

# Housing Management Services

**Russet Homes Limited**

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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](http://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.

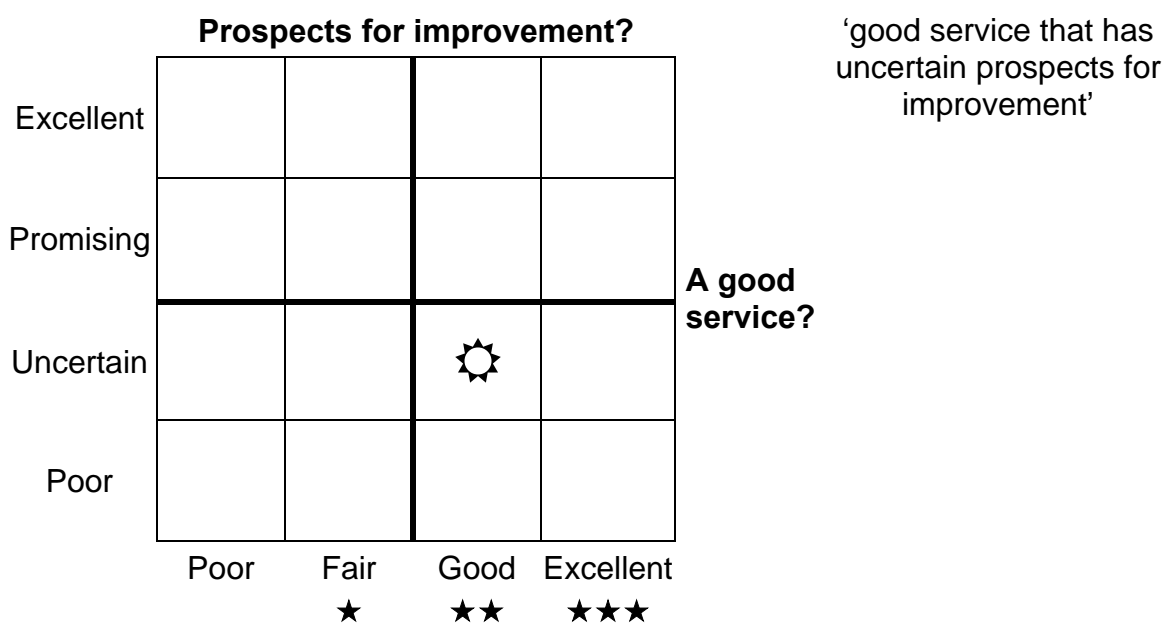
## Summary

- 1 Russet Homes provides a 'good' housing management service to tenants which has 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are high levels of customer satisfaction with the service and service delivery is generally effective. Information and access to services is customer-focused and there is a high level of support for older, vulnerable tenants. There has been good progress on meeting the decent homes standard and arrangements for the delivery of repairs, planned maintenance, gas servicing and void management work well. Performance on income collection is strong and tenants in arrears have reasonable access to advice.
- 3 Improvements in service delivery have been made but some issues remain. For example, not all service standards are routinely monitored and reported and tenants have not been systematically involved in shaping Russet's long-term approach to maintenance and asset management. Arrangements for delivering major disabled adaptations place insufficient emphasis on meeting the needs of high priority cases in reasonable timescales. More work is needed to effectively engage with the association's Gypsy and Traveller community.
- 4 Russet is developing a more effective approach to benchmarking and has taken action to reduce overall operating costs and maximise its income. However, a strategic approach to promoting value for money (VFM) is not yet firmly embedded and some aspects of the repair service - such as high levels of emergency and urgent repairs - reduce its overall cost effectiveness and efficiency. There is not yet an agreed action plan to support delivery of the association's value for money strategy.
- 5 Overall, weaknesses in the strategic and service planning framework create doubts about whether Russet's future plans focus on the right priorities and will promote a step change in performance. Equally, while changes to the management cultures are promoting a more open culture, ownership of key priorities for improvement among the wider staff group is under-developed. The absence of a fully effective performance management system for staff creates risks that under-performance will not be tackled effectively. More work is needed to develop a sustained focus on value for money and realise benefits that can be derived from modern procurement methods.
- 6 Nevertheless, Russet has to date demonstrated a positive track record of achievement and has learnt from its tenants, staff and best practice organisations. Staff morale is high and effective partnership arrangements are in place. Financial management and control of wider risks facing the organisation is effective and internal capacity has been strengthened through the creation of new posts and recent organisational re-structuring.

## Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Russet Homes Limited as providing a ‘good’ two-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 chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 We judged the service to be good, with a number of strengths in service delivery.
- Services provided by Russet Homes are generally customer-focused. There is good access to services and information for residents is informative and easy to read. Residents express high levels of satisfaction with the service.
  - There is a good level of support to older and more vulnerable residents, with a floating support service providing targeted support where necessary.
  - Significant investment in properties has ensured that tenant's homes are well-maintained. Russet will meet the decent homes standard by 2010 and is exceeding its basic requirements.

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

## 8 Housing Management Services | Scoring the service

- Tenants' safety is enhanced by effective policies and procedures for gas safety and asbestos management.
- Russet lets its empty homes quickly and to a good standard - its re-let times are in the best 25 per cent of associations nationally.
- Grounds maintenance on estates and repairs to tenants' homes are carried out to a high standard.
- Income management is systematic and robust, with high collection rates and support for vulnerable tenants.
- Complaints about anti-social behaviour and harassment are well-managed, with effective multi-agency working arrangements in place.
- Russet has taken some action to reduce its operating costs, leading to saving of more than £1 million over the past three years.

### 9 However, there are some areas which require further improvement.

- Complaints handling is not fully effective, with some delays in resolving residents' concerns within agreed timescales.
- Customer service standards and progress on ASB cases are not consistently monitored, making it hard to assess performance against some of the published targets.
- There has been limited success in effectively engaging the association's Gypsy and Traveller community.
- Tenants have not been systematically involved in shaping Russet's long-term approach to maintenance and asset management.
- There are high levels of emergency and urgent repairs and pre and post-inspections, reducing the overall efficiency of the repairs service.
- There are no arrangements for fast tracking major disabled adaptations for high priority cases.
- The overall approach to value for money is weakened by a lack of robust action plans to improve efficiency and cost effectiveness and a detailed understanding of reasons for higher costs in some service areas.

### 10 We have judged that Russet Homes has uncertain prospects for delivering improvements to its residents. We found some evidence to support the view that Russet would deliver further improvements.

- There is a positive track record of achievement, demonstrated by implementation of key recommendations from previous inspections and external assessments, as well as some improvements in key PIs.
- Recent changes to the management structure are helping to promote a more open culture and wider staff involvement in decision-making, though this is not yet fully embedded.
- Russet has demonstrated a willingness to learn from its tenants and staff, including learning from complaints.

- Financial management of the organisation is strong, with effective procedures to control budgets and manage wider risks facing the organisation.
  - Increased investment in IT should help to support improvements in service delivery in some areas.
  - Significant investment in staff training and development is helping to maximise internal capacity. Staff morale within the organisation is high.
  - There is evidence of effective partnership working to strengthen capacity.
- 11 However, there are also some barriers to improvement which make success difficult to determine.
- Russet's strategic framework document 2006/08 does not reflect an effective approach to service planning. It is not based on a robust analysis of the issues the association faces, current performance or consultation with key stakeholders.
  - There is not yet a shared understanding or ownership of key priorities for improvement among the wider staff group.
  - The service improvement plan (SIP) is not sufficiently focused on outcomes and targets within the plan are not well-prioritised or consistently SMART<sup>2</sup>.
  - The approach to service reviews to date is weak, with a lack of emphasis on challenge, compare and compete.
  - Performance management arrangements for staff are not robust, with inconsistent recording of one-to-ones to show performance on individual work programmes and to monitor under-performance.
  - There has been little investment in developing the capacity of involved tenants and increasing their ability to influence decision-making.
  - Plans to develop a more robust approach to value for money and drive forward more modern approaches to procurement are at an early stage, making future success difficult to determine.
  - The lack of a well-embedded formal development and appraisal system for Board members poses some risks, both in terms of effectively developing and supporting new recruits and enhancing the skills of existing members.

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<sup>2</sup> Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound.

## 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 costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the association shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members, and addresses 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.

