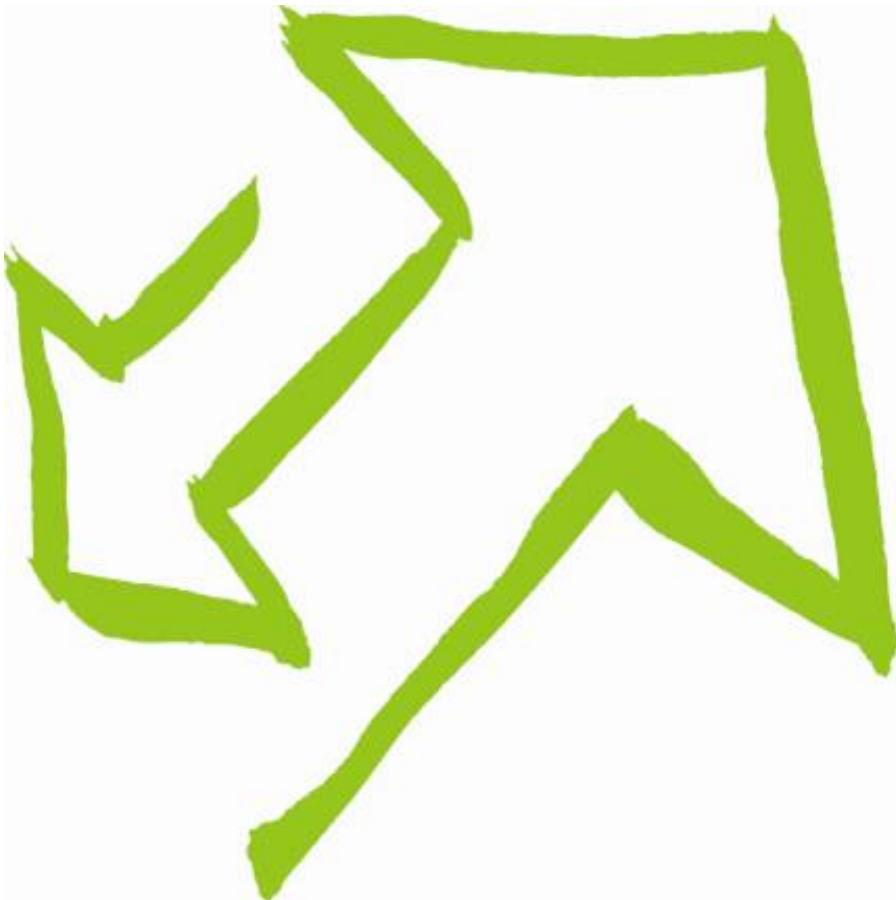


Housing Management Services

Merlin Housing Society

October 2009



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Housing Association Inspections

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

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the association;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its lead regulation staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the Housing Association's future business prospects.

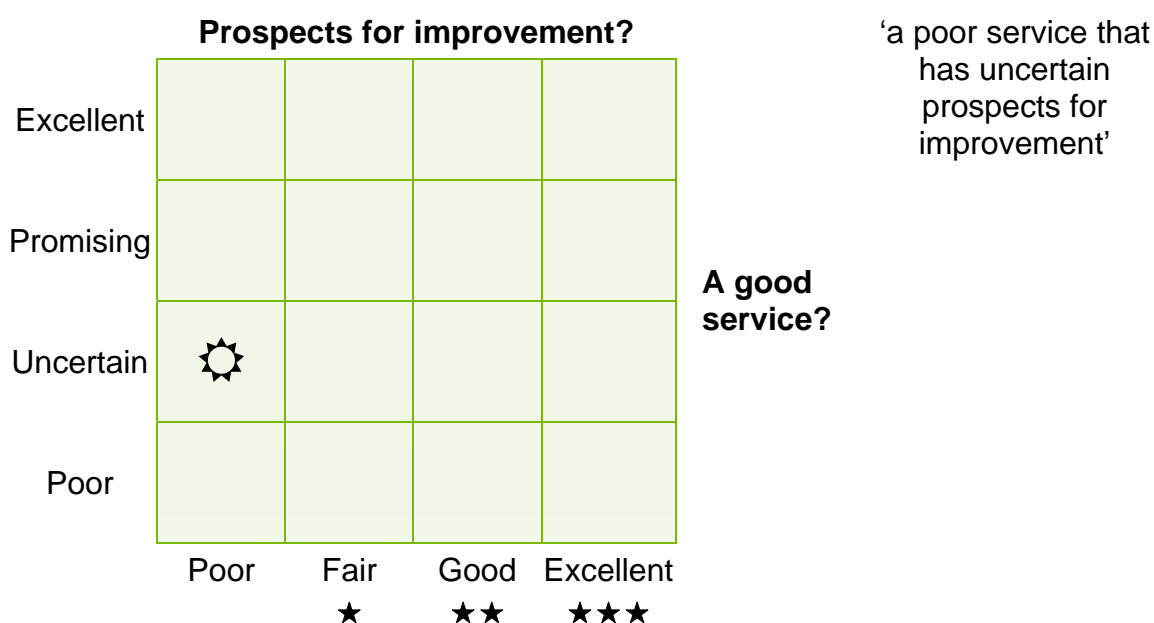
Summary

- 1 Merlin Housing Society provides poor housing management services and prospects for improvement are uncertain.
- 2 The Society lacks some key elements of a customer-focused culture. There is no overall strategic approach to customer access and insufficient priority has been given to equality and diversity. Repairs are not delivered efficiently, cyclical repairs are not done and it takes too long to let empty properties and provide aids and adaptations. Performance on former tenant arrears and other housing charges are areas for improvement. The approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour and estate management are not effective. Merlin has limited information about its service costs and how they compare and does not yet have a clear approach to managing value for money.
- 3 There are however some positive aspects. Office reception facilities are welcoming and information for tenants about services is generally good. The Society has made good progress on improving homes and ensuring tenants' health and safety. Overall performance in collecting rent is strong and some improvements in value for money have been delivered.
- 4 Merlin has a clear vision for the organisation and its Board and senior managers have showed strong and effective leadership. High-level plans generally address areas of weakness although there are weaknesses in its operational plans. There is good financial capacity and an enhanced strategic capacity to drive improvement. Board capacity is good and internal capacity has increased.
- 5 However, performance management (including tenant involvement) and overall programme management remain areas for improvement. Strategic capacity is also reduced by involvement in operational issues. Some staff do not feel valued. The Society is not maximising capacity through effective partnership working, procurement practices and by harnessing the capacity of its tenants.
- 6 The overall track record of improvement of services to residents is weak. Positively, many of the original commitments made at the time of transfer have been delivered including significant improvements to the quality of tenants' homes. However, there has been insufficient improvement in core service areas such as repairs and estate management. Improvements in value for money have been limited and progress on equality and diversity has been slow.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

8 We found the service to be poor because it has a range of weaknesses including:

- the Society lacks some key elements of a customer-focused culture. There is no overall strategic approach to customer access, service delivery is often not customer-focused and opportunities for engagement with tenants are not being maximised;
- insufficient priority given to equality and diversity; important targets have been missed and the needs of some vulnerable groups have not been effectively addressed;
- repairs are not delivered efficiently with a high level of repairs ordered out-of-hours or as emergency work and cyclical repairs are not done;
- it takes too long to relet empty properties and costs are high;

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

- tenants have to wait too long for adaptations work to be completed and Merlin is not supporting its tenants to secure adaptations;
- the approach to financial inclusion is underdeveloped and performance on former tenant arrears and other housing charges are areas for improvement;
- the Society is not responding effectively to cases of anti-social behaviour and there are relatively low levels of tenancy enforcement and support activity. Community development and diversionary work are both areas for improvement;
- estate management arrangements are not effective. The quality of presentation of internal and external communal areas is often poor; and
- Merlin has limited information about its service costs and how they compare and does not yet have a clear approach to managing value for money.

9 However, there are some strengths. These include:

- office reception facilities are welcoming and information for tenants about services is generally good;
- there is a clear strategic framework for equality and diversity and a positive approach to tackling domestic abuse and harassment;
- the Society has a good asset management strategy and a sound understanding of stock condition and has made good progress on improving homes;
- there is a robust approach to asbestos management and annual gas service checks are carried out promptly;
- major adaptations are dealt with quickly where they are linked to the major works programme;
- overall performance in collecting rent is strong and there is an appropriate balance between enforcement and support; and
- service reviews have resulted in efficiencies and some practical steps have been taken to secure value for money.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- Merlin has a clear vision for the organisation;
- the Board and senior managers have showed strong and effective leadership;
- Board capacity is good;
- Merlin has good financial capacity and has enhanced its strategic capacity to drive improvement;
- training and development, human resources management, investment in ICT and the use of specialist external capacity have increased internal capacity;
- risk and financial management is effective;

Scoring the service

- many of the original commitments made at the time of transfer have been delivered including significant improvements to the quality of tenants' homes;
- there is an increasing amount of learning from others;
- the organisation is self-critical and has a high level of self-awareness; and
- high-level plans generally address areas of weakness.

