

Communities Scotland  
**Inspection report**

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**West Lothian Council**

October 2006

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# 1. Introduction

## About this inspection

1.1 This inspection was carried out by Communities Scotland under section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Our purpose in inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of housing service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement. Inspections are conducted within a published framework of *Performance Standards*.

## How we assessed performance

1.2 Our inspectors asked two key questions:

- How good are the services we have inspected?
- How well are these services being managed for improvement?

1.3 In order to answer these questions inspectors:

- spoke to tenants, service users, staff and elected members of the council;
- asked other partner organisations for their views;
- visited homes and local areas;
- saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
- examined key policies, publications, information and the organisation's self-assessment submitted for this inspection; and
- analysed published performance and financial information.

1.4 We have awarded grades for the housing management, property maintenance and homelessness services. This is what our grades mean:

A	Excellent	Major strengths.
B	Good	Many strengths and some areas where improvement is needed.
C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
D	Poor	Major areas where improvement is needed or where a number of very significant weaknesses are found.

## The inspection team

1.5 The inspection team was led by Tony Cain (Inspection Manager) and included Lesley Kerr (Inspection Manager) and Marie Savage, Lindsay Stother, Paul Milligan, Tom Burns and Mark Gibson (Inspectors). The team also included three tenant assessors\*, Christina Madden, Charles French and Margaret Anderson. We were on site between May and June 2006. We would like to thank everyone involved in the inspection, particularly the councillors, staff, service users and tenants for their time and co-operation.

## Responding to this inspection

1.6 We expect all inspected bodies to make the summary of this report available to all their tenants, report our findings to other stakeholders and respond to the issues raised in this report.

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\* see glossary

## 2. Context

### Geography

- 2.1 West Lothian covers an area of 165 square miles and is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest local authority in Scotland by population. Two thirds of the Council area is rural and the main centres of population are in Livingston, Bathgate and Linlithgow. The area also includes a number of smaller settlements including Broxburn, Blackburn, Armadale, Whitburn and Fauldhouse. Many of the smaller settlements are former mining communities.

### Population

- 2.2 The latest census figures indicate that the population of West Lothian is 161,387 and the population is predicted to rise by 8.6% over the next 12 years. The authority will see a rise in the number of older people, and in contrast to the national trend it will also see a rise in young people between 0-16 years of age. There is also a projected rise of 44% in single person households.
- 2.3 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population in West Lothian makes up 2.16% of the total population. This figure is lower than the figure for Scotland as a whole of 3.34%. The largest ethnic group is 'White Other' which accounts for 1.01% of the total population. This figure is based on the 2001 census. In the five years since this was recorded, it is likely that this figure will have grown, with an increase in the Polish community particularly. Pakistanis make up the largest visible BME community at 0.5% of the population. It is likely that the visible BME community has also increased significantly since the 2001 census.

### Economic factors

- 2.6 Over the last 25 years West Lothian's economy has seen growth in the retail and service sectors and a general change from traditional manufacturing activity to research and development and an increase in high technology businesses. Although overall the authority is experiencing significant population and economic growth this has not occurred equally across the areas, particularly, in the former mining towns in the south and west.

2.7 The unemployment rate for the area is 3.57% which is lower than the national figure of 3.97%. Overall 64.7% of the population are either self employed or employed in full or part time employment. This compares to the national figure of approximately 58%. However, whilst unemployment is lower than the national rate average earnings in West Lothian are lower than those for Scotland as a whole.

### Social housing supply

2.8 The tenure\* profile in West Lothian is similar to the rest of Scotland. Owner occupation is the dominant tenure in the area at 62.69% of the housing stock. The level of social rented housing is similar to the national figure with 31.61% renting from social landlords including Registered Social Landlords (RSL's)\* compared to a national figure of 29.4%. Census figures show that between 1991 and 2001 owner occupation increased by 14,338 properties while Council rented stock reduced by 10,293 due largely to the impact of the Right to Buy\*.

### Council membership

2.9 West Lothian Council has 32 elected members and its current political make up is as follows:

- 18 Labour
- 11 Scottish National Party
- 2 Independent
- 1 Conservative

2.10 The Council has a Labour administration. Services are managed through five main committees based on service themes rather than traditional departments. The Council has also recently established an audit committee to improve scrutiny and performance monitoring. Performance and service development proposals are also considered by the Housing Policy Working Group which includes one voting tenant elected from a tenants' panel.

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\* see glossary

## Organisation of the Council

- 2.11 The Council delivers its services through four main service groupings including a joint board arrangement with the local health board, The West Lothian Community Health and Care Partnership. The Council reorganised some of its services in early 2006 and brought most housing management functions and building services together to form Housing and Building Services. Strategic planning for housing and homelessness and homeless services for young people are managed through the health and care partnership arrangement. Front line customer contact including all telephone contact is managed through Customer Services.
- 2.12 Customers can access services through the Customer Service Centre (CSC); this is a call centre operating 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The Council also operates 10 local Customer Information Centres (CIS) dealing with “walk in” customers. Both the Customer Service Centre and the Customer Information Centres handle enquiries and service requests for all council services.

## Key facts

	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/06
Houses owned	14,258	13,799	13,581
No. of applicants on housing list* as at 31 March	N/A	9,364	9,129
Employees (Full time equivalents)	112	112	112
HRA* Gross Capital Expenditure (incl. Capital Funded from Revenue (CFCR))	£34.2m	£26.4m	£27.6m
Total possible rental income	£34,070,408	£33,956,407	£33,615,772
% of Rental income from Housing Benefit (HB)	56.24%	56.72%	56.15%
% of tenants in receipt of HB	60.84%	61.58%	59.31%
% of rent arrears	3.2%	2.8%	3.2%
Average weekly rent	£43.47	£46.70	£48.33
Average rent increase	3.5%	3.5%	3.5%
Houses relet	1,221	904	848
Responsive repairs* carried out	48,982	44,129	47,215
Maintenance spend per house inc cost of service	£682	£688	£806
Supervision and management spend per house	£743	£653	£562
Right To Buy sales	627	459	316
No. of Homeless presentations	1,785	1,966	1,946
No. of evictions	31	59	67

Sources: West Lothian Council's inspection submission and Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins

\* see glossary

### 3. Housing management

3.1 The grade awarded for housing management is:

A	Excellent	Major strengths.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

#### How good is the service?

##### Access

*Social landlords should provide open, fair and equal access to their housing lists and should work with partners to simplify and maximise access to housing.*

- 3.2 The Council delivers its housing service through a network of 10 Customer Information Centres (CIS) and a Customer Service Centre (CSC) that handles all telephone enquiries. The Customer Information Centres are easily accessible to the communities they serve and provide a good environment for service users. CIS staff deal with enquiries relating to all Council functions as well as housing enquiries. Staff are trained in the use of Language line\* for those whose first language is not English and the Council advertises the service through posters and leaflets displayed in reception areas.
- 3.3 The Council has conducted comprehensive disability audits for most offices used by the public. It is in the process of carrying out the work identified by these audits to ensure that all its offices are fully accessible. As a result, physical access to the Council's offices is good. We found low-level counters, hearing loops and automatic doors were commonly in place. The Council is aware of areas where it needs to make improvements and is actively addressing these. The Council has also developed proposals to extend electronic access to all its services through the creation of "supported access points" providing dedicated internet access for the public in a kiosk format. This will help service users to access services online.

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\* see glossary

- 3.4 The Council uses a good range of ways to promote access to its housing list including:
- leaflets on how to apply for a council house which are distributed to Council offices, community centres and to other housing providers;
  - information on how to access housing through plasma screens located in Customer Information Centre reception areas;
  - an online Housing Options Guide, providing information on all housing providers in West Lothian; and
  - a useful booklet, “Applying for a house – your guide to applying for a house in West Lothian”.
- 3.5 We asked our tenant assessors to review the Council's leaflets and information booklet. They found that they were well presented, written in plain English and provided all the information that applicants are likely to need.
- 3.6 The Council can arrange for the translation of its allocations policy, housing application form and applicants' guide into other languages or formats on request. It has firm arrangements in place to publish the housing application form and applicants' guide in Polish to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of Polish applicants seeking housing in the Council's area. This is a positive initiative to improve access to its housing and a good example of the Council using equalities monitoring information to improve access to its services.
- 3.7 The Council is working with two of its partners to develop a Common Housing Register (CHR)\* for West Lothian. It told us that progress had been delayed due to the major allocations review which took place last year. The Council has a target for completion of the CHR by the end of the year.
- 3.8 The Council offers good housing options advice to people who apply to it for a house. This includes offering a personal housing plan (PHP)\* to everyone who presents as homeless and to all new applicants. The Council promotes the availability of PHPs to existing applicants through a quarterly newsletter which it sends to everyone on its housing list and actively targets those applicants who are near the top of the list rather than those less likely to be offered a house by the Council. The Council has prepared over 550 PHPs for applicants, which

represents around 6% of its housing list, since it introduced this initiative in October 2005. It plans to review the scheme later this year.

- 3.9 The Council issues letters to all applicants when they apply for a house confirming the areas, house size and heating type they have applied for. However, at the time of our inspection these letters did not give a breakdown of how the points total had been calculated or of the likelihood of rehousing. We highlighted this to the Council during the inspection and it revised the letters to include a points breakdown so that applicants can see how their total points have been calculated. The Council has agreed to review these letters more fully as part of a review of its allocations policy planned for autumn 2006.
- 3.10 The Council received over 4,000 new housing applications during 2005/06. It actively manages its housing list. Following the introduction of a new allocations policy in 2005 it carried out a review of its list which resulted in the cancellation of over 3,000 applications where the applicant did not respond to 3 letters. It also conducts a review of those applications which have reached their anniversary date. The number of people on the housing list decreased by 4% from 9,364 in March 2005 to 8,984 at the end of March 2006.
- 3.11 The Council's published allocations policy sets out the circumstances in which an application will be cancelled. These include where an applicant has purchased a house or refused two offers of housing. We found a small number of cases where the Council had cancelled applications in these circumstances. We also found examples of the Council advising tenants that it would cancel applications due to a former housing debt. Applicants have a statutory right to be included on the Council's list and it should only cancel an application where someone has requested to be removed from its list, where they repeatedly fail to reply to correspondence, or on the death of an applicant. The Council agreed that it would address these issues as part of its planned review when we highlighted them during the inspection.
- 3.12 West Lothian Council operates an open housing list and anyone aged 16 or over can apply at any time and is admitted to the list. We found that the allocations policy and other written material suggest that there are restrictions on who can

- apply for a house but these restrictions are not applied in practice. The Council has revised its written information since we highlighted this during the inspection to ensure that no applicants are deterred from applying.
- 3.13 The Council will suspend applications from those in the armed forces, in prison or in tied accommodation who do not want to be considered for housing immediately. It does not suspend applicants from receiving offers in any other circumstances. There were no suspended applicants at the time of the inspection.
- 3.14 The Council requests tenancy references from all social landlords an applicant or any other person included in the application has had, in the last five years. Where the applicant is a tenant of a private landlord the Council asks for proof of rent payments for the previous six months. The Council told us that since November 2005 offers would not be withheld from an applicant where a reference had not been received from a former landlord. The housing application form has not been amended to take account of this change and applicants are still asked to provide details of all landlords for the previous five years. Good practice guidance<sup>1</sup> recommends that landlords should not seek references for tenancies that ended more than three years previously.
- 3.15 The Council has a challenging target of five working days to place applicants on its housing list. The Council told us that it did not achieve this target during 2005/06 due to the additional volume of work created by the allocations review and that the average length of time to process applications was 13 days. Performance during April and May 2006 had improved to an average of 6 days with 76% of applications added to the list within its target timescale.
- 3.16 The Council monitors and reports on the ethnicity of people who apply to it for housing and also of those who are rehoused. It does not, however, monitor the ethnicity of Gypsies/Travellers as recommended by good practice<sup>2</sup>. The Council has only recently started to collect disability monitoring information from

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<sup>1</sup> Suspending Applicants on Housing Registers: A Guide for Housing Professionals, Chartered Institute of Housing, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee (SPEOC) (2001a) Inquiry into Gypsy Travellers and Public Sector Policies- 1<sup>st</sup> report, Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament

applicants after the introduction of a new housing needs application form in April 2006.

- 3.17 The Council is good at promoting access to its housing list, gives people good housing options advice and actively manages its list. The offer of personal housing plans to housing applicants is a positive initiative although the active promotion of these is limited to those at the top of the housing list. We identified a number of areas for improvement during the inspection including the management of cancellations and the lack of detailed information in letters to applicants. The Council responded positively and agreed to address these as part of its allocations policy review planned for August 2006.

#### **Meeting need and maximising choice**

*Social landlords should meet housing need through lettings and should maximise choice for applicants.*

- 3.18 The Council carried out a major review of its allocations policy in 2005 after extensive consultation with tenants, tenants' groups, applicants registered on the housing list and other key stakeholders. The policy is needs based and prioritises applications on a range of housing needs which reflect the statutory reasonable preference categories.
- 3.19 We reviewed a number of allocations and found that the majority of these were to people with one or more housing need. The Council allocated 754 houses between 31 March 2005 and 28 February 2006; 13% to its own tenants, 38% to people on its list who were not its own tenants and 49.5% to homeless people. The Council abolished the award of waiting time points to applicants after the allocations review in 2005 but protected these points as "attained points" for existing applicants. We analysed 100 lets made by the Council and found that 90% were to people who were homeless or people whose needs points outweighed their waiting time points.
- 3.20 The Council ensures that points levels for all new applications are checked by two members of staff. It carries out a 10% check of lets on a monthly basis.
- 3.21 We found that the Council does not always inform those who are bypassed during the selection process for housing. The Council only advises in writing

- those applicants who have been bypassed for current or former rent arrears or tenancy related debt. We saw that the Council bypasses applicants for reasons other than those contained within the published allocations policy and had not advised these applicants of the reasons why they were bypassed or what action they could take to appeal the decision. The Council does not record consistently the reasons for bypassing. We made the Council aware of these findings and it responded positively and agreed to review its approach to ensure that applicants were aware that they were not being considered for housing.
- 3.22 The Council offers housing list and transfer applicants a good level of choice. It allows them to indicate a preference for any number of its 45 areas, unlimited choice of house types and a maximum of 2 house sizes. However the Council limits the offers of housing to two and cancels applications if these offers are refused. This approach limits choice. The issue of cancelling applications has already been discussed earlier in the report.
- 3.23 The Council has nomination agreements in place with 13 RSLs and 1 Housing Management agency within its area. This is a positive way to meet need and widen choice for applicants. The number of properties made available to the Council for nominations by RSLs has fallen, as a result nominations fell by 20% from 372 in 2004/05 to 298 in 2005/06. The level of successful lettings has decreased by 12% from 298 in 2004/05 to 203 in 2005/06. The Council monitors nominations and has arrangements in place to review the effectiveness of its approach.
- 3.24 Housing applicants living in the Council's area must respond within 24 hours to an offer of housing or the offer will be withdrawn. For some applicants with particular needs this timescale may present problems. The Council is aware of this issue and intends to review its approach as part of its scheduled allocations review.
- 3.25 The Council has one Tenant Management Co-operative (TMC) which operates in the Elburn area of Livingston. The TMC has 45 houses with a very low turnover of properties. The Council has not registered it under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and has had little engagement in its management. We found through case

reviews that, in making nominations for one property let by the TMC in 2005, the Council bypassed significant numbers of homeless applicants.

