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REPORT TO: COMMUNITY SCRUTINY

AGENDA ITEM: 5

DATE OF MEETING: 1<sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER 2003

CATEGORY: DELEGATED

REPORT FROM: DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

OPEN

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DOC: Community Strategy.doc

SUBJECT: BEST VALUE REVIEW – SHELTERED HOUSING SERVICES

REF: myfiles/committees/communityscrutiny/bvreview sheltered

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

TERMS OF REFERENCE: G

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### 1.0 Recommendations

2.1 That Members note progress.

### 2.0 Purpose of Report

2.1 To provide members with background details to the Best Value Review of the Sheltered Housing Service.

### 3.0 Detail

3.1 The Council has around 1,100 sheltered homes for older people. Every property is connected by an alarm system to a Central Control Unit, giving round the clock cover. A Warden service is also provided.

3.2 The Council carried out a Best Value Review of its sheltered housing service during 1999-2001. The service was inspected in January 2001 and the report published in June 2001 judged the service to be poor (no star) with unlikely prospects for improvement.

3.3 Following the inspection, the Council developed an Improvement Plan for dealing with the weaknesses that had been identified. A key part of the plan was a move from resident to community wardens.

3.4 This change was introduced in March 2002, after consultation with residents, employees and partner organisations. As part of the new arrangements, Community Wardens work across the district delivering services to all tenants in their area. Each property is visited at set intervals, although in practice, the number of visits depends on the needs of individual tenants.

3.5 The Best Value Inspectors re - inspected the service in December 2002 and they now consider the Council is providing a fair (one star service) with promising prospects of improvements.

3.6 Their report notes:

*'We found that the Council has worked hard to improve the sheltered housing service since our last inspection and this has led to a significant improvement in service delivery. The sheltered housing service has been completely reorganised and all tenants now receive the same level of service delivered by caring and committed staff. Customer satisfaction with the service is high.*

*However, there is still no overall vision in place for the sheltered housing service and progress with introducing some service improvements has been slower than we anticipated..'*

3.7 The report also contains a number of recommendations to help make further improvements to the service. These relate to the development of a vision for the service; measures to improve customer care; diversity and equal opportunities issues; and, partnership working. These recommendations were subsequently added to the Improvement Plan. A copy of the Inspectorate's full report is attached as Annexe A.

3.8 The Action Plan has been the subject of several monitoring reports to the Committee and reality checks have been undertaken as part of this process. A further monitoring report together with further suggestions for improvement is included as a separate agenda item

#### **4.0 Financial Implications**

4.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

#### **5.0 Background Papers**

Reports to Community Scrutiny Committee

## **South Derbyshire D C**

Sheltered Housing Service re-inspection

*February 2003*

## Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty of local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. <sup>1</sup>Best value is a challenging framework designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission's Inspection Service performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working on the ground;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

<sup>1</sup> This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

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# Summary and recommendations

## Summary

- 1 South Derbyshire District Council is in the East Midlands region bordered by the city of Derby in the north and by the towns of Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Burton-upon-Trent to the East and West. It has a population of 81,571<sup>2</sup>. South Derbyshire has the fastest growing population in Derbyshire, since 1991 the population has increased by 12.9 per cent. 1.6<sup>3</sup> per cent of the population are from ethnic minority communities.
- 2 The Council is comprised of 34 elected members of which 23 are Labour and 10 are Conservative, with 1 vacant seat. Outside of the administrative centre, Swadlincote, there are 50 parishes, 33 administered by parish councils and 17 by parish meetings.
- 3 The Council employs around 300 staff across all services and the Council's net revenue expenditure for 2002/03 is £7.8 million.
- 4 The Council carried out a best value review of its sheltered housing service during 1999-2001. The review covered sheltered housing and warden services for older people. An inspection by the Housing Inspectorate followed. The report of our inspection was published in June 2001 and the service was judged to be a poor (no star) service which had unlikely prospects for further service improvements.
- 5 A re-inspection of the sheltered housing service was undertaken by the Housing Inspectorate during December 2002 and this report details our findings.
- 6 The Council owns 3,608 properties of which 1,166 (32 per cent) are designated as sheltered housing. There are 21 members of staff providing the sheltered housing service at a cost of £736,000 in 2001/02.

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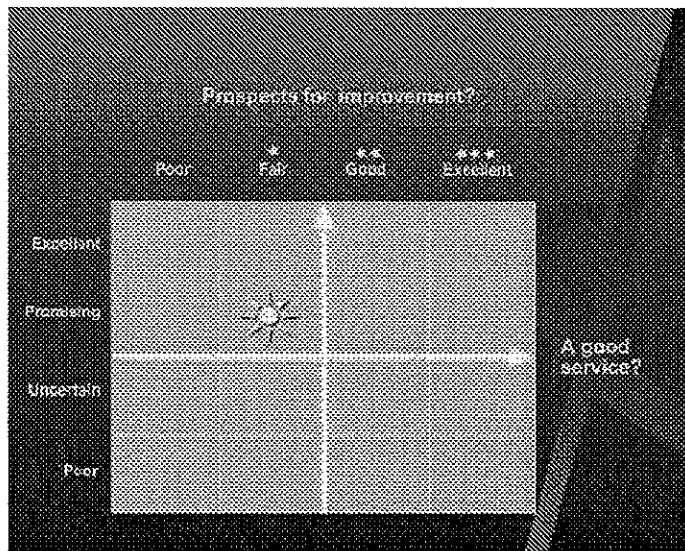
<sup>2</sup> 2001 Census

<sup>3</sup> 1991 Census

## Scoring the Service

- 7 We have assessed the Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has **promising** prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

