

Pathfinder Inspection Report

Summary

July 2004

West Dunbartonshire Council



1. Introduction

The role of Communities Scotland

- 1.1 Communities Scotland is responsible for the inspection of all Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and the landlord, homelessness and factoring services of all local authorities. We inspected West Dunbartonshire Council between December 2003 and January 2004. This summary report sets out the main findings from our inspection.

West Dunbartonshire Council

- 2.1 West Dunbartonshire extends from Clydebank towards Loch Lomond and its boundary with Argyll & Bute. It has a population of just over 93,000, and just under 41,000 households. Most of the population live in the three main settlement areas of Clydebank, Dumbarton and Vale of Leven.
- 2.2 West Dunbartonshire's population is projected to decline over the next ten years. There are also projected changes in the make-up of the population, with a reduction in the number of young people and a growth in the number of older people.
- 2.3 Despite the projected decline, the number of households is expanding, particularly young, single person households and lone parent households with children. West Dunbartonshire Council has the third highest number of lone parents and the highest number of children per lone parent in Scotland.
- 2.4 Incomes across West Dunbartonshire are low, with over one third of the population receiving less than half the national average. Unemployment has been steadily falling over the past few years. The pattern of employment has changed significantly, with part-time and seasonal work in service industries replacing traditional manufacturing and heavy industries.
- 2.5 A number of wards within West Dunbartonshire suffer from multiple deprivation. Almost two thirds of West Dunbartonshire Council's tenants receive housing benefit. The Council has an anti-poverty strategy which influences the way it delivers services, including its housing service.
- 2.6 West Dunbartonshire Council is a Labour controlled council. A previous Council administration took a decision not to carry out a full option appraisal on the issue of whole stock transfer. The Council's current preferred option is to retain its landlord function, though it has carried out small scale transfers to other social landlords to achieve local area

regeneration objectives.

- 2.7 West Dunbartonshire Council owns and manages just over 13,000 properties. The Council's housing service is managed by the Department of Social Work and Housing Services. The service is delivered mainly through three area housing offices in Clydebank, Dumbarton and Alexandria, and two repairs centres. The housing service employs 240 staff.
- 2.8 Around 70% of the Council's properties are flats, consisting of four in a block, traditional tenemental and multi storey. The Council has identified localised low demand as an important contextual factor. It has demolished more than 600 properties in the last three years, and is considering options for a number of its estates.
- 2.9 There is an active network of 35 local tenants' and residents' groups within West Dunbartonshire. There are also two umbrella federations covering the eastern and western parts of the Council area.

Inspection Grades

- 3.1 These are the inspection grades achieved by West Dunbartonshire Council.

Housing Management	D	<p>The Council delivers a poor housing management service with major areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the housing management service are promising.</p>
Property Management	C	<p>The Council delivers a fair property management service with some strengths, but with significant areas where improvement is required.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the property management service are promising.</p>
Homelessness	B	<p>The Council delivers a good homelessness service with many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.</p> <p>We consider that prospects for improvement in the homelessness service are promising.</p>

Key Themes Influencing Performance

- 4.1 This section describes some key management issues that affect how well the housing services we inspected are working overall. These themes reflect the Guiding Standards set out in “Performance Standards for Social Landlords and Homelessness Functions”.
- 4.2 There are some areas of strength, and also major weaknesses, in the housing and homelessness services West Dunbartonshire Council delivers. Its properties are in reasonable condition, it provides good homelessness and support services, and it has taken positive steps to respond to anti-social behaviour. It has a well-established framework for supporting tenants’ and residents’ groups.
- 4.3 However, the Council’s performance in delivering some key elements of its service is poor. There are significant weaknesses in the planning and performance management framework, which contribute to the overall performance. It systematically delays the completion of a large number of non-urgent repairs, restricts access to its properties and does not relet its empty properties as effectively as it could. It does not make the most efficient use of its resources, or maximise its income. It has not been proactive in finding out what users think about the service, and provides users with only limited information about how well the service is performing.
- 4.4 The Council is aware of many of the areas where improvement is needed, and has proposals in place to address some, though not all, of the weaker areas. It has shown a willingness to review elements of its practice in light of initial feedback from the inspection. Future improvements in service delivery will however depend on how well the Council addresses the key issues of resourcing, planning and performance management, and engaging more effectively with a broader range of service users.
- 4.5 Overall, these areas are working well:
- ✓ The Council provides good support to a large network of tenants’ and residents’ groups across West Dunbartonshire, and has a strong base for participation.
 - ✓ The Council has made good progress in improving the environmental sustainability of its stock.
 - ✓ The Council’s housing service is accessible to service users through its local offices and other arrangements.
 - ✓ During our inspection the Council showed a real willingness to respond positively by reviewing elements of its practice in light of our initial feedback.