### *Recommendations*

#### *R1 Improve standards of customer care delivery by:*

- *reviewing arrangements for complaints handling to ensure that all are resolved within published timescales;*
- *reviewing arrangements for communal cleaning in blocks of flats to ensure consistent standards;*
- *reviewing the policy for the provision of aids and adaptations to ensure that high priority cases are dealt with in reasonable timescales;*
- *developing ways to maximise feedback from, and involvement of, tenants from the Gypsy and Traveller community; and*
- *routinely involving tenants in all estate inspections to ensure that local concerns are addressed effectively.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- more timely resolution of complaints and high priority requests for major disabled adaptations;
- increased ability to understand the needs of tenants from the Gypsy and Traveller community and to respond to their concerns; and
- higher standards of communal cleaning in flats and increased ability to identify and respond to residents' concerns about estate management.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

**Recommendations**

*R2 Strengthen the capacity and expertise of both involved staff and Board members by:*

- *reviewing the training needs of Board members, developing individual training plans and introducing formal appraisals; and*
- *developing a programme of initiatives, including training, to strengthen the capacity of involved tenants and increase their involvement in strategic decision-making.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Board members are better placed to drive performance and improvement; and
- increased opportunities for involved tenants to shape and influence the overall direction of the organisation.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2007.

**Recommendations**

*R3 Improve the approach to asset management and repairs by:*

- *ensuring that tenants are routinely involved in shaping priorities for further investment in the stock;*
- *arranging appointments for all repairs when tenants first make a request for work;*
- *developing a clear strategy to reduce the level of emergency and urgent repairs;*
- *review arrangements for pre and post-inspections and ensure that new arrangements reflect good practice; and*
- *consider options to improve the SAP rating of the association's non-traditionally constructed homes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved repairs service to tenants;
- improvements in value for money;
- better long term-maintenance of the stock; and
- greater opportunity to tailor work programmes to meet tenants' priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with high costs. This should be implemented by November 2007.

**Recommendations**

*R4 Strengthen the approach to service and improvement planning by:*

- *ensuring that all service improvement plans and progress reports to Members are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound);*
- *increasing staff and resident involvement in service planning;*
- *improve monitoring of outcomes in key service areas, including ASB, harassment, and complaints handling;*
- *developing a robust action plan to support the implementation of the value for money strategy;*
- *ensuring that outcomes of one-to-one meetings with staff are recorded to show progress against individual work programmes and to highlight any under-performance; and*
- *adopting a clear plan to consider procurement options for the long-term delivery of repairs and maintenance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased staff and resident understanding of service improvement priorities and improved ownership of key plans;
- more informed managerial approaches to areas of weak performance;
- increased ability to track progress on key plans and work programmes and address areas of staff under-performance;
- improved ability to develop response to strategic and operational concerns; and
- improvements in value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by November 2007.

**Recommendations**

*R5 Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in this report.*

*R6 Submit this report to the Board and main resident's forum.*

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

Dates of inspection: 6 to 10 November 2006.

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 14 Russet Homes (Russet) operates mainly in the Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council area in West Kent. The area is mostly rural but with concentrations of population in the Tonbridge and Medway Gap areas. The area is generally affluent, with many people commuting to London to work and earning high incomes. As a result, house prices are high, averaging £255,838 in October 2006 compared to a south east average of £209,151.<sup>4</sup> The area is ranked 304<sup>th</sup> out of 354 English councils on the Government's index of deprivation 2004 (where 1 is the most deprived). However, one ward - East Malling - was highlighted as an area of concern in Kent County Council's indices of child poverty. There is a high level of demand for social housing in the area.

### The association

- 15 Tonbridge and Malling Housing Association (TMHA) was formed in 1991 to take the large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) of 6,368 homes from Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (TMBC). It is a non-charitable Industrial and Provident Society and a Registered Social Landlord (RSL). In 2005 TMHA changed its name to Russet Homes. Russet's head office is in Borough Green, with regional offices at Larkfield and Tonbridge in Kent.
- 16 The association currently has 6,614 homes, consisting of 6,070 general needs properties, 313 sheltered homes, 9 supported homes and 222 shared ownership and leasehold homes. Almost all of its homes (98 per cent) are in the TMBC area. Despite a high level of right to buy sales, stock levels have grown since transfer due to a significant development programme. In 2006, the association completed its 1,000th new home, and 248 new homes will be built over the next four years.
- 17 The association is run by a Board which currently includes 15 members, including 5 tenants, 3 local authority members, 5 independent members and 2 executive members. Following a recent governance review in partnership with the Housing Corporation (HC), the number of Board members will reduce to 12 by 2007/08. Other changes will include the cessation of local authority membership to the Board and new length of service rules. There three standing committees that support the work of the Board are: Operations; Resources; Audit and Remuneration, as well as three sub-committees.

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<sup>4</sup> Land Registry, October 2006

- 18 Russet has a senior management team (SMT) consisting of an interim chief executive and ten directors. The interim chief executive has been in post since June 2006 and the senior management team has recently been re-organised into operational and resources directorates. The association currently employs approximately 105 staff. The annual turnover of the organisation was £29.078 million in 2005/06.
- 19 Russet has a profit making subsidiary, Invicta, which provides a 24-hour emergency telephone care service to Russet Homes' vulnerable tenants. Invicta also provides services to other organisations, tenants of other landlords and to private clients.
- 20 Russet has gained Investors in People status, which it has held for nine years, and a Chartermark for customer service excellence which it has held for ten years. Invicta has had accreditation from the Telecare Services Association since August 2001.
- 21 The most recent tenant profile information from the residents' survey showed that:
- 46 per cent of tenants are aged 60+;
  - 45 per cent of tenants rely on state pension, 24 per cent on company pension;
  - 29 per cent of tenants are in full-time or part-time employment;
  - 50 per cent of tenants rely wholly on state benefits;
  - 57 per cent of tenants rely on full or part housing benefit (HB);
  - 48 per cent of tenants have a long-term illness or disability;
  - 7 per cent of households have a member that uses a wheelchair;
  - 93 per cent of tenants are white British; and
  - 6 per cent of tenants are from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, of which 5 per cent are White Irish and 1 per cent is White Other.
- 22 Russet considered a merger with a neighbouring RSL in 2005 but the Board did not proceed with this because they concluded that it would not be in the best interests of the tenants. The Board was evenly split on the vote on the merger proposal and, in the absence of majority support for the merger, decided to maintain the status quo. A strategic review is currently underway to determine whether the association should enter into a partnership with another RSL or housing group or remain independent. The review is expected to conclude in February 2007.

## How good is the service?

- 23 The assessment of the service provided by Russet Homes is based on the following Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) issued by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate:
- access and customer care;
  - diversity;
  - stock investment and asset management;
  - housing income management;
  - tenancy and estate management; and
  - value for money.

## What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 Russet Homes' service philosophy is:
- 'Our properties but the tenants' homes.'*
- 25 The association's objectives are:
- to provide, maintain and improve homes to meet the needs of our present and future tenants;
  - to provide high quality local services by working closely with all customers and partners;
  - to keep rents and other charges as low as possible and ensure value for money by being efficient and cost effective;
  - to operate with a commitment to equality and diversity principles in all activities;
  - to develop and support staff and agents to achieve our goals; and
  - to strive to be the best amongst our RSL peer group.

- 26** Since 1991, Russet has also published seven or eight 'guarantees to tenants', which are renewed every two years which have always been met. For 2005/07, its guarantees are:
- to keep rent increases to inflation plus 0.5 per cent;
  - to build at least another 100 new homes before April 2007;
  - to offer 300 tenants the choice of improvements to their homes, such as new kitchens, bathrooms or central heating;
  - to spend approximately £3 million on major repairs, such as new roofs, re-wiring and re-pointing, to maintain the structural integrity of homes;
  - to spend £300,000 to make homes safer through the installation of mains powered or monitored smoke alarms;
  - to spend approximately £800,000 on improvements to the environment around peoples homes;
  - to take account of tenants' views; and
  - to provide support for elderly and vulnerable tenants through the Invicta Telecare service.

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

### Access and customer care

- 27** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Access to services is good, with high quality public offices and an effective telephone service. Service standards help residents to know what kind of service to expect and tenants consider staff helpful and easy to get hold of. There has been a focus on providing customer care training for staff and tenant satisfaction with the overall services is well above the national average. However, monitoring arrangements for services standards are not yet fully effective and some complaints are not resolved within published timescales.
- 28** Russet's public offices offer a good service. The two regional offices are close to concentrations of Russet's homes and are easily accessible although the head office is not well-served by public transport. All reception areas are welcoming and well-maintained, with a good range of information leaflets, and private interview rooms. The two regional offices also have interactive feedback boards where tenants can comment on the service they receive.