### Scoring chart<sup>4</sup>: South Derbyshire D C – Sheltered Housing Service re-inspection



*'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement'*

- 8 We found that the Council has worked hard to improve the sheltered housing service since our last inspection and this has led to a significant improvement in service delivery. The sheltered housing service has been completely re-organised and all tenants now receive the same level of service delivered by caring and committed staff. Customer satisfaction with the service is high.
- 9 However, there is still no overall vision in place for the sheltered housing service and progress with introducing some service improvements has been slower than we anticipated.
- 10 During our inspection we found a number of service improvements which included:
- ◆ a consistently high level of service being provided to all tenants living in sheltered housing schemes;
  - ◆ Community Wardens who have a clear role and are committed to providing a caring and supportive service;
  - ◆ a district wide programme of improvements to sheltered schemes;

<sup>4</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the Service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- ◆ comprehensive policies and procedures in place;
  - ◆ regular health and safety checks being undertaken;
  - ◆ introduction of a customer care charter;
  - ◆ the planned closure of two difficult to let sheltered schemes; and
  - ◆ improved partnership working.
- 11 However, we found a number of weaknesses that still need to be addressed:
- ◆ no overall vision for the sheltered housing service;
  - ◆ diversity and equality issues are not receiving sufficient priority;
  - ◆ not all satisfaction surveys are being monitored by ethnicity, gender, age and disability;
  - ◆ there is a lack of information and publicity available about sheltered housing, the 'lifeline' service and the incentive to move scheme;
  - ◆ housing information leaflets are in need of revision;
  - ◆ two different customer complaints procedures in place;
  - ◆ a lack of measurable targets in the customer care charter; and
  - ◆ progress with the planned intermediate care facility has been delayed.
- 12 We found the following indicators for improvement:
- ◆ there is a shared understanding between Officers and Members of the issues to be addressed and a shared commitment and enthusiasm for delivering service improvements;
  - ◆ the Council has been able to demonstrate that it is prepared to tackle poor services and take difficult decisions in order to improve its services for customers;
  - ◆ there has been a culture change within the Housing Service, new staff have brought with them a 'can do' attitude and this has helped to improve the morale of existing staff;
  - ◆ improvements are now being planned more strategically;
  - ◆ a 'Change and Improvement Programme' has been developed which has involved all staff in the Housing Service;
  - ◆ the Council has improved the way it involves its tenants in service improvements;



- ◆ However, we did have concerns that there is still no overall vision for the sheltered housing service and that the Council has not given diversity and equality issues a high enough priority;
- ◆ a number of the actions contained within the Sheltered Housing Improvement Plan have been completed after their target date and several actions remain uncompleted; and
- ◆ many of the planned service improvements cannot be fully implemented until a new computer system is in place.

## Recommendations

- 13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team feels that the Council should now take action to resolve a number of general, political, managerial and partnership issues.
- 14 We recognise that the Council already has proposals in place to address many of the weaknesses identified above. These are detailed in the report and the recommendations detailed below do include some of these proposals.
- 15 We recommend that the Council should:
  - ◆ ensure that a draft vision for the future of the sheltered housing service is in place by April 2003, which can then be used as a basis for consultation with service users;
  - ◆ improve access to services and customer care by:
    - ◆ revising all the housing information leaflets;
    - ◆ producing information and publicity about sheltered housing, the 'lifeline' service and the incentive to move scheme;
    - ◆ replacing the two existing complaints procedures with a single procedure;
    - ◆ improving the housing information available on the Council's website;
  - ◆ improve diversity and equalities by:
    - ◆ ensuring a better understanding amongst Members and staff of diversity and equality issues and particularly their importance for the sheltered housing service;
    - ◆ consider appointing a Member of the Council to be the 'Diversity Champion' for the authority;
    - ◆ ensuring that all customer satisfaction surveys organised by the Council measure satisfaction by ethnicity, gender, age and disability;
    - ◆ ensuring that the Council introduces a Race Equality Scheme by April 2003;

- ◆ Improve partnership working by:
  - ◆ ensuring there is a Local Strategic Partnership in place by June 2003; and
  - ◆ reaching an agreement with all partners and stakeholders on the future of the intermediate care facility and the empty properties at Granville Court by April 2003.

16 We would like to thank the staff of South Derbyshire District Council, particularly the staff in Housing Services, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

**Ann Bennett**            **Housing Inspector**  
**Charmaine Arbouin** **Housing Inspector**  
**Dennis Rees**            **Tenant Inspection Adviser**  
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**Dates of inspection: 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2002**

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 17 South Derbyshire District Council is in the East Midlands region bordered by the city of Derby in the north and by the towns of Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Burton-upon-Trent to the East and West. The District covers an area of 340 square kilometres.
- 18 South Derbyshire has the fastest growing population in Derbyshire and since 1991 the population has increased by 12.9 per cent and now stands at 81,571<sup>5</sup>. 1.6<sup>6</sup> per cent of the population are from ethnic minority communities, which is the highest proportion of all districts in Derbyshire<sup>7</sup>.
- 19 The town of Swadlincote is the main centre of population, with the rest of the district being mostly rural in character. A large part of the district has been included within the designated area of the National Forest.
- 20 Unemployment at 2.1<sup>8</sup> per cent is currently below the national average (3.6 per cent). Although in parts of Swadlincote and Woodville, unemployment rates are closer to the national average. The Council is ranked at 216<sup>9</sup> out of 354 local authorities on the Government's indices of deprivation.
- 21 There are 34,636 homes in South Derbyshire, 87.6 per cent are either owner-occupied or privately rented, 10.7 per cent are owned by the Council and Housing Associations own 1.7 per cent. Around 1,900 homes are considered to be unfit.