- ✓ The Council has recognised that it is weak on performance management and during our inspection created a new senior post to strengthen its approach in this area.

4.6 Overall, these areas could be working better:

- As a result of financial constraints, the Council systematically delays a large number of non-urgent repairs.
- The Council is not doing all it could to make the most effective use of its resources or to maximise its income.
- The Council does not have a strategic planning framework for the housing service as a whole, setting out objectives and priorities for the service. As a result, the service lacks strategic direction.
- There is a weak performance management and evaluation framework for the housing service, and the Council sets very few targets to measure how well it is performing.
- The IT and information management systems are not fully meeting the Council's needs and are limiting its ability to manage some elements of its service effectively.
- The Council does not yet have a consistent approach to finding out what service users think about its housing services.
- There is only a limited range of information available to service users about how well the housing service is performing.
- The Council's approach to equalities issues is underdeveloped, and it has not met all the requirements of the Race Equality Scheme.
- The Council is not responding consistently to complaints and does not have a systematic approach to monitoring complaints.
- The Council breaches individuals' confidentiality by making sensitive information about former tenants' rent arrears publicly available in an annual report to Council.
- The Council's approach to the purchase of a major supply of furniture for temporary accommodation was not in line with statutory procurement regulations or its own standing orders.

4.7 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should examine whether it makes available sufficient resources for the housing service, and should ensure that it manages its resources effectively to provide a responsive service.
- ❖ The Council should develop a strategic planning framework for its housing service. It should integrate this with the recently-created service plans for individual elements of its service, and set out a clear framework for developing the quality of service it wants to achieve.
- ❖ The Council should develop a robust performance management system to allow it to monitor service quality consistently and work towards quantifiable improvements in service delivery.

- ❖ The Council should build on its good work in tenant participation by providing service users with more opportunities to give their views on the quality of its services, and should take account of feedback in future service developments.
- ❖ The Council should take account of the impact on service delivery when prioritising areas for improvement in its IT system.
- ❖ The Council should develop a more consistent approach to dealing with complaints and should continue its recent work on setting up an effective monitoring framework.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it fully meets its duties under the Race Equality Scheme for its housing service.
- ❖ The Council should provide service users with more information about how well it is performing.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it treats confidential information sensitively and acts in line with data protection legislation.
- ❖ The Council should always ensure that it is able to demonstrate value for money in how it procures services and should always act in line with statutory regulations and its own standing orders.

Housing Management

- 5.1 This section summarises how well the Council manages access to its houses, set rents, and deals with empty houses and rent arrears. It also describes how the Council manages its estates and deals with antisocial behaviour.
- 5.2 There are positive aspects to the way that the Council delivers its housing management service, but also major weaknesses. The Council has made real efforts to ensure that lettings outcomes are good and that it is housing people in greatest need. The Council has demonstrated a willingness to tackle anti-social behaviour by identifying it as a key priority at a corporate level. It has committed resources and introduced a range of initiatives, including a specialist enforcement and support team and estate wardens to combat anti-social behaviour.
- 5.3 However, there are significant areas where performance is poor. The Council restricts access to its properties by deferring large numbers of housing applications, and there are weaknesses in its approach to cancelling applications. Current rent arrears levels are higher than any other Scottish local authority in percentage terms. The Council could be more effective at managing the arrears recovery process.
- 5.4 The Council has a large number of empty houses. Its performance in managing the empty house relet process is very poor, though there has been some improvement recently. It takes the Council a long time to relet properties, and it is not letting as many properties as it could. The poor

performance in recovering arrears and letting empty properties impacts significantly on the Council's ability to maximise its income from rents.