- 3.26 The Council is good at housing those in most need and providing choice to applicants. It is achieving good outcomes for those in housing need. Over 87% of those being housed are either homeless or from the housing list. We found a number of weaknesses in its approach to bypassing applicants when letting houses and in its engagement with the TMC that operates in its area. Restricting applicants to two offers limits choice. The Council accepted all the weaknesses that we identified and has agreed to review its practices in these areas as part of its planned review of its allocations policy.

#### **Sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness**

*Social landlords should maximise security of tenure for all residents of their accommodation, and should work to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness through their delivery of housing management services.*

- 3.27 West Lothian Council had signed up 97% of its tenants to the Scottish secure tenancy agreement (SST)\* by the end of March 2006 and has plans to sign up the remaining tenants. The Council also has 21 short Scottish secure tenancies (SSSTs)\* 19 of which were granted on the basis that the tenant required housing support and 2 were issued as a result of the Council obtaining an Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO)\*. Nine of the short SSTs created in 2005/06 have been converted to SSTs.
- 3.28 We found that the Council has a number of weaknesses in the way that it manages short SSTs:
- it does not always follow its own policy and procedures including serving the necessary notices;
  - it is not always clear or consistent on the grounds for providing this type of tenancy;
  - it does not make these tenants aware of the right to appeal its decision to provide this form of tenancy; and

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\* see glossary

- it does not always record details of the support arrangements in place or regularly monitor or review these tenancies.

3.29 The Council provides useful information to new tenants at sign up interviews and takes this opportunity to advise tenants of their rights and responsibilities. It gives tenants a comprehensive handbook and information pack. We saw that the Council uses sign up interviews to:

- explain how tenants can pay their rent;
- help them apply for housing benefit;
- complete a referral form for the Tenant Energy Adviser; and
- complete a referral for a benefit health check to maximise benefit take up and offer other financial help.

This is a good approach to offering new tenants support at the start of their tenancy.

3.30 The Council has Quality Assurance Officers based in its local offices. These officers carry out a range of duties which include visiting new tenants within four weeks of taking up a tenancy to explain their rights and responsibilities and identify any support needs. There is an appointments system in place for these visits and a procedure for following up cases where no access is achieved. The Council regularly monitors and reports the number of completed visits. This is a positive way to help identify vulnerable tenants at an early stage of the tenancy. However, during 2005/06 the Council only completed visits for 61% of new tenants.

3.31 The Council has a good support framework in place to assist vulnerable tenants and to sustain tenancies. Where staff identify that a tenant requires support they can make a referral to a Housing Needs Officer (HNO) located in offices throughout the Council's area. The HNOs can arrange for a low level support package; including advice on benefits, home safety and general help with settling in, delivered by one of the Council's six Housing Support Officers (HSOs). If an applicant has more complex support requirements, the Housing Needs Officer will liaise with other agencies to ensure that these are met.

- 3.32 West Lothian Council's tenant population is relatively stable, just 6.6% of its stock became empty in 2004/05, more than a third lower than the national figure for Councils. The figure for 2005/06 was 6.3%. We saw that 95% of transfer applicants and 86% of housing list applicants were still living in the same home a year after they took up their tenancy.
- 3.33 The number of tenancies abandoned by tenants reduced by 25%, from 118 in 2003/04 to 88 in 2005/06; tenancies given up in this way represented 0.65% of all tenancies. Case reviews that we carried out showed that the Council has clear, comprehensive procedures for staff to follow when dealing with houses that appear to be abandoned. We found that while staff generally followed these procedures well, there was not always clear evidence of checks made to trace tenants. In addition, we saw a small number of cases where it would have been more appropriate for the Council to take action under the tenancy conditions rather than seek to recover possession through the abandonment procedures.
- 3.34 West Lothian Council takes eviction action only as a last resort. Staff are aware of the need to make early face to face contact with tenants that may be at risk of losing their tenancy. The Council issued 5,620 Notices of Proceedings for possession (NOPs)\* in 2005/06; all of them for rent arrears. NOPs are issued at an early stage in the arrears procedures, often with the second letter advising the tenant that they are in arrears and as early as two weeks after the arrear has arisen. Published good practice indicates that NOPs should only be issued when a landlord intends to raise a court action<sup>3</sup>.
- 3.35 The number of NOPs that resulted in court actions in 2005/06 was 1,284 or 23% of the number issued. The number of court actions that resulted in an eviction decree reduced by around 30% in 2005/06 compared with 2004/05. However, the number of tenants who were evicted or who absconded before their home was repossessed was 77. This represents 0.5% of all West Lothian Council tenants. This is consistent with the average eviction rate\* for Scottish local authorities, but it is the Council's highest number in the last five years. The

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\* see glossary

<sup>3</sup> Good Practice Briefing 21- managing rent arrears, Chartered Institute of Housing 2001

Council is aware of the increase in the number of tenants that it evicts and it has firm plans to review its practices to ensure that it is minimising the number of evictions it carries out.

- 3.36 We reviewed a number of cases where the Council had carried out procedures leading to court action and recovery of possession. We saw that the Council makes and maintains good contact with tenants by means of home visits and letters. It clearly informed tenants that the situation was increasing in seriousness and offered a range of support and advice opportunities including the option of meeting with the Council's arrears panel to review their situation. Around 10% of tenants facing eviction take this opportunity.
- 3.37 Prior to January 2006 the Council was not issuing new Scottish secure tenancy agreements where it has decided not to action court orders for recovery of possession. The Council reviewed its approach in the light of recently published good practice<sup>4</sup> and now issues new tenancy agreements in these circumstances. It has also backdated this process to include 105 similar cases that occurred in 2004/05. There were a further 90 cases of this type in 2003/04 that have not been provided with new tenancy agreements.
- 3.38 West Lothian Council is good at sustaining tenancies and supporting those at risk of losing their home. It provides good information to tenants at sign up and has made progress in identifying and providing support to those at risk of eviction. Over 85% of all new tenants are still in their home after a year. The Council responded positively to a recent rise in the number of tenants being evicted and has already revised and improved some aspects of its approach. We found some weaknesses in the Council's use of abandonment procedures and in the use of short Scottish secure tenancies. The Council was aware of these and has firm plans in place to address them.

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\* see glossary

<sup>4</sup> Evictions in Practice, Communities Scotland 2005

### Quality of neighbourhoods

*Social landlords should deliver services to ensure that neighbourhoods are attractive, well-maintained and safe places to live. They should deal appropriately with antisocial behaviour.*

3.39 West Lothian Council's estates vary in terms of size and house type. They are located within distinct communities in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. Many include a number of owner occupied properties and others that are owned and managed by RSLs or other landlords.

3.40 The estates that we saw during our inspection were generally well kept, although we saw evidence that antisocial behaviour was a problem in some areas. The Council has developed an Environmental Standard for West Lothian and actively manages its housing areas to achieve this standard. This is achieved through a good range of approaches including:

- an enhanced estate management service;
- regular checking of estates by Quality Assurance Officers and Community Based Housing Officers;
- programmed garden inspections;
- community based action plans;
- quarterly estates inspections involving local members, community representatives and service providers; and
- estate regeneration programmes.

These actions are supported by Community Safety Wardens, and Neighbourhood Environment Teams responding to litter, vandalism and graffiti problems. The Council also has firm plans to develop the work of its Community Safety Wardens and the Neighbourhood Environment Teams to strengthen its approach to enforcing its standard.

3.41 The Council regularly asks tenants for their views on where they live and the services it provides. The latest survey indicates that 82% are satisfied with their neighbourhood, an increase of around 6% over satisfaction levels expressed in a similar survey carried out a year earlier. Tenants we spoke to were very positive about the work of both the Community Safety Wardens and the Neighbourhood Environment Teams.

- 3.42 West Lothian Council works well in partnership with local communities and other agencies to focus improvement work and estate regeneration activity where it is most needed. It uses locality planning techniques to develop local action plans which bring together a range of public agencies in order to match the range and level of services provided to the level of need within different communities. Several of its estates have benefited from major refurbishment works or replacement of unpopular housing stock in recent years. The Council is continuing to develop its approach to estate regeneration to ensure that it focuses on those communities most in need.
- 3.43 The Council has an excellent approach to dealing with antisocial behaviour. The Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, places a duty upon Local Authorities and Chief Constables to prepare a joint antisocial behaviour strategy. The Council's published strategy takes a multi agency approach to responding to incidents of antisocial behaviour and the wider issues that contribute to such behaviour. It also includes criteria for the targeting of resources as well as monitoring arrangements to measure the effectiveness of actions taken.
- 3.44 The Council received 1,056 complaints of antisocial behaviour in 2005/06; 805 were received in 2004/05 and 1,120 in 2003/04. The Council's specialist Neighbourhood Response Team (NRT) deals with the majority of antisocial behaviour incidents across all tenures. Complaints are prioritised in terms of seriousness. Less serious cases, where Council tenants only are involved, are handled by area housing offices. More serious incidents or those involving non-council tenants are responded to by the NRT.
- 3.45 The Council has comprehensive policies and procedures in place to guide staff dealing with incidents of antisocial behaviour. It uses a range of methods including mediation, Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Interim ASBOs, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Youth Notices, and management transfers, to deal with antisocial behaviour. It rarely seeks to recover possession of dwellings, but places tenants subject to ASBOs on short Scottish secure tenancies, which can be ended where an ASBO is breached.

- 3.46 The Council is obtaining an increasing number of ASBOs; it obtained 10 in 2005/06, against 7 and 4 respectively during the two previous years. In 2005/06 the Council converted two tenancies to short Scottish secure tenancies where a family member had been issued with an ASBO.
- 3.47 The Council asks complainants how satisfied they are with the service they receive. Recent improvements to the service have resulted in reported satisfaction levels increasing. During 2005/06 66% of complainants said actions taken by staff to deal with their complaint was excellent or good. Levels of satisfaction with the outcome of complaints were slightly less, at 59%, a further 21% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Whilst this level of satisfaction remains relatively low it represents a significant increase over previous years. The Council is also in the process of increasing staffing levels in the Neighbourhood Response Team to improve its capacity to respond to incidents of ASB particularly those that occur outside normal office hours.
- 3.48 Cases we reviewed and discussions with staff generally demonstrated that the Council provided a prompt response to complaints of antisocial behaviour and that steps taken were well considered and appropriate to the level of seriousness. We saw evidence of multi agency working and of good record keeping and communication. However, the Council did not always keep complainants informed of actions being taken as the complaint was being progressed. During 2005/06, 29% of complainants asked, said they were not adequately informed about the steps being taken by the Council.
- 3.49 The Council's approach to improving the quality of its neighbourhoods is excellent. It has set a clear environmental standard and actively manages the quality of housing areas using a wide range of tools. The Council also engages well with local communities and partners in planning and delivering services. The Council responds to antisocial behaviour well. Service user satisfaction levels with this aspect of the service are improving.

### Responsiveness to tenants

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 3.50 West Lothian Council has a good range of structures in place for involving tenants in the development and delivery of housing management services. These are supported by an excellent tenant participation strategy developed in partnership with tenants. The Council has registered 24 tenants' organisations (RTOs) including 3 local area committees that bring together RTOs within specific geographical areas.
- 3.51 The Council has also established a Tenants' Panel made up of representatives from the area committees. The panel meets regularly with senior staff and discusses policy and performance issues. It also reviews and approves all the Council's housing related publications. One member of the panel sits, as a voting member, on the Council's Housing Policy Working Group. This group is a formal part of the Council's committee structure. Its role is to monitor performance and consider service development proposals.
- 3.52 The Council works well to encourage the formation of new groups and provides good support to RTOs including funding an independent tenant advisor. It also provides an excellent training programme for tenants who want to get involved. This training programme is agreed with the RTOs each year and is delivered along side its staff training programme in conjunction with the local college.
- 3.53 We met eight tenants groups during the inspection including all three area committees. Some of the groups raised issues around some aspects of the participation process or local problems, however, they were generally positive about the quality of the services tenants received and the willingness of the Council to listen and respond to their views.
- 3.54 The Council is also developing its approach to involving tenants outside formal groups by developing a contact list of interested individuals. Those on the list can identify particular areas or issues they want to be involved in or consulted on. At the time of our inspection over 200 tenants had asked to be included in this group.

3.55 The Council produces an annual consultation plan and uses a good range of methods to gauge levels of tenant satisfaction with the housing management service. These include:

- a three yearly door to door survey of all its tenants;
- an annual tenants' satisfaction questionnaire;
- a survey of tenants who have experienced antisocial behaviour;
- new tenant visits;
- an annual housing information and advice survey; and
- a housing support service questionnaire.

It has good systems in place to collate and report on the information from these surveys and also includes tenant satisfaction targets in its performance management system.

