 per cent having two bedrooms. In addition Green Vale Homes provide services to 102 leaseholders.
- 29 The former Housing Corporation Assessment of the Group in 2007 gave the association a full set of green traffic lights.<sup>8</sup>

---

### The service

- 30 The Executive Director is supported by Heads of Operations, Financial Services, and Asset Management. Green Vale Homes employs a total of 160 staff. Services are provided from three office bases with a number of local surgeries.

### Scope of the inspection

- 31 The inspection covered the areas of stock investment and asset management, housing income management, tenancy and estate management (ASB element only). In addition the generic areas of access and customer care, diversity, value for money and prospects for improvement were covered.

---

<sup>8</sup> TPH (Green Vale Homes) SACS assessment 2007 - source (former)HC

---

# How good is the service?

---

## What has the service aimed to achieve?

**32** Green Vale Homes vision is 'making a difference for people, homes and communities'. This provides an overarching vision to support the following 12 commitments made to tenants at transfer.

- Improving your home.
- Tackling anti social behaviour.
- Improvements to aids and adapts.
- Investing in older peoples services.
- Your repair service.
- Clean safe and secure communities.
- Tenant involvement and communication.
- Improved customer service.
- Development for new homes.
- Local employment.
- More for your money rents.
- Protection of key rights.

**33** The vision is underpinned by a number of values, as follows.

- To be honest, fair, accountable and innovative.
- To value diversity and treat everyone with respect.
- To only make promises we can keep.
- To be community and customer driven.

## How good is the service?

34 Strategic Business plan objectives support these aims by:

- ensuring that strategies and actions are inclusive;
- developing a clear strategy for developing the people within the Trans-Pennine Housing Group, including training, development and realising everyone's potential;
- developing further the customer focused approach to services;
- maximising income from supporting people grant and developing appropriate services for vulnerable people;
- developing asset management good practice across the group;
- developing growth across the group to meet the growth strategy target of 20000 homes by 2012, but also to grow and develop services;
- developing green issues and sustainability across the group via green champions in each team;
- setting out how to make sustained changes by targeted investment of time and resources; and
- developing local connections, using local knowledge and partnership working to achieve more.

---

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

### Access and customer care

- 35 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. A wide range of information is available and there is easy access to most services. Customer feedback is used to influence the development of services, and complaints are generally well-managed but there are some weaknesses in the policy and procedures. However, telephone answering does not meet the agreed standard, services standards are not all measured and none are currently reported. Services to leaseholders are not well developed and Green Vale Homes cannot be sure that it routinely captures the views of all customers to shape its services.
- 36 There is a strong commitment to customer care throughout Green Vale Homes. One of its key values is to be community and customer driven, and this is underpinned by a group customer care strategy and action plan. This identifies high level activities to drive customer focus, of which one is complete and the rest in progress. Customer involvement in determining priorities is evident in the promises made at transfer and the monitoring of their implementation. Training has been provided to all staff, who are knowledgeable, demonstrate good skills in dealing with service users, and treat customers with respect. These actions promote a focus on the customer throughout the organisation.

- 37** Performance against the majority of service standards is measured in a variety of identified ways. However this measurement is recent and outcomes have not yet been fully analysed and reported to the board or residents. Our mystery shopping indicates that the service standard to see personal visitors at offices within ten minutes is not always met. Customers will know the standards of service they can expect, but information on performance is not used to challenge and improve services.
- 38** There is a wide range of methods for customers to access services. Centrally located town centre offices are supplemented by estate surgeries. There are improving levels of satisfaction with access to services with improvements noted between the STATUS survey of 2004 (carried out when the stock was owned by Rossendale Borough Council (RBC) and another in 2007. In areas such as customers finding it easy to contact the right person, satisfaction increased from 76 per cent to 81 per cent and those finding staff helpful increased from 86 per cent to 90 per cent.
- 39** There is a range of good quality customer information. Printed leaflets covering the main services are clear, concise, attractively presented, and benefit from being agreed and reviewed with customers. The leaflets can be provided in community languages and other formats for people with visual impairment. The tenants' handbook is of a good quality and available in other formats if requested. Quarterly newsletters are interesting, informative, and professionally presented and contain corporate, community and partner information. The website has a comprehensive range of useful information and a range of interactive features including a repair diagnostic tool and benefits calculator, with links to relevant external sites and the ability to report and request services online. This makes it easier for customers to understand the range of services available and access any necessary support.
- 40** Green Vale Homes has a variety of mechanisms to encourage service users to make their views heard, participate effectively and influence improvement. There are five established Tenant and Residents Associations (TRAs), a tenants' forum and two recently established area panels which provide a formal route for consultation. There are improving levels of satisfaction with opportunities to participate, showing an increase from 52 per cent in 2004 to 76 per cent in 2007.<sup>9</sup> All returned satisfaction surveys that score less than seven out of ten are investigated, complaints are used for learning, and those lessons shared with staff. Customers are told of the influence they have on services in a variety of ways, both individually and through newsletters and posters. However there is limited ongoing customer involvement in the development of individual services, either by the formation of focus groups or inclusion in the various improvement groups in place. Tenants are able to see the impact they have on services.

---

<sup>9</sup> STATUS surveys

## How good is the service?

- 41 Complaints are well managed. The complaints policy is well advertised, with a variety of ways for customers to make a complaint, and an option for third party mediation, although this has not been used to date. Positively there is no requirement to complete a standard form, which can deter customers from reporting dissatisfaction. There is a low level of recorded complaints, 34 in 2007/08 and 18 in 2008/09 to date, with only one escalating to stage two of the process. All have been responded to within published timescales. There is appropriate performance reporting to board and the senior management team (SMT) as part of an overall report on customer contact. Customers will find it easy to raise concerns and should benefit from a prompt response.
- 42 Green Vale Homes has responded to expressions of dissatisfaction about the complaints process. Satisfaction with the process was measured in 2008 and although there was a low response rate, there were concerns that responses did not always include information on what customers could do if they were not happy with the response or what Green Vale Homes would do to ensure the same situation did not reoccur. Green Vale Homes has addressed these by the use of a standard paragraph in letters giving the next stage of the process and more robust monitoring of the process, including letters to individual tenants to inform them of changes made.
- 43 Front-line customer services do not consistently meet agreed standards, and the monitoring of access arrangements is not comprehensive. Recent efforts have been made to address the issue but telephone answering does not meet the published service standard to respond to 83 per cent of calls within 20 seconds, with performance during June 2008 at 74 per cent during September 2008 at 67 per cent at both the repairs line and main reception switchboard. Green Vale Homes is not yet using mystery shopping to fully test access arrangements. Customers are not always receiving the agreed levels of service.
- 44 Green Vale Homes is unable to consistently tailor services to all customers according to their needs. Comprehensive customer profile information is not available to staff or consistently used to proactively deliver services based on known customer needs. Where information is known to staff through day to day knowledge of individual customers, they use it positively, by providing information in requested formats and arranging home visits as standard, which is particularly important given the geography of the area, and liaise with other agencies. Customers may not always receive a service appropriate to their needs.
- 45 Services to leaseholders are in their infancy and are not robust or well co-ordinated. Recent efforts have been made to engage with leaseholders, and the first edition of a newsletter has been produced. Leaseholders are not offered the opportunity to benefit from the competitive rates available through Green Vale Homes for servicing of gas appliances and there have been limited major works carried out on leaseholder flats to date. While there are plan to improve services, they fall below expected standards.

- 46 Green Vale Homes cannot be sure that views it receives and bases decisions on fully reflects those of all tenants. A limited number of individual tenants are involved in consultation exercises on strategic issues. For example, 127 were consulted about service standards, resulting in 48 responses. A small number of tenants were involved at the VFM event where a decision was made not to pursue the provision of a repairs handbook including a diagnostic tool. Decisions may not reflect the views of the majority of customers.
- 47 There are a number of weaknesses within the complaints process, as follows.
- Green Vale Homes cannot be sure it is capturing information from informal complaints and complaints received from all staff. Only 34 complaints were recorded in 2007/08, with none from face to face contact. Whilst this may indicate that issues are resolved at first contact, the organisation is losing an opportunity to record and learn from these.
  - There is no independent third stage within the complaints procedure. Complainants have no opportunity to have their complaint considered by arbitrators such as board members who have no involvement in the service delivery function.
  - The compensation for service failure accepted within the complaints process does not give sufficient guidance to staff. Payments are at the discretion of a manager, with no standard compensation offered to tenants, and no guidance to the level of such payments. Complainants may receive inconsistent treatment.