11 However, there are some significant barriers to improvement. These include:

- strategic capacity is reduced by involvement in operational issues and there is not always clarity about roles;
- some staff do not feel valued;
- the Society is not maximising capacity through effective partnership working and procurement practices;
- the Society is not harnessing the capacity of tenants and tenant involvement in performance management is underdeveloped;
- there are weaknesses in the approach to target setting and the quality of performance information;
- performance management (including tenant involvement) and overall programme management remain areas for improvement;
- there has been insufficient improvement in core service areas such as repairs and estate management and performance in some key areas has worsened;
- improvement in value for money has been limited and progress on equality and diversity has been slow; and
- there are weaknesses in operational plans for improvement.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the approach to access, equality and diversity by:

- developing a customer access strategy;
- producing a framework that ensures the division of service responsibility between housing and property management best reflects the needs of the organisation and its customers;
- ensuring that compliance with service standards are measured and reported on;
- developing new methods of involvement which are representative and engage a wider range of residents in management of their homes and monitor the profile of those who are involved;
- developing a robust understanding of tenants levels of satisfaction with services and acting on the findings to improve services;
- taking steps to address the levels of concern expressed in the staff survey in relation to equality and diversity;
- exploring viable options for improving disabled access to the offices in Yate; and
- making use of knowledge held on tenants profile to tailor services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased accountability to residents;
- more responsive services to vulnerable people;
- services are better shaped to respond to customer needs; and
- increased tenant satisfaction.

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

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve performance in key areas by:

- developing comprehensive programmes for cyclical decoration and preventative maintenance;
- ensuring that all categories of repairs are completed promptly and in accordance with targets;
- developing a long term strategic approach to the management of empty homes and garages leading to significant reductions in the time properties remain empty;
- setting targets for the independent auditing of gas servicing and include the results as part of the regular property services maintenance reports;
- ensuring a consistent and effective approach to the management of cases of anti-social behaviour which maximises opportunities for prevention, early intervention, support as well as robust enforcement;
- developing a strategy to ensure that grounds maintenance and cleaning specifications meet the needs of tenants;
- developing a programme of well publicised estate inspections linked to clear local service standards agreed with tenants;
- ensuring that the availability of estate management budgets is well publicised and that these are effectively used to deliver tenant-led improvements;
- introducing arrangements for out-of-hours phone contact to address tenancy management issues;
- maximising the number of repairs jobs where an appointment is made and minimising the number of jobs carried out as emergencies; and
- reviewing the approach to aids and adaptations with the Council ensuring that a customer-focused approach is taken with access being well publicised and suitable priority given to urgent cases.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved quality of housing estates;
- higher levels of resident satisfaction with neighbourhoods;
- improved health and safety; and
- more accountability.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve resource management and value for money by:

- developing a strong understanding of service costs and how they compare with others;
- routinely reviewing service costs alongside levels of service performance;
- ensuring that responsive maintenance and voids repairs are procured in a way which demonstrates value for money and that the in-house trade team regularly demonstrates that it represents value for money;
- ensuring that former tenant arrears and recharges are routinely and proactively pursued and robustly managed; and
- including value for money targets within performance reports.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better use of resources; and
- increased income.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve performance management by:

- developing robust reporting arrangements for anti-social behaviour;
- ensuring performance reporting of responsive repairs are comprehensive and based on actual performance as well as customer feedback; and
- developing action plans and targets which are SMART³.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater accountability;
- improved performance; and
- more likelihood of strategies being delivered.

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

13 We would like to thank the staff of Merlin Housing Society who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 22 to 26 June 2009.

³ SMART: Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Timely

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Merlin Housing Society operates solely within the boundaries of South Gloucestershire, a unitary council in the West of England, to the north and north-east of the City of Bristol. It has a population of 254,000, living in around 104,000 households. It covers area of 497 square kilometres that includes a diverse mix of new and established urban populations as well as significant rural areas. It includes the extensive urban areas around the northern fringe of Bristol. Approximately 60 per cent of the population live in these built up areas adjoining Bristol, 21 per cent in more rural areas and 19 per cent live in the towns of Yate, Chipping Sodbury and Thornbury.
- 15 The population of South Gloucestershire has grown by over 20 per cent in the past 20 years, making it one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Significant growth is expected to continue, with the proportion of both older and younger age groups expected to rise. For example, the number of people over 65 will increase by a quarter by 2011.
- 16 The proportion of people from black and minority ethnic groups is 4.2 per cent, slightly below the regional average and significantly less than the national average of 13.1 per cent.
- 17 South Gloucestershire is relatively affluent, ranked 298 out of 354 English Councils, where 1 is the most deprived. However there are pockets of deprivation mainly in the older urban and some rural areas. Unemployment is low at 1 per cent, employment high at 84 per cent and average earnings are significantly higher than regional and national averages.

The Association

- 18 Merlin Housing Society was established to take the stock from South Gloucestershire Council in February 2007. It operates from headquarters in Chipping Sodbury and has two other area offices at Kingswood and Patchway.
- 19 In March 2009 the Society had 8,345 homes of which 1,450 were for older people.
- 20 Merlin Housing Society is run by a Board of 16 unpaid non-executive directors, five of whom are residents, including the current chairman; five are South Gloucestershire councillors and the remaining five are independent members. There is currently one co-optee. The Board meets four times a year and there are three Committees which report to the Board, Audit and Risk; Investment and Housing and Support.

- 21 In March 2009 the Society employed 286 staff. Since stock transfer the organisation has undertaken major reviews of how it delivers services and this has led to significant staffing changes. Thirty-five per cent of staff who transferred from the Council have since left the organisation. The management team consists of a Chief Executive and Directors covering Housing and support, Investment, Finance and Corporate Services.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

22 Merlin has adopted the following Vision Statement.

“A first class provider of affordable housing and related services for communities across South Gloucestershire, with our residents at the heart of all that we do”

23 The Business Plan lists its key values as:

- Include;
- Respect;
- Improve;
- Respond; and
- Empower.

24 Its key business objectives are:

- to be a first class provider of value for money housing and related services;
- to put residents and customers at the heart of everything we do;
- to be a viable, influential and respected organisation;
- to be recognised as a good employer, encouraging staff to achieve their potential; and
- to invest in our communities and their environment.

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

Access and customer care

25 Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. Reception facilities are welcoming, publications and the website are generally helpful and informative. New tenants receive clear information about services and it is relatively easy for tenants to report repairs and complaints. There are a broad range of service standards but there are some weaknesses in their quality and monitoring and in the monitoring of tenant satisfaction. There is no overall strategic approach to customer access with access to most services restricted to traditional opening hours. In addition, opportunities for engagement with tenants are not being maximised.

- 26** Reception facilities are welcoming and effective. Following a recent review, the society has three area offices. These offices are welcoming, reception staff are helpful, wear name badges and respond to visitors courteously and promptly. Staff receive a broad range of training on service and customer care issues to equip them to respond effectively. Reception areas are clean and tidy and information is presented clearly on noticeboard displays and on stands. Interview rooms are available and a lack of privacy at the Kingswood office was promptly addressed following the inspection. There is adequate seating and toys and books are available for children. The recent review places an emphasis on front line staff being out on estates and while this goal has yet to be achieved; it is supported by reception staff being able to make appointments for officers to visit tenants.
- 27** Publications about services are generally helpful and informative. Merlin has worked with tenants to produce a range of leaflets and handbooks which explain the level of service that customers should expect. A quarterly newsletter is produced through a tenants editorial panel; it is written in plain and easy to understand language. This means that tenants are more likely to understand the role of their landlord.
- 28** The society's website is reasonably easy to use and informative. A new website was launched shortly before the inspection and is being continuously developed. It is relatively easy to navigate and has facilities for people with sight impairment. It is possible to download copies of publications. While it is possible to make rent payments and report repairs on line it is not possible to view rent accounts or track progress on a repair job. Website access is increasingly important given the reduction in offices and the rural nature of parts of the area covered by Merlin.
- 29** New tenants are provided with clear information about landlord services at the start of the tenancy. All tenants receive a clear explanation of their rights and responsibilities at the time they sign the tenancy agreement. Each tenant receives a welcome pack containing relevant information to make their tenancy a success. Issues such as resident involvement and tenancy conditions responsibilities are clearly explained. This is important in getting the relationship between landlord and tenant off to a positive start.
- 30** It is relatively easy for tenants to report repairs by telephone. Calls can be made 24 hours a day. The service is free to those dialling from a landline. Calls are answered by staff who are equipped with appropriate IT to be able to diagnose and order the repair at the first point of contact. However, call answering is not always effective; recent performance shows that only 73 per cent of calls were answered within the target time of 15 seconds. A lack of joined up computer systems means that repairs reported to the area housing offices have to be redirected to the call centre rather than being dealt with at the first point of contact.

How good is the service?

- 31** A new complaints system is being promoted. The recently introduced system sets clear and challenging timescales for dealing with complaints. It allows for collection, reporting and analysis of complaints. Complaints can be made on line and performance in dealing with complaints is published on line. Recent reports indicate that complaints are now being responded to promptly and procedures make it clear how staff should respond. However, this is very new and tenants overall satisfaction with these arrangements has yet to be fully measured. Prior to the new system dissatisfaction with complaint handling was relatively high at 28.6 per cent. An effective complaints system helps to ensure greater accountability to tenants and provides opportunities for learning.
- 32** The Society does not yet have an overall strategic approach to customer access. Merlin has not yet developed a clear and overarching strategy to guide future direction of access to services. This is significant as it means that individual initiatives such as changes in rent collection methods may not be seen in the wider context.
- 33** Access to most services is restricted to traditional opening hours. The area offices are open from 8.30 to 5.00 Monday to Friday with the exception of Wednesday when they close at 3.00 to allow for staff training. There is no evening or weekend access to services, other than for repairs and the few services which can be accessed through the website. There is currently no out-of-hours emergency number for dealing with incidents of anti social behaviour (ASB). As the three area offices are the only telephone point of contact for housing management services, this places a barrier in the way of tenants contacting their landlord to discuss important issues such as rent arrears or to report breaches of tenancy conditions.
- 34** Opportunities for engaging with tenants over service delivery are not being maximised. Arrangements which would previously have been innovative are now no longer fully fit for purpose. The society has a broad but complex structure for tenant participation and tenant bodies have been important and influential in decision making processes. The Tenants Panel always has an opportunity to comment on Board reports prior to meetings and various working groups have enabled tenants to influence choice of building contractors, service standards and voids specifications. Tenants have been well supported through opportunities for training. However, tenant consultation is not representative of the whole population. Merlin does not keep records of the profile of tenants who participate in the various engagement activities but it is understood that younger and BME tenants are under represented. A full menu of options for tenants to become involved on their own terms has not been developed.