- 29 Russet deals effectively with both correspondence and telephone contacts. Repairs calls are taken at the head office and routed through to the appropriate regional office. The service is provided on a low rate call basis. Telephone calls are generally handled effectively with performance indicators in September 2006 showing that 91 per cent of calls were answered within ten seconds against a challenging target of 99 per cent - a slight deterioration on performance in July 2006 (94 per cent). Correspondence is generally answered effectively with Russet often achieving its target of responding to 98 per cent of letters within seven days. Overall, residents get a prompt response to their enquiries.
- 30 Residents regard staff as positive, friendly, helpful and easy to get hold of. All the association's staff and some of its contractors have received customer service training. In the 2005 STATUS survey, 84 per cent of tenants said that staff were helpful, against the NHF average of 80 per cent; and the Housing Corporation performance indicators for 2005/06 show that tenant satisfaction overall was 86 per cent compared with a national average of 79 per cent. Feedback from tenants during our inspection was equally positive, with most expressing high levels of satisfaction with the service.
- 31 New service standards were published in 2005, helping residents to know what standards they can expect. The standards include a number of measurable targets which allow performance to be assessed. These include:
- answering the telephone within ten seconds;
  - replying to emails and correspondence within seven working days;
  - answering complaints within ten working days; and
  - measurable service standards for dealing with repairs/maintenance issues and grounds maintenance.
- 32 However, not all service standards are monitored and reported. For example, performance reports do not show whether estate inspections are taking place within agreed timescales or if responses to ASB complaints and racial harassment complaints are responded to within target times. This means that Russet cannot always consistently ensure that its services match its published standards or compare its performance with similar organisations.
- 33 Tenant feedback is used to shape services but there is scope for improvement. There are examples of positive changes to services to meet tenant concerns: for instance, requests for mutual exchanges are now posted on the website and toilet seats are now replaced when properties became void following tenant feedback. However, some survey forms used to solicit tenants' views do not help Russet to check performance against its own standards, with the complaints form not asking whether problems were resolved within stated timescales. Russet agreed to change its forms to reflect this during our inspection. Additionally, while consultation exercises allow tenants to shape operational issues, they are not directly involved in developing strategic policies and plans, such as the overall approach to asset management or service improvement plan. As a result, Russet is yet to maximise learning from residents' experiences of service delivery.

- 34** Complaints management is not fully effective. A three-stage complaints procedure is in place and publicised to residents, with regular reviews ensuring that learning from complaints is maximised. Compensation is paid in the event of service failure and all residents are sent a satisfaction survey following their complaint. However, while there are clear timescales for responding to complaints at stages 1 and 2, there is no timescale for resolving stage 3 complaints. Informal complaints are not recorded and in a few instances we found that progress on formal complaints was not accurately recorded. Some slippage in handling complaints within agreed timescales is also evident, with performance data at September 2006 showing that 38 per cent of cases (5 out of 13) were not resolved within the target time (10 days). However, each of the five complainants was contacted within the ten-day timescale and none of the complaints proceeded to stage 2. Published timescales for resolving stage 3 complaints and resolution of all complaints within agreed timescales would make this service area more customer-focused.
- 35** Written information about services is comprehensive, clear and in plain English. The association's handbook is colourful and easy to read, with a range of useful information. Quarterly newsletters, which are developed with tenant input, offer regular updates on issues such as ASB, fire safety and resident involvement, while 33 quarterly local newsletters offer specific information for different localities. There is also a good range of high quality information leaflets covering issues such as the equality and diversity policy, ASB, and money advice. Although we identified some examples of out-of-date information in the handbook, the wide range of information provided ensures that residents are kept well-informed. The tenant STATUS survey in March 2005 found that 90 per cent of tenants felt Russet kept them well-informed.
- 36** Russet's website provides useful information about services, but there is some scope for improvement. Information on the website is in plain English and is easy to navigate. It includes facilities for people with visual impairments and non-English speakers, although a text only facility was not working, between 11 and 14 July 2006 when we undertook our first website check. The text only facility was also not working on the 26 October 2006, although it was operative on 6 November following our initial briefing. The website gives information about the governance of the association, including agendas for Board meetings, although minutes have to be requested from staff.
- 37** Within the website there is a 'tenants' website' that can be entered using a unique password. This facility allows tenants to check their rent history, pay rent and report repairs. Approximately 110 tenants are using this facility, helping them to get easy access to services.

## Diversity

- 38** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The association is effectively tailoring services to meet the needs of its customers, with a strong focus on meeting the needs of elderly and vulnerable residents and promoting access to services. The association complies with the Commission for Race Equality (CRE) code for rented housing and handles racial harassment and domestic violence cases effectively. However, while the association is starting to build links with some traditionally hard-to-reach groups, it has yet to engage its small Gypsy and Traveller and BME communities effectively. There is not yet a fully comprehensive profile of tenants, limiting Russet's ability to identify some tenants' individual support needs.
- 39** Russet Homes has a clear corporate commitment to diversity. There is a comprehensive diversity policy covering board membership, employment and service provision. The equality and diversity action plan is incorporated into the service improvement plan and is monitored by SMT on a regular basis, with equality and diversity champions at both Board and officer level. All members of the Board have received equality and diversity training, with its membership reflecting the profile of the wider community. The association meets the monitoring requirements of the HC regulatory framework, helping to ensure that services are provided fairly.
- 40** The association provides effective support for its elderly and vulnerable tenants through its Housing Support Officers (HSOs). The HSOs provide a floating support service, including advice on welfare benefits and income maximisation and support for people with physical and sensory disabilities. A recent external review of the service by Kent County Council's Supporting People team rated the services provided by the HSOs as excellent and continually improving. The service helps older and more vulnerable tenants to stay independent and maintain their tenancies.
- 41** Russet Homes is profiling its services to meet tenant needs, but more work needs to be done. A tenant survey in 2004 had a 67 per cent return rate and that information was entered onto the IT system. However, that survey concentrated on race and did not address disability effectively. A survey in 2006, with a return rate of 57 per cent, collected a wider range of information, including data on disability. While this information is being used to improve services, only half of the data had been entered onto the IT system at the time of our inspection. Gaps in data mean that staff will not be aware of, or be well-placed to respond to, all residents' support needs.

- 42 Russet has taken steps to make services accessible to all residents. For example, Russet subscribes to language line, provides hearing loops in its reception areas, offers a type talk facility and publishes information in large print, audio and Braille. All letters to residents offer translations in over 20 different languages and basic training in signing for the deaf has been provided for 13 staff. The association's offices have also been externally assessed as complying with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and staff have been commended for the way they deal with disabled people, though the counter at the Tonbridge office remains too high for wheelchair users.
- 43 There are clear policies and procedures for dealing with racial harassment and domestic violence and cases are handled effectively. In both types of cases a multidisciplinary approach is adopted, with Russet working with key partners, such as the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Council's domestic violence unit, to support victims. Links with the police and Invicta mean that people experiencing harassment can be swiftly provided with alarms and extra locks, helping to maximise their safety.
- 44 Work to engage Gypsies and Travellers, the association's main BME group, is at an early stage. For example, the association has identified 23 Gypsy and Traveller households, but meetings for this group to date have been poorly attended and there have been few outcomes from them. No initiatives are being pursued with local government or other agencies to develop links with this group. While four Gypsies and Travellers have joined the consultative panel, there is a need for further development in this area.

## Service area covered

### Stock investment and asset management including repairs

- 45 This is an area of strength for Russet. There has been significant investment in the stock since the transfer took place, ensuring that homes are well-maintained. Planned maintenance works and repairs are generally of good quality and the speed of repair work is improving. Asbestos management, gas servicing and works to empty homes are all handled effectively. Request for minor aids and adaptations are managed well, though the provision of some major adaptations is subject to delays. The poor thermal efficiency of some non-traditional homes is increasing heating costs for some tenants and having a negative impact on the SAP rating.