### Diversity

- 48 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. There are clear resources and evidence of leadership to promote and drive work on equality and diversity within the organisation. A range of services support vulnerable tenants, and there is a positive approach to combating hate crime and domestic violence. The collection of customer profiling and its use to tailor services to individual needs however is not complete. Offices and communal areas in sheltered schemes are not all accessible to people with a mobility or sensory disability. Monitoring of diversity is underdeveloped and does not cover all areas and diversity strands.
- 49 There are resources and leadership which effectively promote and drive work on equality and diversity within the organisation. Overall leadership is provided by the Managing Director. The equality and diversity policy was developed in 2005 and Green Vale Homes commissioned an independent assessment of their approach in 2006, which resulted in an overarching equality strategy. A group disability equality scheme and action plan and a gender equality statement and scheme supplement this. Training was delivered to all staff and Board Members in May 2007 and received positive feedback. The group wide Equality Street magazine highlights activities and issues for staff. However whilst an assessment against the CRE Code of Practice for Racial Equality in Housing has been used to inform the action plan Green Vale Homes does not yet meet these requirements. This approach provides a framework for the organisation's commitment to equality and diversity.

## How good is the service?

- 50** Green Vale Homes staff currently reflect the communities served and, employment and training opportunities help promote the diversity of the workforce. There are currently four trade apprenticeships and a total of ten work experience placements. BME employees represent 4.32 per cent of the workforce and disabled people 8 per cent. Applications from BME groups have increased through advertising in the wider area; applicants, and those short-listed and those appointed exceed the local demographic profile. This is a positive achievement and Green Vale Homes ensures it both serves communities well and provides fair employment opportunities.
- 51** Where known the needs of vulnerable tenants are met. A clear vulnerable persons' strategy helps shape a range of services. These include a gardening service for 620 tenants, community alarms for 288 customers, the 'helping hand' handy person service which carries out on average 65 jobs per month, and the provision of floating support to 16 tenants. There is also a focus on developing service responses to meet the needs of groups within the community, such as the additional resources of £250,000 per annum for disabled adaptations; the inclusion of adaptations work within the investment programme; the development of two extra care schemes; the prioritisation of the sheltered housing review and the routine provision of home visits. This helps support vulnerable people to remain in their own home.
- 52** Green Vale Homes takes a positive and proactive approach to hate crime, racial harassment and domestic violence. A separate domestic violence position statement recognises the role of the in-house housing options and homelessness team. In cases of domestic violence, Green Vale Homes is able to offer target hardening, by the use of additional security, locks, and provision of burglar alarms through the local STAR<sup>10</sup> project, which is funded by Green Vale Homes by £8,000 per year. For 2007/08 this service was provided cross tenure to 357 people. They also offer a panic pendant alarm linked to careline<sup>11</sup> to provide additional security, with an average of 20 to 25 alarms in use at one time. There are low levels of reported hate crime to all agencies. The one report in 2007/08 was dealt with speedily and appropriately. Customers receive a responsive service.
- 53** Customer profile information is not yet complete or well used. Information covering all diversity strands is known for only 41 per cent of tenants. Additionally, this information is not readily accessible. Strategies and plans are not yet fully informed by accurate and current awareness of the make up of the tenant base. Customers may not receive services in ways tailored to their own needs and improvement plans may not address the right issues.
- 54** Not all offices or communal areas in sheltered housing schemes are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant. Not all local surgeries are easily accessible to customers. A recent (July 2008) DDA access audit has been completed for all offices, community bases and sheltered schemes with high priority actions relating to offices resourced and scheduled for completion by December 2008. Communal areas in sheltered housing have lengthy target dates for alterations and in the interim, residents and other visitors to offices and schemes may find it hard to access services.

---

<sup>10</sup> Services targeting abuse in Rossendale.

<sup>11</sup> An emergency response service for vulnerable people

- 55 The approach to Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) is underdeveloped. Although robust Impact Needs Requirement Assessments have been completed for 17 service areas, indicating whether full assessments would be needed, there have been delays in the introduction of the follow up EIAs, with training planned for November 2008. Green Vale Homes does not know how its activities impact on all areas of the community.
- 56 The approach to diversity monitoring is underdeveloped. A range of recently agreed diversity performance indicators (PIs) is monitored and reported. However these largely relate to monitoring by ethnicity. These are due for extension and revision, but only for 2009/10. Achievement of the equality and diversity action plan against the broad objectives is measured as are lettings to BME households. However there are no quantifiable targets around monitoring access to services, satisfaction levels or employment by diversity. In addition, satisfaction surveys are not analysed by diversity headings. Overall, Green Vale Homes has little information to show how its services impact on the communities it serves.
- 57 There are gaps in understanding the profile of those tenants engaged with Green Vale Homes. There is no baseline data relating to the participants, although there is a detailed action plan and some progress in ensuring the tenant profile of active tenants is broadened. Green Vale Homes cannot be sure it is yet accessing the views of the whole community.
- 58 The current board membership is not fully representative of all diverse groups within the community. Board members recognise the need to extend their membership to include representatives from BME communities and younger people although no targets have been set.
- 59 Contractor commitments to equality and diversity are not closely monitored. Not all contractors complete returns and for those that do, it is unclear whether there has been a thorough appraisal and follow up of required actions. Green Vale Homes does not ensure its own commitment to equality and diversity is reflected in its contractors' approach.

### Asset Management

#### **Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works**

- 60 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Homes and the surrounding areas are improved effectively, in line with the asset management programme and in a way that is sensitive to tenants' needs and aspirations. The approach to managing asbestos risk is robust and there is a positive approach to reducing fuel poverty. However, there are weaknesses in the delivery of the planned maintenance programme and the asset management strategy is not fully developed.

## How good is the service?

- 61 Green Vale Homes is on target to complete its major works programme and to achieve the Government's Decent Homes Standard. Although only 54 per cent of homes were classified as decent at the end of March 2008 this was at the end of year two of a five-year programme and was in line with profiling and targets. In the first six months of 2008/09 the situation has improved and 67 per cent of homes were classed as decent. The capital programme is progressing in accordance with commitments to customers.
- 62 Customers are involved in agreeing both the standards of works and the focus of the programme. The capital works standard has been agreed with customers and includes some additional elements beyond minimum decent homes requirements, such as external security lighting and internal hard-wired smoke and heat detectors. The programme was developed with a small group of customer representatives and consulted on more widely through roadshows. It is widely publicised in newsletters and the website, and local consultation begins around eight weeks prior to the planned commencement of work. Customers report a high level of satisfaction with improvement works - 85.3 per cent of people are satisfied which compares well to performance in the West Yorkshire Strategic Procurement Alliance (WYSPA) benchmarking. High standards are set and achieved, resulting in positive customer feedback.
- 63 The capital programme provides an extensive range of choices for customers. The choices for each element of works was agreed by a design specification sub-group that included customers. Choice events take place at local venues and where necessary home visits supplement the consultation. Green Vale Homes has responded to customer preferences and varied specifications based on their feedback, for example including both gas and electric cooker hob choices in specifications. Homes visited by the inspection team had been improved to a high standard and tenants expressed satisfaction at both the level of choice offered and the standard of the work. The programme is customer focused.
- 64 Stock condition information is adequate. Prior to transfer a 20 per cent sample survey was undertaken including all 394 non traditional properties. This was then cloned across property types and used to assess the Decent Homes requirement. As capital elements are replaced in the programme the database is routinely updated. Additionally, all void properties are surveyed and their details amended and recorded as necessary. Because the IT system is not fully integrated across services responsive replacements cannot be automatically uploaded onto the database however. Nevertheless, actual replacements compared to forecasts have aligned closely which indicates that Green Vale Homes is using good stock condition data to plan its capital works.
- 65 Green Vale Homes is improving comfort and affordability for customers. The costs of insulation works are offset by grants at a ratio of 4:1. This, coupled with heating and window replacements, has contributed to an improvement in the SAP rating from 67 at transfer to 70.6 at the end of 2007/08. Customers benefit from improved comfort and affordability.

- 66 The approach to the management of asbestos is reasonable. Type two surveys are completed in the majority of property types and cloned across the stock. This provides reliable asbestos data on 80 per cent of the stock. All relevant staff have been trained in asbestos precautions, and general guidance is issued to staff and tenants. However repair orders cannot yet include specific detail about asbestos to assist operatives and reduce risk. Although this will be addressed in the IT upgrade due in 2009, arrangements are not yet affording full protection to operatives.
- 67 Investment is also improving the environmental quality of local estates. Green Vale Homes carries out some environmental improvement works alongside the capital programme. To date approximately £2 million in improvements have been completed including fencing/boundary wall replacements and security lighting. A programme of targeted improvements will be agreed with customers during 2009 with an anticipated budget of £4 million. This helps to improve neighbourhoods as well as properties.
- 68 Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) requirements have not yet been assessed. This requirement replaces the original fitness criterion in the Decent Homes Standard and requires that properties be risk assessed in terms of potential hazards to current or likely occupants. The HHSRS requirement came into force after the original stock condition survey, but subsequent surveys prior to capital renewals and void surveys have not been adjusted to meet the new standard. This means that some risks may be present that could be more appropriately managed and there remains a risk that additional works will be needed to ensure compliance with the HHSRS.
- 69 Planned programmes of renewal and cyclical maintenance are not fully developed. Although there are programmes in place for landlord obligations, servicing and testing, planned renewals and painting programmes are not included. The stock condition survey and business plan identify future renewal requirements but a fully integrated plan for the years following 2010 is not in place. Green Vale Homes intend to develop and consult upon a programme but it cannot currently demonstrate that decency levels once achieved will be maintained.
- 70 Learning from customer satisfaction returns is underdeveloped. Satisfaction results are provided to a benchmarking club, but analysis is limited. Whilst it is clear that individuals' dissatisfaction is responded to appropriately, there is no evidence of a systematic consideration of results to identify improvements and service enhancements. This is a missed opportunity to continually improve.
- 71 The longer term asset management strategy is in its infancy. The focus of attention to date has been upon achieving decent homes standards by 2010. Further work is required to determine how assets will be maintained and priorities determined linked to markets, demand and sustainability post 2010. The Group plans further work to develop options appraisals and a thorough approach to determine property sustainability. Until this work is complete, Green Vale cannot be confident that it is only investing in properties with a sustainable long-term future.