3.56 The Council has also developed a number of excellent techniques for involving tenants in the assessment of service quality and developing improvements. These include short life quality improvement teams to look at specific aspects of a service and comprehensive tenant led inspections to review more significant service areas. The Council also has a very well structured approach to consulting tenants on proposals to increase rents.

3.57 We saw excellent examples of these approaches being used to agree service improvements including the proposals for the enhanced estate management service and Neighbourhood Response Teams. A programme for tenant led inspections is agreed each year with the tenants' panel and area committees. The Council funds and supports the inspections well. Tenant representatives we spoke to were of the view that the tenant led inspections had a significant impact in improving services.

3.58 West Lothian Council publishes a comprehensive booklet which outlines its service standards and commitments to service users. This is issued to every new tenant during the sign up interview. The booklet contains information for tenants on how to appeal decisions, register complaints or make comments about the level of service provided by the Council. We asked our tenant assessors to

- review this booklet. They considered it to be an excellent way to inform tenants of the service they can expect.
- 3.59 The Council has a well developed approach to equalities and the needs of equalities groups. It has carried out equalities impact assessments for key service areas including allocations, tenant participation and homelessness. It has also completed an equalities audit of the service and developed an action plan to address the areas for improvement that it identified. The Council also employs a BME development worker as part of its Ethnic Minority Project. The project's main aims are to improve access to Council services for BME clients and to support victims of racial discrimination and harassment. This is an excellent approach to meeting the needs of the BME community locally.
- 3.60 The Council has a robust complaints policy with clear guidance available for its staff for recording and responding to both formal and informal complaints. It records and monitors complaints by category, area office and time taken to respond against target. We reviewed a number of complaints and saw that these were generally well recorded on the Council's Enquiry Tracking System (ETS) and were usually responded to within the Council's five day target. The Council keeps tenants informed on the course of action taken.
- 3.61 The Council is also currently piloting a Customer Contact Resolver Team. This team monitors the Council's performance in dealing with complaints and assesses the quality of end results. It also identifies service breakdowns, situations where it is clear that a customer is dissatisfied with a particular service and acts to resolve the problem before a formal complaint is made.
- 3.62 The Council uses complaints information in its performance management system. We saw a number of examples of improvements to services made as a result of reviewing complaints information. The Council also publishes an annual summary of the category and number of complaints received on its website and in its tenants' newsletter.
- 3.63 The Council has an excellent approach to responding to service users' views of its housing management service. Its approach to tenant participation is also excellent. We saw numerous examples of significant improvements in service

quality being driven by the involvement of tenants. Staff at all levels see encouraging and supporting tenant participation as an important part of their work and the service culture is strongly focused on responding to service user views. The Council's approach to equalities and promoting equal access to its services is also well developed.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should maximise their income, in a way that is fair to service users, and manage costs effectively.*

3.64 West Lothian Council offers tenants a wide range of methods by which they can pay their rent. These include:

- in person at any of its Customer Information Centres;
- by post;
- by direct debit or standing order;
- online or by telephone using a debit card; and
- by swipe card at a post office.

3.65 The table below summarises West Lothian's performance in collecting rent.

	At March 2004		At March 2005		At March 2006
	West Lothian	National	West Lothian	National	West Lothian
Current tenant arrears as % of net rent due	3.2%	7.9%	2.8%	7.4%	3.2%
% of current tenants in serious arrears	2.4%	4.9%	1.8%	4.5%	2.3%
Total former tenant arrears (£)	£288,696	n/a	£229,670	n/a	£282,016
Rent arrears written off (£)	£32,716	n/a	£92,049	n/a	n/a

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators

3.66 The Council's performance in collecting rent has improved significantly since the late 1990s and has been consistently excellent in recent years. The Council is now amongst the best performing local authorities in Scotland in this area of its work. At March 2005, both total current arrears and the level of tenants in serious arrears were less than half the national figure. In this year the Council was the

2nd and 4th best performer respectively against these indicators when compared to other similar council landlords. Performance in 2005/06 though slightly down, was also very good.

- 3.67 West Lothian Council devotes significant resources to assisting tenants to avoid rent arrears and in supporting them when they do fall behind with their rent. It makes particular efforts to make early face to face contact with tenants in arrears and ensure that they receive good advice and support on issues relating to benefits and debt. It has clear and comprehensive procedures that allow staff a reasonable level of discretion on how to proceed on individual cases and its ICT system\* supports the process well. We found comprehensive records of actions taken or considered and contact with tenants and others involved in dealing with an arrears issue. The range of standard letters used gives tenants good information on the process and the risks of not making an arrangement to clear rent arrears.
- 3.68 The Council actively manages former tenant arrears. Procedures introduced in 2004 involving the use of collection agencies had some success in increasing payments. In 2005 the Council transferred responsibility for recovery of all types of housing debt to its Debt Support Team. This team initiates and manages all procedures aimed at recovering former tenant debt. The Council continues to use collection agencies where it considers that this approach is likely to be most effective.

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\* see glossary

3.69 The table below summarises West Lothian Council's reported performance in letting houses that have become empty.

	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06
	West Lothian	National	West Lothian	National	West Lothian
Turnover (no. of vacancies as % of total dwellings)	8.6%	11.6%	6.6%	10.6%	6.3%
Total no. of re-lets	1,221		904		848
% let in <2 weeks	73.3%	16.4%	74.0%	14.7%	67.9%
% let in 2-4 weeks	22.3%	24.9%	19.6%	23.8%	23.1%
% let in >4 weeks	4.4%	58.7%	6.4%	61.5%	9.0%
Average time to let**	12 days	73 days	11 days	79 days	13 days
% of total annual rental due lost due to voids*	0.4%	2.7%	0.5%	2.5%	0.6%

Source: West Lothian Council's inspection submission.

Note: Figures other than \*\*-Average time to let- exclude temporary tenancies and had not been validated by the Council's external auditor at the time of our inspection.

3.70 West Lothian Council's performance in letting its houses quickly is excellent.

Rental loss in each of the last three years has been significantly below the national average. The time the Council took to relet its houses was also much shorter than the national average. It is amongst the very best performing local authorities in both of these areas.

3.71 The Council sets clear timescales for selecting new tenants, inspecting, repairing and offering for let properties that become empty. It closely monitors its performance against each part of the process. As well as the challenging timescales there are a number of practices that help ensure that houses are let with the minimum of delay, these include:

- pre termination inspections and the selection of new tenants before keys are received;
- where acceptable to the outgoing tenant, pre termination viewings by prospective tenants;
- offering higher level decoration allowances for properties for which there is lower demand;
- accompanied viewings to allow any questions asked by prospective tenants to be answered and agreeing with incoming tenants which repairs can be completed after the new tenancy has started; and

- simultaneous offers to several applicants where property is in an area known to be difficult to let or where four previous offers have been refused.
- 3.72 West Lothian Council could not provide a break down of the costs of its housing management service separate from that for the property maintenance service. This is as a result of the close integration of these two functions and the fact that officers across the service carry out duties for both functions. This may limit the Council's understanding of some aspects of the overall cost of its housing management service, however, it has put in place a range of tools that ensure that it can demonstrate the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the service overall.
- 3.73 West Lothian Council has an excellent approach to maximising its rental income and reletting of its empty houses. It supports tenants who fall into arrears well and has excellent systems in place for monitoring and improving performance.

#### Performance management

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for housing management services, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 3.74 The Council has developed a comprehensive service planning and performance management system that links local performance targets to corporate objectives. The approach also ensures that service objectives are consistent with those set out in the corporate plan and community plan. It sets out its objectives for the delivery and improvement of its housing management service in its Housing and Building Services service plan. This document is reviewed annually and is developed using its own service evaluation tool, the West Lothian Assessment model (WLAM). This has been developed by the Council incorporating a range of published assessment tools including that for Investors In People\* and Chartermark. Audit Scotland, in its recent best value report on the Council found that "Implementing the WLAM has resulted in the process of challenge and review being embedded within the Council's business process to support continuous improvement in service delivery".

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\* see glossary

- 3.75 The Council develops its housing and building service plan from four local service plans covering each of the service delivery areas. The local service planning process includes staff and community participation events and is used to develop action plans for each local office area. This is a good way to involve local residents and staff at all levels of the organisation. It has contributed to the creation of a strong performance focused culture.
- 3.76 The Council has a robust performance management system in place. It reports performance on a wide range of targets through a well structured series of monthly, quarterly and annual reports. It has a clear framework of performance targets, measures and reports covering all areas of the housing management service including tenant satisfaction.
- 3.77 Individual officers meet on a monthly basis with their line manager to report and discuss their specific job performance. Housing Managers collate their area office information and discuss performance with Customer Service Managers. Action is taken quickly to address any area of performance that falls below target. Performance information is also presented regularly to the Area Committees, the Housing Policy Working Group and the Health and Care Committee. The Council is also in the process of developing a comprehensive corporate performance reporting framework to ensure that elected members receive a good overview of performance across all Council services.
- 3.78 We found that staff at all levels were clear about their objectives and targets. The Council's staff performance appraisal and development system is also closely linked to service level performance objectives and ensures that staff skills and knowledge is tested regularly. The process is supported by an excellent staff training system.
- 3.79 West Lothian Council has an excellent approach to performance management. Its strategic and operational planning processes are well developed and it sets targets, including targets for customer satisfaction, across all the key areas of the service. Performance is actively managed and the staff performance appraisal and training system has contributed to the development of a strong focus on the quality of services and continuous improvement at all levels in the organisation.

## Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.*

- 3.80 West Lothian Council is required by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 to make service performance information available to the public. The Council meets this obligation and has good arrangements to inform applicants for housing, its tenants and the general public about how it is performing in housing management services. Performance and outcome information is provided in review documents, newsletters, leaflets, on the Council's website and on plasma screens in public reception areas.
- 3.81 The Council sends all of its tenants an annual performance report that provides a good overview of performance across the service including tenant satisfaction information. Registered Tenant Organisations and the Tenants' Panel are also provided with a good range of performance information.
- 3.82 The Council has a good approach to reporting the performance of its housing management service. It uses a range of methods to make it easy for people to access information on its performance.

## Grade and overall assessment of housing management

- 3.83 Our overall assessment is that West Lothian Council's housing management service is excellent. The service as a whole is characterised by strengths and we found only a small number of areas where improvement is needed. The Council is committed to service improvement, and we saw that it has the willingness and capacity to tackle the weaknesses identified in this report. This is a significant factor in our grading of the housing management service.
- 3.84 The service has a strong performance culture and focus on service quality. We found particular strengths in:
- tenant participation and responding to service user views;
  - ensuring equality of access to its services;
  - managing rent arrears;
  - reletting empty properties; and

- managing and improving the quality of neighbourhoods and responding to antisocial behaviour.

3.85 We found a number of areas for improvement particularly in the management of some aspects of the allocations process including the management of bypassing and cancellations, the use of NOPs for possession and abandonments and the management of short Scottish secure tenancies.

3.86 The Council also has a strong service user focus and an excellent track record of continuous improvement. Tenants have made a significant contribution to this through their involvement in tenant led inspections and broader tenant participation structures. The Council has shown a willingness and capacity to tackle the areas of weakness we have identified in this inspection. It accepted all of the findings set out in this report and took early action to address many of them.

## 4. Property maintenance

4.1 The grade awarded for property maintenance is:

A	Excellent	Major strengths
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to the repairs service

*Social landlords should have arrangements in place that make it easy for tenants to report repairs and have them carried out.*

- 4.2 West Lothian Council delivers its property maintenance service through its network of local offices and its Customer Service Centre. We set out our general view of these arrangements in paragraph 3.2 and 3.3. Tenants can report repairs to the Council in a variety of ways. The two main methods are by phone to the Council's Customer Service Centre (CSC) or in person at one of the Council's local offices. Tenants can also report repairs to housing or building staff during home visits, online, by email or through contact with their elected members. The Council keeps good records on the methods used by tenants to access the repairs service and can identify the level of contact across the range of access methods.
- 4.3 The majority of reported repairs (70.5%) are by telephone to the CSC. The Centre is open 24 hours a day and deals with initial telephone calls for all Council services. The centre sets a performance target to answer 80% of incoming calls. When all staff are dealing with telephone enquiries incoming callers are redirected to a voice mail. Staff have a target to respond to voice mails within two hours. Performance information for 2005/06 shows that staff responded to 72.6% of all calls within 2 hours and the remainder of calls within 3 hours. Some of the tenants we spoke to expressed concerns about accessing the service through the call centre but all said that they had no problems reporting repairs to the Council.

- 4.4 When a tenant reports a repair, staff access a very informative computer based diagnostic system that allows them to investigate and determine the nature of the repair. This system is also available on the Council's website for tenants to use when requesting a repair on line. The Council orders the repair when it is reported unless a pre inspection is required.
- 4.5 Tradesmen attending to a repair in a tenant's property have the authority to deal with other repairs a tenant identifies within certain limits. This ensures that tenants do not need to make repeated calls to the office, and it also ensures that the tenant gets repairs done at one visit. The Council has not set a target for the number of repairs completed at the first visit but achieves this for 88% of repairs.
- 4.6 The Council operates an appointment system that allows tenants to have a morning or afternoon appointment. It is very good at keeping its appointments. It had made 25,678 appointments as at the end of February 2006 and had kept 99.5% of these appointments. It also operates a compensation scheme and will pay tenants £15 if it fails to keep an appointment.
- 4.7 The Council gives tenants good information on how to report repairs. The tenants' handbook provides an excellent section on identifying types of repairs and it gives good information on repairs responsibilities and timescales. We asked our tenant assessors to review this material and they found that it was well presented and provided the full information that tenants need. The Council also provides repairs receipts for all urgent and routine repairs. Tenants we spoke to said that the information on the repairs service was good.
- 4.8 West Lothian Council provides excellent access to its repair service. It provides tenants with good information across a range of repair subjects and minimises the need for tenants to contact the Council by allowing tradesmen to undertake minor repairs while in a tenants property. It is also excellent at keeping appointments.