- 35** Arrangements for monitoring tenant satisfaction are not comprehensive. Satisfaction surveys have not been undertaken in some key areas such as estate management and income management. In other areas such as ASB management surveys have recently been introduced but results have not yet been collected. The last comprehensive (STATUS) survey was carried out before stock transfer in 2006 and the next is not going to be carried out until September 2009. An earlier comprehensive survey may have been useful, particularly given the relatively low levels of satisfaction recorded in 2006 (71.2 per cent). Merlin has undertaken more recent sample surveys which indicate higher levels of satisfaction and satisfaction with the repairs service is now positive (93 per cent) but levels of satisfaction with individual services is not well understood. Understanding of tenants opinions on services are essential if a service is to be responsive to customers needs.
- 36** There are a broad range of service standards but there are some weaknesses in their quality and their monitoring. These standards generally cover the issues that tenants need to be aware of to hold their landlord to account for example the customer care standard specifies how quickly phones, letters and emails will be responded to. However, there is some duplication in publications with separate leaflets entitled 'our commitment to you' providing very similar information to the service standards. Some service standards are not specific enough, for example the income management standard makes no commitment to inform tenants of rent arrears at any particular stage and there are no standards in place for the quality of grounds maintenance. Significantly, there is no monitoring of compliance with those service standards that can be measured. This makes it more difficult for tenants to hold Merlin to account.

Diversity

- 37** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in diversity. Merlin has not given sufficient priority to equality and diversity and targets have been missed for actions to ensure tenants are treated fairly. Awareness of diversity issues is not embedded among staff and board members. The needs of some vulnerable groups have not been effectively addressed and equality impact assessments have had limited impact. Merlin does not have comprehensive understanding of the needs or requirements of all its residents. Positively, there is a clear strategic framework for equality and diversity and a positive approach to tackling domestic abuse and harassment.
- 38** Merlin has not given sufficient priority to equality and diversity and targets have been missed for actions to ensure tenants are treated fairly. There is no board member identified to champion equality and diversity issues and equalities training for staff and board members have been delayed. Although a clear strategic framework has been developed this has not always been followed. Significant tasks within the equality action plan have been delayed for example a review of aids and adaptations scheduled for 2008 was not completed. These issues are important in ensuring the organisation treats all tenants fairly.

How good is the service?

- 39 Merlin does not have comprehensive understanding of the needs or requirements of all its residents. Merlin has a reasonable understanding of the profile of its tenants with data on age, gender, ethnicity and disability understood on approximately 70 per cent. It has not yet made much progress on understanding of the other diversity strands of sexuality and religion and limited progress is being made on collecting information on the remaining 30 per cent of tenants. It does not monitor the profile of those tenants who are involved in the Residents' Panel and Community Action Groups. While the information that has been collected is of benefit as it allows staff and contractors to be aware of a vulnerable or disabled tenant, it is not being used to shape the way services are planned.
- 40 Awareness of diversity issues is not embedded among staff and board members. Training is being rolled out for staff during the three months following this inspection. Some staff have received diversity training as part of their induction and the broad range of training delivered as part of the recent restructuring included some elements of training on related issues such as domestic violence. However, there are front-line staff, including maintenance operatives, who have not received diversity training since Merlin began operations. Similarly, there had been no board member training between February 2007 and June 2009.
- 41 The needs of people with disabilities and hard to reach groups are not being effectively addressed. Delays in reviewing the approach to disabled adaptations has had a negative impact on the service tenants receive when they need adjustments to be made to their homes. Merlin has not carried out any work to develop an understanding of hard to reach groups (although it has developed a framework for communicating with hard to reach groups). Given the diverse nature of the area covered by the society with a combination of high density urban populations and widely dispersed rural communities, there is a significant risk that it is not meeting the needs of vulnerable and isolated people.
- 42 There is a robust approach to equality impact assessments but these have made limited significant differences. There is a clear framework for undertaking EIAs and consultants have quality assured those assessments undertaken. This enables Merlin to ensure that any adverse impacts are addressed. However, there have been only limited examples of where EIAs have resulted in change.
- 43 There is a clear strategic framework for equality and diversity. The equalities and diversity strategy provides a framework for the Society to make it responsive to the needs of both its staff and residents. A single Equalities Scheme sets out how policies will be reviewed to take account of the six diversity strands. The overarching strategy is well written and sets out clearly how Merlin intends to address the needs of different groups and the responsibilities associated with meeting those needs. Its intention is to be responsive to individual needs and recognise the contribution and be supportive of staff and residents and to build these aspirations into all its work. The strategy is supported by an action plan produced and monitored by the Projects and Performance team. If implemented it will help Merlin to produce better focused services.

- 44 Staff are equipped to support vulnerable people who face domestic violence, racist incidents and hate crime. Merlin has robust procedures for dealing with domestic violence and policies and a toolkit supports staff in managing such cases. Specific service standards covering domestic abuse, racist incidents and hate crime make it clear what support tenants can expect from the society.
- 45 Access to offices and information broadly meet the needs of people with disabilities. The website includes facilities such as audio browsing, large font and translation. Telephone based translation facilities are also available. An appropriate approach is taken to translating documents when required. An access audit identified some weaknesses in access for disabled people to the area offices. Most of these weaknesses have been addressed and overall access for disabled people is positive with, for example the provision of low counters and loop facilities. However, Merlin has not made all reasonable adjustments to ensure ease of access to its offices. The entrance door to the Yate office is heavy and although replacement of the door would be unrealistic given the short time left on the lease, pragmatic steps could have been taken to improve access.

Stock investment and asset management

Asset management and major, planned and cyclical works

- 46 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Society has a good asset management strategy and a sound understanding of stock condition. Good progress is being made on improving the condition of the housing stock although there remains much to do. The programme is broadly customer-focused with generally high levels of tenant satisfaction. There is a robust approach to asbestos management. However, major programmes have not been published in advance, cyclical repairs have not been undertaken and fire equipment has not always been maintained according to manufacturers' requirements.
- 47 A new asset management strategy sets a high level framework for decision making. The asset management strategy was adopted in March 2009. It replaces a more limited AMS adopted in 2006 which focused on meeting the decent homes standard. It is clearly written and gives an assessment of housing need and stock sustainability, including the viability of non traditional homes and overall it provides a framework for Merlin to achieve its asset management goals over the next three years. It is linked to the business plan and 30 year financial strategy. However, the newness of the strategy means that it has yet to have any significant impact.
- 48 Investment decisions are based on a sound understanding of stock condition. An earlier sample of 10 per cent of the stock has been followed up by using consultants. Consequently the Society now has a reliable database having inspected approximately 70 per cent of the stock. The recent stock condition survey assessed the properties in terms of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), together with the assessment of other key building components, modern facilities and thermal comfort. This information has allowed Merlin to develop longer term investment plans up until 2012 with indications of expected work for a further 20 years.

How good is the service?

- 49 Good progress is being made on improving the condition of the housing stock. The improvement programme started quickly after stock transfer. Work has accelerated with the appointment of two external contractors joining the in-house maintenance team. The proportion of non-decent homes has reduced significantly from 32.4 per cent in March 2007 to 5 per cent in March 2009. The energy efficiency of the stock has also improved with the SAP⁴ rating increasing from 63 in 2006/07 to 66.5 in 2008/09. Merlin has a programme which should ensure all properties meet the decent homes programme by the end of 2010. An enhanced 'Merlin standard' is programmed to be delivered between 2010 and 2013. Tenants are therefore benefiting from more comfortable homes that are more efficient to heat.
- 50 The major works programme is broadly customer-focused with reasonable choice for tenants and generally high levels of satisfaction. Tenants were involved in the selection of the partnering contractors and are provided with a reasonable degree of choice in design, materials and colour schemes. The approach taken usually involves carrying out all works, (kitchen, bathroom and heating) at the same time and this minimises the impact of disruption to tenants. The contractors employ their own tenant liaison officers, which enhances communication and enables most problems to be resolved quickly. Contractors hold open days prior to each phase of work commencing. Satisfaction with the work is generally high with all contractors receiving satisfaction levels above 97 per cent. However, some tenants feel that Merlin does not take enough responsibility for any service failure by contractors.
- 51 Merlin has a robust approach to asbestos management. An asbestos management plan and clear policies and procedures set a clear framework for addressing the risk of asbestos. A detailed asbestos register is kept up to date and contractors have access to this through the internet. Comprehensive training has been provided to staff and contractors on how to use the database. A leaflet explaining the approach to asbestos management has been provided to tenants. This reduces any risk to tenants and contractors.
- 52 Major works programmes have not been published in advance. Until very recently, the allocation of works to contractors has been piecemeal and not well planned. It has not been possible to publish programmes in advance and consequently tenants have usually had no more than eight weeks notice of work. Unaware of planned programmes, tenants will inevitably have spent time and money on carrying out decoration and improvement work unnecessarily. In June 2009, Merlin published more detailed longer term improvement plans on its website but this has come too late for a significant number of tenants.
- 53 Merlin has not undertaken any cyclical repairs since stock transfer although this is now being addressed. The former landlord's programme had already slipped at the time of transfer meaning that many properties have not received any external or communal area redecoration over the past five years. There has been no preventative programme of clearing gutters and in some areas there is significant vegetation growth in gutters. Decoration in some communal stairways of blocks of flats and the quality of floor tiling is poor. A new contract for cyclical maintenance was due to start in July 2009.