### The Council

- 22 The Council currently has 34 members, representing 19 wards. Following a periodic electoral review, the size of the Council will increase at the next local elections in 2003 to 36 members representing 17 wards.
- 23 The Council is currently controlled by the Labour Party who have 23 members and the Conservative Party has 10 members with 1 vacant seat.

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<sup>5</sup> 2001 Census

<sup>6</sup> 1991 Census

<sup>7</sup> Excluding Derby City Council

<sup>8</sup> August 2002 –South Derbyshire DC figures

<sup>9</sup> 1 being the most deprived and 354 being the least deprived

- 24 Outside the urban area of Swadlincote, there are 50 parishes, with 33 administered by Parish Councils and 17 by Parish Meetings.
- 25 In July 2001 new political management arrangements for the Council were introduced based on a 'modernised' committee structure. This new structure includes three policy committees, two regulatory committees and two overview and scrutiny committees. It also includes a Standards Committee and an Independent Remuneration Panel that contain external appointees.
- 26 The Council has around 300 employees and its annual expenditure is around £27 million with net revenue expenditure for 2002/03 of £7.8 million.
- 27 The Council faced a severe financial crisis during 1999/00 which led to a reduction in management costs and 42 posts being deleted from the establishment. The restructuring that followed has resulted in a smaller Corporate Management Team (CMT) consisting of the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Head of Community Services and Chief Finance Officer. Each member of CMT is responsible for a number of service areas. These are then managed by Divisional Managers.

#### **Housing Services in South Derbyshire**

- 28 Following the major restructuring of the Council during 2000, the Housing Service became part of a newly created Community Services function. The Housing Services Manager has overall responsibility for the Housing Division and reports to the Head of Community Services. There are around 70 members of staff in the Housing Division.
- 29 The Council owns 3,608 properties and a stock condition survey undertaken in 2002 showed that 77 per cent of properties currently meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard. The Council is currently predicting that all its homes will meet the standard by 2010.
- 30 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2002/03 is £15.6 million and the Major Repair Allowance (MRA) is £1.9 million.
- 31 The Council's Housing Strategy and Housing Investment Plan have recently been rated as 'average' by the Government Office for the East Midlands (GOEM), following a 'below average' rating for the previous three years.

#### **Sheltered Housing Service**

- 32 The Council has a large sheltered housing stock with 32 per cent (1,166) of all its properties being designated as sheltered housing.
- 33 The sheltered housing service is managed by the Advice, Liaison and Sheltered Housing Manager who reports to the Housing Services Manager. In addition to sheltered housing, this manager also has responsibility for housing advice and homelessness, allocations and voids, estate and tenancy management and tenant participation.
- 34 There are 10 Community Wardens who report to the Sheltered Housing Team Leader. Each warden is responsible for visiting a number of schemes within their

designated area, with two relief wardens providing cover for holidays and sickness absence.

- 35 The Central Control Unit provides a call alarm monitoring service to all older people living in sheltered housing. The Control Unit also provides an emergency 'lifeline' service to customers in the private sector and to some residents living in Almshouses and Housing Association properties.
- 36 This service is provided by 6 Central Control Officers, plus 1 relief officer who report to the Central Control Team Leader.
- 37 The total cost of the Sheltered Housing Service in 2001/02 was £736,000, of which £433,000 was recovered in service charges and £303,000 was subsidised by the HRA. This means that the cost of the service for each sheltered housing tenant is £11.83 per week, of which the tenant pays £6.50 per week.

#### **The Council's best value review**

- 38 The Council carried out a best value review of its sheltered housing service during 1999-2001. The review covered sheltered housing and warden services for older people. An inspection by the Housing Inspectorate followed. The report of our inspection was published in June 2001 and the service was judged to be a poor (no star) service which had unlikely prospects for further service improvements.
- 39 During that inspection we found that the service had the following weaknesses:
- ◆ no identified role or vision for sheltered housing in independent living for older people;
  - ◆ poor information available for tenants;
  - ◆ examples of inadequate accommodation;
  - ◆ poor health and safety procedures and practices;
  - ◆ inequalities in service provision;
  - ◆ lack of service standards;
  - ◆ lack of performance monitoring;
  - ◆ no effective partnership working with health, social services and the voluntary sector; and
  - ◆ high levels of long term voids.
- 40 A re-inspection of the sheltered housing service was undertaken by the Housing Inspectorate during December 2002 and this report details our findings.

## How good is the Service?

### Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 41 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.
- 42 Challenge is the key to achieving significant improvements in performance and targets set by the council and government. Without challenge best value will be ineffective. It requires the council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.
- 43 The Council's vision and key aims can be found in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2002/03 and in the 2002 Best Value Performance Plan. The Council's overall vision is:

*To promote and enhance the social, economic and environmental well being of the community through the provision of cost effective, customer focused services*

- 44 In order to achieve this vision the Council has set itself eight key aims, these are:
- ◆ to strengthen and develop the local economy through support for business development and inward investment;
  - ◆ to safeguard and enhance the natural and built environment;
  - ◆ to address the needs of South Derbyshire residents for good quality homes, of a variety of tenures, located in well planned and safe environments;
  - ◆ to promote the health and welfare of all sections of the community, including access to leisure and cultural activities;
  - ◆ to secure continuous improvements in the quality and efficiency of services provided by the Council;
  - ◆ to manage resources efficiently and effectively;
  - ◆ to listen to, represent and provide leadership to the people of South Derbyshire in local, regional and national arenas; and
  - ◆ to support the development of the National Forest and its enjoyment by residents and visitors.
- 45 There is currently no Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in South Derbyshire, however, the Council has set itself a target of having an operational LSP in place by June 2003.
- 46 The Housing Service has developed its own strategic and capital objectives for the provision of a comprehensive housing service. These are contained within the Housing Strategy and the HRA Business Plan. The overall aim of the Housing Strategy is to:

*Address the needs of South Derbyshire residents for good quality and affordable homes, located in healthy, safe and pleasant environments.*

- 47 The five strategic objectives listed in the Housing Strategy are:
- ◆ identify and define the housing needs of South Derbyshire residents;
  - ◆ work with stakeholders to maintain and improve the district's housing stock;
  - ◆ ensure that there is an adequate supply of homes to meet anticipated needs, taking into account the demands of new industry coming into the area;
  - ◆ ensure that vulnerable people have access to appropriate and stable housing; and
  - ◆ provide high quality, customer focused housing services.
- 48 The Housing Strategy also lists six capital objectives for housing, these are:
- ◆ maintain, modernise and remodel council housing to bring all homes up to the Decent Homes Standard;
  - ◆ adapt public and private sector housing to meet the needs of both young and older disabled people;
  - ◆ bring empty homes back into use by continuing to work in partnership with landlords and the use of Empty Property Landlord Grants;
  - ◆ address unmet specialist needs in partnership with Registered Social Landlords and planned with Social Services and Health;
  - ◆ make all homes across all tenures safe, secure and warm and develop burglary reduction projects; and
  - ◆ work in partnership to secure funding for improved security to sheltered housing.
- 49 The HRA Business Plan for 2002 contains the following vision for the Housing Service:

*To ensure an effective and efficient housing service and to agree a long term housing strategy for the district with stakeholders, to be delivered with its partners.*

- 50 The plan also includes a number of detailed objectives for the Housing Service, those which are particularly relevant to the sheltered housing service include:
- ◆ to identify the costs to be covered by the 'Supporting People' pot by March 2002;
  - ◆ to ensure adequate support packages in conjunction with care providers to maintain vulnerable tenants in tenancies in 2003;
  - ◆ to review services with tenants to ensure their relevance bi-annually;

- ◆ to model financial changes, before and after the review of schemes in 2002/03 and consider how these impact on both the Council and its tenants, to assess the costs of schemes against other providers and seek value for money; and
  - ◆ during 2002 consider the appropriateness of 'difficult to let' sheltered schemes within the context of the Council's asset management strategy and to consider options for dealing with those that are unable to achieve a four week relet time.
- 51 The Housing Division produces an annual service plan which details the key tasks for the division together with key performance indicators and targets. The tasks contained within this plan are clearly linked to the corporate key tasks listed in the Corporate Plan.
- 52 The annual service plan is cascaded down through the Housing Division via regular team meetings, a monthly performance update issued to all staff and Members and through individual meetings between staff and their managers when individual objectives and targets are agreed.
- 53 It is our view that the corporate and service aims are generally clear and challenging. Linkages between the Corporate Plan and the Housing Strategy are apparent.
- 54 The Council has consulted with its stakeholders and tenants when producing the aims and objectives contained in both the Housing Strategy and the HRA Business Plan.
- 55 We were disappointed to find that there is still no overall vision for the sheltered housing service, despite this being highlighted as a weakness in our previous report.
- 56 The Council has set up a 'task and finish' group to agree a clear vision of what constitutes the sheltered housing service and how this impacts on the current sheltered housing stock. The council intends that this vision will consider the role of the service in the context of care in the community and promoting independence and will consider the housing needs of older people in partnership with key agencies.
- 57 This group consists of Members, officers, representatives from Social Services, the Health Service and voluntary organisations, together with tenants representatives. The group hopes to complete its task by April 2003.
- 58 Despite this, we were able to use the relevant aims and objectives contained in the Housing Strategy and the HRA Business Plan to make an assessment of how well the sheltered housing service is delivering against these aims. This is discussed in the next section.

## **Does the Service meet these aims?**

- 59 Having considered the aims the council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the council is performing in meeting these aims and the key aspects of the service. This includes an assessment of performance



against specific service standards and targets and the council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.

#### Access to Services and Customer Care

- 60 The ease with which customers or potential customers can access information about a service and get access to that service is key to providing a good service.
- 61 During our previous inspection we found that information provided for tenants was poor and there were no service standards in place to help customers judge whether they were receiving a good service or not.
- 62 During this inspection we found that the Housing Service had produced a Customer Care Charter in conjunction with its Tenants Advisory and Consultation Team (TACT) which represents tenants from across South Derbyshire.
- 63 We found the Charter to be informative and easy to read. It includes targets for answering the telephone, replying to letters and seeing personal callers at the Council's offices.
- 64 The Charter also makes a number of promises regarding service improvements that will be undertaken during the next twelve months. However, the Charter is not dated, so tenants cannot judge if the planned improvements are being delivered on time.
- 65 When we spoke to officers and members of TACT about the Charter they agreed that this was very much a 'first attempt' and that an annual review of the Charter will take place and they will ensure that the next edition due to be published in September 2003 contains measurable targets.
- 66 The Charter promises to provide any housing documents in braille, on audio tape, in large print and in ethnic minority languages upon request. However, this promise only appears in english and we could find no other posters or leaflets which publicise services in the relevant community languages.
- 67 We found the other information leaflets produced by the Housing Service to be unattractive and dull and in need of a complete revision. The print size on these leaflets is very small and the text is often dense making the leaflets difficult to read.
- 68 During our inspection we were told that all housing information leaflets are currently undergoing a revision as part of the Best Value Review of the Strategic Housing function. It is recognised by officers that information and leaflets should be made available in all community languages and the new leaflets will address this.
- 69 There are currently two separate complaint leaflets that could be used by a council tenant to make a complaint. The first is the corporate leaflet entitled 'I want to complain'. The second is the Housing Service leaflet called 'Unhappy with our service'. We were concerned to find that the two leaflets detail separate complaints procedures, with the corporate leaflet detailing a three stage procedure whilst the housing leaflet lists four stages. The housing leaflet also fails to properly describe the Local Government Ombudsman service.