### Speed and quality of response repairs service

*Social landlords should set challenging targets for completing repairs, strive to achieve them and ensure repairs are completed to a high quality.*

4.9 The Council's targets for completing repairs are 24 hours for emergencies, 5 days for urgent repairs and 15 days for routine repairs. The Council has increased the timescale for completing urgent repairs from 3 days in 2005/06 in order to better manage its appointment system.

4.10 The Council's published performance figures for the past three years are set out in the table below.

West Lothian's Target response times		Performance			National median* 2004/05
		2003/04	2004/05	2005/06**	
Emergency	24 hours	94.2%	94%	91%	94%
Urgent	3 days	85%	92%	89%	
Routine	15 days	93.6%	96.1%	92.2%	
% of repairs due to be completed within 24 hours completed within target		94.2%	94%	91%	94%
% of all repairs completed in target		91.2%	94.4%	91%	86.9%

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance indicators & West Lothian Council's inspection submission.

\*\*Figures provided by West Lothian Council are for the period up to 31 March 2006.

4.11 The Council's performance since 2003/04 has fluctuated, although, overall performance is good. In 2004/05 the Council's performance in completing emergency repairs on time was slightly less than the national median. It achieved an excellent performance in completing routine repairs on time and was the third best performing local authority in this category. Performance has slipped slightly during 2005/06.

4.12 The Council has good procedures for accurately recording repair completion times. However, when a repair is pre inspected the starting time for recording purposes is when it orders the repair, not when the tenant initially reports the repair. This results in the Council overstating its performance for urgent and routine repairs. The Council recalculated its performance for 2005/06 taking into consideration the effect pre inspections had on its performance and found that it overstated performance for emergencies by 0.8%, by 3% for urgent repairs and

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\* se glossary

- 3.4% for routine repairs. Overall the impact does not affect what is a good performance. Case reviews undertaken during the inspection confirmed that the Council was completing repairs quickly and generally monitoring performance well.
- 4.13 The Council delivers its responsive repairs service through six Local Repair Teams (LRTs). These were introduced in March 2005 following the outcomes from a tenant led inspection. Area offices have dedicated trades and a works supervisor allocated to their area. This has led to improved communication and importantly allows the Council to efficiently operate the repairs appointment system.
- 4.14 The Council assesses tenant satisfaction with its repairs service, through a 30% telephone survey and from returned repair receipts. Between April 2005 and February 2006 the Council received 1,374 repair receipts and 93% of tenants were satisfied with the quality of work undertaken. In addition 95% of tenants surveyed were satisfied with the quality of service provided by the Local Repair Teams.
- 4.15 Pre and post inspections\* are important tools for ensuring repairs are targeted accurately and carried out to a high standard. The Council sets a target to undertake post inspections on 10% of all jobs over £150. The works supervisors also undertake post-inspections and more recently the Council introduced a pilot team to inspect a further 10% of completed repairs. In addition, the Customer Service Centre telephones 30% of tenants who had repairs completed by the LRTs. This approach could lead to some duplication with tenants receiving more than one contact in relation to a completed repair. The Council is aware of this and has firm plans to review its approach to post inspections and how it gathers satisfaction information.
- 4.16 The Council aims to order repairs at the point at which they are reported, as a result it does not set a target for the number of pre inspections it carries out. In 2004/05 the Council undertook pre inspections of 10% of all repairs and reduced

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\* see glossary

this to 4.5% in 2005/06. It intends to reduce this still further in order to improve the service to tenants.

- 4.17 The Council operates the Right to Repair\* scheme but does not fully comply with some statutory requirements. The Council provides general information on the Right to Repair in the tenants' handbook, through a leaflet and on repair receipts for urgent and routine repairs. When a tenant reports a repair, the Council also advises them that the repair falls within the scheme. However, it does not provide tenants with enough information at the point they report the repair to be confident that tenants understand the details of the scheme, particularly, in relation to the use of alternative contractors and compensation payments. The Council is also not paying compensation when it fails to meet statutory timescales.
- 4.18 West Lothian Council's performance in respect of the speed and quality of the repairs is good. A high percentage of repairs are completed at the first visit. It is also achieving high satisfaction levels with the service. We found only two areas of weakness these being the implementation of the 'Right to Repair' scheme and the accuracy of performance information where it does pre-inspections. These did not detract from the Council's otherwise good performance in this area.

#### Physical quality of houses

*Social landlords should have good information about the condition of their houses and should deliver effective maintenance programmes that take account of housing quality and home safety needs.*

- 4.19 The Council has invested significant resources in its stock over the last 10 years. Typical investment programmes have included work such as window and door replacement contracts, kitchen and bathroom renewals and central heating installations and upgrades. The Council balloted tenants in 2001 on proposals to increase rents by £5 per week to finance a 5 year kitchen and bathroom replacement programme. Tenants voted in favour of the rent increase and the Council is in the process of completing the final phases of this work.

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\* see glossary

- 4.20 Scottish Ministers have set a target that all social landlords' houses should meet the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)\* by 2015. Landlords were required to prepare a plan showing how they will achieve this by April 2005. The Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland will assess each local authorities' plan. West Lothian Council has submitted its Standard Delivery Plan (SDP)\* and expects to meet the SHQS by 2015. Over the last four years it has increased its capital investment to include aspects of the standard in its capital works programme. In order to meet the requirements of the SHQS the Council estimates that it will need to spend £7 million per year over the next 10 years. The Council has agreed a higher West Lothian standard that it wants its houses to meet. It plans to spend £190 million over 10 years to achieve this and the SHQS. The Council received confirmation from Communities Scotland on the 4 July 2006 that they have a robust plan in place to achieve the SHQS by 2015.
- 4.21 The Council undertook a survey of the physical condition of 13% of its houses in 2000. It is currently updating its knowledge on stock condition and will complete a 100% stock condition survey over the next 4 years. It will use this information to revise its capital programme\* to ensure that it is investing in those properties most in need of improvement to meet the SHQS. The Council has a very good understanding of the condition of its stock and general amenities associated with its houses.
- 4.22 The Council has a good approach to prioritising planned maintenance\* work to reduce the need for response repairs. Capital Programme Liaison Officers (CPLOs) gather repair data from a variety of sources such as housing staff, tenants, reactive repair information and from their own knowledge of the stock. Typical works are fencing, gutter cleaning/replacement, doors renewals and external painterwork. The Council reviews the priority for planned maintenance work on a monthly basis. Work agreed at these meetings is programmed to ensure value for money and effective budget management.
- 4.23 In response to tenant feedback the Council introduced improved methods of communicating with tenants on planned maintenance issues. When a tenant

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\* see glossary

reports a repair that falls under the planned/reactive category they receive a letter advising them that the Council will discuss the repair at the next monthly planned/reactive meeting. Following this meeting the Council advises tenants within 5 days that they will either attend to the repair within 28 days or it will be held for inclusion in a future contract. Overall the Council communicates well with its tenants on planned maintenance issues.

- 4.24 West Lothian Council has taken positive steps to ensure the safety of its tenants. All properties have either hard wired or battery operated smoke detectors and these are inspected during the annual gas safety service. Prior to the inspection the Council put in place a contract to inspect smoke detectors in properties that do not have gas. The Council also undertook a programme of lead replacement work between 2001 and 2004 and there are no lead water pipes within the Council's properties. The Council also carries out ongoing water quality tests to identify and address any instances of lead solder in internal cold water supplies. Where the Council identifies lead in the incoming mains it renews this during capital works contracts.
- 4.25 Social landlords have a statutory duty to manage asbestos in the common areas of their properties. The Council is complying with this duty and has good systems in place to identify and manage asbestos in common areas.
- 4.26 Social landlords are required to carry out gas safety checks every 12 months on all gas appliances and flues which it provides for its tenants' use. The Council has 11,346 properties with gas. The table below summarises the Council's performance in carrying out gas safety checks.

	At February 2006	
	Number of houses	% of houses
Houses with gas appliances and flues	11,346	-
Houses with current gas safety certificates	10,952	96.5%
Houses where safety check was carried out within 12 months of previous check	10,499	95.8%
Houses where safety check was carried out up to one month after the due date	123	1.1%
Houses where safety check was carried out one to three months after the due date	75	0.7%
Houses where safety check was carried out more than three months after the due date	255	2.3%

Source: West Lothian Council's inspection submission

- 4.27 As at 4 April 2006 the Council had a valid gas safety certificate for 96.5% of its stock and it had inspected 95.8% of properties within 12 months of the previous inspection. The Council improved its management of gas servicing during 2006. By the time of our inspection 99% of properties had received an annual gas maintenance service.
- 4.28 West Lothian Council's management of gas safety is good and has improved over recent years. The Council has robust procedures to ensure that it carries out gas servicing within 12 months of the previous service. Where the Council is not successful in gaining access at the initial request tenants will receive three reminder letters, a seven day warning letter and the Council will then force entry to a tenant's property. Our case reviews showed that the Council has a good system in place to monitor and administer the process and we found that the cases we sampled reflected the statistical information provided by the Council in the inspection submission. The Council gives a high priority to gas safety issues and is performing very well in meeting its statutory duties.
- 4.29 The Council worked with tenants to agree a standard that all empty properties should meet before they are let. Community Based Housing Officers carry out detailed inspections of empty properties and issue repairs to bring the house up to the standard. Prior to letting the property Quality Assurance Officers will ensure that all repairs and safety checks are complete.
- 4.30 The Council has an excellent approach to ensuring that its houses are in a good physical condition. It is clear on the standards that it wants to achieve and has a well developed approach to planning and undertaking improvement work. It has a

good knowledge of the condition of its stock and has developed a clear programme of work to meet the SHQS by 2015. The Council also has good procedures to manage its gas maintenance and asbestos management responsibilities and it deals with other tenant safety issues well.

### Responsiveness to tenants

*Social landlords should place the people they serve at the heart of their work, treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 4.31 West Lothian Council actively seeks tenants' views about its repairs service. It uses a variety of methods to do this such as:
- a questionnaire on its repair receipts;
  - a telephone survey of 30% of tenants who have had repairs carried out by the local repair teams;
  - post inspection survey undertaken by Quality Assurance Officers; and
  - a survey of all tenants who have been part of the capital works programme.
- 4.32 The Council also uses its excellent tenant participation structures and service wide tenants satisfaction surveys to consult and involve tenants in reviewing and developing its repairs service. Tenant participation is discussed in more detail in section three of this report. Overall the Council uses significant resources to get comment and opinion on the quality of the repair service. It has good systems in place to collate and analyse the information it receives and we saw good evidence that it uses this information to improve the service.
- 4.33 We saw a significant number of improvements that had been made to the service in response to tenants' views. These ranged from relatively small changes like, workmen wearing boot covers when in tenants' properties, to substantial improvements to service delivery including the void property standard and the introduction of the Local Repair Teams.
- 4.34 The Council stages an annual exhibition for tenants whose houses are included in the capital programme. Tenants are able to view the type of work planned and the materials that will be used. Tenants can also view the range of choices they will have, for example, in kitchen and bathroom styles and colours. We attended this exhibition during the inspection and found that the range of advice and the

quality of exhibits on show were excellent. Approximately 800 people attended this exhibition in 2005.

- 4.35 The Council has a very good system to collect, monitor and analyse formal and informal complaints. We assess the Council's general approach at paragraphs 3.60-3.63. From our case reviews we found that the Council dealt effectively with individual complaints in relation to the maintenance service. It keeps tenants informed about progress and it aims to deal with complaints within five working days.
- 4.36 The Council is excellent at responding to tenants' views of its property maintenance service. It has good systems in place to gather feedback on its services and it uses this information to review service delivery. We saw many examples of significant improvements to the service that have been made in direct response to the views of tenants either through feedback or more formal tenant participation arrangements.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Resource management and efficiency

*Social landlords should manage the costs of their services effectively and should procure repairs and maintenance services in a way that takes account of quality and cost.*

- 4.37 West Lothian Council spent £688 per house on repairs and maintenance in 2004/2005. This was 8<sup>th</sup> lowest level of expenditure of the 29 councils managing council houses in Scotland. The Council increased this for 2005/06 to £806 per property.
- 4.38 The Council has a good approach to achieving value for money in the delivery of the repairs service. In January 2006 the Council integrated housing and building service to form one department. The Council believes that one of the immediate benefits of this is that Building Services now operate on a cost basis rather than making surpluses and this has released significant resources for further investment. To assess value for money the Council has employed consultants to

- benchmark\* the Council's reactive maintenance schedule of rates (SOR)\* and its kitchen and bathroom renewal contract against nationally recognised costs. The result of this analysis shows that the Council will achieve savings of £4 million in relation to reactive repairs over the next ten years. It will also save £1.8 million over the life of its kitchen and bathroom replacement programme.
- 4.39 The Council has very effective arrangements in place to manage its maintenance budgets. Spend against budget is monitored monthly. The Council's administration of works orders and associated costs is excellent. At any point in time accurate budget information is available as works orders and costings are calculated and entered on the accounting system very quickly following the completion of repairs.
- 4.40 The Council is good at identifying and issuing accounts for repairs that should be paid for by either tenants or owner occupiers. It also has a robust procedure in place to pursue the outstanding debt. Our case reviews showed that it was following all the key stages of this procedure. The Council identified in the inspection submission that it had 27,320 rechargeable repair invoices and £175,492.42 outstanding as at 28 March 2006. The Council was unable to provide us with information on the amount of money recovered over the last three years.
- 4.41 The Council has occasionally undertaken repair and improvement work to flatted properties where a proportion of the residents are owner occupiers. While the Council has recharged owners for their proportion of the repair costs, owners have not been recharged the cost of improvement work. When we raised this issue with the Council they agreed to work with Audit Scotland to review the accounting treatment of these costs.
- 4.42 The Council's Building Services staff undertake the majority of work of maintaining and improving its houses. However, the Council will employ external contractors for certain works. The Council normally lets contracts through competitive tendering. The Council selects companies from its approved list of

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\* see glossary

contractors. To get on the Councils approved list, contractors must demonstrate they comply with a range of quality factors. The Council assesses contractors annually on issues such as standard of work, tenant responsiveness and health and safety. The contractor's performance affects the likelihood of future work. The Council removed contractors from its kitchen and bathroom contract due to poor performance.