⁴ SAP: Standard Assessment Procedure is a form of energy efficiency rating

- 54 Merlin has not ensured that all equipment has been maintained according to manufacturers' requirements. A report to the Board in June 2009 highlighted that Merlin had not acted upon recommendations made following assessment of fire safety equipment in sheltered housing schemes.

Responsive repairs

- 55 Weaknesses outweigh strengths. Positive improvements have been made to the repairs service but these are not yet embedded for example the new appointment system. There is a high level of repairs ordered out-of-hours or as emergency work. Emergency works are not being completed quickly enough and monitoring of the quality repairs is not comprehensive. However, new systems are making repair ordering and completion more effective with most repairs being completed within target times. The service is responsive to customer feedback and tenant satisfaction is high.
- 56 Positive improvements have been made to the repairs service but are not yet embedded. Following strong external challenge to the service by two independent consultants in 2008 Merlin has taken steps to address the identified weaknesses. However, many of these arrangements such as the introduction of appointments, inspections and new IT are very recent and systems have not yet had time to become established and settled down. These new arrangements are not supported by clear policies. This assessment is based on the most up to date performance reports available at the time of the inspection (April and May 2009). This is necessary because the reliability of earlier performance reports was not robust. Performance in June 2009 is likely to have been better in some areas as systems become more embedded but Merlin cannot demonstrate a repairs service which is yet running smoothly.
- 57 The appointment system is not yet fully operational. Although a service standard commitment has been published in the repairs handbook for the last two years, a system allowing appointments to be made by the call centre at the first point of contact only became operational in May 2009 after the implementation of the required computer systems. Appointments are offered for morning or afternoon with an option to avoid the 'school run'. In May 2009 only 48 per cent of eligible jobs had an appointment made, although of these Merlin reports that over 99 per cent were kept. An effective appointment system reduces inconvenience for tenants.
- 58 Too many repairs jobs are categorised in the highest priorities. Of all responsive repairs, 23 per cent are ordered as emergencies and 28 per cent as urgent. This compares poorly against recommended practice and Merlin's target of 10 and 20 per cent respectively. Although there is no additional cost paid to the internal contractor (there is no schedule of rates) Merlin will incur additional costs through the need to do more journeys than if the jobs can be allocated a non-urgent priority and carried out at the same time as other work in the neighbourhood.

How good is the service?

- 59 The number of jobs ordered when the offices are closed is high. Out-of-hours calls are redirected to a call centre operated by a nearby council. Approximately 140 repairs per month are ordered by the out-of-hours call centre, representing 7.2 per cent of all responsive repairs orders. Arrangements for monitoring emergency work are not robust. Where emergencies are ordered, this only covers making good; a second repair order will be placed to complete the work. This means that Merlin does not have a full understanding of when follow up work is required and it less able to take action to reduce the need for a follow up visit.
- 60 Merlin is not completing emergency repairs quickly enough. Only 85 per cent of emergency repairs were completed within the target time of 24 hours (two hours to make safe). This may present a risk that work relating to health and safety is not being completed in time. Although further analysis will be needed to determine whether the jobs should have been categorised as emergencies in the first place.
- 61 Accurate performance measures are not in place to assess some key aspects of the service. The Society is reporting that 88.73 per cent of jobs are completed within a single visit (first time fix). However, these figures are based on information provided by tenants who have completed satisfaction surveys. This does not cover all jobs and is not based on actual performance. Monthly performance reports do not show how many jobs are varied after the initial order is placed.
- 62 Arrangements for monitoring the quality of repairs are not comprehensive. While it is positive that the workforce is given a reasonable amount of flexibility to ensure that a job is completed properly, this should be supported by effective inspection arrangements. In May 2009 only 3.57 per cent of jobs were inspected on completion. This compares with Merlin's target of 10 per cent for the internal workforce and 20 per cent for contractors. At the time of the inspection jobs were chosen on a random basis however this has now been changed to take account of risk. However, there is no link between the post inspection selection and tenant satisfaction slip returns.
- 63 New systems are making it easier to order work accurately. New computer systems introduced in April 2009 allow call centre staff to diagnose the repair. The system is linked to the repairs handbook making it easy for tenants to communicate their repair and for it to be accurately ordered. Repairs orders are sent automatically to operatives who have their own handheld computers. This means that operatives can collect job instructions while out in their vans and avoids wasting time in visiting the depot to collect paper work. Tenants also receive written confirmation of the order with details of the appointment time.
- 64 Operatives have easy access to materials and parts. An arrangement with a local builders merchant allows operatives to collect materials quickly. This means that there is no need for delays when parts are ordered, nor does the society need to hold large amounts of its own stock.
- 65 Most responsive repairs are completed within target times. In May 2009, 95 per cent of routine (within 20 days or three months) and 93 per cent of urgent repairs (within three to seven days) were completed within target times.

- 66 The service is responsive to customer feedback and tenant satisfaction is high. Tenants are asked to complete a satisfaction slip for all responsive repairs. A relatively high return rate of 38 per cent is being achieved. Feedback is generally positive with 93 per cent recording satisfaction. Positively, where any dissatisfaction indicated they are contacted by Merlin in an attempt to rectify problems.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 67 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. It takes too long to relet empty properties and costs are high. Empty homes management is poorly coordinated between different sections within the organisation. More positively, reletting arrangements are customer-focused and procedures are in place which should speed up the letting process.
- 68 It takes too long to relet empty properties. In 2008/09 it took an average of 68 days to relet properties this compares poorly with Merlin's target of 35 days and places the society among the worst performing 25 per cent of housing associations nationally. There are also too many empty properties. In the period from January to March 2009 1.81 per cent of the stock was empty: again, significantly exceeding Merlin's target of 0.75 per cent (in addition, 19 per cent of garages are empty). This is a wasted resource and means that people have to wait longer than they should to secure a home. It also resulted in an annual rent loss of £535,279.
- 69 Empty homes management is poorly coordinated between different sections within the organisation. An analysis of a sample of voids carried out between January and March by Merlin's performance team indicates that most of the time that a property is void (63 per cent) it is ready for letting with repairs work having been completed. The analysis also highlighted problems with record keeping with some voids being recorded on the housing management IT system but with no record held by the Property Services section. In other cases some voids are recorded on a spreadsheet but not entered on the IT system. There is no integrated voids management system to enable all parties to track progress and to identify the location of keys.
- 70 The cost of carrying out repairs work to empty properties is high. The average cost of repairing an empty property from April 2008 to February 2009 was £2,150. Merlin is confident that the recent introduction of a schedule of rates will reduce costs and this appears to be the case with average voids costs for June 2009 being £1,343. However, this is still significantly higher than many similar organisations.
- 71 Reletting arrangements are customer-focused. Merlin has worked closely with tenants to develop a comprehensive, clear and measurable voids property works standard. A team of tenants (the Voids Monitoring Group) inspect a sample of ready to let properties to test that they meet the standard. A copy of the standard is left in all properties so that the new tenant can check that their new home complies. Merlin has recently started to measure new tenants satisfaction however; results are not being reported in key performance reports such as the annual review of allocations and lettings, the monthly property services information pack or in reports to the Housing and Support Committee. Findings of the Void monitoring Group and our own inspections indicate that properties are meeting the standard agreed with tenants.

How good is the service?

- 72** Procedures are in place which should speed up the letting process. New procedures introduced in January 2009 include many of the features common in effective lettings arrangements. Staff from housing management and property services are now working more closely than before. Pre-termination visits are undertaken by surveyors. Nominations are requested from the Council as soon as notice is received. Accompanied viewings are expected to take place the day after keys are returned. Officers' diaries are arranged around the lettings process. Decoration allowances are available and the housing officer has some flexibility in agreeing additional improvements up to £250 as an incentive to letting a property. However, it is clear that these procedures alone are not ensuring that properties are let quickly.
- 73** New tenants are provided with energy guidance. Merlin is complying with the new legal requirement to provide energy performance certificates for new and prospective tenants. This enables tenants to judge how energy efficient their new homes may be and the measures that could be taken to reduce fuel costs.

Gas servicing

- 74** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in relation to gas servicing. Annual gas servicing is carried out promptly and awareness of the importance of gas safety is promoted. There is broadly a customer-focused approach to gas servicing. However, procedures are new and until recently insufficient gas servicing jobs had been independently audited.
- 75** Annual gas servicing is carried out promptly. At the end of May 2009 there were 10 properties without a valid gas safety certificate (99.81 per cent of properties had received a service within the past 12 months). No gas servicing was overdue by more than two months. A newly appointed servicing contractor works closely with Merlin with their call handling staff co-located with Merlin's repairs team. Prompt servicing minimises the health and safety risk to tenants.
- 76** Awareness of the importance of gas safety is promoted. Merlin uses a range of approaches to make tenants aware of the importance of allowing access for servicing. A leaflet explains the implications of not having the annual service completed. It has been distributed to all households and is available on the website. Service standards explain the legal duty and the tenancy and repairs handbooks also highlight the issue.
- 77** Procedures for gaining access are effective. New procedures adopted in June 2009 clarify previous practices. Servicing is carried out on an 11 month cycle. Tenants are written to with an appointment six weeks in advance but can choose a time to suit themselves. This allows sufficient time for arrangements to be made before the existing certificate expires. Where tenants are not being cooperative, there is a clear escalation of action with recourse to legal letters and the use of injunctions. In a small number of cases Merlin has capped gas supplied where access has not been granted. The repairs computer system flags up if a service is over due which provides an opportunity for a service to be arranged if a tenant reports another repair. Although this is not the case if a tenant contacts the area offices as computer systems are not linked.