- 5.5 The approach to performance management is underdeveloped in the housing management service, and there is a very limited use of performance targets across the activities.
- 5.6 We have awarded a D grade for the housing management service. Though there are strengths in some elements of the service, this grade reflects the significance of the areas of poor performance and their impact both on outcomes for service users and for the Council's own resources.
- 5.7 There has been some improvement in performance in some key areas, and the Council is working on a number of service developments that should lead to improved service delivery. There are areas where the Council's awareness of current weaknesses is less well developed, and future improvements in these areas will depend on the effectiveness of the Council's response. There is a commitment from staff to improve services. On balance, we consider that the prospects for improvement in housing management are promising.
- 5.8 These areas of the housing management service are working well:
- ✓ The Council has taken steps to review and update its allocations policy in line with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001.
 - ✓ The Council uses a range of appropriate methods to tackle anti-social behaviour and neighbour disputes.
 - ✓ The Council is letting properties in line with its policy objectives, with a strong emphasis on housing those with greatest need.
- 5.9 These areas of the housing management service could work better:
- The Council unnecessarily restricts access to its housing. Significant aspects of its practice on suspensions and cancellations are not consistent with statutory duties or good practice.
 - The Rosshead local lettings initiative is not operating transparently or in line with the Council's allocations policy.
 - The Council is not completing all its tenancy agreements correctly.
 - The Council is not managing the relet of its empty properties effectively.
 - The Council continues to have a high level of rent arrears.
 - The Council is not effectively monitoring the outcomes of its housing management services.
 - The Council does not monitor equalities information.
- 5.10 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should review how it manages the empty property relet process, ensuring that it lets properties more efficiently, takes more accurate account of demand and maximises its rental income.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it does not unreasonably restrict applicants' access to its properties by lengthy deferrals and cancellations.
- ❖ The Council should pursue rent arrears more proactively and should improve its monitoring framework for arrears recovery.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that its allocations policy clearly sets out the way in which all of its properties will be relet and that it fully complies with all legislative requirements.
- ❖ The Council should put in place a comprehensive performance planning and management system for the housing management service to ensure it can identify the quality of its service delivery and the outcomes of those services to allow it to target its resources effectively to make improvements.
- ❖ The Council should effectively manage its local lettings initiative to ensure that it is operating transparently and is in line with the Council's allocations policy.
- ❖ The Council should review its new tenancy agreements to ensure they are correct.
- ❖ The Council should put in place a monitoring framework for equalities information.

Property Management

- 6.1 This section summarises how well the Council maintains the fabric of its houses. It describes the quality of repairs that are done when they are needed (response repairs), as well as maintenance and improvements planned in advance. It also looks at how the Council adapts houses so that tenants can stay in their homes when their needs change.
- 6.2 There are some positive elements, but also significant areas where improvement is required, in the Council's property management service. A recent stock condition survey concluded that properties are in reasonable condition, and the Council's planned maintenance work has a strong user focus. The Council has made a positive contribution to local regeneration, working with local RSLs.
- 6.3 The Council provides a fairly accessible responsive repairs service, and a recent tenant survey indicates that tenants are satisfied with the quality of individual repairs and with many elements of the service. The Council's performance in completing repairs on time is variable.
- 6.4 However, there are a number of areas where improvement is needed. The Council systematically delays the completion of large numbers of its non-

urgent repairs for long periods, because of financial pressures. At the time of our inspection, 2,700 jobs were on hold. This is a significant weakness.

- 6.5 There are also other aspects of the property management service where performance is weak. The Council is not ensuring that all its gas heating systems are checked annually in line with its statutory duty, and does not systematically monitor the quality of repairs. There are a number of areas where it could manage its resources more effectively, such as doing more maintenance in a planned way and reducing the number of emergency repairs. The Council is generally weak at monitoring the client side of its own performance and that of external contractors.
- 6.6 We have awarded a C grade for the property management service, which reflects both the strengths and the significant areas where improvement is needed.
- 6.7 The Council is aware of many of its areas of weaker performance in property management, and in a number of these has either taken steps to address the weakness or has firm plans in place to do so. Improvement in the weakest area, holding non-urgent repairs, is likely because the Council intends to clear some of the backlog by doing the work as part of its planned maintenance programme. This has influenced our assessment of a promising prospect of improvement, though its achievement will depend on the Council's plan to deal with the held repairs being fully developed and costed.
- 6.8 These areas of property management are working well:
- ✓ The Council has improved the condition of its properties.
 - ✓ Service users are satisfied with the quality of individual repairs.
 - ✓ The Council's planned maintenance programmes focus strongly on tenant and owner involvement.
 - ✓ The Council has identified many of the areas where it needs to improve and has begun work on some of these.
 - ✓ The Council is working in partnership with local RSLs on local regeneration initiatives.
- 6.9 These areas of property management could work better:
- The Council systematically delays many of its non-urgent repairs for long periods.
 - The Council could manage its repairs resources more effectively.
 - The Council is generally weak at monitoring its own performance and that of external contractors.
 - The Council does not comply with the requirements of the Right to Repair legislation.
 - The Council does not always carry out gas safety checks within the statutory twelve month period.

- The Council carries out a high number of repairs as emergencies.
- The Council does not provide tenants with comprehensive information on its responsive repairs service, or consult with them on key elements of the service.
- The Council has not always set clear objectives for its investment in low demand properties or evaluated the success of projects to tackle low demand.
- The Council's adaptation service is not focused on meeting service users' needs.