## How good is the service?

### Responsive repairs

- 72** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Tenants receive an easily accessible service, customer satisfaction is high, and performance is generally positive. However, the monitoring of appointments is not rigorous, there is no monitoring of jobs completed right first time and work scheduling is imprecise.
- 73** The responsive repairs service is generally customer focused. Customers can easily report repairs in several ways. A freephone repairs direct number is supplemented by options to report repairs at the local offices or via a web-based service. Repair appointments for mornings or afternoons are offered, with approximately 71 per cent of all repairs in 2007/08 carried out by appointment. Customer satisfaction scores average 8.5 out of ten consistently giving some indication that the service meets customers' needs.
- 74** The in-house repair service has been reviewed and put on a stronger footing since transfer. A review completed prior to transfer helped shape Green Vale Homes' restructuring of the service and led to improved materials control, the closure of in-house joinery and two stores sites, new vehicle leasing, including shelving and imprest stocks, and the removal of the unproductive bonus structure. Repair operatives are positive about their ability to offer an improved service as result of these changes. Additional training and access to support such as interpretation services has also assisted operatives.
- 75** Performance in completing repairs within target times is largely positive. In the second quarter of 2008/09. One hundred per cent of emergency repairs, 99.5 per cent of urgent repairs and 95.8 per cent of routine repairs were completed within target times. Attention has been directed to routine repairs and performance here is improving over time. Performance was below average at March 2008, has improved in the period August to October 2008, although this is not yet sustained over time. Performance for emergency and urgent repairs compares well to other.<sup>12</sup> Most customers have repairs carried out in a timely manner.

**Table 1      Responsive Repair Performance 2005 to 2008**

	<b>2005/06 (relates to one months figures post transfer)</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>Q2 2008/09</b>
Emergency	99.42	99.95	100	100
Urgent	99.68	99.26	98.26	99.5
Routine (28 day)	92.33	88.3	91.93	95.83

<sup>12</sup> Housemark top quartile for 2006/07 -emergency and urgent 98.4 per cent.

- 76** There are some positive areas in the repairs service, as follows.
- Repair costs are low. Average repair costs for emergency repairs are £52.33, for urgent repairs £43.25 and for routine repairs are £177.70.
  - The proportion of repair pre- and post inspections reflects good practice levels. Targets are set at 10 per cent for post inspections which has been achieved for 2007/8 and for the first quarter of 2008/09<sup>13</sup>. Whilst no target has been set for pre-inspections, levels of 13 per cent have been achieved since March 2007.
- 77** A lack of basic information prevents staff from offering a sensitive and tailored service. Repair orders do not advise operatives of future renewal work that is planned at the property, do not consistently contain customer profile information to enable the approach to be tailored to individual needs and do not indicate the presence of asbestos. Call centre operators do not have access to diagnostic tools and information. The service offered to customers does not fully take account of their needs.
- 78** The monitoring of the service offered to tenants is incomplete. Recording of appointments made and kept is not rigorous, with different interpretations of what constitutes a kept appointment. Real time recording is not in place and the recorded performance in 2007/08 of 97 per cent of kept appointments must be treated with some caution. There is no current measurement of 'right first time' repairs. Currently the measure indicates whether a follow up trade is required, not whether a follow up visit is necessary, whether the operative has left site for materials or whether an appointment was made and kept. These are not accurate indicators of performance and fail to establish the reality of the customer experience.
- 79** Work scheduling is imprecise. Works orders list the nature of the complaint and schedule of rates codes are added on completion. There is no accurate information on job variations as a result. This does not help the repairs centre to schedule work for operatives, to identify capacity or to evaluate productivity. These are all elements in providing a high value service which cannot be determined at present.
- 80** Proportions of emergency, urgent or routine repairs do not align with best practice. Audit Commission guidance recommends ratios of 10:20:70 for emergency, urgent and routine repairs. Although these have improved during the first two years of operation from 12:38:50 in 2006/07 to 11:33:55 in 2007/08, the improvement is modest and there has not yet been a determined effort to ensure resources are used more effectively.
- 81** Systems for the collection of rechargeable repair charges are not robust. The amounts collected are reducing, from 41 per cent in 2006/07 to 36 per cent in 2007/08. Green Vale Homes does not know the cost of its collection activity. A draft procedure attempts to ensure consistency in charging and collection, and includes an appeals process. Green Vale Homes is not maximising its income.

---

<sup>13</sup> Green Vale Homes performance figures.

## How good is the service?

### Void repairs

- 82** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Performance and customer satisfaction are high in this area, the standard of empty properties is acceptable and changes are made in response to customer feedback. However, there is a high level of refusals at first offer, the use of decoration allowances has not been reviewed and some void processes are inefficient.
- 83** Void repairs are well organised and overall performance is generally positive. Works are done by a specialist multi-skilled team working to tight and monitored timescales. The most recent benchmarking data (2006/07) shows Green Vale Homes is among the best performers regionally. Performance has improved, with turn round times of 20 days at the end of 2007/08, compared to 22 days in 2006/07. The proportion of vacant properties is at 0.6 per cent in 2007/08 and void rent loss is 0.63 per cent. Average costs in 2006/07 were £1336 which reduced to £1152 in 2007/08. Prompt turnaround of void properties means applicants can have their re-housing needs met more quickly and rental income can be maximised.
- 84** The voids re-let standard provides clear guidelines for both staff and prospective tenants. The new standard is well publicised, provided to all applicants at accompanied viewings and specifies improved cleaning and environmental standards. Safety features, for example the fitting of wired smoke-alarms, are now routinely included in all re-let properties. However, only one customer was involved in the improvement team to review the standard and no recently rehoused tenants were consulted.
- 85** New tenants' satisfaction with their home is tested and used to improve. Levels of satisfaction are high, with an average score of 8.5 out of 10 in 2007/08. Green Vale Homes' response to dissatisfaction in the main is to rectify concerns in individual properties. Some service improvements, for example raising cleaning and gardening standards have been introduced when trends in customer dissatisfaction have been recognised. However despite the clear guidelines, three empty properties viewed by the inspection team did not meet the standard. Customers may not be receiving the publicised levels of service.
- 86** There are clear arrangements to deal with the security of void properties. Green Vale Homes risk assesses the use of security sheeting for void properties. There are few areas where security of empty properties is a major concern and the emphasis is on avoiding metal sheeting wherever possible. This has led to a reduction in costs of £2313.00 between 2006/07 to 2007/08. It also reduces the visual impact of empty properties in an area.
- 87** All new tenants are offered assistance to settle into their homes. All are offered up to four hours help provided by the in house 'helping hands' service. Practical help such as putting up curtains or fixing pictures helps tenants to quickly settle in to their new home and helps to promote a positive relationship with Green Vale Homes.

- 88** Kitchens in void properties are brought up to the minimum decent homes standard. Green Vale Homes, in consultation with tenants, has decided not to provide kitchens to the enhanced standards within the capital works programme on the grounds of equity. Kitchens to the agreed enhanced standards are installed if the programmed work is due shortly and full kitchen replacements are carried out in line with the agreed improvement programmes.
- 89** Green Vale Homes has not sought to improve affordability for new or existing tenants through using its energy procurement strength. Opportunities have so far been missed to negotiate favourable rates for new customers and to enhance the attractiveness of stock and its affordability for tenants.
- 90** The use of decoration allowances is traditional and approaches and controls have not yet been reviewed. Standard allowances, available as vouchers to spend at a variety of local suppliers, are agreed at accompanied viewings. In some cases for example where new customers are vulnerable or older, redecoration is done for them. However, there can be different interpretations by staff and the usefulness of cash or vouchers has not been assessed nor has the efficiency of procurement of vouchers. The average allowance awarded in 2007/08 was £79. Current arrangements may not be the most cost effective way of assisting customers and improving property standards.
- 91** A high proportion of properties are refused by applicants. Around 39.6 per cent of properties are refused when first offered and 14 per cent are accepted on the third offer or later. Green Vale Homes has not thoroughly examined why. There is generally high demand in the area. Examining reasons for refusals could lead to improved efficiency through reducing aborted work and could lead to improvements that can benefit customers.
- 92** Tenants have not fully informed developments in void property management. Satisfaction testing was only introduced in 2008/09, and no use is made of tenant inspections or mystery shopping despite the high rate of refusals. Green Vale Homes misses opportunities to ensure standards meet tenants' expectations.
- 93** Some void processes are inefficient. Technical and non-technical officers attempt to visit 100 per cent of properties in the notice period and a technical officer inspects 100 per cent once void repairs are completed. Given that a clear standard now directs the work of the specialist team and which is shared with the new tenant, the extent of inspections is excessive. Green Vale Homes has not examined the cost of all of its void processes and used this to improve value.