- 78** There is broadly a customer-focused approach to gas servicing. Tenants were involved in the selection of the existing contractor. Published service standards make it clear what tenants can expect from Merlin and its contractor. This includes a commitment to service solid fuel and oil appliances, offer a convenient appointment and carry out an inspection of smoke detectors at the same time as the gas service. A higher proportion of gas servicing is currently scheduled to take place during the summer months which minimises inconvenience to tenants.
- 79** Insufficient gas servicing jobs have been independently audited. Independent checks on the contractor are a recent development. Until April gas safety and servicing work was not being checked. Apart from a random check of 200 safety checks on October 2008 there was no independent validation of the work conducted by gas contractors until the start of the new contract in April 2009. Merlin has now started to check safety and servicing work of the gas contractor however, as this is recent, less than 10 per cent of current gas servicing records have been independently validated. The main property services performance report (the management information pack) contains no information on performance in carrying out audits and the service standards for gas servicing make no commitment to the level of independent auditing to be carried out. Furthermore, tenant satisfaction with gas servicing is not being reported. This presents a risk that any service failures may not be identified quickly.

Aids and adaptations

- 80** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in this area. Tenants have to wait too long for adaptations work to be completed and Merlin is not supporting its tenants to secure adaptations. Performance management of aids and adaptations is weak and availability of aids and adaptations is not publicised. Positively, major adaptations are dealt with quickly where they are linked to the major works programme.
- 81** Tenants have to wait too long for adaptations work to be completed. The arrangement agreed between Merlin and the Council at the time of stock transfer is preventing adaptations being carried out when they are needed. Although Merlin has its own budget (£100,000 per year) for minor adaptations, it will not carry out any works unless they are approved by an Occupational Therapist (OT). This rule is rigorously applied and means that due to long delays in carrying out assessments (at mid March 2009 the longest wait was since 12 February 2008) a tenant can wait as long as 14 months for a simple job such as a grab rail to be fitted. Overall, there is a lack of policy to guide how adaptations are provided.
- 82** Merlin is not supporting its tenants to secure adaptations to their homes. Responsibility for aids and adaptation falls within the Property Services section. Staff see their role as carrying out the work after approval has been received from the OT. It does not carry out an advocacy or support role for tenants to ensure that their needs are met quickly and efficiently. Merlin has not agreed any protocols with the Council for fast tracking minor works. This has a significant impact on the ability for older, disabled and vulnerable people to live independently within their own home.

How good is the service?

- 83** Performance management of aids and adaptations is weak. The only reporting relates to the time taken to complete the work after it has been ordered. There are no overall reports showing the time taken from the point of request of the adaptation to the completion of the work. There is no performance information for major adaptations works (works over £1,000 funded through Disabled Facilities Grant). There is no reporting of the extent of the backlog for major adaptations. Detailed and informative performance reports on the service would act as a significant driver to improvement.
- 84** The quality of completed work is not being assessed. Minor works (any job up to £1,000 in value) is not being checked by Merlin to ensure that it has been undertaken properly. Although the service standard for aids and adaptations provides a commitment that customer satisfaction surveys will be undertaken, the results of these surveys are not reported. This means that the job may not be carried out in a way that best meets the tenant's needs.
- 85** The draft aids and adaptations procedure does not match the service standards. The procedure indicates that minor adaptations will be done within seven or 20 days while the service standards state minor adaptations will be completed within 28 days. Although this is largely irrelevant given that the wait for an assessment presents the main delay, this is nevertheless misleading.
- 86** The availability of aids and adaptations is not publicised. There is no information on the website publicising the availability of adaptations or guidance on how to apply. The tenants' handbook makes no reference to the availability of adaptations. This is an inequitable approach and makes it very difficult for tenants to find out what may be available.
- 87** Positively, major adaptations are dealt with quickly where they are linked to the major works programme. Merlin has secured additional OT resources by agreeing to include major adaptation works in the decent homes programme. South Gloucestershire prioritises these assessments to take advantage of this scheme.

Income management

- 88** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Overall performance in collecting rent is strong. Clear procedures place an appropriate balance between enforcement and support and the management of arrears is effective. The Society provides clear information and advice and a broad range of payment options. However, the approach to financial inclusion is underdeveloped and some aspects of the service are not sufficiently customer-focused or do not maximise value for money for example, enabling the easy use of cost-effective methods of rent collection. Performance on former tenant arrears and other housing charges are areas for improvement.

- 89** Overall performance in collecting current tenants rent is strong. Performance in key indicators compare well with other housing associations. In 2008/09 the Society collected 98.05 per cent of the annual rent debit which is above average. Current rent arrears represented 2.86 per cent of total estimated gross debit which is close to top quartile performance. This indicates that prompt and proactive action is taken to prevent large debts arising which causes income loss to the Society and long term hardship to individuals. However, performance in 2008/09 is not as strong as it was in 2007/08.
- 90** Clear procedures place an appropriate balance between enforcement and support. There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment with an emphasis on personal contact with the tenant and an element of flexibility over the arrears escalation process. This is supported by effective computer systems which help to reduce the administrative burden and help to strengthen consistency across the service. Housing staff are trained and supported by an in-house specialist debt advisor to undertake assessments of income and expenditure and to make appropriate agreements with tenants for reducing rent arrears. Procedures require that the debt advisor is always engaged in the arrears procedure before eviction stage. This has had a positive impact with evictions having reduced from 29 in 2007/08 to 16 in 2008/09.
- 91** There is effective case management of rent arrears. Cases are being well documented with clear details of actions taken recorded on the diary pages of the computer system. This ensures that managers can check that procedures are being followed and all possible steps are taken to recover money due. This helps secure successful court judgments and ensures that a change of staff would not have a negative impact on casework.
- 92** The use of in house staff for pre-court work ensures timely action is instigated. All court work, including document preparation, is dealt with by housing officers. One housing officer participates as an active member of the court user group. This ensures prompt action when arrears accrue.
- 93** Rent accounts are set up in a timely manner. Rent accounts for new tenants are set up on the same day as the sign up takes place. Payment arrangements are clearly discussed with the tenant prior to the tenancy commencing and if appropriate, swipe cards are ordered and arrive promptly. This ensures payments are credited to the right account and assists in the prevention of rent arrears.
- 94** Clear information is provided to tenants about rent payments and debt advice. A debt advice pack provides useful information and contact details of independent advice agencies. Standard letters are easy to understand and quarterly rent statements provide essential details of payments and balances as well as some supplementary explanation and advice. Following rent increases and recalculation of housing benefits, a card is sent to tenants summarising the weekly balance that has to be made. This helps tenants to understand their obligations and prevents rent arrears arising.

How good is the service?

- 95 A broad range of payment options are available. Tenants can make payments by cash, cheque or swipe card at council cash offices, post offices and other retail outlets. Payments can also be made by direct debit and bank standing order. Payments can be made on-line (although this is not linked to the rent account and therefore tenants cannot view rent balances). This makes it convenient for tenants to make rent payments in a way that suits their personal circumstances.
- 96 Service charges have been unpooled for rented properties. The council separated costs of grounds maintenance, lighting, cleaning and some other elements in 2003. However, charges were set too low and Merlin is tied to inflationary increases meaning that the full cost of services cannot be recovered.
- 97 The rent service is not sufficiently customer-focused. Some service standards have been developed but generally these are just statements of intent for example 'visit you to discuss matters in the privacy of your own home if appropriate' and do not include measures such as how quickly contact with tenants will be made. There is no service standard commitment to send out rent statements and no commitment in relation to refunding any credit balances. Satisfaction with the service is not formally measured. This means tenants cannot hold the Society to account.
- 98 Income management administration does not maximise value for money. Despite improvements, direct debits can only be paid on two dates per month. This inflexible approach acts to discourage use of this most cost-effective payment option. No incentives are offered to use this form of payment although it is significantly cheaper than other methods. The Society recognises that the current arrangements with the Council for payments to be made at their offices does not represent value for money and these arrangements are to end in December 2009. Merlin is not yet using on line possession claims although it plans to do this when appropriate payment arrangements are in place. Currently this is a missed opportunity to save costs of £50 per case.
- 99 There are limitations in providing up to date information on rent accounts. Rent payments take a relatively long time to show up on the rent account. Payments made at post offices and in shops take two days to be posted to the account. Payments at council offices take a day. Tenants are not able to view their rent accounts on line. Immediate access to up to date account records, similar to those provided by the on-line banks would help improve understanding of rent accounts and guide tenants and housing officers to take quick and appropriate action.