## Asset management and planned and cyclical maintenance

- 46 Russet Homes has an effective approach to the maintenance of its homes. Significant investment since the transfer in 1991 means that 99.5 per cent of its homes currently meet the decent homes standard (DHS). Extensive programmes have been carried out to install gas central heating systems and double glazed PVCu doors and windows and to update kitchens and bathrooms. Programmes to install mains powered smoke detectors, new roofs and low maintenance soffits and fascias are on going. As a result of this sustained investment, the association's properties are in a good condition.
- 47 Stock condition information is generally comprehensive, but there is scope to improve its collection and management. A stock survey commissioned in 2005 provides an accurate assessment of compliance with the DHS and the projected costs of future planned maintenance works. However, the information is not broken down to individual properties, or types of properties, and so cannot be easily used to plan programmes of work, and is held in a format which is not compatible with the main IT system. Programmes of planned maintenance are based on different data obtained from other surveys and information, leading to some duplication of effort. The association is not realising the full benefits from its considerable investment in five yearly stock condition surveys.
- 48 The association has not fully developed its strategic approach to asset management. It has a sustainability model and has undertaken sustainability assessments for some sheltered schemes, leading to the development of an extra care scheme. However, it has not undertaken a full sustainability assessment of all its stock because low demand is not a significant issue. Yet without an overall analysis of the performance of its stock, Russet will not know if there are other demand and sustainability issues it needs to address. This could result in inappropriate investment in some parts of the stock.
- 49 Tenant involvement in the development of long-term plans for stock investment is underdeveloped. To address this, the association has recently created the role of tenant portfolio holder with a remit that covers asset management and repairs. However, there has been no attempt to establish a group of tenants or other mechanisms for tenants to work with the association to develop its maintenance plans and services. As a result of this, Russet Homes could be missing opportunities learn from its tenants' experiences and to more closely align its programmes of work to reflect tenants' priorities.
- 50 Investment in properties is to a standard that exceeds DHS, but decisions about the nature of additional works has not recently been discussed with tenants. Kitchen works are carried out to a higher specification than the DHS and there is a programme to install mains powered smoke detectors. However, while this will enhance the quality of tenants' homes, there is no evidence that tenants have been comprehensively involved in setting enhanced standards since the transfer took place. Consequently, it is hard to know whether the additional works are the key priorities for tenants.

- 51** A significant proportion of the housing stock, 619 properties of non-traditional construction, does not provide thermally efficient homes for tenants. While the association has provided loft insulation and gas fired central heating, the homes still have poor thermal efficiency which is relatively expensive to rectify. As yet no programme has been agreed to improve the thermal standards of these properties although energy efficiency surveys are planned. This means that approximately 10 per cent of the association's tenants are living in homes that are more expensive to heat. It also contributes to the association's below average SAP rating (65).
- 52** In other homes, Russet provides efficient heating systems for its tenants and is pro-actively replacing systems that are expensive to run. For example, in May 2006, Russet surveyed all tenants with electric heating systems with a view to providing them with gas fired systems. It has also set aside £400,000 in 2007/08 and £1 million in 2008/09 to install modern condensing boilers, helping to avoid the expense and inconvenience of sourcing parts for older appliances. There is also a fast track heating system replacement process in the event of a breakdown. This approach helps to reduce fuel costs for many of Russet's tenants.
- 53** Planned and cyclical works are undertaken to a high standard and there are good working relationships between Russet Homes and its contractors, with regular on-site meetings. Tenants are given reasonable notice and information about the works to be undertaken. The quality of works examined during our inspection was good and tenants are generally satisfied with both the standard of work that has been carried out and the conduct of contractors. Russet has learnt from the inspection process and will introduce an annual maintenance programme for solid fuel heating systems
- 54** Russet provides significant choice to tenants when planned works are carried out. In the case of kitchens this includes designing the layout with a surveyor, removing redundant larders to create more space and a range of choices of work tops, flooring, cupboards and tiles. Tenants are sent satisfaction surveys when works are completed, with central heating installation programmes and kitchen refurbishment programmes recording high satisfaction ratings of 97 and 98.5 per cent respectively.
- 55** Russet Homes is improving the appearance and layout of its estates. As part of its asset management strategy Russet Homes has invested £1.2 million in estate refurbishments over the last three years. Examples of works undertaken include alley gating, door entry systems and robust security fencing. There is evidence of good tenant consultation when schemes are planned. For example at the Winterfield estate there were public meetings, surveys of all tenants and consultation with the CDRP, helped to ensure that proposals reflected residents' priorities.

- 56 Russet Homes complies with the regulations for the control of asbestos. It has a comprehensive asbestos register and contractors are informed of its presence in properties by notes on works orders. Consultants have undertaken type two surveys based on a risk analysis of properties and asbestos management plans are being updated. General safety advice has been provided to tenants and more detailed information will be shared with them via the association's website. This helps to ensure the safety of both tenants and contractors.

### **Responsive repairs**

- 57 Tenants find it easy to report repairs. During office hours tenants can report repairs on the head office number, which is a low rate call line. Repair requests can also be made at regional offices, by email, on the association's website and by Invicta Housing Support officers. Clear and concise information on repairs and compensation arrangements are provided in the tenants' handbook and a leaflet. There are clear, published, target timescales for responsive repairs and tenants are sent a copy of the works order which includes the target date for completion of the work, helping them to know when work should be completed.
- 58 The association uses eleven contractors to provide its responsive repairs service. Jobs are allocated to contractors on a cascade system depending on the capacity they have and the price they have quoted on the schedule of rates (SOR). This provides a fair spread of work and encourages better performance and cost control. Contracts have been competitively tendered and will be extended until a partnering contract is put in place following a current maintenance review.
- 59 The association does not offer tenants repair appointments at the first point of contact. In practice all tenants are offered an appointment when they telephone, but for works where the target is seven days or more the contractor has to telephone the tenant back to arrange the precise date and time. This approach does not comply with best practice and means that tenants cannot plan ahead.
- 60 The performance on meeting response repair targets is generally satisfactory. In 2005/06, Russet completed 98 per cent of emergency jobs, 94 per cent of urgent jobs and 92 per cent of routine jobs within target times. Compared to other similar organisations, Russet's performance on emergency and urgent repairs was above average (second quartile), though the completion times for routine jobs was below average (third quartile). For the quarter ending September 2006, 97 per cent of emergencies, 97 per cent of urgent jobs and 99 per cent of routine works were completed within timescale. The association's methodology for calculating achievement against target times has been externally validated, ensuring that performance is accurately recorded.
- 61 Russet Homes uses information from the satisfaction surveys to improve the repairs service. Where tenants are not happy with the service, reports are followed up with the individual contractor and outcomes are used to improve services in the future. Tenants are sent a satisfaction survey for each repair, with a £50 prize draw contributing to a high return rate (40 per cent).

- 62 Tenant satisfaction with repairs work is high. For the quarter ending September 2006, Russet Homes achieved a 96 per cent satisfaction rating for repairs work based on a satisfaction slip return rate of 40 per cent. Tenants reported that contractors treated their homes with respect, tidied up after themselves and completed jobs to a high standard. A sample of repair works we inspected also found that repairs were completed to a good standard. Tenants we contacted said that the majority of works are completed right first time, although the association does not have a robust method of measuring its performance.

### **Gas servicing**

- 63 Performance on gas safety is reasonably strong, with 98.5 per cent of properties having an up-to-date gas safety certificate at the time of our inspection. There is also high tenant satisfaction with gas servicing (98 per cent).
- 64 There are clear and effective policies and procedures for gas servicing, based on an 11-month cycle. There are also robust quality assurance processes, with the contractor required to undertake a full inspection of 10 per cent of the jobs undertaken by its operatives and report back to Russet Homes. There is a further 4 per cent random inspection undertaken by an external gas auditing company. This helps to ensure high standards of gas servicing, reduce appliance failures and minimise risks to tenants.
- 65 The processes to gain access to tenants' homes are effective. Russet has achieved good access by promoting the importance of gas servicing through regular items in Russet News and the locality newsletters, as well as through close working with housing management staff, vulnerable tenants and their carers. Appointments are also offered for gas servicing and the system is flexible, with some appointments timed to avoid the school run or arranged for Saturday mornings. This approach has helped Russet to gain access without recourse to legal action.
- 66 Limiting valves are being installed to help gain access for gas servicing. The association has instructed its contractors to install limiting valves in all properties where it can and in all cases where access has been difficult. While it has not used the devices as yet, they are an option that can be used to encourage tenants to give access in the future.

### **Voids**

- 67 Russet's performance on voids is strong. It was among the best quartile performers in 2005/06 with an average general needs relet time of four weeks. New void handling arrangements have recently been introduced and the association has now reduced its void turnaround time to 3.6 weeks, which is quicker than most other RSLs.

- 68 Policies and procedures for handling voids are clear and well co-ordinated. A void co-ordinator within the allocations team maintains an overview of the void process and there is close working between housing management staff, void contractors and the allocations team to ensure the process runs smoothly. Housing management staff inspect properties before they become void to ensure that outgoing tenants leave them in acceptable condition. Where necessary tenants are asked to undertake works to bring them up to standard. These requirements are publicised and clearly set out, helping tenants to know what action they need to take when they vacate their home. This approach helps to speed up void handling and maximise rental income.
- 69 The association's approach to letting voids is customer focused. Allocations staff pre-allocate properties at the earliest opportunity and if possible will arrange a viewing before the outgoing tenant has left or while void works are underway. All viewings are accompanied and new tenants are given a welcome pack of useful information and materials to assist settling in. There are regular satisfaction surveys of new tenants, with results in September 2006 showing that 83 per cent rated the condition of their new home as good.
- 70 Works to void properties are undertaken to a consistently high standard. The association has developed a void standard with residents to ensure that relets are completed to satisfactory standard and all homes have a gas and electrical check prior to letting. The void standard is supplied to prospective tenants so they know what condition the property should be in. Reasonable decorations allowances, for example £100 for hall/stairs and landing, are calculated according to the condition of the property and given to incoming tenants in appropriate cases. All void properties we inspected were in a good condition. The high standard of re-let homes has contributed to a low refusal rate (7.5 per cent).