### **Gas servicing**

- 94** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The majority of gas appliances have a valid gas safety certificate, robust measures ensure access is obtained to properties in a timely manner and adequate quality checks are in place. However, there has been no work to ensure access at first visit and the IT system is cumbersome.

## How good is the service?

- 95 Green Vale Homes perform strongly in ensuring gas appliances are safe. There is a clear procedure in place. The number of outstanding gas services has reduced from 481 at June 2006 to two at March 2008. There is a robust system for storage and retrieval of gas safety certificates. Safety of tenants is prioritised.
- 96 Green Vale Homes ensures that systems are designed to gain early access to service appliances. Tenants are made aware of the importance of gas safety, with arrangements publicised through regular newsletter articles and a letter prior to the check which offers an appointment with 50 per cent of customers taking up this opportunity. The process starts two weeks in advance of the expiry date and this will be brought forward by a further four weeks next year. Follow up of non-access cases is robust, appropriate and timely using clear letters, cards and visits from estate staff, and the use of high visibility security tapes. This approach means that legal injunctions were used in only five cases in 2007/08.
- 97 Quality assurance systems are sound. An external provider has tested both administration and servicing. Several practices were highlighted for possible improvement and these were incorporated into the gas safety service review and improvement plan. These improvements have contributed to improved performance in completing gas servicing.
- 98 Gas servicing and maintenance costs are competitive. An in-house administrative and project team supported by a team of eight servicing engineers provide the service at an average cost of £119 per property per year. Satisfaction with servicing is monitored and in this financial year has averaged between 9.5 and 9.6 out of 10. This coupled with high completion rates of servicing represents good value for money.
- 99 The ICT system used is standalone and cumbersome. A spreadsheet based system is used to schedule and monitor work, and reports are generated through a web-based reporting facility linked to Blackburn and Darwen local authority, who provided the gas servicing prior to transfer. Green Vale Homes plans to rectify this with an integrated in-house system during 2009. The current system is fit for purpose but laborious involving the use of staff resources and carrying the inherent potential for data input errors associated with spreadsheets.
- 100 Incentives have not been introduced to encourage a prompt response to requests for access. At present approximately 65 per cent of customers give access for servicing at the first attempt and 87 per cent by second request, but much time is spent chasing those who do not. It is not known what level of improvement and increased value might be achieved by having an incentive scheme.

### **Aids and adaptations**

- 101 Strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Additional resources have been put in place, adaptations are carried out as part of the investment programme, and the inherited backlog of requests has been significantly reduced. Positive use is made of adapted properties in the allocations process. However some people are still waiting a significant length of time for adaptations. The service is not tightly managed and long term resource implications have not yet been fully identified.

- 102** The adaptations service is well promoted. A leaflet for customers supplements routine newsletter articles, website promotion, awareness raising at customer conferences, and coffee morning presentations at sheltered housing schemes. This ensures that people who need adaptations know what support is available and how to access it.
- 103** Green Vale Homes has committed significant resources to extend the assistance available. This reduced an historical backlog of adaptations, but waiting times are still too high. Non urgent work is funded by Green Vale Homes and carried out by RBC on their behalf, with a budget of £250,000 per year.
- 104** Adaptations are provided as part of the capital renewals programme. As the programme progresses and customer needs are discussed, adaptation requirements are identified. Works are then adjusted based on the assessment of the in-house occupational therapist (OT) and where necessary is re-specified to adaptation standards. This pro-actively addresses tenants' mobility needs and reduces disturbance.
- 105** Customer waiting times for assessments have been significantly reduced. The average waiting time for an assessment at transfer was 38 weeks and this is now four weeks. Green Vale Homes has funded an OT post to bring about this improvement. Customers receive an early indication of their eligibility for adaptations and an assessment of the work required.
- 106** Green Vale Homes is developing better information on its adapted properties. Some information is held about adaptations completed and this is being populated onto the housing management IT system. Information about the number of households assisted has not been consistently gathered but we viewed several case studies that demonstrated the very positive benefits for customers. Additionally, in just four cases it was realistically estimated that approximately £120,000 had been saved by moving tenants to suitably adapted properties. Tenants and new customers with adaptations needs are offered moves to existing adapted properties in some cases saving money and delivering timely solutions. Customers benefit from personal and tailored approaches to their needs.
- 107** Green Vale Homes inherited a significant backlog of adaptations. The local authority has limited resources to meet the level of funding needed to ensure all those who require them are provided with adaptations. Green Vale Homes has committed resources to assist in meeting these needs, which although it compares well with many other housing associations is not sufficient to meet local needs. Some tenants will not receive adaptations in a timely manner.
- 108** The time taken to complete adaptations is too long. At the time of inspection the average waiting time for a major adaptation was 429 days with six applicants waiting since 2006. Waiting times for assistance have a direct relationship with the resources available within both the Council and Green Vale Homes and although Green Vale Homes could point to examples of recent cases that were dealt with much sooner, some applicants have experienced lengthy waits for assistance.
- 109** Service standards are not comprehensive. They relate only to the assessment process and Green Vale Homes does not know whether their customers are satisfied with the completed work. Tenants are not closely involved in developing or monitoring the aids and adaptations service. This reflects only limited focus on outcomes for customers.

## How good is the service?

**110** Green Vale Homes has not used needs information to consider resource requirements over the medium-term. This information is available through a variety of sources; in-house customer profile data, tenant requirements gathered in advance of the capital programme and more comprehensively through the PCT and Council community health data. Almost a third of respondents to the 2007 STATUS survey stated that they require adaptations. It is clear that needs exceed currently available resources but current actions taken by Green Vale Homes and RBC will not address these needs adequately.

---

## Income Management

**111** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The level of arrears is low, tenants have a variety of options for rent payment and those in arrears receive a supportive service. The approach to income maximisation and debt advice is strong and customers benefit from sound working relationships with partner agencies. However rents collected are static over time and the collection of former tenants arrears is reducing.

**112** Rent collection performance is strong with arrears levels well within in the best 25 per cent of comparable organisations.<sup>14</sup> Current tenant arrears have reduced from 2.04 per cent in 2006/07 to 1.79 per cent in 2007/08 and have reduced in value by £15,000 during 2007/08. There are clear corporate policies and procedures for writing off debt, with a total of £133,000 written off since transfer. Green Vale Homes is ensuring that income is maximised.

**113** Tenants have easy access to the service, and a wide range of flexible payment options. These include direct debit, payments by phone 24 hours a day, swipe card, card transfer and the post office and other Allpay outlets. Green Vale Homes understands the costs of rent collection and the numbers of tenants using different methods of payment. The cheapest method (direct debit) is promoted on repair receipts. This enables tenants to access the service and pay their rent in a way which suits them best.

**114** A rent payment culture is promoted in a variety of ways. As well as leaflets and newsletters, opportunities are taken within the sign up process to stress the importance of rent payment, carry out benefit checks and take the first week's rent if applicable. Tenants are made fully aware of their responsibility to pay their rent on time.

**115** Appropriate mechanisms are in place to collect charges from leaseholders, and tenants of garages and garage plots. Green Vale Homes has 102 leaseholders, with an annual debit of £19,000. This is invoiced annually in September, with the same range of payment options as offered to tenants. At the the end of September 2008, £2923.94 was outstanding, an arrears level of 15 per cent. There were no garage arrears. Green Vale Homes is maximising income from these sources.

---

<sup>14</sup>Former Housing Corporation Data. Appendix 1.