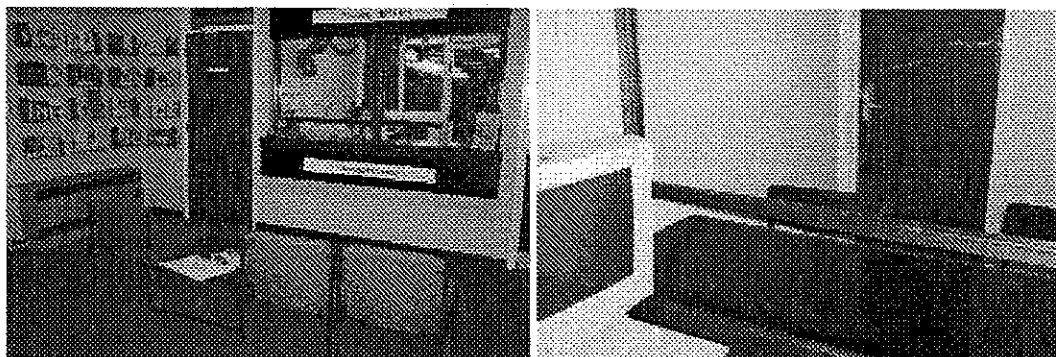
- 70 Having two separate complaints procedures inevitably leads to confusion for the customer and an inability for the Council to produce accurate monitoring information.
- 71 There are currently no leaflets or other information available publicising the sheltered housing service or the 'lifeline' service provided by the Central Control Unit. The existing leaflets were withdrawn as their content did not reflect the new service that has been in place since March 2002.
- 72 However, we were given a copy of the draft Sheltered Housing Guide, which has been sent out to a number of tenants representatives for their comments before the guide is formally launched in January 2003.
- 73 The guide explains the role of sheltered housing and community wardens and what facilities are available in sheltered schemes and the charges that are made in order to provide these facilities. The guide also contains an extensive list of service standards that both tenants and their carers can expect to receive when using this service. This guide will be available in other formats.
- 74 The Council's current allocation policy states that in order to be considered for sheltered housing potential tenants have to be at least 60 years old. However, the Council is currently reviewing its allocation policy to take account of the changes introduced by the Homelessness Act 2002. As part of this review the criteria for allocating sheltered housing is to be amended to state that:

*Properties identified as sheltered accommodation will not normally be allocated to persons below the age of 60 years. However, consideration will be given to applicants aged not less than 55 years, whereby the applicant demonstrates a need for sheltered accommodation by virtue of disability.*

- 75 The Housing Service is delivered from the Council's offices in Swadlincote. The housing reception area is located on the ground floor and the main entrance doors open automatically. The reception area is quite small, however, it was clean and tidy and we did not observe any queues during our inspection.
- 76 The reception desk and the two interview rooms have glass screens separating customers from staff. Although we accept the need to address health and safety issues, the screens are not very welcoming or private. The interview rooms are small and wheelchair users and customers with pushchairs are likely to find them difficult to use. There are no telephones in the interview rooms, which can be disruptive and impact upon the flow of an interview if the officer has to leave the interview room in order to make enquiries. One interview room did contain a computer.
- 77 The Customer Care Charter promises to 'look at possible improvements to the whole reception area and office signage within twelve months'.

### Reception and interview facilities

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- 78 The Council has its own website, which we found easy to use. Unfortunately, there is very little general information about the housing service on the website, apart from information about tenant participation and there is no specific information on the website about the sheltered housing service.

### Scheme Facilities and the Community Warden Service

- 79 The Council has over 50 sheltered housing schemes. The schemes vary in size from 4 to 50 units, with some schemes being arranged around a single building and others having individual properties or small blocks of properties in a tight geographical area. The oldest scheme is a bungalow scheme built in 1933 and the most recent scheme was built in 1990.
- 80 In total the Council has 1166 properties which are designated as sheltered housing. These are made up of 55 bedsits, 579<sup>10</sup> flats and 540 bungalows.
- 81 During our previous inspection we found examples of inadequate accommodation for residents in some schemes, poor health and safety procedures and practices, inequalities in service provision and high levels of long term voids.
- 82 Since our previous inspection the Council has worked hard to address these weaknesses by undertaking a complete re-organisation of the sheltered housing service and the role of wardens, by appointing new managers and team leaders and by introducing new policies, procedures and working practices. Financial provision has also been made to improve the facilities and services at schemes.
- 83 Because of the diverse nature of the sheltered housing stock in South Derbyshire the new Sheltered Housing Team Leader has begun undertaking a programme of scheme audits, at the time of our inspection around half of all schemes had been audited.