### **Aids and adaptations**

- 71 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Minor works are undertaken quickly and there are high levels of satisfaction with major adaptations. However, there is no fast track procedure for high priority cases. This means that some tenants with pressing needs wait for long periods and this is not a customer-focused approach.
- 72 There are detailed policies and procedures for dealing with both minor and major adaptations, but these are not yet fully embedded. A surveyor deals with all design work and on-site supervision, and an administrative officer processes minor adaptation requests. However, we found that not all operational staff were familiar with the new process for minor works which was introduced in October 2006 and that written procedures had not been updated to reflect current practices, risking some inconsistency in approach.
- 73 Minor adaptations under £500 are completed quickly. The average performance in 2005/06 was 6.9 weeks, but fell to 2.4 weeks in October 2006. For such works no Occupational Therapist (OT) assessment is required, although applications must be supported by a medical professional. Works are undertaken directly by the association through the 'stay active service'. This is an effective service that is easily accessible to residents.

- 74 There are some weaknesses in the approach to managing requests for major adaptations. Major adaptations are provided under a service level agreement (SLA) with Kent County Council (KCC) and TMBC which sets out targets for OT assessments and for the Council to progress grants. However, all adaptations require an OT assessment and at times it has taken up to six months for assessments to be completed. There is also no definition of what constitutes an urgent or priority case, a lack of liaison with hospital OTs and no fast track procedure for high priority cases. The average time to complete works has fallen to eight to nine months over the last year and these time periods do not include the time taken for the OT to visit or for the assessment of the DFG application. There are five cases that have been waiting for adaptations over one year. This could mean that some residents with high priority needs for major adaptations wait longer than the Communities and Local Government (CLG) department guideline timescale (16 weeks). Russet has recognised these weaknesses and is exploring possible solutions with TMBC and KCC, though there are not yet firm plans for improvement.
- 75 Once grants have been approved, the association is effective at liaising with tenants and managing the adaptations process on-site. Tenants are kept informed as to what is happening and 94 per cent report satisfaction with the process.

### **Income management**

- 76 This is an area of strength for Russet Homes. Income management policies and procedures demonstrate a customer focused approach, with good access to welfare benefits advice and a wide range of rent payment methods. The rent collection rate is high and the association is helping to sustain tenancies.
- 77 The association has a strong record in rent administration. Two rent audits in 2005 found that rent charging, adjustment and the control of rent income were effective. Rent restructuring will be completed in 2016, allowing tenants on low rents more time to adjust to higher rent levels, and the business plan has detailed calculations of rent income until 2041. In April 2005, the association moved all rents that had to be reduced to lower target levels without phasing. This was a positive step by the association, helping to benefit tenants on low incomes.
- 78 The association has good policies and procedures for income management, which reflect a customer focused approach. It has consulted its tenant forum on rent arrears procedures and about the use of ground 8 in possession proceedings. Russet provides clear information about its approach to rent arrears, access to independent welfare benefit and debt advice and its focus on tenancy sustainment. There is an emphasis on personal contact with the tenant and area housing officers (AHOs) can act flexibly in dealing with cases. New tenants have a settling in visit two weeks after the commencement of their tenancy, helping to ensure that rent and benefits issues are addressed effectively.

- 79 The standard letters used to chase rent arrears are of a good quality and are in clear English. These generally highlight the availability of free, independent debt and money advice and all have a translation offer in more than 20 BME languages on the reverse. Rent statements are sent to all tenants at the end of each quarter. They are easy to read and clearly show if tenants are in arrears or credit. Tenants that have registered with the tenants' website are also able to view their rent account on line. There is a wide range of rent collection methods including direct debit, paypoint, on the tenants' website and by debit card. Good information and varied payment options help residents to understand rent collection procedures, make it easy to pay rent and help to keep arrears down.
- 80 The association pursues rent arrears effectively. There is an emphasis on contact with the tenant and sustaining the tenancy. As a result, eviction rates are low with only three households evicted in 2005/06 and seven to date in 2006/07. All evictions have to be approved by the Arrears and Tenancy Compliance Panel (A&TCP), comprising three tenant members of the Board. The association is careful in its use of Section 8, with all cases requiring approval by both the chair and vice chair of the A&TCP. The work of rent collections staff is regularly monitored, ensuring that recovery procedures stay on track.
- 81 High rent collection rates are achieved. Rent collection rates were 101.5 per cent in 2004/05 and 100.5 per cent in 2005/06. For these two years the level of arrears was 1.2 per cent and 1.5 per cent as a percentage of the rent roll. These are above average levels of collection which help to maximise resources for the association.
- 82 In October 2006 Russet Homes introduced two specialist rent arrears recovery officers on a pilot basis. These staff will take over all cases where legal action is being pursued and will free up other staff involved in rent collection to deal more effectively with lower level arrears cases and other duties. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this initiative.
- 83 Russet Homes offers good quality, free, independent welfare benefits, debt and money advice to its tenants. The association's rent collection staff have been given basic training in welfare benefits advice, with in-depth advice provided through arrangements with the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Tonbridge Debt Advice Centre (TDAC). The association currently funds 50 per cent of the CAB debt adviser post as well as providing a laptop and mobile telephone. The arrangement is managed through a formal SLA and both the CAB and TDAC provide the association with quarterly performance indicators on the cases they have dealt with. The association holds regular meetings with each agency to discuss performance and working practices. These arrangements are ensuring that tenants get the level of support they need.
- 84 The relationship between the TMBC Housing Benefit (HB) team and Russet Homes is effective. Although there is no SLA in place, the two organisations confirm there is an effective exchange of information. However, more routine meetings and the introduction of an SLA could help to highlight areas for improvement and clarify the role and expectations of both parties.

- 85 The IT system used to manage the rent accounts and rent income is effective and staff have been trained in its use. The system includes information about HB entitlement so that personal debt can be separated from HB that is owed. The system can produce a variety of reports. Rent collection rates are good.
- 86 The association has 158 leaseholders and the management and collection of their service charges is effective with 98 per cent of charges due collected to date in 2006/07. The collection rate is good and there are formal written procedures for the collection of charges. Collection rates were included in the performance indicator matrix from September 2006.
- 87 There are clear and effective procedures for the collection and write off of former tenant arrears (FTAs). FTAs have reduced slowly from approximately £157,000 in March 2004 to £104,000 in March 2006. For September 2006, FTAs are within the 0.2 per cent target at 0.14 per cent of the rent due.

### **Tenancy and estate management**

- 88 This is an area of strength. There are clear policies and procedures for managing estates, with all generally maintained to a high standard. However, the communal areas of some flats are not as clean and tidy as they should be. The association is working effectively with other agencies to tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB), but monitoring arrangements need to be improved.
- 89 Russet Homes has clear policies and procedures for the management of its estates which are publicised to tenants. The grounds maintenance contracts are closely supervised and monthly meetings are held with the contractors to monitor progress. Tenants are not involved in the contract supervision meetings. However, a network of tenants has been established to provide a tenant perspective on the standard of work. Grounds maintenance and external cleaning of estates is carried out to a high and consistent standard, with little evidence of graffiti. The estates are generally pleasant places to live and there are high levels of tenant satisfaction with their estates.
- 90 The estate streets and parking areas are cleaned to a good standard. The association has a contract with the TMBC who supply the service through a national cleaning contractor. The effective cleaning of estate roads and car parks contributes to the overall pleasant condition of the estates.
- 91 There is scope to improve the management of estate inspections. Sheltered schemes are formally inspected once a month and since January 2006 estates are formally inspected once every quarter. Tenants and other stakeholders are invited to attend an estate inspection once a year, although there are plans to invite tenants to all quarterly inspections. However, no consideration has been given to increasing the frequency of inspections on particular estates which are more difficult to maintain and there are no performance indicators reported relating to the occurrence of estate inspections and condition of communal areas, making it difficult to know if standards are improving or deteriorating.