- 116** Service charges are not currently depooled. The transfer agreement guaranteed that this would not happen for the first five years. Green Vale Homes does know the costs of service provision, the majority of which relates to gardening and caretaking services. Preparatory actions to depool charges are currently under discussion at senior management team. In the meantime all tenants will be paying for services that only some tenants receive.
- 117** A supportive approach is taken to tenants in arrears. There are requirements for personal contact at an early stage and tenants are offered independent advice. Services are tailored to individual needs where vulnerabilities are known. The approach consists of staged escalation procedures, monitored by management on a monthly basis where all arrears over £400 are considered, and supported by IT prompts and system generated letters. This emphasis on tenancy sustainment in an area with high levels of deprivation has resulted in a reduction in the number of court orders from 183 in 2006/07 to 134 in 2007/08. Evictions however remain static at 20 in both years and are above average for comparable organisations. Tenants are generally supported to remain in their tenancies.
- 118** Green Vale Homes has a positive and proactive approach to income maximisation. This is underpinned by a financial inclusion strategy and partnership working to share information and good practice, for example within the East Lancashire RSL financial inclusion group. Green Vale Homes actively promote benefit entitlement within rent statements, the newsletter and leaflets sent out with arrears letters, and takes part in targeted take-up campaigns. Tenants are assisted to maximise their incomes.
- 119** Tenants benefit from positive partnership working with local agencies. Green Vale Homes provides funding to the CAB of £10,000 per year and in the first quarter of 2008/9, 78 tenants were seen, with £26,000 in additional income generated for five families. Green Vale Homes also provides a local credit union with a guarantee of £10,000 to underwrite loans given. Over 300 Green Vale Homes tenants participate in this scheme and since its inception in December 2006 loans to the value of £70,000 have been allocated. Relationships are enhanced by regular meetings which ensure that issues and trends are identified, performance and outcomes monitored. Tenants are able to benefit from specialist advice and assistance.
- 120** Tenants benefit from sound working relationships with the Housing Benefit (HB) Department and the outsourced provider of the service. Good relationships have led to some positive outcomes, such as the weekly notification to Green Vale Homes of tenants with suspended benefit, and negotiation of earlier bulk payments to ensure more accuracy in rent accounts. Housing staff are also able to verify documents for HB. This means that in an area where 54 per cent of tenants receive help from Housing Benefit to pay their rent, income is maximised for both tenants and Green Vale Homes.
- 121** No alternatives to possession are in place. Although Green Vale Homes actively encourages and supports tenants to apply for variations to court orders where their incomes change, tenants in arrears have no alternative to losing their home if they do not make arrangements to clear debts.

## How good is the service?

**122** The collection rate of former tenants' arrears (FTAs) is reducing. Rates have fallen from 19.7 per cent in 2006/07 to 13.47 per cent in 2007/8 and to 7.78 per cent for 2008/09 to date. There is a procedure for the collection of FTAs with a dedicated officer, standard letters and the use of two external agencies, with both paid on a commission basis for money collected. A more robust monitoring procedure is now in place to measure the effectiveness of these agencies but there is still limited information on performance on FTAs to indicate the effectiveness of current procedures. Potential income for Green Vale Homes from FTAs is not being maximised.

### Tenancy Management (Anti-social behaviour and enforcement)

- 123** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Preventative approaches and robust partnership working are leading to positive outcomes for customers and increasing the sustainability of neighbourhoods. Tenants are aware of the stance taken to deal with anti-social behaviour and a focus on diversionary activities is proving effective. However, there has been no analysis of the most effective interventions.
- 124** Green Vale Homes has a robust approach to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) which places emphasis on prevention and behaviour change. There is a comprehensive anti-social behaviour strategy and policy which sets out the organisation's approach, including cases of hate crime, and is supplemented by a separate policy relating to domestic violence. Green Vale Homes focus on early intervention, prevention and partnership working. Delivery is supported by generic and specialist resources and through partnership working. ASB complainants report high levels of satisfaction with the responses provided by Green Vale Homes. This has increased from 8.9 out of 10 for 2007/8 to 9.14 for 2008/9 to date. Positive actions are helping to create sustainable communities.
- 125** Green Vale Homes actively promotes the government's Respect Standard for housing management. Green Vale Homes signed up to the Respect Standard for Housing Management in May 2007. A self assessment was completed against the standard resulting in an action plan of 25 actions of which 19 are complete. Actions to further strengthen the approach against the Respect standard are integrated into the ASB strategy. Opportunities were taken to promote this on a tour of estates, 'Making a Difference' establishing customers' views of ASB and their preferred approaches to it.
- 126** Partners make a contribution to the Respect Standard and promote community integration through a range of positive and intergenerational activities. These include youth drop in and music sessions, an intergenerational project covering local history, including the production of a DVD and culminating in a street party with attendance of over 100 people, sports coaching, football training and tournaments and promotion of a cheerleading group. Green Vale Homes contribute to RBC's Streetwise programme exploring the respect agenda with primary school children. Community cohesion is promoted with partners in a variety of ways including a redecoration and art project and gardening work. This shows Green Vale Homes' ongoing commitment to this area of work.

- 127** Tenants are aware of Green Vale Homes stance on ASB. Tenancy agreements set out clearly the tenant's responsibilities around ASB, violence, racial harassment and drugs. All new tenants are placed on a Starter Tenancy for a 12 month 'probation' period before moving to an assured tenancy. A range of publicity is provided including leaflets and newsletter items report successful interventions. Out-of-hours arrangements enable customers to report ASB and receive advice. This service is promoted through leaflets and fridge magnets although take up is low at five calls since April 2008. Customers are aware of the stance Green Vale Homes take on ASB and the actions and outcomes of their activities.
- 128** Green Vale Homes provides an appropriate level of resources for ASB initiatives. All cases are dealt with initially by estate management officers (EMOs), who have access to a dedicated ASB officer who provides specialist advice and intervention. Green Vale Homes has funded both longer term projects such as the family centre and Groundwork activities, and one off projects such as the provision of hanging baskets. Green Vale Homes monitors the use of the funded activities. For example during 2007, 48 service users at the family centre lived in Green Vale Homes homes and accessed services such as parent/toddlers and playgroup, family support, Happy Club and the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder support group. This approach supports community interventions.
- 129** A focus on prevention and early intervention is proving effective. Preventative and diversionary activities have had a positive impact on levels of reported ASB and damage. Police statistics available for four indicate an overall reduction in reported cases of ASB from 928 in 2006/7 to 767 in 2007/8 to 302 in 2008/09 to date, and in criminal damage from 211 to 177 to 65 in the same years. A range of support is offered to victims, witnesses and perpetrators by both staff and referrals to support agencies. Customers receive support appropriate to their needs and communities benefit from these activities.
- 130** Green Vale Homes has carried out work to establish the effectiveness of activities. Surveys in five ASB hotspots identified concerns people had about the area they lived in and how they felt local agencies could address these. Inter-agency working with regular meetings to monitor activities and target specific issues, has been used to address these concerns. A follow up survey a year later indicated that in one area the percentage of people who felt very safe had increased from 56 per cent to 69 per cent and in three other areas perceptions of areas feeling unsafe had reduced by between 1 per cent and 5.5 per cent, with a bigger reduction around some particular issues such as off road vehicle nuisance reducing from 33 per cent to 7 per cent, crime and drugs from 25 per cent to 16 per cent and noise nuisance from 46 per cent to 8 per cent. Monitoring these results ensures resources are directed effectively.
- 131** Individual ASB cases are well managed. Positive use is made of specialist software both to record actions and activities and to ensure progression of cases. Case files inspected indicated thorough recording of action, compliance with procedures, partnership working, best practice approaches and support for vulnerable tenants. Cases are closed appropriately, with management review and approval and in agreement with the complainant. Green Vale Homes and customers can be assured that an effective service is provided.

## How good is the service?

- 132** Green Vale Homes is involved in partnership working. Green Vale Homes is an active member of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership at both strategic and operational levels. There is clear evidence of partnership working with a variety of agencies such as Groundwork Trust, police, family centre, and RBC. These partners appreciate the contribution and support Green Vale Homes gives to initiatives and point to examples of their positive and proactive approach. Green Vale Homes provide office bases and other venues for some partner agencies, allowing them to operate within communities where they are offering services. Individual partner agencies can point to many positive outcomes for individuals and families ranging from re-establishing school attendance and improved parenting to reductions in re-offending. Co-ordinated approaches to issues of ASB are proving effective.
- 133** Positive outcomes are achieved in the use of a local mediation service. Green Vale Homes provides funding of £1,000 per annum plus £300 per case referred. In 2007/08, 14 cases were referred to mediation, with 50 per cent successfully resolved. This is a cost effective way to resolve disputes. Green Vale Homes will follow up cases that are unable to be resolved to consider other options for action. Tenants are supported to find solutions to neighbour disputes.
- 134** Green Vale Homes uses a range of enforcement activities both themselves and in partnership with the police. There are appropriate monitoring and reporting mechanisms for these. In 2007/08 a total of 35 actions were taken including one eviction, eight acceptable behaviour contracts, two Anti-Social Behaviour orders and one injunction. Robust action is taken when necessary.
- 135** There are minor weaknesses in the approach to ASB as follows.
- Target timescales for responses to ASB complaints are not always met. Response times of one day, three days and 15 days relate to the severity of the report, and for 2007/08 these have been 92 per cent responded to in one day, 83 per cent within the three day target and 90 per cent within the 15 day target.
  - There is no structured tenant involvement in the development of ASB activities and strategies, although reports are provided to area panels and tenant and resident associations.