- 100** The Society's approach to financial inclusion is in its infancy. There has not been sufficient analysis of housing debt. Some analysis has been carried out relating to gender but there has been no analysis of arrears by ethnicity and no debt mapping. This would help build an understanding of why arrears arise and would enable a more targeted approach to be taken. Benefit take up campaigns have been limited to easy to reach groups such as residents of sheltered housing. Opportunities are being missed to promote schemes such as contents insurance and access to financial support for those with energy debts. However, Merlin is proactively involved in the development of steps to improve financial inclusion. It is working closely with statutory, voluntary and commercial agencies to develop a credit union and is committed to providing a shop for this. This forms part of developing a wider financial inclusion strategy which has already been the subject of resident consultation and is expected to be adopted by the Board.
- 101** Former tenant arrears are not being proactively managed. The level of former tenant arrears is high and has risen from £103,715 in March 2008 to £207,484 in March 2009. They rose by a further £30,000 during April and May 2009. Responsibility for pursuing former tenant arrears has been allocated to the Customer Services Advisors since January 2009, however, staff are finding it difficult to balance their front line reception responsibilities with back-office administration. This has meant that former tenant arrears have continued to rise. Delays in following up former tenant debts decreases the likelihood of recovery ever being made.
- 102** Other housing charges are not effectively recovered. There is a lack of a clear policy on recovery of costs on items such as rechargeable repairs. Performance has been weak with only 11.6 per cent of costs being recovered.

Tenancy management and enforcement including anti-social behaviour (ASB)

- 103** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Society is not responding effectively to cases of ASB and there are relatively low levels of tenancy enforcement and support activity. Performance management arrangements are weak and community development and diversionary work are both areas for improvement. However, clear policies and procedures provide a strong framework, the Society actively participates in partnership arrangements and tenants are provided with clear information about tenancy management.
- 104** Merlin is not responding effectively to cases of anti-social behaviour. The Society has recognised that it does not yet meet the requirements necessary to meet the Government's Respect standard which places emphasis on prevention, early intervention, support and enforcement and has developed clear plans to enable it to sign up to the plan. However, currently there are few positive outcomes from recent changes that have been made.
- 105** There are relatively low levels of tenancy enforcement activity. The Society aims to use non-legal measures wherever possible and places an emphasis on the use of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) however, relatively few (eight) of these are in force. During 2008/09 six tenants were evicted for ASB, eight notices of seeking possession were served, seven injunctions and two demotion orders were used.

How good is the service?

- 106** Arrangements for monitoring and recording performance in tenancy management issues are weak. Merlin is in the process of implementing IT which will allow effective management of performance but currently this is not available to support the service. All records are held on large, and in some cases untidy paper folders. This means that it is very difficult to manage cases and to ensure that policies and procedures are being followed with the appropriate level of intervention being undertaken by the right member of staff at the right time. It also means that managers do not know what level of activity is being undertaken or that the correct follow-up action is happening. There is no system or evidence available to demonstrate that starter tenants are visited after one, six and nine months. This also makes evaluation of the effectiveness of different approaches difficult, for example although Merlin knows that 14 cases were referred for mediation in 2008/09 it does not record how many referrals were successful.
- 107** The Society lacks many of the basic tools to undertake effective enforcement. It does not own any equipment such as sound or CCTV recording equipment which would enable it to collect evidence of tenancy infringement. Although this equipment is available through the Safer South Gloucestershire Partnership, applications for a loan of equipment can delay action. The Society does not use any forms of witness support and does not use independent professional witnesses.
- 108** The service is not providing effective support for victims of anti social behaviour. There is no out-of-hours service for tenancy management, meaning that the Society can only offer support when its offices are open. Complainants are not being regularly and consistently informed of progress in resolving cases. Although customer satisfaction surveys have recently been introduced, there have so far been no results from this, and apart from surveys, there is no follow up by officers once cases are closed.
- 109** New working arrangements implemented in January 2009 as part of the Access to Services Review have not yet become effective. New staffing structures are designed to allow Housing Officers to become involved in early intervention work and prevent cases from escalating with each area office supported by a specialist Anti Social Behaviour Officer. So far however, pressure on Housing Officers' time means that they have difficulty in making the necessary commitment to carrying out early intervention work. There is also a lack of clarity and consistency as to when the specialist officers become involved in either supporting the Housing Officer or in taking the full case over. ASB Officers are not sufficiently aware of all the case work being handled by colleagues within their own areas. This means that the expertise within the organisation may not be used to its full potential and that the effectiveness of the ASB Officers contribution to the multi-agency partnership meetings they attend may be weakened.
- 110** There is only limited work to divert young people away from anti social behaviour. With the exception of some financial support to a local boxing club, sponsorship of teaching materials relating to crime prevention and drug awareness, and support for two camera clubs for children the Society is not actively involved in engagement with young people as a means to addressing anti social behaviour issues. There has been no evaluation of the effectiveness of those activities which the Society does support. This is a missed opportunity to support the community in creative and productive activity which could reduce incidents of nuisance and anti social behaviour.

- 111** Community development work is an area for improvement. There are some very good but isolated examples of community investment work, most notably the provision of a community flat which provides a meeting place, information resource and meals to local people. New posts of Community Investment Managers have been created based in each of the area officers. They are tasked with supporting existing community groups, such as five Community Action Groups which bring together Merlin, the police and council and with developing new community investment activity. It is too early for this to have had any impact yet and currently large rural areas covered by Merlin lack investment in community support.
- 112** Clear policies and procedures provide a strong framework for tackling anti social behaviour and tenancy management issues. A broad range of policies have been developed through a tenants and officers working group. The ASB policy recognises the needs of perpetrators as well as victims. There are robust policies and procedures for addressing incidents of domestic abuse. All officers involved in tenancy management have received comprehensive training to enable them to understand and implement these policies.
- 113** The Society actively participates in partnership arrangements with the police and local authority. It has signed up to the Safer South Gloucestershire partnerships information sharing protocols. Neighbourhood police officers meet with Merlin staff. Although, clarity of respective roles of Merlin officers in participation in the various partnership groups would strengthen this further.
- 114** Tenants are provided with clear information about tenancy management. Tenancy conditions clearly set out respective obligations and define anti social behaviour, nuisance, harassment and domestic violence. A leaflet clearly explains the special conditions applying to Starter Tenancies. A domestic violence toolkit provides helpful support to victims. Service standards explain what tenants can expect from Merlin in relation to managing cases of ASB, domestic abuse, racist incidents and hate crime, and tenancy management. The newsletter includes articles about these issues and has publicised some successful action taken to tackle breaches of tenancy conditions. This is important in raising awareness of the support Merlin can provide as well as acting as a method of discouraging breaches of tenancy conditions.

Estate management

- 115** This is an area of significant weakness. Estate management arrangements are not effective. The quality of presentation of internal and external communal areas is often poor. Estate management budgets are not used effectively and services are not customer-focused.
- 116** There is a lack of an effective estate management service. Merlin is not proactively and routinely inspecting estates and taking actions to address poorly maintained communal areas. Action is not being taken to deal with untaxed vehicles. Estate walkabouts are listed as a commitment within the estate management service standards but have not yet been introduced.

How good is the service?

- 117** The presentation of communal areas outside blocks of flats and the quality of grounds maintenance is poor. Communal drying and bin areas are generally un-maintained and grounds maintenance is poor. The quality of grass cutting at the time of the inspection was particularly weak as a new contractor was catching up following a gap in service during April and May. Cut grass was lying in thick piles and the base of trees and posts are not strimmed. In many areas shrubs and flower beds appear neglected. The quality of the estate environment has a significant influence on peoples' quality of life.
- 118** Arrangements for cleaning of communal areas is inconsistent and in some cases poor. Some flats have a caretaker service but this is not offered everywhere and in many cases tenants are responsible for undertaking their own communal cleaning. A level of service for cleaning has not been established with residents. Supervision of cleaning standards rests with the in-house contractor and housing officers do not have direct responsibility for standards. This is a missed opportunity as housing officers are the main point of contact for tenants on estates.
- 119** Estate management budgets are not being used effectively. A total budget of £60,000 was allocated to be spent by the five Community Action Groups in 2008/09, but only a small amount of this (£6,610) was actually spent. This is a missed opportunity for Merlin to engage within its tenants and provide improvements that would enhance the neighbourhood and potentially make the area a safer, cleaner and more pleasant place to live.
- 120** Estate management services are not customer-focused. There are few service standards relating to estate management and the grounds maintenance specification is not published to enable residents to measure if it is being met. Tenants have not been consulted over the level of service to be provided although this is a future target within the asset management plan. Tenant satisfaction with estate management services is not measured.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 121** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in relation to value for money. Merlin has limited information about its service costs and how its costs compare. The strategic approach to both value for money and procurement and a culture of VFM is not yet embedded across the organisation. Procurement of repairs services do not demonstrate value for money. However, service reviews have resulted in some significant efficiencies.

How do costs compare?

- 122** Merlin has limited information about how its costs compare with similar organisations. Significant documents such as the Business Plan, Value for Money Strategy, Procurement Strategy, Asset Management Strategy, board performance reports and the inspection self assessment provide little information on individual service costs and on how costs compare with others. This means that policy is being shaped without a full understanding of where the most efficiencies could possibly be made.

123 Benchmarking is not being used to understand how costs compare. The Society is a member of a national housing benchmarking club but so far activity has focused on process rather than cost benchmarking.

How is value for money managed?

124 The strategic approach to value for money is new and not yet embedded. A VFM Strategy was approved by the Board in December 2008. The strategy is high level and sets some clear guidelines and health measures for VFM but sets few targets about the levels of efficiencies to be secured.

125 The approach to procurement is new and has yet to deliver efficiencies. The Procurement Strategy was approved by the Board in March 2009. It is based on positive practice and takes account of key matters including probity, equality and sustainability. Although the decent homes programme used modern procurement methods, this has not been the case with other elements of asset management and the new strategy has yet to have a significant impact. Merlin recognises that to date, procurement arrangements have been piecemeal. It has benefited from taking part in some shared purchasing for example in procuring legal services and it has followed Egan principals in the procurement of two framework partnerships for decent homes work. However, until recently the lack of a strategic approach to procurement means that Merlin has not been maximising opportunities to secure value for money.