6.10 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:

- ❖ The Council should ensure that it is able to complete all of its responsive repairs in a reasonable timescale.
- ❖ The Council should review how it manages gas safety inspections to ensure all properties are checked within the statutory 12 month period.
- ❖ The Council should review how it categorises and controls its emergency repairs.
- ❖ The Council should develop performance monitoring systems that provide comprehensive and accurate information on its repairs performance.
- ❖ The Council must put arrangements in place to comply with the statutory Right to Repair scheme.
- ❖ The Council should set performance targets for contractors which are challenging but achievable.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that its decisions about investment in low demand housing are based on good information on demand levels, clear objectives and incorporate an evaluation framework.
- ❖ The Council should ensure that its adaptations service focuses on the needs of service users.

Homelessness

7.1 This section summarise show the Council is responding to the needs of people who are homeless or may become homeless. It also looks at what the Council is doing to help prevent homelessness occurring.

7.2 West Dunbartonshire Council is clearly committed to preventing homelessness and to dealing with it when it occurs. There are a number of key strengths in the Council's homeless service. Its support service for homeless people means that it is well placed to meet its duties to provide advice and assistance to all homeless people, and this service should make a major contribution to preventing the recurrence of homelessness. The Council treats those to whom it has a duty to provide permanent housing and other applicants on the housing list fairly in terms of the type of houses it allocates and the number of offers. It has also widened access to housing for homeless people. The ethos of the Council's

- homeless service is focused on meeting the needs of homeless people, and clearly reflects the spirit of recent legislative changes. Staff are well-motivated and have a good understanding of the needs of people in housing crisis.
- 7.3 The Council still relies heavily on bed and breakfast establishments to provide temporary accommodation to homeless people. It has improved its performance recently through a significant increase in its provision of good quality temporary furnished accommodation. Its on-going programme to increase the level of furnished accommodation will result in further reductions in the number of homeless people placed in bed and breakfast.
- 7.4 The Council has also significantly reduced the time taken to make decisions on homeless applications, but further improvement in its management of applications is needed to achieve a performance which is closer to that of its peers and the target of 28 days. The quality of the assessment process is good, and applicants have access to good quality support service whilst waiting on decisions.
- 7.5 The Council is also potentially underreporting the number of people who apply as homeless and the number of people it loses contact with. There are also some weaknesses in the way the Council is implementing interim accommodation.
- 7.6 West Dunbartonshire Council provides a homeless service with some major strengths and some areas where improvement is required. We have awarded a B grade for homelessness. The Council's reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation is a weakness, but its performance has significantly improved and we are confident that this aspect of performance will continue to improve. Our assessment of the homeless service as good takes account both of recent changes and of the improvements that the further expansion of temporary accommodation will bring. We consider that the prospects for improvement in homelessness are promising.
- 7.7 These areas in the homelessness service are working well:
- ✓ Homeless people are getting good outcomes when the Council secures them permanent accommodation.
 - ✓ The Council has significantly increased its provision of good quality furnished temporary accommodation.
 - ✓ The Council has reduced its use of bed and breakfast accommodation, out-of-area placements and the number of families placed in bed and breakfast.
 - ✓ The Council has a range of initiatives to identify people at risk of homelessness and people in need of support.

- ✓ The Council is committing significant resources to support homeless people and vulnerable tenants and is working well with its partners.
- ✓ The Council is working with its partners to deliver a comprehensive service to homeless young people.
- ✓ The Council is implementing a Section 5 protocol with RSLs to widen access for homeless people to houses.
- ✓ Progress is being made in implementing the homelessness strategy.

7.8 These areas of the homelessness service could work better:

- The Council is not assessing applications as quickly as possible, there are delays in arranging interviews and it does not keep homeless applicants advised of the progress of their application.
- The Council still has a high use of bed and breakfast accommodation, and is using out of area placements.
- The Council is using interim accommodation where the level of support could be provided in permanent accommodation.
- Homeless applicants do not have equal access to housing in the Rosshead area.
- The Council is potentially under reporting the number of people who apply as homeless and the number of people it loses contact with.
- There are weaknesses in the Council's homeless information recording and performance monitoring systems.
- Consultation with service users is limited.

7.9 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance.