---

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 136** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Operating costs compare well. Significant efficiency savings in key areas are reinvested back into service improvements. Economies of scale offered by the group are being used well particularly in the capital contracts. The value for money culture is improving but still needs further development particularly in delivering the strategy and related action plan, re-structuring services and carrying out process reviews to deliver improvements in cost and efficiency. The adaptations service provided by the Council has not been thoroughly reviewed to ensure it provides value for money.

---

### How do costs compare?

- 137** Green Vale Homes operating costs compare well with other LSVTs. The total core housing management cost per property (including overheads) was £552 for 2006/07 which ranks 13 out of 39 similar organisations.<sup>15</sup>
- 138** Tenancy and estate management costs are also low, at 11 out of 39, with a cost of £118 per home in management. When comparing overhead costs as a percentage of frontline staff costs, Green Vale Homes ranks even better, at 6 out of 31 organisations. It is known that costs increased in the second year of operation (2007/08) by about 4.5 per cent, the major increases occurring in responsive repairs and tenancy management which reflect tenants' priorities.
- 139** Performance in some key areas compares well with similar organisations. Several performance indicators (2006/07) show improvement for example, the level of vacant dwellings, re-let times and rent arrears place Green Vale Homes among the best performing LSVTs in the north and within the top 25 per cent within the former Housing Corporation data. Customer satisfaction does not compare quite as well, but at 79 per cent overall satisfaction is close to the mean for northern LSVTs (81 per cent). Satisfaction with opportunities to participate at 76 per cent compares with a mean for the group of 78 per cent. These indicators reflect the year after transfer of the failing service. Considering this alongside relatively low costs indicates that value for money is positive.

---

### How is value for money managed?

- 140** There is a developing awareness of value for money (VFM). A revised, robust and updated group VFM Strategy covers the five strands of service reviews, growth/selling Services/maximising capacity within the Group, partnering, use of consortia/consultants and effective procurement. This is supplemented by an action plan and performance indicators. Action is taken to embed a value for money culture within the organisation through recent training and staff able to identify VFM savings in their areas of operation. This ensures that emphasis is given to VFM in all areas of work.
- 141** Green Vale Homes has exceeded its efficiency targets. New efficiency gains of £1.3 million in 2006/07 were achieved, exceeding the target of £0.8 million. A total of £3.1 million savings were achieved when including recurring gains from 2005/06. Targets of new savings of £1.3 million for 2007/08, and total savings of £4 million including the previous two years recurring savings are on target to be achieved. This ensures resources are available to fund things that matter most to tenants.
- 142** Green Vale Homes has reviewed the operation of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) it had with the local authority. At transfer one SLA was in place covering IT services. This has subsequently been reviewed with services brought in-house realising savings totalling approximately £110,000. These savings have contributed to lower operating costs.

---

<sup>15</sup> Housemark LSVT benchmarking.

## How good is the service?

- 143** Some important savings have been achieved within capital works contracts. Procurement of the capital contracts by the group brought benefits of scale that would not be available to Green Vale Homes on its own. The scale of the capital contracts has enabled the main partner to waive annual increases to contract sums in each of the last two years which has delivered approximately £240,000 in savings. Benefits have also been spread to the group by renegotiating target prices for all capital contracts. Savings made are identified for Decent Homes plus elements and environmental improvements. Green Vale Homes is delivering cost savings which it uses to extend benefits for customers.
- 144** Capital contracts are well focused on cost and performance. After the first year of operation it became clear that one of the two capital partners offered significantly better value, and the decision taken to transfer work from one partner to the other. Over the three remaining years of the programme an estimated £695,000 will be saved. The group has framework agreements with several other partners and this reduces risks of contract failure with this partner. It is clear that the major programmes are closely managed and deliver value for money.
- 145** Several benefits provided by the increased scale of the group are being delivered. The transfer into the Trans Pennine group has delivered efficiencies from shared services and overheads in the region of £648,000. For example, the group insurance policy has been renegotiated saving approximately £100,000 over a three year period.
- 146** A variety of smaller efficiency savings have been made, some of which have been identified by staff members. These include:
- re-tendering the printing service saved £16,000;
  - submitting court cases on line has reduced costs from £150 to £100 per case and in 2007/08 saved £4,700;
  - re-tendering the fire equipment maintenance contract saved £2,500; and
  - provision of cameras and camera telephones in vehicles to mitigate insurance claims or provide evidence in the event of accidents or dispute has contributed to the reduction in the groups insurance bill. Overall Insurance costs reduced by £95,000 across the Group, and a further £50,000 has been saved in 2008/09.
- 147** Opportunities have been taken to procure goods and services efficiently. At transfer a review of commodities and consumables was carried out. Procurement activities since then have generated in the region of £155,000 savings. In addition Green Vale Homes uses a regional partnership for the supply of its central heating boilers. This has brought a per unit saving of £100 which will deliver £120,000 in savings. The purchase of repairs stores and components benefits from an alliance with a local housing group. The alliance allows Green Vale Homes to benefit from greater purchasing strength through scale, and although not benchmarked it provides the potential for reduced costs. Savings can be directed to priority areas of the business.

**148** There is market testing in some areas, as follows.

- Green Vale Homes inherited the in-house repairs provider at transfer and has carried out an independent assessment of vfm, which indicated that costs were 4 per cent below market levels in 2006. Since then there has been no increase in the schedule of rates costs and the service has not been assessed as a business risk
- Within Pennine 2000 a project was undertaken on void repairs. The introduction of Choice based lettings meant that a number properties previously held void could now be let. Four contractors were identified to undertake the work one of which was the in house team of Green Vale Homes and an evaluation was undertaken, which indicated that Green Vale Homes provided the lowest cost for the works.

**149** The updated service review programme is not well developed at present. Green Vale Homes has concentrated on delivery of its capital programme but has yet to fundamentally review each of its services to maximise value and its ability to deliver upon customer commitments. A draft review programme and guide was nearing completion while the inspection was taking place but to date there has been no formal strategic risk based approach to these.

**150** Completed service reviews are not well informed by service costs. Improvement projects fail to analyse the costs of existing and proposed ways of working. There is a developing awareness of the costs of processes, evidenced by the plans for future restructuring and a new appointment in the group to provide a business development function. To date process costs have not been sufficiently challenged.

**151** Not all areas of work have been assessed for cost effectiveness. The local authority currently carries out all adaptations work whether funded by it or Green Vale Homes. Whilst this work is competitively tendered no assessment has been made whether this provides a cost effective service.

**152** Some processes are costly and do not deliver the intended benefits. Some, such as the voids process involve several staff at various stages including 100 per cent pre and post inspections and despite this we found in several cases that ready to let properties did not meet the published standard. In some cases it cannot be demonstrated that processes are efficient and effective

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

---

## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 153** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Promises made to tenants at transfer are being met. Homes are improved in line with plans and commitments to tenants. There is increasing satisfaction with services, key performance indicators are improving and investment is providing additional services for customers. But there are some areas where progress is limited and where customer focus is lacking.
- 154** Green Vale Homes is making good progress in delivering its twelve transfer commitments. Actions have been taken on all the commitments with further improvements and activities forming part of the overall improvement planning process. There is regular reporting to both tenants and Board on this progress with key indicators relating to each promise showing the progress made.
- 155** Green Vale Homes has been proactive in establishing and responding to customer priorities, and has redirected resources into areas that deliver outcomes for customers. These include additional front line staff, additional capacity of £67,000<sup>16</sup> to support the robust approach to ASB, providing additional staff and funding for diversionary activities, additional resources for resident involvement of £45,000<sup>17</sup>, delivery of a decent homes plus programme, provision of a 'helping hand' handy person service, additional funding for adaptations, and positive outcomes from financial inclusion activities. Customers have benefited from these approaches to service improvement.
- 156** Performance in some key areas compares well with similar organisations. Several performance indicators (see Appendix 1) show improvement. For example performance on the level of vacant dwellings, re-let times and rent arrears place Green Vale Homes among the best performing associations in the north.
- 157** Customers are more satisfied with the services provided. Green Vale Homes carries out a range of satisfaction surveys in individual service areas, and the 2006/07 STATUS survey identified that 76 per cent of customers were satisfied with the repairs and maintenance service. This however was below average compared to similar organisations in the north. Internal monitoring shows scores on a scale of 1 to 10 with ten being excellent and satisfaction levels average nine in the 2008/09 year to-date. The different mechanisms for measuring satisfaction mean that it is difficult to compare over time at this stage, however satisfaction ratings for specific services show improvement.