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<sup>10</sup> The actual stock size is 1174 properties which includes flats that were once occupied by resident wardens

### Examples of sheltered housing schemes in South Derbyshire

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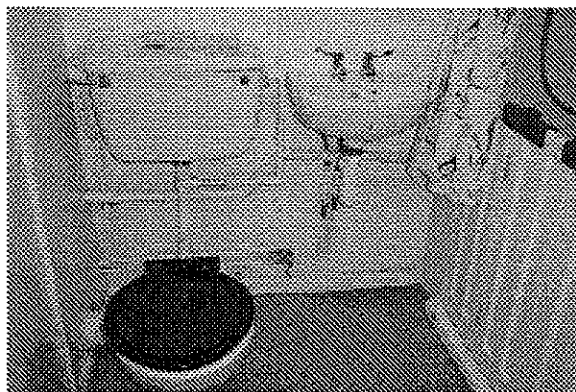
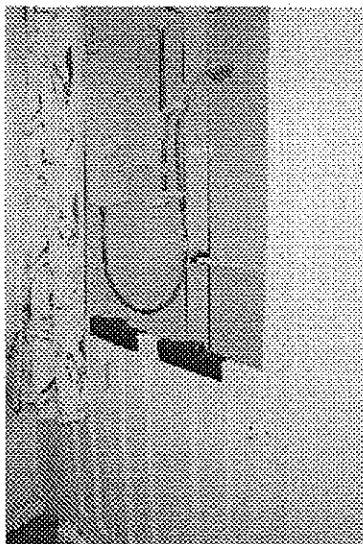


- 84 These audits provide an up to date assessment of the facilities in each scheme and the work required to bring these facilities up to an acceptable standard. The information from these audits is currently being fed into the new ten year improvement programme for the whole council stock and will ensure that when planned improvements are undertaken in a particular area, the communal facilities at sheltered schemes in that area will be included in the programme of works.
- 85 During our last inspection we criticised the poor facilities at three schemes which were predominately made up of bedsit flats and which resulted in tenants having to share poorly designed and maintained communal bathrooms. The Council responded to these criticisms by evaluating the long term future of these schemes and conducting extensive consultation with scheme residents, their relatives and carers and local Members. As a result of this work the Council decided to close two of the schemes, Basses Crescent and Smallthorn Place, and to refurbish the third scheme, Willoughby House.
- 86 It was clear from speaking to residents and their local Member that the consultation had been handled in a sensitive and caring manner and a relocation package has been agreed which will provide financial compensation plus practical help with relocating to a new home. At the time of our inspection most residents had decided where they would like to move to and several had already been made offers of accommodation. The Council is handling the closure of the scheme sensitively and given the age and frailty of many residents has not set a closure date.

- 87 Following consultation with residents at Willoughby House an improvement programme for the building was in the early stages of implementation at the time of our inspection. This included improving the communal lounge and kitchen and providing each bedsit with its own walk-in shower as illustrated in the photographs below. The total cost of the works is estimated to be £100,000.

#### Improvements underway at Willoughby House

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- 88 A district wide programme of improvements has also been started which will improve facilities and services at all schemes these include:
- ◆ updating signage and providing fire safety notices in all communal areas;
  - ◆ replacing and installing fire doors where required;
  - ◆ providing door entry systems to all schemes with communal entrances, on larger schemes these will be linked to the Central Control Unit;
  - ◆ providing security lighting and safety improvements in conjunction with the South Derbyshire Crime and Disorder Partnership;
  - ◆ replacing door locks with suited locks to enable easier access in emergencies;
  - ◆ replacing easy chairs and curtains in all communal lounges, following extensive consultation with scheme residents;
  - ◆ refurbishing guest rooms;
  - ◆ ensuring that all communal areas including small blocks of flats are cleaned on a regular basis;
  - ◆ ensuring that all windows in communal areas are cleaned on a regular basis;
  - ◆ replacing obsolete call alarm equipment; and

- ◆ improving the standard of landscape maintenance.

- 89 In addition to these improvements the Council has recently agreed to spend an additional £100,000 per year on refurbishing communal areas in recognition of the lack of planned investment in the sheltered housing stock for a number of years. This budget will also be used to fund the improvements that will be needed to ensure that all schemes meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 by 2004.
- 90 During our inspection we visited a number of different schemes and found that the improvements had already started to make an appreciable difference with communal areas looking cleaner and better maintained than during our previous inspection. However, we found that many communal lounges and guest bedrooms were still quite drab and some communal laundries and kitchens needed their equipment replacing.

**Communal kitchen at Kendricks Close prior to planned improvements being started**

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- 91 We were also concerned to find that disabled scooters were still being parked in the communal area at one scheme and that loose pieces of carpet laid by residents in communal areas were still a potential trip hazard. Officers told us that they have found it difficult to prevent residents from relaying carpet.

**Disabled scooters parked in communal areas**

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- 92 With the introduction of the new cleaning specification it will be made clear to residents that clear access to the floor is required. Officers agreed that the storage of disabled scooters in communal areas was not the most appropriate place, although steps are taken to ensure that no fire exits are blocked. As part of the development of the strategic vision and annual improvements via the planned improvement programme, consideration will be given to the provision of storage for such scooters, as it is recognised that these scooters promote independence.
- 93 A recent service improvement has been the introduction of a dedicated Building Maintenance Inspector for all sheltered schemes. This officer is responsible for all responsive and planned repairs in schemes and this ensures a continuity of service between the different schemes. Community Wardens and scheme residents also know who to contact if they want to discuss a repair.
- 94 Following the re-organisation of the sheltered housing service a new role of Community Warden was introduced in March 2002. There are now 10 Community Wardens who each cover a designated area within the District and have responsibility for between 92 and 133 properties each. In addition there are two Relief Wardens providing cover for holidays and sickness absences. They all report to the Sheltered Housing Team Leader which is also a newly created post.
- 95 During our last inspection we found that sheltered housing tenants were receiving a differential service, with some tenants receiving a daily visit from their Wardens, whilst other tenants could not even be certain of seeing their Warden once a week.
- 96 The role of the new Community Warden is to visit all the sheltered housing tenants in their area on 5 days out of every 10. This means that tenants receive three visits one week and two visits the following week. For each visit undertaken the warden completes a contact sheet, which provides a record of the visits undertaken.
- 97 For frail or vulnerable tenants these visits can be supplemented with daily calls from the Central Control Unit using the call alarm system fitted in each property. This new visiting regime provides consistency of service and certainty for tenants who now know when to expect a visit from their Community Warden.
- 98 Community Wardens work Monday to Friday and provide out of hours cover during evenings and weekends on a rota basis. If a tenant uses their call alarm to summon assistance and the Central Control Operator decides that a Community Warden is required, then either one or two of the Wardens who are on duty will attend and deal with the incident. Between March and November 2002 Community Wardens have responded to 275 such incidents.
- 99 During our previous inspection we were critical of the Council for having few policies and procedures in place and for poor health and safety practices. Community Wardens are now required to keep detailed records on both residents and health and safety issues. To assist them with this, a detailed Guidance and Procedure Manual has been produced following consultation with the Wardens.
- 100 The purpose of the manual is to provide all new and existing Community Wardens with a comprehensive set of procedures and guidelines to enable them to consistently deliver a high quality service to their tenants. The manual is more than just a procedure guide as it contains examples of good practice and helpful