126 A culture of value for money is not embedded across the organisation. Formal training in value for money for staff and Board members has so far been limited to those with specific responsibilities for finance and budgets and performance reports do not set individual targets for achieving VFM. Service costs are not reviewed alongside levels of customer satisfaction and service performance. However, it is positive that steps are being taken to address this. The establishment of a tenants working group to oversee finance provides an opportunity for customers to challenge cost and quality of service. A corporate VFM group which also involves tenants has a clear role in overseeing implementation of the strategy and the Society's extranet is used to inform staff of progress in achieving VFM.

127 Procurement of repairs services does not demonstrate value for money. Merlin has not market tested the competitiveness of the in-house contractor. A traditional schedule of rates is used for voids work and more modern forms of procurement such as charging a unit cost per property have not been explored. Other aspects of the repairs service including the high level of emergency and urgent repairs and the low number of post inspections indicate that opportunities are being missed to drive efficiency in the delivery of repairs.

128 Service reviews have resulted in efficiencies in service delivery arrangements. The Access to Services review has resulted in a reduction in offices from six to three. Savings have largely been reinvested in front-line services and IT. This has enabled some improvements in services to be delivered such as longer opening hours for the remaining offices although the full benefits of these changes have yet to be demonstrated through higher levels of customer satisfaction.

How good is the service?