---

<sup>16</sup> GVH Two year VFM review

<sup>17</sup> Ditto

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

**158** Improvements have delivered a range of positive outcomes for tenants. These include:

- financial inclusion and debt advice provision through local agencies, generating £26,000 additional income for tenants in the first quarter of 2007/08;
- a coordinated multi-agency response and investment in tackling anti-social behaviour; and
- investment work has had a positive impact on the sustainability of local communities. There is decent homes compliance of 67 per cent with projected full compliance in 2010 and a range of environmental and boundary wall works have been carried out. This has resulted in improvements to the condition of properties and local estates.

**159** The direction of travel of KPIs is positive. Green Vale Homes performance is in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations in relet times, percentage of vacant dwellings, and levels of current arrears <sup>18</sup> Overall customer satisfaction does not compare as well, but at 79 per cent overall satisfaction is close to the mean for northern LSVTs (81 per cent). Satisfaction with opportunities to participate at 76 per cent compares with a mean for the group of 78 per cent and an improvement on the 52 per cent recorded in the 2004 STATUS survey when the service was managed by RBC. These reflect improved performance and perceptions of services.

**160** There are some areas, such as the provision of major adaptations, telephone answering, and the completion of routine repairs where progress is limited. These areas have received little attention to date, and not been sufficiently challenged to improve.

**161** Green Vale Homes lacks customers focus in some key areas. It lacks profile information to fully understand both the make-up and needs of customers and telephone answering is poor. This limits the ability of the organisation to understand customer needs and the impact of its services.

---

### How well does the service manage performance?

**162** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is co-ordinated improvement planning, a focus on performance management and an appropriate range of reporting. There is evidence of learning from within and outside the group. There are a number of areas where further development is needed such as the service review programme, customer involvement in the assessment and development of services, and the level of detail in performance reports.

---

<sup>18</sup> Former HC performance comparators-Northern HAs 2006/07.

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

- 163** Green Vale Homes has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve. This is articulated through the vision, business plan, and the transfer commitments that were made to customers. As well as providing high quality services to customers, the vision includes community integration and tackling social exclusion, with an ambition for further growth and development once service delivery improvements are embedded. Plans currently reflect customer priorities as identified pre transfer and in various consultation events. This ensures Green Vale Homes targets work in areas that make a difference to customers and communities.
- 164** The approach to business planning and continuous improvement is coordinated within the organisation. The annual planning process is timely: The process starts in November, ensuring planned activities can be resourced, budgeted and included in business plan projections. There are clear links from the business plan through SIPs to team plans. Additional plans such as respect and KLOE action plans are referenced within them and where plans cover two areas they are cross referenced. Actions against plans are monitored at team, operational, SMT and board level. This ensures the organisation has the ability to deliver what it sets out to achieve within the business plan.
- 165** Plans are developed using a range of mechanisms, including the use of external consultants, demographic information, assessments against Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) and Audit Commission good practice, learning from other organisations, input from staff at all levels and some consultation with tenants. They incorporate actions to achieve national objectives, such as the Respect Standard, and ensure compliance with best practice.
- 166** Targets are set in line with business and team priorities for individual staff members at annual appraisals. Staff are given information about the performance management structure within Green Vale Homes and their performance is monitored on a regular basis. This provides clarity and direction for staff and ensures their work is focussed on areas that reflect wider service priorities.
- 167** Leadership is shown by the senior management team and Board, and from the Trans-Pennine Housing Group. Leadership is reflected in the approach to communication, addressing difficult decisions and providing a clear vision for the future. Difficult decisions have been taken where budget constraints affect the ability to deliver improved services in all areas. The Board provides an appropriate level of challenge, querying performance targets and performance, and identifying areas where they require improvement. A clear lead is given to the direction of Green Vale Homes.
- 168** Appropriate arrangements are in place for target setting. Targets are set as part of the business planning process and consider existing performance, comparative performance using quartile information, and challenge from senior managers. Target proposals for headline performance indicators are aligned to budgeted spend and are challenged and approved by Board. Performance is clearly monitored against targets throughout the year. However some targets are not challenging, specifically in the areas of re-let times and income collection. Nevertheless, the majority of targets set are realistic but challenging and should drive forward service improvement.

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

- 169** Adequate and timely information is available to the Board to support performance management. Performance reports cover key priority areas with a range of reports used to monitor performance at individual, team, operational and organisation level with appropriate high level reporting to the board and further high level reports to the group board. A variety of information including KPIs, financial and tenant satisfaction information and commentaries to reports provide a range of information to help inform decisions and progress. This is supplemented by an annual performance report with benchmarked and comparative information. This ensures that the Board is aware of performance and other key issues when taking decisions.
- 170** There is an adequate level of performance reporting to customers. Performance information is reported to area committees and other tenant and resident groups. An annual summary is included within the tenants' newsletter against the transfer promises and some headline indicators. However some gaps remain. To date customers have received no information on compliance with service standards and information provided on various service areas via the newsletter does not include comparator performance. However, tenants are generally able to identify how Green Vale Homes are performing in key areas.
- 171** Green Vale Homes is learning from other organisations and this is embedded in continuous improvement processes. Links have been made to other organisations within the sector. Examples of learning relate to performance management, the development of the customer focus action plan, the development of the lettable standard, the use of repair receipts to provide additional information to tenants, and the development of community gardens. The organisation is a member of a national benchmarking organisation which is also used to access good practice. This ensures services are developing in line with best practice.
- 172** There is evidence of learning within the Trans-Pennine Housing Group and internal communications are effective. Senior managers meet regularly with their peers to share information. There is evidence of the group benefiting from the expertise and progress made within Green Vale Homes for example with the voids process and the reciprocal arrangements for sharing staff with expertise in dealing with ASB. Shared learning can lead to improvements.
- 173** There are appropriate arrangements for the management of risk within the organisation. A robust group-wide risk management strategy, identifies organisation specific risks analysed by likelihood and impact. Board members have considered risk and a Business Continuity Plan is under development. This approach helps to reduce the likelihood of service failure.

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

- 174** The service review programme is not well developed at present. There is no programme of prioritised reviews to fundamentally review each service to maximise value and the ability to deliver upon customer commitments. Two reviews were identified within the transfer promises. The resident involvement review is complete, with an accompanying action plan showing activities complete and in progress. Sheltered housing was also identified as a priority area where there were potential efficiency gains, the need to ensure sheltered housing was fit for purpose for the future and to ensure a contingency plan was in place if Supporting People funding was removed. The review of this service is in progress and being conducted in a comprehensive manner. Green Vale Homes have identified the next two reviews as aids and adaptations and access arrangements. A draft review programme and guide was nearing completion while the inspection was taking place but it is a weakness that this is not further advanced at this stage.
- 175** Not all action plans are SMART or comprehensive. Although plans identify anticipated outcomes there is no indication in some of how these will be measured or how Green Vale Homes will know they have been achieved. For activities with a long completion date there are no milestone activities included. These weaknesses will make it hard for Green Vale Homes to know if it is on target to achieve the aims of the improvement plans, identify slippage or measure success.
- 176** Satisfaction monitoring is underdeveloped, and it is difficult to make comparisons over time. For example the STATUS survey which gives a robust overall satisfaction measure was last completed in 2006/07, and more recent satisfaction surveys have concentrated on specific elements in the services. Green Vale Homes cannot accurately assess how much progress is being made in this area.
- 177** The involvement of tenants in auditing services is underdeveloped. The organisation benefits from being able to access tenant auditors from within the group to increase the independence of the feedback. The initial report related to access to services and resulted in recommendations and an action plan to ensure learning from these exercises is taken forward. A programme of work is in place to take this forward which should ensure that services are improved in line with customer feedback.
- 178** There are some weaknesses in the performance monitoring reports. There is inconsistent use of benchmarking information in performance monitoring. Benchmarking information is not used consistently in reports and there is no indication of the source of data or the point in time to which this refers. There is a lack of historical performance information included in performance reports to measure movement over time. Reporting on diversity is recent and targets have not been set for all areas, with some definitions of areas monitored needing clarification. There is no reporting on telephone answering performance and timescales within which tenants are seen in offices within the customer services report, and within income management relating only to rental income. Staff and board will not be able to assess their performance in all areas and in comparison to others or over time.

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

- 179** Some areas of project management are under developed. In particular expectations are not always clearly set out at the commencement of improvement initiatives with measures put in place to establish the success and completion of the initiative. Training has recently been delivered for managers and includes project management approaches however. These weaker elements in Green Vale Homess approach reduce its ability to deliver intended benefits.
- 180** Green Vale Homes have been in protracted negotiations with a local Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) but this has not resulted in any positive change in over two years. It is clear that several points of tension exist however the TMO has been funded and supported by Green Vale Homes to the value of approximately £20,000 per annum since transfer without clear expectations of outcomes or any measures of value.