tips. The Council hopes that the manual will help to enhance the Community Wardens professionalism and assist them in becoming 'reflective practitioners'.

- 101 The new procedures introduced in the manual mean that regular checks are now undertaken by the Community Warden on the following:
- ◆ speech module and pull cord testing;
  - ◆ fire alarms and fire protection equipment;
  - ◆ dispersed 'Lifeline' alarms;
  - ◆ door entry systems;
  - ◆ lifts;
  - ◆ communal facilities and equipment; and
  - ◆ standard of cleaning.
- 102 Following the re-organisation of the sheltered housing service it is the responsibility of the Sheltered Housing Team Leader, working in conjunction with the Community Wardens, to co-ordinate social and community activities in sheltered schemes.
- 103 The Sheltered Housing Team is expected to promote and act as a catalyst for resident's participation with a particular focus on enabling and encouraging social activities. If residents are in agreement then the organised activities are opened up to other older people living in the local community.
- 104 It was feared by officers, Members and tenants that many of the social activities that were previously organised by resident wardens would cease with the introduction of the new non-residential Community Wardens. However, it would appear from the visits we made during our inspection and from speaking to scheme residents and members of TACT that many activities have continued, with scheme residents or voluntary groups taking over the responsibility for organising them.
- 105 However, at some schemes there were few activities taking place, partly due to the age and capacity of residents.
- 106 During our last inspection we found an unacceptably high number of empty sheltered properties, many of which had been empty for long periods.
- 107 During our current inspection we found that there were 31 sheltered properties that were empty and waiting to be re-let, of which 20 were on offer. This represents 2.7 per cent of all sheltered housing. Many of the properties that had been empty for long periods were in Basses Crescent and Smallthorn Place. The Council's decision to close these schemes has obviously meant that the number of empty properties waiting to be re-let has reduced as a consequence.
- 108 The Council has also decided, following consultation with existing residents to de-designate the first floor flats in another 'difficult to let' scheme at Pine Grove. This will mean that these flats can be let to mature applicants who will not necessarily



require the warden service. There are currently four empty first floor flats at Pine Grove, three of the four flats have been empty for over twelve months with two of them being empty for over two years. We see this as a positive example of the Council responding to the issue of low demand sheltered accommodation.

- 109 The Council has also introduced a pilot 'incentive to move' scheme which is designed to encourage older tenants to leave their family sized accommodation and move into a smaller property thereby releasing their property for a family to move into. Tenants must be aged 60 or over and be under occupying a two, three or four bed house. If accepted onto the scheme tenants can choose from a range of options worth up to £400 as an incentive to move.
- 110 Whilst we applaud the council's aim of making best use of its stock, the lack of publicity means that, although the scheme has been in operation since July 2002, so far no one has used it. This scheme has been temporarily suspended until the relocation of residents from Smallthorn Place and Basses Crescent has been completed.
- 111 We were pleased to find that Community Wardens are now involved in re-letting the empty properties in their schemes. They undertake accompanied viewings with all prospective tenants which enables them explain their role and provide information about the scheme's facilities. At present Community Wardens are joined by a Tenant Liaison Officer and the Building Maintenance Inspector on each accompanied viewing. When we queried whether this was an effective use of resources we were told that this is only an interim arrangement until the Community Wardens feel confident enough to undertake the viewing with just the assistance of the Building Maintenance Inspector.
- 112 During our inspection we held a focus group with all the Community Wardens and asked them their views of the new service. All were very positive about the changes that had taken place despite the trauma of the actual re-organisation when all wardens were served with redundancy notices and residential wardens had had to leave their accommodation:

*'We thought we were giving a good service'*

*'Members blamed us for the poor score'*

*'It was terrible for staff and a double whammy for resident wardens'*

- 113 Wardens went on to tell us that the service was now much more organised, with planned and regular visits taking place, including visits from the Relief Wardens:

*'We know where we are and what we are doing'*

- 114 They felt that the service now being provided was a 'fairer service' as all sheltered housing tenants now received the same level of service. They also felt that the service would continue to improve:

*'We will be the best service'*

- 115 Wardens also felt that the new managers who have been appointed as part of the re-organisation have a much more positive attitude and this has resulted in a much improved working relationship:

*'He is brilliant'*

*'They know what they are doing'*

*'They keep us informed'*

- 116 When we asked the Community Wardens what further improvements could be made to the service, they told us that more work needs to be done on facilitating social activities in schemes. They also said that better IT facilities would help them to be more efficient, for example by using laptop or handheld computers to record their daily visits and health and safety checks.
- 117 During our inspection we also held a focus group with sheltered scheme residents and conducted a telephone survey with 30 residents. The results of these show that all residents we spoke to:
- ◆ were happy with the service they currently receive;
  - ◆ receive 5 visits every 10 days;
  - ◆ receive visits from a Relief Warden when their Warden is unavailable;
  - ◆ have the call alarm equipment in their homes tested on a regular basis; and
  - ◆ no residents thought that the service had deteriorated since the re-organisation had taken place.
- 118 When we asked residents to rate how good the service is on a scale of 1 to 5<sup>11</sup>, all residents scored the service as being either 4 or 5.