- 92 Standards of internal communal areas in blocks of flats vary. Tenants are expected to clean the internal communal areas in blocks of flats themselves, While this approach works in some locations, we found some communal areas that were not properly cleaned and had tenants' possessions in them. The association is considering the cleaning arrangements for communal areas as part of its current service improvement plan.
- 93 Russet Homes has effective ASB policies and procedures, with responses proportionate to the problems, most of which are noise or youth-related. The policies and procedures were developed with stakeholders, including tenants, and provide victim and witness support. They also focus on providing assistance to perpetrators through engagement with Invicta support staff. The association undertakes some community initiatives for young people, such as the sponsorship of football teams and a skateboard park, to help reduce ASB problems on estates.
- 94 The approach to ASB is customer focused. Helpful leaflets have been produced by the association which clearly explain service standards, advice on what constitutes ASB and how it can be addressed. Russet Homes has also recently introduced two specialist posts to deal with more complex cases. This is helping other housing staff to focus more effectively on low level nuisance cases and ensures greater levels of expertise in handling complex cases. This approach is providing a better service to tenants, with satisfaction rates for dealing with ASB for the year to September 2006 running at over 70 per cent.
- 95 The association has developed effective working relationships with the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), the TMBC ASB officer and other organisations. These contacts give Russet access to services such as the use of police CCTV cameras and additional household security devices for victims. In addition, the association provides significant funding to the Police Community Support Officers. The CDRP acknowledge that Russet Homes are proactive and effective, with good engagement from both operational and senior staff.
- 96 There is an information exchange protocol in place to enable effective action to be taken against perpetrators. For example the ASB specialists are accompanied by the TMBC ASB officer and the police when tenants sign Acceptable Behaviour Agreements (ABAs). The multi-agency approach and exchange of information leads to more successful outcomes for the association and its tenants.
- 97 The association has taken appropriate action to deal with ASB cases (see table below). It has an effective SLA with West Kent Mediation and monitors its work on a quarterly basis. Since the creation of the new specialist posts actions against ASB activity have increased. The association worked with the police to obtain one ASBO but the case was not successful. Similarly, a demotion of tenancy order was served but not followed through because the perpetrator stopped their anti-social behaviour.

**Table 1 ASB actions**

Action	2004	2005	2006
ABAs	2	2	13
NOPPs	-	2	4

*ABA = Acceptable Behaviour Agreement; NOPP = Notice of Possession Proceedings.*

- 98 Monitoring of ASB cases is under-developed. Although cases are recorded, the information collected does not clearly show if targets to interview victims and perpetrators are met, the date of actions taken or the ethnicity of those reporting or perpetrating ASB. This does not help Russet to know if it is meeting its own performance standards or quickly assess if new hotspots are emerging.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 99 There is a balance of weaknesses and strengths in this area. Data from the Housing Corporation (HC) and Housemark shows that Russet's costs compare favourably with their peers and some action has been taken to reduce operating costs. Overall, the association provides a number of good quality services at a relatively low cost. Effective approaches to income collection and void management also help to maximise the overall level resources available to Russet. However, Russet has only recently developed a strategic approach to securing VFM and this is not yet fully embedded. Arrangements for the delivery of repairs and maintenance do not consistently demonstrate VFM. Analysis of variations in service costs highlighted through benchmarking exercises is yet to lead to tangible savings.

### How do costs compare?

- 100 Russet's costs compare favourably with those of similar organisations. HC data for 2005/06 shows that Russet's weekly operating cost per general needs unit and its general needs operating cost as a percentage of turnover are both in the best quartile. Similarly, recent benchmarking with 99 LSVT RSLs via Housemark showed that headline costs in 2005/06 compared favourably with those of other RSLs (see Appendix One). Of the seven services benchmarked four are in the median quartile, and three are in the best quartile (with the best quartile indicating lower costs). Total core costs are in the upper quartile, demonstrating that overall the association provides a number of good quality services at a relatively low cost. In the 2005 tenants' survey 82 per cent felt that their rent was good value for money.

- 101 The association does not yet have a clear understanding of why its costs may vary from other members of the club. Managers are now actively reviewing the benchmarking information to compare costs with similar organisations to get a full understanding of their costs. There is evidence that this is helping staff to improve services, for example in void management where void repair costs have been reduced, but work is at an early stage. A more detailed understanding of cost variations could help Russet achieve better value for its tenants in some service areas.
- 102 Comparative work in recent years has demonstrated that Russet Direct, a subsidiary of the association that undertakes repairs to voids and other works, is providing a competitive service. Benchmarking exercises on planned maintenance as part of the South East Consortium, for example, also shows that procurement is contributing to better value for money in some areas, for example, via arrangements to purchase kitchens at lower prices.

### **How is value for money managed?**

- 103 The development of a strategic approach to VFM is at an early stage. Russet recently developed its first VFM strategy covering the period 2006/09. This shows an understanding of the key principles of VFM but does not make clear how further improvements will be achieved. For instance, work has not yet been undertaken to explore different methods of procurement for maintenance and responsive repairs or the financial and service benefits that could accrue from alternative arrangements. As there is no clear action plan to support implementation of the VFM strategy, it is not yet clear how these issues will be addressed or how the strategy will drive improvements.
- 104 Russet's approach to VFM is not yet firmly embedded within its management arrangements. Following the development of the VFM strategy, Russet Homes has created a VFM cabinet to oversee its delivery. However, this had only met twice at the time of our inspection and tangible outcomes from its work were not yet evident. Equally, wider staff training on VFM was not scheduled until January 2007. The VFM cabinet only includes Executive Board members and does not include any other Board members. The delivery of the VFM strategy is not yet routinely monitored at Board level. As a result, it is not yet clear if the overall approach to VFM will be delivered and monitored effectively.
- 105 The AES shows that the association delivered savings of £648,000 in 2005/06 and is expected to deliver savings of £1.19 million in 2006/07. The AES refers to the VFM strategy which addresses the balance between cost and quality which sets out the approach to delivering VFM improvements. It does not however, say how tenants will have a say in VFM decisions.

- 106** Some significant savings in operating costs to date have been achieved without a negative impact on the quality of services for residents and some resources have been redirected to improve service quality in key areas. For example:
- £1 million savings have been achieved through re-negotiating loans;
  - the introduction of new software in the Finance Department has reduced the staffing establishment by 1.3 posts;
  - approximately £6,500 has been saved through participation in the Kent Housing Associations Training Consortium;
  - approximately £13,000 savings have been secured from internal training and recruitment advertising discounts; and
  - the posts of ASB, rent and void specialists have been created from within the existing establishment through realignment of resources. This has provided better services in these areas, without increasing overall costs.
- 107** Strong performance on rent collection and void management means that Russet is maximising its income and increasing its ability to redirect resources to meet key priorities. For example, the association has achieved high collection rates for rent (100.5 per cent), repair recharges (39 per cent) and leaseholder service charges (98 per cent). Similarly, its quick turnaround of empty properties has minimised void losses.
- 108** Russet's approach to the procurement and delivery of repairs has a balance of strengths and weaknesses. In 2005/06, it spent 70 per cent of its revenue funded expenditure on planned maintenance, which is better than the Audit Commission good practice guidelines. However, the high level of urgent and emergency repairs, with 57 per cent of jobs falling within these categories compared to a good practice guideline of 30 per cent, reduces the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the repair service. The association also has high levels of pre and post-inspections (13 per cent and 38 per cent respectively) which inflate job costs. Moves towards partnering approaches could provide a platform to address these issues and control client-side costs more effectively, but this has not yet been fully explored.

## Summary

- 109** Overall, we judge that Russet Homes is providing a 'good' two-star service.
- 110** There are high levels of customer satisfaction with the service and service delivery is generally effective. Information and access to services is customer-focused and there is a high level of support for older, vulnerable tenants. There has been good progress on meeting the decent homes standard and arrangements for the delivery of repairs, planned maintenance, gas servicing and void management work well. Performance on income collection is strong and tenants in arrears have reasonable access to advice.

### 34 Housing Management Services | How good is the service?

- 111 Improvements in service delivery have been made but some issues remain. For example, not all service standards are routinely monitored and reported and tenants have not been systematically involved in shaping Russet's long-term approach to maintenance and asset management. Arrangements for delivering major disabled adaptations place insufficient emphasis on meeting the needs of high priority cases in reasonable timescales. More work is needed to effectively engage with the association's Gypsy and Traveller community.
- 112 Russet is developing a more effective approach to benchmarking and has taken action to reduce overall operating costs and maximise its income. However, a strategic approach to promoting value for money is not yet firmly embedded and some aspects of the repair service - such as high levels of emergency and urgent repairs - reduce its overall cost effectiveness and efficiency. There is not yet an agreed action plan to support delivery of the association's value for money strategy.