- ❖ The Council should minimise delays in the assessment period and keep applicants informed of progress.
- ❖ The Council should minimise the waiting period for interviews and record all approaches from homeless people.
- ❖ The Council should minimise the time to secure permanent accommodation.
- ❖ The Council should only use interim accommodation where the level of support cannot reasonably be provided within permanent accommodation.
- ❖ The Council should review the Rosshead local lettings initiative to make sure that homeless people have equal access to houses in Rosshead.
- ❖ The Council should develop a clearer planning, monitoring and reporting framework.
- ❖ The Council should make sure that it has comprehensive policies and procedures to guide and support staff.

Services for Owners

- 8.1 This section summarises how the Council deals with Right to Buy sales and the provision of repairs and maintenance services to owners.
- 8.2 The Council's performance in completing house sales is slightly better than the Scottish council average, though it has declined in the last three years. Over the same period the number of properties sold has almost doubled.
- 8.3 The Council's factoring service is effective at collecting factoring fees. It pursues arrears effectively and has started to collect service user feedback on repairs. However, the Council is not effectively recouping the cost of common repairs to factored properties, and so is not maximising its income.
- 8.4 These areas of services to owners are working well:
- ✓ The Council provides good information to service users.
 - ✓ The Council issues factor accounts on time and pursues arrears effectively.
 - ✓ The Council is collecting complaints about factoring in a structured way, and has begun to seek feedback from factored owners on repairs quality.
 - ✓ The Council has identified areas where it needs to improve.
- 8.5 These areas of services to owners could be improved:
- The Council is not effectively recovering the costs of common repair work from owners.
 - The Council's performance in selling houses within 26 weeks is declining.
 - The Council does not always follow its statutory duties of issuing an offer letter to sell its houses within two months or checking the conduct of tenants who have applied to buy their property.
 - Joint working between the sold property service and other Council sections is not effective in some key areas.
- 8.6 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:
- ❖ The Council should ensure that it meets all its statutory responsibilities.
 - ❖ The Council should maximise its income by consistently recharging owners for all repairs work for which they are liable.
 - ❖ The Council should use the forthcoming review of sold property to ensure that the service meets the increasing scale of demands on both house sales and factoring.

- ❖ The Council should improve its house sales joint working arrangements.
- ❖ The Council should build on its recent work on seeking owners' views on repairs so that it has a fuller understanding of users' views of its house sales and factoring services.

Services for Gypsies/Travellers

- 9.1 This section sets out how well the Council is managing the site for Gypsies/Travellers that it runs.
- 9.2 West Dunbartonshire Council provides a fair service for Gypsies / Travellers. After a long period without any investment, the Council has in the last few years shown a real commitment to improving the site, principally through upgrading of the access road and providing a new children's play area. A further project to upgrade the amenity units will, once complete, improve residents' quality of life. Residents we spoke to were generally satisfied with the service.
- 9.3 The Council has consulted with residents over the recent improvements, though it could do more to ensure gypsies' / travellers' views and priorities are at the centre of future service developments. Taking account of the recent track record of improvements and the creation of a more structured framework for future service developments, we conclude that the prospects for improvement are promising.
- 9.4 These areas are working well:
- ✓ The Council has improved the quality of the site's facilities through recent investment.
 - ✓ There is a needs-based approach to letting pitches.
 - ✓ The Council has consulted with residents over the recent improvements on the site.
 - ✓ The Council has recently made it easier for residents to buy electricity cards.
 - ✓ The Council has set up a corporate forum to examine and co-ordinate services for Gypsies / Travellers.
 - ✓ The Council has developed a service plan setting out objectives for developing the service.
- 9.5 These areas could work better:
- The range of information available to Gypsies / Travellers about the Council's services is poor.
 - The Council's consultation with residents to date has not gathered views on service quality, residents' needs and future priorities.

- The Council has yet to establish how to resource some of its proposed service improvements.
- 9.6 These are our key recommendations. They are broadly in order of significance:
- ❖ The Council should provide better information to site residents about services.
 - ❖ The Council should widen the scope of its consultation to ensure that it takes account of residents' views, needs and priorities.
 - ❖ The Council should develop a clear plan for funding future service improvements.

Inspection Report

- 10.1 Any one can ask for a copy of the full inspection report. All reports are on the Communities Scotland web site at <http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>
- 10.2 This summary can also be made available on tape, in Braille, MOON, large print and community languages. For information please contact Janette Campbell on 0131 479 5162 or email campbellj@communitiesscotland.gov.uk
- 10.3 We have asked West Dunbartonshire Council to produce an improvement plan within eight weeks of publishing the inspection report to show how it intends to respond to all our recommendations. We will agree the plan with the Council. We will liaise regularly with the Council and track progress in improving all the inspected services until the next scheduled inspection, which will take place within five years.