---

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 181** Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Governance, human resource, financial management and training are strong. Staff are knowledgeable and focussed on improving services. Approaches to procurement are underdeveloped.
- 182** Staff at Green Vale Homes are well motivated, knowledgeable and focussed on improving services. Staff suggestions for improvement are encouraged and acted on and in a recent staff survey 92 per cent of staff stated they feel proud to work for Green Vale Homes. A suggestion to deliver health and safety training in house has proved successful, helping to develop a health and safety function across the group, and personal development for the Health and Safety team Repair operatives were among the most positive and particularly welcomed staff health and welfare initiatives that include a company funded preventative healthcare scheme. This helps to ensure that staff deliver an effective service.
- 183** Management have addressed areas of concern in the staff perception survey. One-to-ones are now carried out for all staff, information is made widely available through a regular newsletter, SMT attend team meetings on a regular basis, spend time with individual staff members and have recently introduced a 'big ears' scheme to encourage feedback from staff and to ensure pro-activity in these activities.
- 184** Green Vale Homes has additional capacity as a result of group membership. This includes access to a specialist human resources team, with specialist advice on pensions, staff disputes, sickness and absenteeism which normally would not beaffordable to an organisation of this size. Information and skills are shared at all levels, there is an ability to compare performance, shared costs of backroom services, staff secondments, access to development funding, with plans to revise the group SMT structure to further enhance group working.

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

- 185** Governance of the association is robust. The Board has a reasonable skills mix and board members are assisted to carry out their functions in a variety of ways. There is a range of training opportunities and an induction programme, with a consultant used to carry out independent individual appraisals. There are also a number of awaydays where members meet to discuss and identify strategic issues. There are links within the group structure that ensure Green Vale Homes Board members are aware of and can influence matters within the group. Board members give effective oversight and management to Green Vale Homes services.
- 186** There are developed plans for upgrading the inadequate IT system. Full implementation is targeted for 2009 with a phased introduction in priority areas in advance of this. Several key upgrades to parts of the IT infrastructure are already in place. A project team is in place using project management methodology which should ensure timely delivery. Staff will be assisted to work more effectively.
- 187** There are robust budget management arrangements. Finance officers work closely with budget holders to provide assistance in managing budgets and there are adequate monitoring arrangements in place. There are appropriate financial planning arrangements.
- 188** Green Vale Homes has an effective approach to managing human resources .Overall staff turnover is high in comparison to other similar organisations. <sup>19</sup> Running at 6.75 per cent at the time of inspection this is projected to be around 13 per cent by year end. This is a reflection of the relatively high age profile and some new approaches that are still bedding in. When assessing these against the number of staff voluntarily leaving Green Vale Homes this reduces to 3.7 per cent this year. Sickness levels have reduced considerably since transfer. At transfer on average 6.15 per cent of available working days were lost to sickness. Through a variety of firm management and supportive approaches this has been reduced to 3.92 per cent at inspection. This is a particularly important contributor to improved capacity especially in the context of a small workforce.
- 189** Work to integrate TUPE transferred staff into the group and to harmonise terms and conditions has had very positive results. Negotiation and consultative forums were set up at transfer in several areas and these have been maintained into standing forum structures for the group for example, the employees' forum, the health and safety forum and strategic training forum. Each has assisted in harmonising approaches and in sharing and spreading learning. For example the strategic training group has recently overseen improvements in the appraisal process and the joint negotiation committee helped rationalise terms and conditions and a move away from national conditions to local bargaining. These are important and difficult changes to deliver and Green Vale Homes has achieved them whilst engaging staff effectively. This has contributed to a very positive company culture.

---

<sup>19</sup> NW Housemark benchmarking data

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

- 190** Training for staff has been prioritised. Training records exist for all staff covering a mixture of compulsory and tailored opportunities identified through appraisal or line-manager contact. The range is comprehensive and evidently focused on improving staff effectiveness. The group infrastructure has been usefully applied here with input from the HR team coordinating and evaluating the training. A sizeable training budget, £45,000 in the current year is likely to be overspent. Middle managers have been targeted for specific training to assist them to contribute to service improvement. Over £7,000 is budgeted for leadership management training and awards as well as project management training. This recognises the contribution of this tier of management to improving services for customers. Green Vale Homes is ensuring that staff are well equipped to deliver improved services.
- 191** Staff are recognised for their achievements. Staff who receive compliments receive a voucher and cards. The recently introduced 'tip top' scheme offers opportunities to make suggestions for the improvement of services and to recognise staff nominated by colleagues as providing exceptional service. An example of this is the introduction of 'concern cards' available to be completed by operatives where they have a concern about a tenant or tenancy and which allows follow up action and where appropriate referral to other agencies. This approach supports staff to improve services.
- 192** Green Vale Homes is a member of local and strategic partnerships with positive working relationships at the local level. There are positive working relationships with RBC at officer and member levels in areas such as neighbourhood management and joint working in the 'Streetwise scheme' <sup>20</sup> and the support given by RBC to initiatives to further develop social rented housing in the area. Green Vale Homes are active members of the Local Strategic partnership. Co-operative working relationships deliver benefits for customers.
- 193** Green Vale Homes has used additional funding from partners to benefit customers. Although small in scale, a £5,000 grant from the associations funder has been used to benefit communities through the provision of places for disengaged young people on the 'Livin it' Project which was a residential outward bound course, and also to fund communal gardening projects. Discussions are currently underway with the funders community section to help fund a local community project 'the family centre' which will provide support and assistance to vulnerable families. By accessing available grants Green Vale Homes is extending the support it can provide for communities.
- 194** A consistent and coordinated approach to procurement is not in place within the organisation. To date the focus has been on the largest areas of spend within the improvement programme. There is a recently agreed and updated Trans-Pennine Housing Group procurement strategy, which is accompanied by a robust action plan with objectives to achieve further consistency across the Group, reduce costs, ensure effective planning and monitoring, supplier management and a customer focus. There is no procedure manual in place to inform other staff who may have different approaches to cost and quality issues. This means potential savings or gains in quality are not consistent across the association.

---

<sup>20</sup> working in local schools to promote sustainable communities.

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

195 Only limited attention has been given to wider procurement benefits. Capital contracts have standard clauses encouraging local labour and training and benchmarking in the WYSPA group indicates that for 2007/08 Green Vale Homes performed best at the percentage of labour living within the local authority area at 55 per cent. However, contractor requirements have not been closely monitored and Green Vale Homes is not driving additional benefits for example in terms of training and apprenticeships and in encouraging opportunities for long term employment.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

## 1 Performance Indicators and Comparative Information for the year to 31 March 2007

**Table 2**

Performance Indicator	2004/ 2005	200 / 2006	2006/ 2007	2006/07 Comparison Group Mean	2006/07 Comparison Group Median	2006/07 Quartile Position in Comparison Group
Stock Failing Decent Home Standard	-	71.2 per cent	58.9 per cent	12.9 per cent	8.9 per cent	4
Average GN SAP rating	-	67	64	68	68	3
Routine repairs completed in target	-	-	88.3 per cent	94.6 per cent	96.3 per cent	4
Vacant Dwellings	-	-	1.2 per cent	2.7 per cent	2.2 per cent	1
Vacant General Needs Dwellings	-	-	0.7 per cent	2.5 per cent	1.6 per cent	1
Re-let time (all managed stock)	-	-	25.8 days	38.5 days	38.9 days	1
GN Re-let time (for managed stock)	-	-	24.6 days	39.8 days	38.9 days	1
Current tenant arrears at FYE	-	-	2.0 per cent	5.1 per cent	4.8 per cent	1
Tenant satisfaction overall	-	-	79 per cent	83 per cent	83 per cent	3
Tenant satisfaction with participation	-	-	60 per cent	65 per cent	65 per cent	3
Tenants satisfied with repairs and maintenance	-	-	76 per cent	79 per cent	78 per cent	3
Shared owner satisfaction overall	-	-	-	70 per cent	-	-

The former Housing Corporation data for all northern Housing Associations with stock between 1,000 and 5,000 properties.

# Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - focus groups with staff and tenants;
  - interviews with staff and partners;
  - viewing property improvements and repairs;
  - inspection of ready to let properties;
  - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
  - observation at repairs contact centre;
  - tour of the housing stock;
  - talking to tenants;
  - various file checks;
  - review of Housing Association’s website and leaflets; and
  - mystery shopping.

# Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

## **Provision of handyman service to new tenants**

- 1** New tenants are offered the service of the in house handy man to assist in the installation of curtain track, shelving etc. Every new tenant is offered up to four hours assistance and to date 18 per cent have taken up the offer. This helps tenants settle in and creates a positive relationship with Green Vale Homes

## **Use of 'Concern Cards' by operatives**

- 2** Arising out of the Respect training undertaken by all staff at Green Vale Homes a suggestion was made that where operatives (or any staff member ) had a concern about the tenancy or tenant/families there should be a mechanism for this to be recorded and actioned. The introduction of these cards early in 2008 has to date resulted in three expressions of concern, two of which have been discussed and referred to partner agencies.

---

# The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

---

## Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

---