- 4.43 West Lothian Council's approach to managing its resource to deliver its property maintenance service is excellent. The cost of repair and maintenance work carried out by in house teams is benchmarked against nationally recognised costs and compares well. The Council administers its systems well and ensures effective control of costs for both response repairs and capital works. Despite the service recently going through a period of major change the Council has continued to demonstrate that it is achieving value for money.

#### **Performance management**

*Social landlords should have clear objectives, standards and targets for property maintenance services, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

- 4.44 West Lothian Council has developed a well structured strategic and operational service planning system. We set out our views on this system in section 3 of this report. The recent merger of Building Services with Housing Services means that planning across the two is not yet fully integrated and for the present both are working with service plans developed through the previous management structures. However, the Council has well developed plans to ensure the full integration of service planning across Housing and Building services through the 2006/07 service planning round.
- 4.45 The Council's property maintenance service operates within a very robust performance management framework. The Council monitors its approach to property maintenance across a significant number of indicators and it sets challenging but realistic performance targets including targets for tenant satisfaction. The Council closely monitors its service outputs on a monthly basis and staff meet with line managers to discuss personal performance. Where reported performance declines the Council responds quickly and has an excellent approach to putting in place structured and proportionate responses.

- 4.46 From our case reviews on site it was evident that the Council has good recording systems from which it takes its performance information. Our case reviews raised only one minor concern over the accuracy of the performance information for urgent and routine repairs which is discussed at paragraph 4.12. This did not adversely affect the good level of reported performance.
- 4.47 The Council has an excellent performance management system for the property maintenance service. It makes use of a range of performance indicators\* and targets, including some relating to tenant satisfaction, that allow it to effectively monitor the quality of its service delivery. Staff have clear performance standards to work to and there is an excellent level of staff supervision and management in delivering the service. The Council responds well when targets are missed.

#### Public reporting

*Social landlords should give stakeholders the information they need about the organisation and its plans, services and performance.*

- 4.48 West Lothian Council publishes information about its repairs service through a variety of means. The Council website provides good information on a range of issues about the repair service.
- 4.49 The Council also provide a good variety of repairs information through its newsletter where it informs tenants on performance issues such as satisfaction results and how quickly it completes repairs. The Council also provides performance information to tenants groups, publishes performance information on plasma screens in its local offices, in its newsletter to all tenants, its annual review and in the Councils' and local newspapers. However, the Council's annual performance booklet sent to all tenants "Looking Forward- Looking Back" contains only limited information on the performance of the repairs service.
- 4.50 West Lothian Council is good at reporting the performance of its repairs service. It publishes performance information in a wide variety of ways that generally ensures that tenants and other stakeholders have the information they require to understand the repairs service, its plans and its performance.

## Grade and overall assessment of property maintenance

- 4.51 Our overall assessment is that West Lothian Council's property maintenance service is excellent. The service as a whole is characterised by strengths and we found only a small number of areas where improvement is needed.
- 4.52 The service has a strong performance culture and focus on service quality. We found particular strengths in:
- the speed and quality of repairs;
  - the management of gas servicing;
  - the Council's approach to investing in its houses and ensuring that they are maintained to a high standard;
  - responding to tenants view; and
  - ensuring value for money and managing its resources.
- 4.53 We found a small number of areas for improvement in the Council's maintenance service. It is not fully implementing its responsibilities in relation to the Right to Repair and its performance information is slightly inaccurate in relation to how quickly it completes repairs due to the impact of pre inspections. The Council has not recharged all the relevant costs to some owner occupiers during improvement contracts.
- 4.54 The Council has a strong commitment to continuous improvement and an excellent track record in working with tenants to improve its services. It accepted all of the areas for improvement that we identified during the inspection.

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\* see glossary

## 5. Homelessness services

5.1 The grade awarded for homelessness services is:

C	Fair	Some strengths, but with many areas where improvement is required or with a small number of significant weaknesses.
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We explain at the end of this section how the assessments and judgements we have made result in this grade.

### How good is the service?

#### Access to homelessness services

*Local authorities should provide open, fair and equal access to their homelessness services and should provide a 24-hour crisis response service for roofless households.*

- 5.2 West Lothian Council delivers its homelessness service through its network of local offices and a specialist Youth Homelessness Team based in Livingston town centre. Homeless people are also able to contact the service by phone through the Customer Service Centre. This is also the contact point for the emergency standby service. We set out our views on the physical accessibility of these offices in paragraphs 3.3-3.4. Unlike some other Council emergency services the Customer Service Centre does not have a free phone number for the out of hours service.
- 5.3 The Council received 1,966 applications for assistance during 2004/05, an increase of around 9.2% on the previous year. The number of homeless applications amounts to 2.76% of all households in the Council's area, which is above the national figure of 2.41%.
- 5.4 The Council routinely collects ethnicity information about applicants as part of their homeless applications. It reviews and reports this information on a regular basis. We saw good evidence of the Council using monitoring information to improve access to its services by translating key documents into Polish to meet growing demand.
- 5.5 The Council publicises its homeless service through leaflets and posters in a range of locations where people facing homelessness are likely to see them. The

Council has also advertised the homelessness service through a number of channels likely to reach a much wider audience, for example the local football club. The Council has published a useful advice booklet giving information to applicants. We asked our tenant assessors to review this booklet and some of the leaflets publicising the service, they found that they were well produced, written in plain English and provided the range of information that those at risk of homelessness are likely to need. However, we found that details of how to use the out of hours service were generally not displayed prominently and one office had no homelessness information on display.

- 5.6 Publications relating to the homelessness service are available in other formats and languages on request and most display this commitment prominently. Information on the Council's homelessness service is available on its website, along with a useful list of frequently asked questions and links to other sites that may be of interest to applicants. Information on the homelessness service, including details of the out of hours number, is displayed on plasma screens in local area offices.
- 5.7 Customer Information Service (CIS) staff have useful written guidance on how to respond to homeless applicants, emphasising the need for sensitivity. Staff are encouraged to complete the initial presentation form with the applicant in private interview rooms wherever possible, but we witnessed instances of this not being offered and private information being discussed in a public area. Whilst general guidance on dealing with homeless applicants is available to Contact Centre staff, there is no specific guidance for responding to homeless applicants who approach the Council in this way. The Customer Service Centre is often the first point of contact for homeless applicants.
- 5.8 CIS and Customer Service Centre staff complete a basic initial presentation form, and arrange for the applicant to see a housing needs officer. Where an applicant is roofless they are seen by a housing needs officer that day. In all other cases, they are given an appointment within five working days. Applicants are given an appointment card and offered a reminder call 48 hours before the interview. The Council has recently started to record and monitor the time taken between first

contact and the assessment interview. Between 6 February 2006 and 22 March 2006 this averaged 1 day for applicants who were not roofless.

5.9 Where applicants contact the service outwith normal working hours, staff at the Customer Service Centre take details of callers and pass them to a duty standby officer, who then contacts the caller directly. However, we found a number of weaknesses in the operation of the out of hours service including:

- inappropriate questions being asked at initial contact;
- a limited supply of immediately available temporary accommodation;
- poor recording and follow up of out of hours contacts; and
- the failure to advise callers of the Council's statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation.

We saw a number of instances where the Council failed to offer temporary accommodation including one serious instance where the Council failed to respond appropriately to a vulnerable individual who was made homeless by an emergency. Weaknesses in the recording and monitoring of contacts to the out of hours service mean that the Council cannot always be certain it is meeting its statutory duties to people using this service. This is a significant weakness.

5.10 The Council has formal referral arrangements in place with a wide range of other agencies, including prisons, hospitals and Women's Aid. Third parties we spoke to felt that these arrangements were working well but expressed some concerns relating to other aspects of access to the Council's homelessness service. These included the shortage of temporary accommodation and accessing the homelessness service via the Customer Service Centre. Service users that we spoke to were generally satisfied with the level of information they had received and most understood the process and found staff friendly and helpful.

5.11 West Lothian Council provides fair access to its homelessness service. Applicants find it easy to contact the service and there is a range of well produced publicity material widely available. The Council has used its ethnic monitoring to improve access to the service for those from minority ethnic communities. However, the Council does not always respond to out of hours applicants appropriately and cannot be sure that it is discharging its statutory

duty to accommodate homeless people out of hours. This is a significant weakness.

### Assessing homeless applications

*Local authorities should treat homeless people fairly and consistently and be responsive to their individual needs when assessing their application for help.*

5.12 The Council has a duty to make all necessary inquiries to satisfy itself whether homeless applicants are homeless or threatened with homelessness, have a priority need, and became homeless or threatened with homelessness intentionally. West Lothian Council assessed 1,861 homeless applications in 2005/06. The table below provides an overview of the Council's assessment decisions of people who applied to it for assistance over the period 2003/04 to 2005/06.

	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06
	West Lothian	Scotland	West Lothian	Scotland	West Lothian
Total number of applications assessed in period	1,788	49,937	1,836	54,302	1,861
Priority unintentional	62%	54%	60%	52%	59%
Priority intentional	2%	2%	2.4%	2%	4%
Non-priority	29.7%	21%	25%	19%	22%
Not homeless	5%	8%	9.2%	9%	9%
Lost contact/withdrew before assessment	1%	9%	2.7%	12%	3%
Resolved prior to assessment	4%	6%	1%	6%	2%

Source: Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletins and West Lothian Council's inspection submission

5.13 The proportion of homeless applications assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need has fallen from 62% in 2003/04 to 60% in 2004/05 but remains higher than the national figure of 52% for 2004/05. The figure for those assessed as homeless and not in priority need has also fallen. These are in line with national trends. The level of applications assessed as not homeless has risen from 5% in 2003/04 to 9% in 2004/05 and 2005/06, which is also in line with the percentage for Scotland. The levels of lost contact/withdrew before assessment decisions have risen from 1% to 3% but remain significantly below the national figure of 6%.

- 5.14 Homeless assessments are carried out by 17 officers in 8 different teams based in 7 of the local Customer Information Centres and the Youth Homeless Team in Livingston. In 2004/05, 30% of applications were received at the Livingston offices (The Ability Centre in Carmondean, and West Lothian Connected, in Livingston town centre), 13% at the Youth Homeless Team and the remaining 58% at the other 6 Customer Information Centres.
- 5.15 We found some variations in the proportion of each type of decision being made between offices most notably around “lost contact before assessment” and “not homeless” decisions, and the proportion of applicants assessed as “threatened with homelessness”. The Council is aware of these variations and improved its quality assurance process for all homeless assessments in April 2006. Local housing managers must now approve a homeless decision before the decision letter is sent and 10% of closed cases are formally audited. This is a good approach to ensuring consistent decision making, but at the time of our inspection it was not fully effective.
- 5.16 We shadowed\* a number of interviews (assessment and follow-up interviews) across the teams and saw that generally officers are sensitive to the needs of people who approach the Council for assistance. However, during interviews the Council does not always tell homeless people everything they should. In particular discussions do not always provide applicants with:
- clear explanations of the homeless assessment process;
  - information about the Council's statutory duties to provide temporary accommodation if required;
  - information about the out of hours service and how to access it; and
  - the Council's advice booklet for applicants was not always available.
- The majority of homeless people we spoke to were happy with their interview and the information provided.
- 5.17 We reviewed 76 Homeless applications across the range of assessment decisions and found that generally the Council follows the correct sequence of

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\* see glossary

inquiries but that there are a number of areas of weakness in its approach including:

- weaknesses in the recording of investigations;
- generally poor and inconsistent recording of evidence and reasons for decisions;
- variations in the interpretation of “threatened with homelessness” between offices; and
- some decisions notified to applicants were different to those recorded on file.

In addition, we saw examples where officers tried to assist applicants to resolve their housing situation through the Council’s mainstream allocations process but in doing so they failed to complete the homelessness assessment correctly. This resulted in a number of cases being wrongly assessed.

At our request the Council undertook an urgent review of a substantial number of cases during the inspection and found a similar range of problems. As a result the Council cannot be sure that it is discharging its statutory duties to all applicants. This is a significant weakness.

5.18 The Council has recently reviewed its approach to assessing homelessness and introduced new guidance for staff on 1 April 2006. The intention was to improve the assessment of whether someone was homeless or not. We reviewed this revised guidance and found that staff were required to make enquiries about housing options that were inappropriate. The guidance also directed staff to define homelessness as rooflessness.

5.19 At our request the Council analysed the impact of its revised approach by looking at all homeless decisions for April and May 2006. These figures showed significant changes in the pattern of decision making, most significantly:

- the percentage of “unintentionally homeless” and “in priority need” assessments fell from 59% in 2005/06 to 38% for April and May 2006;
- the proportion of “not homeless” assessments increased from 9% in 2005/06 to 28%; and
- levels of “lost contact or withdrew before assessment” decisions increased from 3% to 9%.

- In response to these findings the Council accepted that it should review its guidance as a matter of urgency and began this work whilst we were still onsite. The Council also undertook to contact all the applicants who may have been disadvantaged by its approach over this period and reassess their applications.
- 5.20 The Code of Guidance recommends that councils should notify people of the outcome of their application as quickly as possible and suggests a target of 28 days to complete inquiries. It also suggests applicants should be sent their decisions within a day of the completion of inquiries. The Council has a target to advise applicants in writing of the outcome of their interview within 28 days. Their performance against this target has declined from 94% in 2003/04 to 83% in 2005/06 and during April and May 2006 decline further to 67%. Our case reviews found that it took on average just over four days from the decision date to issue a decision letter.
- 5.21 The Council reviewed and improved its standard decision letters in early 2006. However, they do not contain information about the applicant's right to request a review of any accommodation offered as suggested by the Code of Guidance. In addition the explanation of the reasons for the decision and the matters which have been taken into account are not always clear.
- 5.22 West Lothian Council is poor at assessing homeless applications. We found significant weaknesses in the decision making process including incorrect decisions, limited evidence of investigations and poor recording of evidence. The Council's recently introduced quality assurance process is not fully effective. The Council's performance on making decisions within 28 days of an application is decreasing. The Council has accepted our overall assessment of this aspect of its service and has developed an action plan to address these weaknesses. Work on implementing this plan began before the onsite phase of the inspection was completed.