129 Merlin has made some significant improvements in value for money following reviews in areas where it recognised it could secure the greatest efficiencies in its first two years. These included major works, sheltered housing, offices and treasury management. Other smaller reviews and initiatives have also contributed to achieving savings in ICT services, internal audit, legal and admin services. This has established savings of £1million a year that has so far been used to invest in ICT provision, which directly benefits front line services and to increase capacity to deliver promises to residents made at transfer.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 130** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. There has been insufficient improvement in core service areas such as repairs and estate management and performance in some key areas has worsened. Improvement in value for money has been limited and progress on equality and diversity has been slow. However, many of the original commitments made at the time of transfer have been delivered including significant improvements to the quality of tenants' homes. Merlin has also responded positively to external scrutiny and positive investment has been made in service improvement.
- 131** There has been insufficient improvement in core service areas. Positive improvements have been made in a number of areas. However, the repairs service is still not delivered effectively and despite the aim of the Access to Services review to allow housing officers to get out of the office more both estate management and the approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour remain weak. Tenants will not yet have seen visible and significant improvements in core services.
- 132** Performance in some key areas has worsened. The time taken to relet an empty property has increased from 50 days in 2006/07 to 68 days in 2008/09 (it has reduced from 94 days to 45 days between January and June 2009). Current tenant rent arrears have increased from 1.58 per cent in 2006/07 to 3.17 per cent in 2008/09 (part of this is due to the way Housing Benefit is paid). The reliability of data quality makes it difficult to track performance over time. In particular, there has been little reliable information about repairs performance so it is not possible to demonstrate a track record of improvement in completion of jobs within target times.
- 133** Delays in implementing new IT infrastructure have had a negative impact on delivering improvements. The lack of an interface between housing management and repairs systems has held back improvement in a number of areas. Area offices cannot provide information on repairs status, opportunities to arrange access for gas servicing are reduced. Without being provided with mobile technology, housing officers cannot work effectively outside of the office.
- 134** Improvement in value for money has been limited. Merlin demonstrates that it has made some improvements in value for money but weaknesses in this area mean that these fall short of what could have been achieved. Investment and procurement decisions do not always demonstrate maximising opportunities for efficiencies, notably in relation to repairs services. Both the Value for Money and Procurement Strategies are new and have so far had little impact.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 135** Improvements in the approach to equality and diversity have been slow. The Equality Scheme was not adopted until March 2009. Many of the tasks in the Equality and Diversity action plan were not completed on time. For example, plans to review the approach to aids and adaptations, introduce diversity training for staff and board members and monitoring of results of tenant satisfaction surveys have all slipped. This is holding back progress in embedding diversity within the organisation.
- 136** Merlin has delivered many of the commitments it made at the time of transfer and has made significant improvements to the quality of tenants' homes. So far it has delivered 97 (70 per cent) of the 137 Promises it made to residents. Those not yet delivered mainly relate to longer term stock investment issues, although commitments to improving grounds maintenance have still yet to deliver results. Some of the most significant commitments which have had a positive impact on service quality are listed below:
- The major repairs programmes have resulted in significant improvements in the numbers of homes meeting the decent homes standard (the proportion meeting the standard has increased from 67.6 per cent to 95 per cent between 2006/07 and 2008/09.);
 - repairs can be reported via a free telephone number;
 - area offices are open longer hours; and
 - improvements to debt advice arrangements.
- 137** Merlin has responded positively to external scrutiny. Following a mock inspection in 2008 the Society quickly set about addressing many of the weaknesses identified. It reports that it has implemented 233 (66 per cent) of some 350 recommendations arising from the inspection. Improvements which have had a positive impact on tenants include a more effective gas servicing arrangements.
- 138** Merlin has made positive investment in service improvement. Much of the focus has been on developing the culture of the new organisation and in tackling some poorly performing areas of service. The Access to Services review has placed greater emphasis on front-line services. This has been supported by a broad range of training which is having an impact on changing the culture of the organisation. However, so far this has largely been about changes in internal management arrangements and procedures, many of which have yet to deliver noticeable improvements for customers.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 139** This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Merlin has a clear vision for the organisation. Its' Board and senior managers have showed strong and effective leadership. Risk and financial management is effective and the organisation is self-critical and has a high level of self-awareness. High-level plans generally address areas of weakness but there are weaknesses in its operational plans for improvement, its approach to target setting and the quality of performance information. Performance management (including tenant monitoring of performance) and overall programme management remain areas for improvement. There is an increasing amount of learning from others.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 140** Merlin has a clear vision for the organisation. The Business Plan translates the Society's vision into five clear business objectives and 15 goals. There are clear arrangements for monitoring implementation of the promises made in the original offer to tenants and these are effectively reported to tenants. A project monitoring tool is used to review progress on implementing the business plan.
- 141** The Board demonstrates strong leadership. It has made some significant and tough decisions in the light of weak performance in some areas. It has directed and supported the Chief Executive in driving through significant culture change within the organisation. Supported by an external consultant, members receive annual appraisals where development needs are identified and addressed. The Board acts cohesively and demonstrates a clear vision. However, delays in implementing parts of the Equality and Diversity Strategy indicate that leadership has not been fully demonstrated in delivering fair access to services.
- 142** Leadership by senior managers is visible and effective. Senior management has taken ownership of problems and shown a determination to drive through change. Implementation of the Access to Services review has been subject to regular reappraisal by a group of senior managers (the Pursuing Excellence Group) and where pressures have been identified procedures have been amended. A further impact assessment of these changes is being undertaken by external consultants. This is important as it demonstrates a willingness to challenge and amend working practices. However, there is a risk that senior managers become too involved in operational issues at the expense of providing strategic direction.
- 143** Business planning processes have been reviewed and improved. Earlier business plans were overly ambitious and needed significant re-prioritisation through its life. In the current plan key priority projects have been identified on the basis of those that will have the most impact on service delivery. There is a reduction in the number of tasks from previous years and these are clearly prioritised. Merlin's approach to business planning is clear and is supported by the Board. This provides confidence that future plans will be delivered. However, this has to be balanced with the fact that Merlin has not secured 'buy-in' to its change programme from some of its staff.
- 144** Merlin has high-level plans that address many of the weaknesses highlighted in this report. A broad range of strategies have been developed and these are generally based on a strong basis of research such as the Asset Management Strategy. The Business Plan lists other areas where new strategies are to be developed during 2009/10, this includes resident involvement, financial inclusion and aids and adaptations.
- 145** There are some significant weaknesses in the Society's operational plans for improvement. Plans do not make it clear how strategies will be delivered. Some significant strategies such as those covering asset management and procurement do not include action plans. Although more detail is contained within Merlin's project management system, the lack of clear action plans with measurable outcomes, identified responsibilities and resources included within the strategic document makes it difficult to measure whether the strategy will be delivered.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 146** The organisation is self-critical and has a high level of self-awareness. The self assessment undertaken in preparation for the inspection demonstrates a strong understanding of strengths and weaknesses. Merlin's own analysis of its approach to meeting the Respect Standard demonstrated an honest and robust approach and it is to its credit that Merlin has held back from signing up to the standard until it is fully confident that it meets all requirements. This provides a strong incentive to improve services.
- 147** There is an increasing amount of learning from others. Board members have benefited from exchange visits to other housing associations. The recently revised complaints procedure allows for greater learning from complaints. Increasingly Merlin is learning from its customers for example through involving residents in the development of service standards.
- 148** Risk and financial management is effective. A clear internal audit strategy indicates a strong approach to internal controls. The project management system includes a clear risk register which is routinely reviewed by the Audit and Risk sub committee. There is clear accountability at board membership level of all identified risks. Financial reports indicate that overall expenditure has been within budget and that resources are used flexibly and in line with priorities.
- 149** There is increasingly more active performance management but this remains an area for improvement. Merlin recognises that there has been a focus on monitoring rather than actively managing performance. It plans to address this through the implementation of a new performance management framework based on robust project management systems. This is supported by a clear Performance Management Strategy adopted in March 2009 with emphasis placed on staff training during the next year followed by implementation of 'balanced score card' approach to reporting. These systems are dependent on new releases of IT software, which when implemented will support the move to a stronger performance management culture. Until then, performance management is largely dependent on a series of unlinked spreadsheets controlled by individual service managers.
- 150** Overall programme management is an area for improvement. The resources needed to deliver projects are not robustly assessed and projects and change processes are not managed as a single coordinated whole to ensure that capacity gaps are identified and resolved. Various plans are not well integrated and the relative priority of tasks is not fully understood. The body responsible for overseeing performance (the Projects Performance Review Board) meets relatively infrequently (every two months) and has not been tasked with forecasting and preventing failure. A new performance group is being established to address these issues.
- 151** The quality of performance information is not robust. Data quality has been a challenge since stock transfer. There have been significant gaps in performance reporting. There is a dependence on manual manipulation of performance reports. This is not time effective and can lead to inaccuracies. Limitations in IT and historical records have made it difficult for the Board to be confident that they receive accurate information. Operational management is also held back by inadequate reporting systems for example in the management of ASB where managers cannot easily monitor progress by individual officers. This is a barrier to robust challenge and informed decision-making.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 152** Target setting has not always been realistic. Targets set for rent arrears and relet times were over optimistic. Targets have been set without taking account of change management and the impact that it would have on the ability of the organisation to continuously improve while undergoing significant changes.
- 153** Tenant involvement in performance management is underdeveloped. The main vehicle for reporting performance to tenants is via the Residents Forum which receives performance reports in advance. Although they are able to challenge performance generally this does not happen. There is also a voids monitoring group which includes tenants and tenants do inspect and scrutinise the quality of void properties. The community action groups do not receive any information which would allow them to challenge performance and quality of service. Performance information was added to the website during the inspection which allows anyone to see how well Merlin is performing. The recent establishment of a tenants finance group will allow service users to challenge cost and quality of service but it is too soon to see results from this yet.
- 154** Proposals for meeting efficiency targets are not fully clear. Targets are not based on a sound understanding of costs and there are few measures to enable Merlin to judge whether there is a positive relationship between cost and quality. Performance reports do not include VFM targets or a broad range of customer satisfaction indicators. While the organisation understands the benefits of partnership working and joint procurement the approach has so far been piecemeal.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 155** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Merlin has good financial capacity and has enhanced its strategic capacity to drive improvement. Board capacity is good and training and development, human resources management, investment in ICT and the use of specialist external capacity have increased internal capacity. However, strategic capacity is reduced by involvement in operational issues, there is not always clarity about roles and a significant number of staff do not feel valued. The Society is not maximising capacity through effective partnership working, procurement practices and by harnessing the capacity of its tenants.
- 156** There is the financial capacity to deliver improvement. Financial capacity has been enhanced through the 2009/10 budget process with an additional £11 million available for investment in services. Savings made in interest payments are being reinvested in front-line services. The long term financial plan indicates that there is the financial capacity to deliver planned improvements.
- 157** Merlin is investing in ICT to help increase capacity. The organisation has a clear and resourced ICT strategy and is at an advanced stage in delivering many of the key elements of this. The ground work has been completed with infrastructure now in place. Interfaces between housing management and repairs systems and introduction of new modules for the housing management system including voids and ASB management are critical to improving services. Implementation is supported by robust project management systems which provides confidence that implementation will be completed successfully.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 158** The strategic capacity within the organisation has been enhanced. The Board has confidence in the executive team's leadership. Gaps in capacity in some key areas for the success of the organisation have been filled for example, in asset management. Most relevant to this inspection, a new post of Director of Housing and Support enhances capacity to develop the service from a traditional housing management service into wider community development and support work. The management team has a broad range of compatible financial, human resources and technical skills to deliver the Business Plan.
- 159** The creation of a performance management team has added capacity to the organisation. Recognising weaknesses in performance management, Merlin has created a new Projects and Performance team. This has made it possible to implement a robust project management system. As well as developing new systems of performance management, the team undertakes analysis of areas of performance, for example it has been used in analysis and gaining a better understanding of the whole process of voids management. This makes it easier for any barriers to improvement to be identified and addressed.
- 160** Board capacity is good. It has a broad range of skills and experience to manage a complex social business. It works well as a cohesive body and members of the three sub committees demonstrate accountability for particular areas of responsibility. Capacity has been enhanced through working with an external consultant to develop personal development plans. A members' handbook helps make it clear what role is expected on the Board. This helps ensure a clear strategic direction for the organisation.
- 161** Effective use is being made of consultants to supplement staffing capacity. A consultant has been employed to provide the necessary capacity and skills to implement the new IT systems and modules. Consultants have also been engaged to add capacity to the repairs service through working on reviewing individual service activities and developing cultural, organisational and managerial change. This allows the organisation to benefit from specialist skills for a defined period of time.
- 162** Staff capacity is being increased through effective human resources management to tackle sickness absence. New policies and procedures have been developed which support managers. For example new procedures are having a positive impact on managing sickness absence with levels having reduced (although still relatively high) to an average of 11 days per year. The HR team provides support to managers in tackling difficult staff management issues.
- 163** Training is being used to increase capacity. Management of training programmes has recently been centralised which has enabled programmes to meet corporate priorities. As well as reflecting the needs identified from annual appraisals. A comprehensive training programme was put in place to equip staff to undertake new roles as part of the Access to Services review. Management capacity is being enhanced through the introduction of a management development programme. However, there are some gaps in training, for example Board members and staff have not received training in value for money and diversity training was delivered late. Staff satisfaction with training has not improved between 2008 and 2009 and remains at a relatively low 55 per cent.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 164** Staff are clear about their roles and the Society's objectives. Staff demonstrate an understanding of the main aspects of the Business Plan and this has been enhanced by producing a short leaflet summarising the plan for tenants and staff. The 2009 staff survey showed that 90 per cent were clear what they were expected to achieve and 86 per cent understood Merlin's values. Team meetings held regularly on Wednesday afternoons and monthly cascade briefings keep staff informed of organisational issues.
- 165** Surveys indicate that some staff do not feel fully valued. Results from the 2009 staff survey provide a mixed picture with 69 per cent saying they feel they are treated with fairness and respect (compared with an average of 74 per cent for the syndicate of housing organisations surveyed) and only 52 per cent (syndicate average 63 per cent) feeling they could report bullying or harassment. Only 36 per cent (syndicate average 46 per cent) said it was one of the best organisations they had worked for with 59 per cent (syndicate average 67 per cent) saying they were satisfied with the organisation. Although these results demonstrate improvement on 2008 relatively low levels of morale represent a possible barrier to improvement. However, overall job satisfaction is around the average for comparable organisations at 70 per cent.
- 166** There is not always clarity about roles which means that the Society does not always make best use of skills and capacity. In some areas there is confusion and overlap in responsibilities between housing management and property services. For example housing officers have a responsibility for estate management but property services are responsible for grounds maintenance and caretaking. The housing management section is responsible for providing support to vulnerable people but is not responsible for aids and adaptations budgets. This is likely to be exacerbated by poor communication between departments with only 19 per cent of staff saying communication between departments works well. This may lead to inconsistency in approach, gaps in accountability and a less customer-focused service.
- 167** Strategic capacity is reduced by the need to be involved in operational issues. There is limited capacity within the middle management of the organisation. Strategic directors are involved in operational issues to an extent which suggests a lack of capacity at middle management level in some areas. It is positive that the society has plans to address this through the management development programme.
- 168** The organisation has not had the capacity to implement the level of change without a reduction in performance. Implementation of the Access to Services review resulted in staff taking on new responsibilities before they had been fully trained and equipped to take them on. Reductions in performance in former tenants' arrears and voids management are examples of this. Staff are in need of a period of consolidation and stability if performance levels are to improve.
- 169** Partnerships with other organisations are not being maximised. Although there are examples of partnership working, in many areas these are not yet being fully drawn on to maximise capacity. Partnership working with the council is not delivering fully effective services in some key areas including aids and adaptations.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 170** The approach to procurement has only delivered limited benefits. There are some examples of joint procurement such as a shared contract with another housing association for legal services. While partnership contracts for major repairs work has brought benefits, there are other areas of the repairs service where services are still procured using a traditional approach. Effective use of partnership procurement can bring benefits in terms of innovation in service delivery and improved value for money.
- 171** The Society is not harnessing the capacity of its tenants. Positive aspects of tenant involvement such as involvement in contractor selection and development of service standards has to be balanced against the fact that tenant involvement is generally not representative of the whole population. It is a further weakness that there has been limited devolvement of budgets. This means that an opportunity is being missed to use the full potential of service users to drive service improvement.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 Unaudited	2007/08 National median	2007/08 National quartile position
Per cent stock failing decent homes			32.4%	5%	4.9%	4
Average SAP rating	N/A	63.0	63.0	66.5	67.2	4
Re-let time (all managed stock)	58	50	48.1	68	35.5 days	4
Current tenant arrears	1.15%	1.58%	2.88%	3.17%	4.4%	1
Tenant satisfaction overall	82%	71.2%	71.2%	71.2%	80.8%	4
Tenant satisfaction with participation	54%	51.9%	51.9%	51.9%	60.0%	4
Tenant satisfaction with repairs and maintenance	N/A	N/A	73%		76.8%	3

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups with staff, board and tenants;
 - interviews with staff and the board Chair;
 - tour of the stock;
 - inspection of estates;
 - inspection of ready to let properties;
 - file checks;
 - review documents, leaflets and the web-site; and
 - mystery shopping.

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