*'For the first time in 17 years I feel like someone cares'*

*'The warden provides ... peace of mind and security'*

*'We couldn't cope without her'*

*'The cleanliness is better'*

- 119 It was clear to us from speaking to Community Wardens, scheme residents and from visits we undertook during this inspection that this service has been substantially improved during the last nine months. Staff are now motivated and committed to providing the best service possible. Wardens provide a caring and supportive service to their residents.

<sup>11</sup> 5 being a good service and 1 being a poor service

120 Wardens now receive support and encouragement from their managers. The sheltered housing service is planning to become accredited to the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies and to comply with its Code of Practice for Sheltered Housing. In order to achieve this standard all Community Wardens will undergo a structured training programme, which will ensure that current standards of service will be both maintained and hopefully improved upon.

#### Call Alarm Service and Central Control

121 The Central Control Unit (CCU) is based at Granville Court, a sheltered housing scheme in Swadlincote. The unit is open 24 hours a day all year round and provides a call alarm monitoring service for:

- ◆ all tenants in sheltered housing schemes;
- ◆ 35 tenants in Almshouses and Housing Association properties; and
- ◆ 315 customers who have individual 'Lifeline' alarms in their homes.

122 It also deals with all emergency, 'out of hours' calls, received by the Council, of which there are an average of 117 calls per month.

123 During our last inspection we found this service had inadequate policies and procedures. In addition, insufficient staffing levels were resulting in Wardens being taken off their normal duties to cover in the CCU, and some staff being allowed to 'cherry pick' which shifts they wanted to work, to the detriment of other team members. Not surprisingly, this was resulting in poor morale and high sickness levels.

124 Our current inspection found a vastly improved service. There is now a clear staff structure with 6 Central Control Officers and 1 Relief Officer who report to a Team Leader. Shift patterns have been agreed between team members and sickness levels have been reduced with the result that Wardens are now longer called upon to cover at the CCU.

125 Policies and procedures are currently being developed and about 25 per cent have been completed so far, with a target completion date of March 2004, however staff we spoke to, who have been involved in developing these procedures said they aim to have them all completed by June 2003.

126 CCU staff have worked hard to improve their customer care skills and all staff now give their name when answering calls. All calls are recorded and the Team Leader has been able to use this facility as a training aid to improve the quality of call answering and the information given to individual callers. The calls we observed were handled in a sensitive and professional manner.

127 In addition to responding to calls made by residents who have activated the alarm in their home, staff in the CCU also contact sheltered housing tenants who are classed as vulnerable and require more than the standard five visits every ten days. Calls are also made to tenants who may have been out when the Community Warden called. These calls ensure that daily contact is maintained with all vulnerable tenants.

- 128 Staff in the CCU are also responsible for installing 'Lifeline' alarms which can be purchased or rented by anyone living in South Derbyshire who would benefit from having such a alarm in their home. Its costs £115 to purchase an alarm or they can be rented at a cost of £4.70 per week, which also includes the monitoring charge of £1.50 per week. The weekly monitoring charge is also paid by residents who have purchased their alarm and by tenants of Housing Associations and Almshouses.
- 129 Unfortunately, there is currently no information or publicity produced by the Council about 'Lifeline' alarms. However, following our inspection we were shown details of advertising space that has been purchased in order to publicise this service.
- 130 In addition to answering emergency calls made by 'Lifeline' customers the CCU arranges for a Community Warden to visit each customer once every six months to check that the equipment is working properly and to make sure that the personal contact details are up to date. The Council is currently investigating the feasibility of introducing an extra facility whereby the CCU would check if the alarm was working on a quarterly basis by making a pre-arranged 'call' to the lifeline alarm.
- 131 During our inspection we undertook a telephone survey of 30 sheltered housing tenants asking a number of questions about the services they received. All tenants who had used the call alarm service said their call was responded to either quickly or very quickly and all said the staff who dealt with their call had been helpful or very helpful.
- 132 When we asked residents to rate how good the service is on a scale of 1 to 5<sup>12</sup>, all residents scored the service as being either 4 or 5.
- 133 However, we also spoke to several tenants during our inspection who expressed their concerns about the length of time that it took for their alarm calls to be answered. Following an audit of all the call alarm equipment the Council is aware that some of the equipment is in need of replacement and a programme is underway to replace the older style equipment. The Council is confident that as the equipment is replaced tenants who have experienced delays in their calls being transferred from their scheme to CCU will notice an improved service.
- 134 Community Wardens now undertake regular testing of the call alarm equipment in each tenants home and are encouraged to report back on any delays they experience whilst testing the equipment. In addition, staff at the CCU undertake a daily equipment check to ensure that the equipment at each scheme is working correctly.
- 135 During our inspection it became evident that the CCU has improved the service it provides to sheltered housing tenants and lifeline customers. However, there is more work to done on improving the information available for service users.

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<sup>12</sup> 5 being a good service and 1 being a poor service