### Temporary accommodation

*Local authorities should make available an adequate supply of good quality temporary accommodation to meet the needs for homeless people.*

5.23 West Lothian Council provides 332 furnished tenancy spaces and 108 emergency supported accommodation spaces as temporary accommodation for homeless people in a range of property types including:

- mainstream council furnished properties;
- mainstream housing association properties;
- hostel accommodation; and
- direct access hostel accommodation.

The Council works in partnership with a number of organisations including Open Door, Women's Aid, Bethany Christian trust and six housing associations to ensure that a range of accommodation is available to meet different needs. This is a good approach.

5.24 The accommodation is located across the West Lothian area, some of which is suitable for disabled people. Young, single homeless people are usually allocated hostel accommodation rather than a dispersed furnished tenancy. The Council does not use Bed and Breakfast accommodation, but does place some applicants in hostel accommodation in the Edinburgh area. Key figures on the use of temporary accommodation by the Council are set out in the table below.

	2002/03		2003/04	2004/05	2005/06*
	National	West Lothian	West Lothian	West Lothian	West Lothian
Number accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation	9,240	0	0	0	1
As % of total	36.7%	0%	0%	0%	0.17%
Average length of stay (days)	26 days	0 days	0 days	0 days	19 days
Number accommodated in Council furnished accommodation	6,446	418	525	612	419
As % of total	25.6%	87%	94%	70%	70%
Average length of stay (days)	142 days	93 days	66 days	83 days	126 days
Number accommodated in hostel accommodation	8,154	44	34	261	182
As % of total	32.4%	9.5%	6%	30%	30%
Average length of stay (days)	53 days	110 days	73 days	52 days	37 days

Source: Audit Scotland's published performance information & West Lothian Council's inspection submission.  
\* April – September 2005

- 5.25 The number of people placed in temporary accommodation by the Council has increased significantly over the past 3 years from 559 in 2003/04 to 873 in 2004/05. The average length of stay over the period has increased from 66 days to 126 days in furnished accommodation, and has reduced from 73 days to 37 days for those occupying hostel accommodation. The reported reduction in the length of stay in hostel accommodation is a result in improvements in the scope of monitoring to include the Women's aid refuge where lengths of stay are generally much shorter than other types of accommodation.
- 5.26 The Council has increased the number and type of hostel places and dispersed lets available for use as temporary accommodation each year since 2002/03. It has also recently launched a private leasing scheme with the intention providing 50 leased properties by March 2007. These properties are intended to initially supplement and eventually replace mainstream Council furnished tenancies, releasing these for permanent lets.

- 5.27 We found a number of weaknesses in the Council's approach to providing temporary accommodation. These include:
- delays in offering temporary accommodation;
  - a shortage of temporary accommodation resulting in homeless people being offered hostel places in Edinburgh; and
  - a failure to monitor the number of out of area placements or the reasons for refusing temporary accommodation.

Some service users we spoke to reported being told that no temporary accommodation was available at the time they made their application. We saw one occasion when a family was split between two hostels in Edinburgh because no suitable temporary accommodation was available in the West Lothian area. Separating families is very poor practice. As a result of these weaknesses the Council cannot be certain that it is meeting its statutory duties or that it has sufficient accommodation available to meet the needs of applicants. This is a significant weakness.

- 5.28 The Council has already begun a capacity planning exercise to assess temporary accommodation needs to meet the 2012 target for the abolition of priority need. The Council agreed to act immediately to improve its management of access to temporary accommodation to ensure that it could meet all its statutory duties. It also agreed to consider the wider issues we raised about this aspect of the service in its capacity planning process.

- 5.29 The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2004 prohibits councils from using unsuitable temporary accommodation for households with children and pregnant women for longer than 14 days unless exceptional circumstances apply. We found that the Council was fully complying with the terms of this order.

- 5.30 We visited the Council's hostel accommodation in the Blackburn Homeless Unit and in Quentin Court and a number of dispersed furnished flats. We found them to be of a good standard. The Council has made a number of improvements to its hostel accommodation including reducing the need to share facilities and creating space for training and other activities.

- 5.31 The Council manages its temporary accommodation well. There are few restrictions on visitors, and no residents' curfew in operation in the hostels. It also has a clear standard for the quality of its dispersed lets. All residents are given a comprehensive information pack and the Council ensures that they have access to a range of services including general health services, help with addictions and mental health services. The Council carries out a support needs assessment for all temporary accommodation residents and ensures that they are contacted regularly. Residents we spoke with were satisfied with the accommodation and the assistance given to them by the Council's staff.
- 5.32 The Council aims to offer accommodation within the area requested by the applicant where there is family support or where children attend school. This cannot always be achieved but applicants are moved to more suitable accommodation as soon as it becomes available. Where households with children are accommodated at a distance from their school the Council provides transport. The Council provided this service to 77 children during 2005/06.
- 5.33 The rent charge for mainstream temporary tenancies is the basic Council rent, with a small additional amount for furnishings where these are provided. This makes them affordable to those in employment or seeking employment, and reduces the risk of residents accruing significant rent arrears during their stay.
- 5.34 The Council has a fair approach to the provision of temporary accommodation. When temporary accommodation is provided, it is of good quality and residents are well supported. The Council works effectively with a number of partners in the provision of temporary accommodation. It has made significant improvements to the standard of its hostels and has plans to extend the range of temporary accommodation. The Council does not use bed and breakfast establishments. However, the Council does not have sufficient temporary accommodation available to meet demand and is not managing access to temporary accommodation effectively. It cannot be sure that it is meeting its statutory obligations. This is a significant weakness. The Council has accepted the areas for improvement that we have identified and has begun work to address them.

### Permanent accommodation

*Councils should, so far as possible, make offers of permanent accommodation quickly and should offer the same level of choice and quality of houses as other applicants.*

- 5.35 West Lothian Council has set a target that 50% of its lets should be made to homeless applicants and has achieved this in each of the last 2 years. In 2004/05, the Council secured permanent accommodation for 57% of the people it assessed as having a statutory duty to ensure permanent accommodation was made available. This is significantly lower than the national figure of 69% and was the third lowest of all Scottish local authorities. However, in 2005/06 the Council's performance improved to 61.7%. We found that as a result of poor recording of decisions and outcomes, the Council may be under reporting the number of lets being provided to homeless applicants.
- 5.36 The Council does not actively manage or monitor homeless applicants on its waiting list. It awards applicants in temporary accommodation 400 points and 350 points to those it considers to be threatened with homelessness, and places them on its housing list. Offers are made as and when they are matched for a house. The Council has no target time to offer permanent accommodation to those it has a duty to house. It has only recently started to monitor how long it takes to make a first offer. For the period 2005/06 it took on average 12 weeks to make a first offer of permanent accommodation.
- 5.37 We asked the Council to analyse how long homeless people were waiting on the waiting list. For those applicants housed between 1 July 2005 and 31 May 2006, all homeless applicants were housed significantly faster than both transfer and waiting list applicants. However, those awarded 400 points waited 113 days on average compared with 53 days for those with 350.
- 5.38 The Code of Guidance recommends that homeless people should be treated on the same basis as others on the number of offers they receive. We found that the Council does not always give those assessed as unintentionally homeless and in priority need, two offers which all waiting list applicants are entitled to receive under the Council's allocations policy. Homeless applicants who have already received an offer through an existing housing application, under the Council's allocations policy, are only made one offer as a homeless applicant. Other homeless applicants may receive two offers.

- 5.39 Homeless applicants must choose a minimum of 15 communities out of 42 (5 of the smaller communities are grouped into 2 communities for homeless applicants) and have no choice of house or heating type, unless these are specifically required. We found that the Council allocates homeless people properties of all types and across all areas. Third parties we spoke to confirmed that homeless people were offered a variety of properties throughout the area.
- 5.40 West Lothian Council recently started to collect and analyse refusals of offers and appeals against offers to homeless applicants. However at the time of our inspection it did not yet have enough of this information to be useful in understanding the pattern of refusals and appeals or to use the information to improve service delivery and outcomes for homeless people.
- 5.41 West Lothian Council's section 5\* protocols sit within its nomination framework. When the Council is notified of a vacant property for let by an RSL either a nomination or section 5 referral is made. The number of successful referrals to RSLs has increased from 12 in 2003/04 to 84 in 2004/05. For nominations, the success rate over the period 1 April 2005 to 24 March 2006 was 17.56%. The Council recently reviewed its approach to nominations and section 5 referrals and has identified a number of improvements, including improvements to the monitoring of the process to be implemented by 31 August 2006.
- 5.42 The Council has a duty to those applicants that it considers to be either intentionally homeless or not in priority need to provide advice and assistance and temporary accommodation for a reasonable period to assist them in finding permanent accommodation. These groups made up 26% of homeless applicants to West Lothian Council in 2005/06.
- 5.43 A key feature of the Council's approach is for officers to discuss all housing options open to applicants and to agree a personal housing plan with them. The revised homeless application form has a personal housing plan and checklist printed at the end and applicants are given a copy at their interview. This is a

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\* see glossary

- good approach to ensuring that applicants receive information and advice and that this is routinely recorded. We found that officers generally provide housing information and advice to applicants at the initial interview but that the level of detail and information varies between officers.
- 5.44 In 2004/05, for those applicants to whom the Council had a duty to provide advice and assistance, 75% had a final recorded outcome of either “not known” or “return to previous” and 0% had an outcome of “lost contact”. However, the Council’s own analysis of this area of its work concluded that the recording practice of final outcomes was poor and that the outcomes being reported were not reliable. Action has been taken to address this and for 2005/06 the percentage of outcomes recorded as either not known or return to previous had reduced to 67%. Our case reviews found that poor practice in the recording of outcomes was still evident and that outcome figures continue to be unreliable. As a result the Council cannot be certain what it is achieving through its information and advice services.
- 5.45 The Council has worked with a voluntary sector organisation and private landlords to provide a rent deposit guarantee scheme to assist homeless applicants in accessing the private rented sector. Referrals to this scheme include those assessed as threatened with and actually homeless. Between April and December 2005, 66 private lets were accessed through this scheme.
- 5.46 The tenancies created are usually short assured tenancies and therefore would not be considered as permanent accommodation for those applicants to whom the Council has a duty to secure permanent accommodation. Case reviews and shadowing showed that where a referral is successful, officers are not recording whether the tenancy is assured or short assured or that applicants are being advised whether the Council has a continuing obligation to secure permanent accommodation for them.
- 5.47 West Lothian Council’s performance in providing permanent accommodation to homeless people is fair. The Council is meeting its target to make 50% of its lets to homeless applicants. However, it is likely that this is an underestimate of the proportion of lets being made to homeless applicants. The Council’s recorded

performance of securing permanent accommodation is improving and homeless people are being housed more quickly than other applicants. The Council has improved its performance in accessing housing provided by other landlords. However, the Council has no target time to offer permanent accommodation, and it cannot be certain that it has discharged its duty fully to those that take up offers of accommodation in the private rented sector. Not all unintentionally homeless applicants are entitled to receive two offers. The recording of final outcomes is poor. The Council accepted all the areas for improvement during the inspection and has taken early action to address some of them.

### Preventing homelessness

*Local Authorities should work to prevent people from becoming homeless and to reduce the incidence of repeat homelessness.*

5.48 West Lothian Council sets out its approach to preventing homelessness and reducing repeat presentations in its Homelessness Strategy and local outcomes agreement. These include:

- formal referral arrangements for those being released from prison;
- a rent deposit guarantee scheme to assist people to access sustainable tenancies in the private rented sector;
- establishing a service level agreement\* with the Neighbourhood Response Team to provide assistance in cases of antisocial behaviour;
- targeting housing support services to vulnerable tenants to prevent homelessness; and
- establishing a pool of Housing Needs Officers to carry out homeless assessments and provide information and advice.

The Council has made good progress in implementing these commitments and has identified further opportunities to improve its work on preventing homelessness. These include the developments of a hospital drop-in service and research into the provision of a family mediation service.

5.49 The Council's level of repeat homelessness in 2004/05 was 7% which is in line with the national figure of 8%. Figures for the first 6 months of 2005/06 indicated that repeat presentations are continuing at around the same level as the previous

- year. In May 2005, the Council carried out a review of repeat applications and made a number of improvements to its approach to providing services to young single homeless applicants and formerly looked after children.
- 5.50 The Council ensures that advice and assistance on housing and homelessness issues is available through its Advice Shop, which the council describes as “semi independent”. Staff in the advice shop provide advice and advocacy services on a wide range of issues. The Council also runs a Schools Education Programme in all 11 high schools in the area. In 2005/06 this project delivered sessions relating to leaving home, housing and homelessness to 700 young people. In addition, the Council is committed to training its staff to HomePoint\* standards and all officers making and approving homeless decisions have been trained to HomePoint level II.
- 5.51 A furniture recycling service is available to all residents in West Lothian but with a particular emphasis on clients experiencing homelessness or on low incomes. During 2004/05, this project assisted 440 homeless households.
- 5.52 The Council is good at providing support to homeless people in temporary accommodation and vulnerable tenants. Five Housing Support Officers provide services across all area offices and the Council can access additional and specialist support services as required from a range of external agencies. This enables the Council to tailor support to an individual tenant’s needs. In 2003/04 the percentage of lets to homeless households still in their tenancy after 12 months was 86% increasing to 91% for the year 2005/06. This is comparable with other types of applicant over the same period.
- 5.53 West Lothian Council’s Resettlement Team works with those homeless applicants moving from hostel accommodation into permanent housing. Support from the team includes assisting applicants with applying for benefits, setting up utilities accounts, liaising with housing officers about repairs, helping tenants with budget plans and assisting tenants to purchase items of furniture and white goods as required. This is a good approach to assisting people to sustain their

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\* see glossary

tenancies. Since the resettlement team was established in May 2005, 94 households have been assisted with only 1 re-presenting as homeless.