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

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

- 113 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Over the past three years, Russet has maintained strong performance in key areas, such as rent collection and the delivery of its asset management programmes to improve tenants' homes. The direction of travel on most key performance indicators is positive. Russet has implemented recommendations from previous inspections and quality assessments, although some minor slippage on the current service improvement plan is evident. These changes have delivered service improvements that tenants would recognise. However, there is not yet a consistent track record of driving and implementing value for money across the organisation.
- 114 Russet has taken steps to improve its service delivery in recent years and has successfully taken forward its work on asset management to improve the quality of tenants' homes. Examples of initiatives which have improved the quality of services for tenants include:
- the installation of gas fired central heating, PVCu windows and doors and the renewal of kitchens and bathrooms has improved many tenants' homes, making them more comfortable and cheaper for tenants to heat;
  - the move to reduce all rents to lower target levels from April 2005 without phasing has helped to benefit tenants on low incomes;
  - new gas safety quality assurance arrangements have helped to improve the safety of tenants and minimise the risk of appliance failure;
  - energy grants of £313,000 have been secured since 2003, helping tenants to heat their homes at a lower cost; and
  - the creation of ASB specialist posts and a new post for managing minor disabled adaptations have ensured a more effective approach to anti-social behaviour and reduced the amount of time tenants wait for minor adaptations.
- 115 The association can demonstrate a positive direction of travel on some key performance indicators over the past three years, while maintaining strong performance in other service areas. The time taken to re-let general needs homes has fallen from 23 days to 20 days. Over the same period, performance on rent collection has remained within the best quartile and the proportion of homes meeting the decent homes standard has consistently exceeded 99 per cent. Although the time taken to complete repairs has fallen over the past three years, performance in 2006/07 to date indicates that an upward trend is now emerging, though performance on completing emergency repairs remains below best quartile.

## 36 Housing Management Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 116** Russet's performance in implementing recommendations from previous inspections and quality assessments has led to improvements in service delivery which would be recognised by tenants. The association was inspected, as a pathfinder by the Housing Corporation in 2001 and it has been inspected by those organisations from which it has received accreditations, such as Investors in People and Chartermark. Examples of improvements implemented from the earlier inspection include the introduction of a new voids standard, better information for customers and stronger approaches to the management of ASB through the pilot of the Neighbourhood officers. Implementation of key recommendations has shown that Russet can deal with some improvement issues effectively.
- 117** Russet's service improvement plan (SIP) for 2006/08 shows progress within target time on most tasks, though some minor slippage is evident. Overall, just 11 per cent of tasks (15 out of 138) were not completed as scheduled by quarter two of 2006/07. However, some of the slippage, such as delays in introducing mystery shopping for the repairs service and plans to allow ASB incidents to be reported via the website, means that expected benefits to tenants have not yet been realised.
- 118** The overall track record on value for money is mixed. The association can demonstrate significant savings in operational costs and performance on income collection is strong. Most tenants (82 per cent) also feel that their rent represents value for money. However, some weaknesses in the delivery of repairs, including high levels of emergency and urgent repairs, means that VFM has not been maximised in all areas of the business. Although Russet is working towards a more strategic approach to VFM, new arrangements are not yet embedded. Operational staff still lack a full understanding of cost and quality issues and work on scrutinising the cost effectiveness of existing services is still developing. A decision to delay full exploration of the benefits that could accrue from modern procurement methods until the outcome of the strategic alliance proposal was agreed means that some aspects of service delivery cannot yet fully demonstrate value for money.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 119** This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Senior managers are seeking to provide effective leadership and promote a more inclusive management culture, but some staff do not yet have clear understanding of the strategic priorities for improvement. The overall approach to service planning and service reviews is weak, with insufficient focus on resident and staff engagement and use of the '4Cs' (challenge, compare, consult and compete). Russet can demonstrate some learning from its tenants, staff and best practice organisations.

- 120** The senior management team (SMT) has taken steps to develop a more inclusive management culture, but ownership of key strategic priorities is not yet fully embedded at all levels of the organisation. Following a recent review of the management structure, there has been increased focus on building the capacity of middle managers and widening their involvement in the decision-making process, including more direct involvement in governance meetings. The creation of two new directorates has also promoted a more co-ordinated approach to service delivery. However, while this has helped to sustain staff motivation during a period of change, our discussions with staff did not always demonstrate ownership and understanding of Russet's plans for improvement. This suggests that more work is still needed to clarify key priorities and build ownership of key plans across the workforce.
- 121** Russet's future plans for its housing management services are not based on a robust analysis of the issues the association faces. A Strategic Framework document (SF) for 2006/08 was developed in conjunction with Board members. This sets out a number of actions aligned to six themes, as well as a statement of overarching aims and objectives. However, the SF does not set out an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current performance, future internal and external challenges, or the level of resources required to support further improvements. The budget and business plan for 2006/07 and 2007/08 includes some information on external and internal challenges facing the organisation, as well as wider financial issues, but the SF does not spell out how anticipated outcomes from its proposed actions will ensure these are fully addressed or how long-term, sustainable improvements will be delivered. This makes it hard to judge if it is focussing on the right priorities or if the proposed actions are deliverable and will lead to a step change in performance.
- 122** Equally, the SF has not been informed by wider consultation with tenants, staff or external stakeholders. This creates a risk that future plans will not be owned or understood by staff or reflect issues that matter most to tenants, or to particular groups, such as BME residents. Staff we spoke to during our inspection had a weak understanding of the future priorities for improvement, suggesting that communication of the SF and its priorities has not been particularly effective.
- 123** The focus of the service improvement plan to support delivery of the SF is primarily operational and short-term. The majority of targets focus on relatively small scale improvements to customer information and satisfaction monitoring, work to review existing policies and procedures and improvements to IT systems. There is little focus on how some of the more strategic challenges facing the organisation will be addressed. Consequently, while delivery of the SIP may result in some improvements that tenants will recognise, it is less clear how some of the more significant challenges facing the organisation, such as taking forward plans to assess the benefits of strategic alliances or mergers with other associations or ongoing work to strengthen governance, will be progressed or how success will be measured.

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- 124** Plans to monitor progress on the SF are undermined by the absence of specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound (SMART) targets. Most of the targets in the SIP focus on process rather than outcomes and lack specific timescales for completion. Equally, the six-monthly monitoring report to the Board lacks baseline targets to assess improvements against a number of performance indicators. Nor does it make clear how the impact of some actions, such as those to embed VFM in service planning and achieve demonstrable efficiencies via partnering, will be evaluated. Vague information about anticipated outcomes and outputs, and a lack of synergy between the targets within the SF, SIP and member reports means that the Board cannot always be sure of the purpose of actions or that they will be delivered.
- 125** Performance reports do provide a useful range of information to track progress on some key aspects of service delivery, but there remains scope for improvement. The range of reports set out progress against targets in key areas, such as rent collection, void management, repairs and planned maintenance. Performance against some customer facing standards is covered and monitoring in some areas, such as void management, is strong, with challenging targets helping to drive improvements in turnaround times. However, the reports do not show whether ASB and domestic violence cases are responded to and resolved within agreed timescales, making it hard to assess the overall quality of service in these areas. Although SMT set aside one meeting each month to concentrate on performance issues, gaps in the range of information and lack of clear outcomes for many actions within the SIP weakens the overall approach.
- 126** The approach to service reviews is not yet wholly effective. Russet has not always made full use of the '4Cs' in carrying out service reviews, although most demonstrate some degree of resident consultation. Comparisons with other organisations are often limited, and combined with the lack of challenge, means that reviews may have missed opportunities for improvement. Although a new rolling programme of service reviews has been developed, it is too early to assess whether this will deliver a more comprehensive approach to improvement planning.
- 127** Performance management arrangements for staff are under-developed. Although annual staff appraisals are carried out effectively and inform the association's training plan, one-to-one meetings with staff are not consistently recorded. Only 1 out of 11 records of one-to-one meetings requested during our inspection could be provided. Lack of routine record keeping of the outcomes of one-to-ones reduces the ability to track staff progress on key targets over time or demonstrate the steps taken to tackle any under-performance. Without clear recording, Russet may struggle to take forward more formal actions to deal with competency issues within the workforce or to demonstrate that staff receive effective managerial support and guidance to enable them to deliver the organisation's priorities.