- 5.54 The Council's approach to preventing homelessness and reducing repeat presentations is good. The Council identifies vulnerable tenants and is good at ensuring that they receive the support they need. The provision of information and advice has improved. The Council has well developed plans to further improve this aspect of its service.

#### **Responsiveness to homeless people**

*Local authorities should place homeless people and those threatened with homelessness at the heart of their work to prevent and alleviate homelessness. They should treat them with respect and be responsive to their views and priorities.*

- 5.55 The Council has 11 service standards relating to its homelessness service and 5 additional Customer Care Standards. These are outlined in the Council's "Customer Service Commitments" and "Your Information" booklets and in its Housing Information and Advice strategy. However, most of these standards cannot be properly measured and monitoring and reporting of these is not part of the routine performance reporting framework. We saw some examples of good customer care practices but this was not consistent across the service.
- 5.56 The Council publishes a quarterly newsletter "Homelessness", which is sent to all residents in temporary accommodation and is made available in the Customer Service Centres. It provides a range of information about services and forthcoming events that may be of interest to service users. This is a positive approach to providing information to service users.
- 5.57 The Council conducts number of annual satisfaction surveys to gather the views of those in temporary accommodation on all aspects of the service they receive. In addition, residents of the Blackburn Homeless Unit and Quentin Court are asked to complete a satisfaction questionnaire when they leave the accommodation. The Council reports the results of these surveys and identified areas for improvement to service users in its quarterly newsletter. We saw a number of examples of service improvements that have been made in response to this feedback. From April 2006 the Council has also been carrying out a

satisfaction survey of all homeless applicants after the completion of their assessment interview. The results of this survey are reported and discussed monthly. The Council has firm plans to draw together the results from all its satisfaction surveys to provide an annual report on service users' views.

- 5.58 Local Authorities have a duty to notify people who apply for assistance of their right to have their homelessness decisions and offers of temporary and permanent accommodation reviewed. West Lothian Council operates a three stage appeals process that meets statutory requirements. The Council is good at advising people of their right to appeal and explains its appeals process in its decision letters, leaflets and the booklet "Your Information". The Council received 27 appeals against homelessness assessment decisions and 40 appeals against an offer of permanent housing by homeless applicants in 2005/06. In those cases we reviewed, the appeals process worked well, with good decisions being made within timescales. However, the Council has only recently started to monitor outcomes from the first two stages of its appeals process; this will help it to identify possible improvements to its service.
- 5.59 Homeless applicants also have access to the same complaints procedure as tenants. The Council's pilot Customer Contact Resolver Team analyses this information for any trends and areas for improvement. The work of this team is discussed in more detail in paragraphs 3.60-3.63.
- 5.60 The Council's approach to seeking and responding to the views and priorities of homeless people is good. It has published a number of service standards and it is good at informing applicants of their right to review. It publishes a quarterly newsletter for service users and its appeal process meets legislative requirements. The council has recently started to collect feedback from service users and has made some improvements to the service in response to this information. However, performance against its published service standards is not monitored and reported consistently.

### Working with partners

*Local authorities should work corporately and co-operate with other organisations, to ensure that the needs of homeless people are met quickly and appropriately.*

5.61 West Lothian Council works with a range of partner organisations both in planning and delivering services to homeless people. It has established a Homelessness Providers Joint Strategy Group to assist in the planning of service developments. The group involves statutory and voluntary sector organisations including:

- Through Care/After Care team;
- the Moving into Health Team;
- Cyrenians;
- Open Door;
- The Rock Trust; and
- Bethany Christian Trust.

The Council has also established a number of sub groups looking at specific aspects of the service including support, health and information and advice.

5.62 The Council works well with those partners that are involved in joint planning and service provision but is not engaging with the full range of agencies involved in providing services to homeless people in its area. This was identified as an area for development within its first Homelessness Strategy. Third parties we spoke with had mixed views about how well partnership working operated in practice. Corporate partners and some external partners were happy that they were involved in developing services and the homelessness strategy, and felt they were listened to. However, some voluntary sector organisations felt it was difficult to become involved in discussions around some areas of development, particularly the homelessness strategy, and some felt the Council was not always interested in their views.

5.63 The Council's approach to working with partners is fair. It has put in place a range of joint planning and service development groups and involves a range of other organisations in the delivery of services. Corporate working within the Council and other public sector bodies, particularly the health service, is good. However, the full range of agencies involved in providing services to homeless people are not currently engaged in partnership working and some of the third

parties we spoke to expressed doubts as to the effectiveness of consultation and joint working. The Council is aware of the need to consult more widely with external agencies.

## Is the service managed for improvement?

### Performance management

*Local Authorities should have clear objectives, standards and targets for their homelessness service, should monitor achievement of these, and should work to continuously improve services.*

5.64 The Council sets out its objectives and priorities for the development of its homelessness service in its homelessness strategy. Objectives are clearly linked to wider corporate priorities and the strategy includes a local outcomes agreement that identifies specific actions and timescales. Since the publication of the homelessness strategy the Council has also developed a number of other planning documents that set out commitments to service developments. These include:

- a revised homelessness outcome agreement with the Scottish Executive;
- the homelessness team work plan;
- an action plan developed as part of the Council's preparation for inspection;
- and
- a Homeless and Health Action Plan

Progress with each of these action plans is monitored and reported to the Homelessness Providers Joint Strategy Group or Homelessness monthly meetings.

5.65 Responsibility for the management and delivery of the homeless service is split between two directorates within the Council. The strategic management, including the homeless strategy and the management of homeless services to young people, and management of hostel accommodation, is managed by officers in the Community Health and Care Partnership. The rest of the service, including assessment and support of applicants who contact the Customer Information Centres and the management of furnished temporary tenancies is managed by Housing and Building Services.

- 5.66 As a result, performance is managed through two separate reporting frameworks. Whilst responsibility for specific aspects of the service are clearly allocated to individual officers and teams there is no clear responsibility for the service overall and no mechanism for reporting a comprehensive picture of performance and outcomes. The overall strategic leadership of the service is unclear; this has resulted in some inconsistency in areas including customer focus.
- 5.67 We found that whilst performance was reported regularly within both directorates, overall the performance management system was underdeveloped. The information available did not provide a clear picture of the operation of the overall service and the Council was not monitoring or actively managing key parts of the process. These include:
- access to temporary accommodation;
  - the quality and consistency of decision making;
  - outcomes for homeless applicants;
  - appeals and complaints; and
  - repeat homelessness applications.
- 5.68 The Council was aware of some of these weaknesses but was not fully aware of the impact the limitations of its approach to performance management was having on the quality of the service and its ability to improve.
- 5.69 The Council provides staff working with homeless clients with guidance on a range of issues including, initial contact, assessments, decisions and outcomes. We found that staff understand the guidance and refer to it regularly. However, we also found some weaknesses in the guidance that contributed to poor decision making and inconsistent recording of decisions and outcomes. The Council had planned to review the guidance as part of the implementation process but agreed to do this earlier than planned in response to the issues identified during the inspection.
- 5.70 The Council uses a variety of approaches to provide training and support to staff. These including regular team meetings, one to one supervision meetings, an annual training needs assessment and access to good quality training courses

using internal staff, specialist trainers and professional qualifications through its partnership with the local college.

- 5.71 The Council's approach to performance management for its homelessness service is poor. Although the objectives for the service are clearly linked to wider corporate objectives and staff are well trained and supported and have access to comprehensive guidance material, we found that some of the guidance misdirected staff on key aspects of decision making and contributed to some of the weaknesses we found. In addition the Council is not gathering or reporting enough performance information to ensure that it has an accurate view of performance across the service as a whole or the outcomes that are being achieved and there is no clear overall strategic leadership for the service. The Council accepted these weaknesses, and revised some aspects of its guidance to staff in response to our findings. It has developed a detailed action plan to address the other weaknesses we identified.

#### **Resource management and efficiency**

*Social landlords should procure homelessness services in a way that takes account of quality and should manage the cost of their services effectively.*

- 5.72 West Lothian Council's expenditure on its homelessness services increased from the previous year's total by 24% to £4.1 million in 2004/05. This includes expenditure on direct support and accommodation provided by the Council and external partners. Over the same period its income, mainly from temporary accommodation rents, also increased from £3.3 million to £3.9 million in 2004/05.
- 5.73 The Council is good at ensuring that it maximises its income through the receipt of housing benefit for those eligible and who are placed into temporary accommodation. The Council has good procedures in place to ensure that residents in temporary accommodation complete housing benefit applications on time and to minimise rent arrears in temporary accommodation. The Council collected over 99% of possible benefit income in 2004/05. Rent arrears levels were similar to those for mainstream tenancies.
- 5.74 At the time of our inspection, West Lothian Council had not carried out any internal audit or any best value reviews of its homelessness services. However it

had firm plans for a best value review and a tenant led inspection of the service during 2006/07.

- 5.75 West Lothian Council's approach to resource management and efficiency is fair. The Council has good procedures to ensure rent arrears for temporary accommodation are minimised. However it has not carried out any assessment of the service against best value criteria.

### Public reporting

*Local authorities should give stakeholders and service users the information they need about the homelessness service, its plans and performance.*

- 5.76 West Lothian Council reports information about its homelessness service through its annual report, newsletters to tenants and homeless applicants, and on the plasma screens on display in the Customer Information Centres and other Council offices. The information available relates mainly to the number of presentations in each office, the numbers placed in temporary accommodation and the results of the service user satisfaction surveys. The Council does not report on performance against its service standards and its annual report does not give a good overview of progress in developing the service or delivering on its homelessness strategy.
- 5.77 West Lothian Council's approach to public reporting on homelessness services is poor. Although service standards and customer service commitments are publicised, the Council does not report on its performance against these. The publicly reported information provided focuses on demand for the service rather than performance in meeting service commitments.

### Grade and overall assessment of homelessness services

- 5.78 Our overall assessment of West Lothian Council's homelessness services is fair. We found a number of strengths and a range of weaknesses that impact to varying degrees on the quality of service that homeless people receive. We also found weaknesses in the management of the service that have had an impact on its ability to improve. The Council is committed to service improvement, and we saw that it has the willingness and capacity to tackle the weaknesses identified in this report. This is a significant factor in our grading of the homelessness service.

We set out below the key factors we have taken account of in coming to our overall assessment.

- 5.79 The Council promotes its service well and provides good information on how to access the service. The Council is good at gathering service users' views and has used this information to improve services. Most Council staff have a good client focus, the Council's work on preventing homelessness and with its corporate and health partners is also good. The quality of temporary accommodation is good and the Council does not use bed and breakfast establishments.
- 5.80 The Council has a number of weaknesses that impact on service users and which, at least in part, undermine the stronger areas of the service. These include:
- an inadequate supply of temporary accommodation and poor management of access to it;
  - significant weaknesses in the operation of its out of hours service; and
  - significant weaknesses in the assessment process leading to limited investigation, poor recording and wrong and inconsistent decision making.
- 5.81 There are also significant gaps in the performance management system and overall strategic direction and leadership of the service. The Council does not have a good picture of performance across the service as a whole including the outcomes it is achieving. These weaknesses have had a direct impact on the Council's view of performance and service quality and have impacted on its ability to improve.
- 5.82 The Council has accepted all the main findings set out in this report. It took early action to address the most significant weaknesses and has developed a good action plan for addressing all the areas for improvement that we identified.

## 6. Areas for improvement action

These are the key areas that need to be targeted for improvement action. They are broadly in order of priority within each of the key service areas:

In housing management, the Council should:

- ensure that all the areas for improvement relating to its allocations and lettings process including its management of suspensions and the cancellation of applications are considered and responded to as part of the planned review of its allocations policy;
- review its management of short Scottish secure tenancies;
- review its approach to managing abandonments; and
- review its approach to the use of NOPs to comply with published best practice.

In property maintenance, the Council should:

- ensure that it takes account of the time taken for pre inspections when calculating its repair performance figures;
- ensure that it fully complies with its duties in respect of the Right to Repair; and
- review its approach to funding works attributable to owner occupiers.

In homelessness, the Council should:

- increase the supply of temporary accommodation and improve its management of access to temporary accommodation to ensure that it fully meets its statutory obligations;
- review its approach to access to its service out of hours including the availability of temporary accommodation to ensure that it is meeting its statutory obligations;
- review its approach to, and management of, homelessness assessments and case management to improve the quality and consistency of decision making and the recording of evidence and outcomes;
- review its performance management system and the reporting of outcomes to ensure that it has a full picture of the quality of services being provided and the outcomes that are being achieved; and
- review its approach to reporting performance to ensure that it is giving homeless applicants and other stakeholders an accurate picture of how the service is performing against statutory obligations and the Council's own service standards.

## 7. Next steps

- 7.1 This report highlights our findings following this housing inspection. We expect all organisations to respond effectively to our recommendations using their own improvement planning processes. We ask organisations that receive fair or poor assessments overall in their housing management, property maintenance or homelessness services, to submit an improvement plan to us within eight weeks of the publication of this report.
- 7.2 West Lothian Council's improvement plan should show how it intends to respond to our findings in homelessness. The plan will be agreed with us. We follow up improvement plans at regular intervals.
- 7.3 If you would like to see West Lothian Council's improvement plan you should contact:

Penny Hasling  
West Lothian House  
Almondvale Boulevard  
Livingston  
West Lothian  
EH54 6QG

Telephone: 01506 777305  
Email: [Penny.Hasling@westlothian.gov.uk](mailto:Penny.Hasling@westlothian.gov.uk)

## Appendix 1 Sources of evidence

### Groups and third parties consulted

- Eight local tenants' and residents groups, including all three area committees and the Tenant's Panel
- The Council's external auditor
- Women's Aid
- FourSquare
- Shelter
- Cyrenians
- Citizens Advice Shop
- Local housing associations
- Communities Scotland Tenant Participation Team
- HomePoint
- Care Commission
- Lothian and Borders Police
- Advice Shop (Bathgate)
- Scottish Public Service Ombudsman

### Interviews/Meetings

- Councillor Morrice, Leader of the Council (Labour)
- Councillor Anderson, Opposition spokesperson on housing (SNP)
- Councillor Ferrie, Convenor Health and Care (Labour)
- Councillor Johnston, Leader of the opposition (SNP)
- Customer Contact Resolver Team
- Alex Linkston, Chief Executive
- Senior and front-line staff in the Housing and Building Services Department
- Senior and front-line staff in the Social Policy Department
- Director of Customer and Support Services
- Director of West Lothian Community Health and Care Partnership
- BME Development Worker
- Chief Accountant (HRA)
- Chairperson, Eliburn Tenant Management Co-operative

### Reality checks

- Observation of Health and Care Committee
- Observation of rent arrears panel
- Observation of staff conference
- Observation of Homes Not Houses Exhibition
- Observation of information and advice to service users
- Shadowing of allocations
- Shadowing of tenancy sign up interview
- Shadowing of an accompanied viewing
- Shadowing of personal housing plan interviews
- Shadowing Housing Support visits
- Shadowing Housing Needs Assessment
- Shadowing of assessment and follow-up interviews with homeless people
- Shadowing of support and temporary accommodation visits
- Shadowing of repair pre and post-inspections
- Shadowing of repair satisfaction visits

- Review of short SST's
- Review of housing list applications and allocations
- Review of information for applicants and tenants
- Review of homeless assessments and appeals
- Review of complaints
- Review of antisocial behaviour cases
- Review of arrears cases
- Review of legal actions against tenants
- Review of reported repairs
- Listening to homelessness related calls received by Customer Service Centre, including out of hours calls
- Empty property visits
- Estate visits

#### Key documents reviewed

- West Lothian Council's Inspection Submission
- Housing management performance reports
- Relevant policy and procedures
- Minutes of meetings and associated reports
- Tenants' newsletters
- Council's website
- Outcome reports for housing management, property maintenance and homelessness
- Housing Options Guide
- Protocols with other agencies
- Local Housing Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy
- Scottish Housing Quality Standard Delivery Plan

## Appendix 2 Examples of positive practice

These are areas we would highlight as working particularly well, taking account of the organisation's operating context:

### Involving tenants in planning service improvements

The Council involves tenants in service improvements through short life working groups involving tenants and staff, Quality Improvement Teams (QITS) and comprehensive tenant led inspections (TLIs).

The Council will convene a QIT to focus on a particular service area. It will look at the structure of the service, its objectives, its performance indicators and outcomes. Overall its purpose is to identify areas for improvement.

Tenant led inspections are driven by tenants, the programme for TLIs is agreed by the area committees and tenants panel each year. TLIs look in detail at what is really happening in service delivery and whether the service meets tenants' needs and expectations. TLIs are covered by the "framework and ground rules of tenant led inspections" and the Council provides training and funding to support them through the area committees. The TLI will make recommendations for improvements to the Council. The Council responds to these recommendations through the Tenants panel and area committees by preparing an action plan.

Subjects covered by QITS have included antisocial behaviour and tenant participation. TLI have examined the repairs service, and tenants training programme. Both tenants and the Council are of the view that QITS and TLIs have made a significant contribution to improving the housing management and repairs service.

### Tenant appointment system

The Council offers tenants a morning or afternoon appointment for any visit a member of staff makes to a tenant's property. The Council closely monitors how well staff keep to their appointments and pays £15 compensation when an appointment is missed.

### The Ethnic Minority Project

West Lothian Council established its ethnic minority project, including the employment of a BME development worker in 2004. Based in the advice shop the project has two core aims:

- Increasing uptake of advice shop and council services by the minority ethnic population locally; and
- Providing help and assistance to people suffering discrimination and harassment.

The Council has identified what it considers to be the key issues that act as barriers to accessing services and advice by the BME community and developed a work plan to address them. The BME worker has also contributed to the Council's overall understanding of the issues facing the BME population locally and helped improve its overall approach to equalities issues generally.

### Customer Contact Resolver Team

The Council is currently piloting a Customer Contact Resolver Team. This team monitors the Council's performance in dealing with complaints and assesses the quality of end results. They have a quality assurance role in ensuring that complaints are dealt with appropriately within corporate timescales and that customers are kept fully informed of the process. The Resolvers intervene when a service breakdown has been identified, and advocate on behalf of the customer to find an appropriate resolution to persistent complaints.

### Staff appraisal and training needs assessment

The Council has developed a parallel Training needs assessment and people planning process to support its Business Planning processes. Job specific competencies are identified for each post. Performance against these is tested regularly and used to agree Personal Development Plans for each member of staff.

Training Needs Analysis (TNA) questions have been developed for all core business topics, for example; allocations, repairs, and homelessness based on the Council's policies and procedures. Every member of staff is tested annually, under exam, conditions, on how well they understand the policies and procedures in relation to their job tasks. The Council expects staff to score above 70% in each test. Where someone's score falls below this level the wrongly answered questions are analysed to develop a training and development programme for that officer.

The process is supported by a well developed training programme, delivered in conjunction with the local college.

### The Council's approach to carrying out additional work when tradesmen are in a tenant's home.

Repairs staff are authorised to carry out additional works taking up to two hours or with a value of less than £50 when requested to do so by a tenant. This is irrespective of the trade involved other than where health and safety requirements prevent this. Typical work carried out in this way includes the easing of doors and windows.

This reduces the number of visits required and ensures that tenants receive a quick and common sense response where they identify additional work when a tradesman is in their home.

### The Council's procedures in managing gas maintenance.

The Council contact tenants well in advance of the date the annual gas service is due. Tenants can contact the Council on a freephone telephone number and make an appointment to have the service undertaken at a time suitable for the tenant.

The Council operate very tight procedures where the tenant does not contact the Council or give access to the property. Tenants will receive three reminder letters, a seven day warning letter and the Council will force entry to undertake the service. The Council also employ an independent consultant to undertake quality assurance assessments on 7% of the gas systems that it has serviced and also inspect 3% of gas systems in-house. The Council closely monitors service engineers through a scoring system that identifies the quality of work their work and any specific training needs.

### **The Council's approach to providing information on property maintenance through its Homes not Houses exhibition.**

The Council's Homes not Houses exhibition provides tenants with the opportunity to see, in detail, the range of work the Council is due to undertake. The Council provides mock ups for various planned work such as fully completed kitchen suites and different types of bathrooms including wet floor shower rooms it will install. The Council also provides information on issues such as the different types of roofing material it will use and provides information on its thermal insulation contracts. It also provides useful information on common electrical faults in houses and it allows tenants to view various pieces of electrical equipment that they can choose during major works. The exhibition allows tenants to view the wide range of choice that will be available to them particularly in relation to its main contracts.

To maximise attendance the Council provides buses to ferry people from different areas, provides lunch, has tea and coffee available throughout the day and extends the opening hours into the evening to cater for those who cannot make it to the exhibition during the day.

### **Access to Health Services for homeless people**

Access to health services for homeless people is a clear strategic priority for the Council and its NHS partner, as is evidenced by the local CHCP's Health and Homelessness Action Plan. Innovative practices include:

- co-locating the NHS Moving into Health team within Council homelessness services which link homeless people directly into primary care when required;
- the development of emergency and ongoing treatment for homeless people within Community Dental Services;
- holding an annual health promotion event 'Pamper Yourself' for homeless people which stresses the importance of health eating, and sexual health within a relaxing and fun environment.

### **Resettlement team**

The Council has established a Resettlement team to work with homeless people who are moving on from emergency accommodation to permanent housing. The team actively manage this often difficult transition in a way which aims to stabilise the person in their new home as quickly as possible, and prevent tenancy breakdown/repeat homelessness. They provide practical assistance with Benefits issues (including applications for Community Care Grants), and ensure links are made with support/advocacy agencies where appropriate. Comparative analysis identified an 83% reduction in arrears, and a 25% increase in tenancy sustainment over a 9 month period.

### **Homelessness newsletter**

The Council publishes an eye-catching quarterly newsletter "Homelessness", which is sent out to all residents in temporary accommodation, clients of Young Adult Services and made available in the Customer Service Centres. It provides a range of information about services which are not all covered in other leaflets and information about forthcoming events that may be of interest to service users in the future. Contact details of an Officer and a tear off slip are also provided to enable service users to pass on their complaints, comments or suggestions about services anonymously.

## Glossary

<b>Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO)</b>	ASBOs are preventative orders designed to protect individuals from further antisocial behaviour that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress. Breach of an order is a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.
<b>Capital programme</b>	Major repair schemes funded mostly from borrowing.
<b>Common Housing Register (CHR)</b>	A register of all applicants for social housing used by two or more landlords within an area.
<b>Eviction rate</b>	The eviction rate is the number of evictions, including post-decree abandonments, as a percentage of total housing stock.
<b>HomePoint</b>	A department of Communities Scotland that supports providers of housing information and advice services. HomePoint has broken down advice activities into three types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Type I active information, sign-posting and explanation.</li><li>• Type II casework.</li><li>• Type III advocacy, representation and mediation.</li></ul>
<b>Housing list</b>	A list of applicants for housing which is used by the local authority to allocate its housing stock.
<b>Housing Revenue Account (HRA)</b>	The budget a local authority has from rental income for managing and maintaining its houses and housing services.
<b>ICT system</b>	Information and communication system.
<b>Investors In People (IIP)</b>	The Investors in People Standard is a business improvement tool designed to improve an organisation's performance through its people.
<b>Language line</b>	A telephone translation service.
<b>National median</b>	The middle value of the performance results of all Scottish local authorities, put in order of value.
<b>Notice of Proceedings (NOP)</b>	The formal notice provided to tenants informing them that their landlord is taking legal proceedings to seek a court order for recovery of possession of a property.
<b>Performance indicator</b>	A measure of how a council is achieving its objectives. Performance indicators can be compared with a pre-set standard (a benchmark) or with other organisations.

<b>Personal housing plans (PHP)</b>	Personal housing plans are used to assist those seeking housing to understand all the options available them and what actions they can take to improve their chance of finding accommodation. They generally involve a detailed interview with a housing advisor who sets out the options that are available and discusses the client's preferences and needs. The plan will include details of the preferred options and actions for the client and the advisor.
<b>Planned maintenance</b>	The planned renewal or maintenance of key property components.
<b>Pre inspections</b>	Inspections undertaken to ascertain the nature of the repair required.
<b>Post inspections</b>	Inspections undertaken following work to check the suitability and quality of repairs.
<b>Registered social landlord (RSL)</b>	A landlord providing social rented housing that is registered and regulated by Communities Scotland.
<b>Responsive repairs</b>	Day to day repairs carried out on a reactive basis, distinguishable from planned, capital or cyclical maintenance.
<b>Right to Buy</b>	Many Scottish secure tenants have the right to buy their property at a discounted price subject to length of tenancy.
<b>Right to Repair</b>	Statutory scheme which sets out timescales for some repairs and actions which can be taken if timescales exceeded.
<b>Schedule of rates (SOR)</b>	List of costs for repair items, usually organised by trade.
<b>Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS)</b>	All property managed by registered social landlords must be brought up to a certain standard by 2015.
<b>Scottish secure tenancy (SST)</b>	The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establishes the Scottish secure tenancy as the tenancy for all tenants of social landlords in Scotland.
<b>&amp;</b>	
<b>Short Scottish secure tenancy (SSST)</b>	Section 34 and schedule 6 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 establish the basic conditions when a short Scottish secure tenancy can apply to some tenants of social landlords in Scotland in place of a full SST.

<b>Section 5 referral</b>	Under Section 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 a local authority can request a registered social landlord which has accommodation in its area to provide accommodation to homeless people. This request is known as a section 5 referral.
<b>Service level agreement</b>	An agreement between departments within an organisation or between partner organisations that defines the type and level of service they will provide.
<b>Shadowing</b>	An inspection technique that involves accompanying and observing staff while they carried out their day-to-day tasks.
<b>Standard Delivery Plan (SDP)</b>	A standard deliver plan sets out how an RSL or local authority will ensure that all its houses meet the requirements of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015. The plan will include details of the number of houses not currently meeting the standard, the costs associated with upgrading and how this work required will be organised and funded.
<b>Tenancy agreement</b>	Legal document or contract between landlord and tenant setting out the rights and responsibilities of each.
<b>Tenant assessors</b>	Tenant assessors are trained lay people (tenants) who are part of the inspection team. They may be involved in the preparation for the inspection, reading landlord documents, on-site visits, and talking to tenants.
<b>Tenure</b>	The method by which a person occupies a property i.e. tenant, lodger, owner occupier.
<b>Void</b>	A property without a tenant. Voids occur in the period between one tenant leaving and another taking over the tenancy.

Regulation and Inspection is a separate division within Communities Scotland (the Scottish Executive's housing and regeneration agency) that regulates and inspects social housing and homelessness services. We operate independently and impartially, while remaining accountable to Scottish Ministers for the standard of our work and for inspecting and reporting within the overall context of Scottish Ministers' strategic objectives for the social housing sector and tackling homelessness. A code of practice sets out what Ministers expect from us in delegating their regulatory powers to us. Our independence is further safeguarded by a Regulation Board that oversees our work.

Our two core objectives are:

- to promote improvements in the quality of housing and homelessness services delivered by registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities and, by doing this, to help improve people's lives; and
- to make sure RSLs are well governed and financially viable, so that we can safeguard the interests of tenants and funders and maintain their confidence in the sector. RSLs are housing organisations registered with Communities Scotland. They include housing associations, housing co-operatives and companies limited by guarantee.

In order to meet these two core objectives we have five priority activities. We:

- undertake rigorous independent inspections and thematic studies of housing and homelessness services and promote public accountability by publishing our findings in clear, concise reports that provide practical recommendations for change and spread good practice;
- have a successful strategy in place (which may involve exercising our statutory powers of intervention) with regulated bodies that need our support to improve services or to deal with governance and financial viability problems;
- register new landlords and grant statutory consents in line with our regulatory criteria and standards;
- provide information and advice to Scottish Ministers, relevant departments of the Scottish Executive, landlords, key national bodies, funders and other regulators; and
- minimise the regulatory burden on regulated and inspected bodies by taking account of the principles of good regulation and working with other scrutiny bodies, while maximising the benefits of our work.

## Regulation & Inspection

### **EDINBURGH**

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