- 128 Russet can demonstrate that it is willing to learn from tenants, staff feedback and, more recently, from other best practice organisations. A range of tenant feedback mechanisms is in place and some initiatives have been introduced in response to tenants' suggestions. Complaints are also regularly considered by senior managers to identify lessons to inform service improvement and staff are encouraged to contribute to continuous improvement through the staff suggestion scheme. Russet also uses benchmarking clubs and good practice websites. However, while there are some examples of using learning from other organisations, such as putting key safes on voids, introducing sickness return forms and developing a browse aloud website facility, these will not lead to a step change in service performance. The association shows a willingness to use the experience of others to improve service delivery.
- 129 Plans to introduce and embed VFM in Russet Homes are at an early stage. Russet intends to implement its VFM strategy through a cross-departmental team (VFM cabinet). However, at the time of our inspection this has only met twice and wider staff training on VFM was not being implemented until January 2007. Although these measures should make Russet better placed to drive forward its VFM strategy, it is too early to assess the impact of these new approaches.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 130 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Financial management is sound. Russet has taken steps to strengthen the management of the organisation and improve governance arrangements, though managerial changes are not yet fully embedded. However, while staff are well-motivated and have good access to training, performance management arrangements are not robust. There has also been limited focus on building the capacity of the wider tenant body to ensure they have the skills to contribute to service planning and improvement or on the adoption of modern procurement methods.
- 131 The association's financial management is sound. The association is financially viable and is meeting Housing Corporation regulatory requirements in this area. A robust approach to investment planning has ensured that properties are well-maintained and that resources are available to exceed the basic requirements of the decent homes standard. Finances are well-managed and within budget, with appropriate procedures and controls in place to identify and manage financial and wider risks facing the organisation.
- 132 Increased investment in IT should support further improvements in service delivery. The association put investment in its ICT systems on hold during the negotiations to form a strategic alliance with another RSL. However, it is now piloting the use of handheld devices, for both housing management and technical staff, allowing them access to key information while in a tenants' home. The association has also developed its own customer and contractor websites to improve communication with them. However, it is yet to incorporate its asset management information into the main ICT system to minimise duplication of effort.

- 133 Steps are being taken to strengthen the capacity of the Board and adopt the NHF code of governance, but this presents both opportunities and risks. The number of Board members will reduce to 12 by 2007/08. Other changes will include the cessation of local authority membership to the Board, new length of service rules, which mean that the current Board chair will retire, and the introduction of formal appraisal systems. These changes should bring benefits to the organisation in terms of new skills and business efficiencies, but could also present challenges through the loss of some more experienced board members. To address these challenges, the association is starting to work on succession planning for the Chair. However, at a time when hard decisions will need to be taken about the future of the organisation the lack of a well-embedded formal development and appraisal system for Board members poses some risks, both in terms of effectively developing new recruits and enhancing the skills of existing members.
- 134 Weaknesses in the strategic and service planning framework do not provide a robust framework for driving improvement. Although there is a good working relationship between the Board and senior management team and a commitment to improvement, the SF and SIP do not show how some of the more strategic challenges facing the organisation will be driven forward or demonstrate how future plans reflect residents' priorities and aspirations. Equally, the absence of SMART targets with clear outcomes make it difficult to be clear what will be achieved or how overall success will be measured. As a result, it is not clear if delivery of existing plans will result in a step change in performance in the longer-term.
- 135 Russet is improving management and staff capacity within the organisation. A major staffing re-structure in June 2006 is promoting a more inclusive style of management with a stronger focus on involving operational managers and staff in decision-making. The creation of specialist posts for ASB, voids management, disabled adaptations and ten additional posts being funded through supporting people grant has also led to improvements in service delivery, while the recent appointment of a Policy and Compliance Director aims to strengthen policy development and performance monitoring. However, while this suggests a positive direction of travel, variable understanding among staff of Russet's strategic priorities does not suggest that the new, more open managerial approach is yet fully embedded.
- 136 The association is effectively investing in training for its staff. The association has made a significant investment in staff training designed to improve individual skills and service delivery. This includes training on customer service, ASB and asbestos handling. Russet Homes has also sponsored some staff on courses that lead to professional qualifications such as the Institute of Legal Executives (ILE) and technical qualifications for surveyors. There has been a specific training for 29 managers, designed to improve their management skills. This is helping to maximise internal capacity.

- 137 Although the outcome of the proposed strategic alliance with another association could have created some uncertainty for staff, staff morale has remained high. Results of a staff survey in 2005 showed that 86 per cent of staff were satisfied with Russet as an employer and 83 per cent were satisfied with their job. Although there has not been a more recent survey, the low staff sickness rate of 2.3 days (2.1 per cent) and a low staff turnover rate of 11.4 per cent in the past year suggests that high levels of satisfaction remain. Senior managers commitment to regular communications with staff around the proposed strategic alliance has helped to keep staff motivated during a period of possible change.
- 138 Russet Homes is not developing the capacity of its tenants so that they can be effectively involved in decision-making. The training offered to involved tenants is limited, with no courses in 2006 and little focus on capacity development since 2004. Although two new tenant portfolio holders have received comprehensive induction training, the lack of focus on capacity building for the wider group of involved tenants does not make them well-placed to develop the skills and confidence needed to influence decision-making.
- 139 Effective partnerships at a strategic and operational level help to strengthen the capacity of Russet to achieve its objectives. It works closely with TMBC and is regarded as a valuable partner by the Council. It also works closely with the Police and CDRP, helping to tackle to address ASB effectively. It is a member of the In Kent Alliance (INK) development partnership with AmicusHorizon and West Kent Housing Association and has effective working relationships with the CAB, WKM and its maintenance contractors. Some partners have reported engagement with Russet Homes have been more effective in the last six months, reflecting a more outward looking approach.
- 140 There is little evidence of modern procurement methods being used within the organisation. As a member of INK, Russet is looking at the most cost effective methods of building new homes and it has worked through purchasing consortiums to reduce the cost of kitchens and gas boilers. However, plans to explore more modern procurement methods for the delivery of repairs and maintenance were put on hold while the merger proposal was being considered. As a result, opportunities for improved value for money have not yet been maximised.

## Summary

- 141 We have judged that Russet Homes has **uncertain** prospects for improvement.
- 142 We found evidence to support the view that Russet will deliver further improvements. There is a track record of achievement, demonstrated both by implementation of recommendations from external inspections and assessments and improvements against key performance indicators. The organisation has learnt from its tenants, staff and other best practice organisations and staff morale is high. Financial management and control of wider risks facing the organisation is effective and internal capacity has been strengthened through the creation of new posts and recent organisational re-structuring. Some effective partnership arrangements are in place.

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- 143 However, there are also some barriers to improvement. Overall, weaknesses in the strategic and service planning framework create doubts about whether Russet's future plans focus on the right priorities and will promote a step change in performance in the longer-term. Equally, while changes to the management cultures are promoting a more open culture, ownership of key priorities for improvement among the wider staff group is under-developed. The absence of a fully effective performance management system for staff creates risks that under-performance will not be tackled effectively. More work is needed to develop a sustained focus on value for money and realise benefits that can be derive from modern procurement methods.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06 comparison group mean	2005/06 comparison group median*	2005/06 quartile position in comparison group*
General needs rent						
Average GN weekly gross rent	£65.85	£70.04	£73.85	£76.36	£78.08	1
General needs voids and lettings						
GN re-let time	23 days	6 days	20 days	30 days	29 days	1
Vacant and available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	0.7%	1.1%	0.6%	0.5%	4
Vacant and not available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	0.1%	0.2%	0.4%	0.2%	1
GN lettings to BME tenants	-	7.1%	4.1%	8.0%	-	-
Asset condition						
Average SAP rating	66.5	69	65	71	70	4
Failing decent homes standard	0.5%	0.5%	0.6%	12.6%	9.4%	1
Repairs performance						
Emergency repairs completed in target	98.0%	97.0%	97.9%	96.5%	96.7%	2
Urgent repairs completed in target	96.5%	94.0%	94.3%	92.9%	92.4%	2
Routine repairs completed in target	95.2%	93.0%	91.9%	93.8%	94.7%	3

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Performance indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06 comparison group mean	2005/06 comparison group median*	2005/06 quartile position in comparison group*
Appointments made that were kept	93.3%	91.1%	92.1%	95.8%	97.0%	4
Service to tenants						
Tenant satisfaction overall	86%	86%	86%	79%	79%	1
Tenant satisfaction with participation	88%	57%	57%	59%	57%	2
General needs FPI						
Weekly operating cost per GN unit	£56.33	-	£50.83	£53.53	£53.03	1
GN operating cost as a percentage of turnover	77.2%	-	62.3%	69.6%	64.3%	1
Weekly investment per GN unit	£37.56	-	£31.28	£35.86	-	-
Rent collected for GN	101.5%	-	100.5%	98.4%	99.2%	1
Rent lost due to GN voids	0.8%	-	1.1%	1.3%	0.9%	3
Current tenant rent arrears at year-end for GN	-	-	1.5%	3.9%	3.8%	1

## Housemark information

Analysis by activity 2005/06

LSVT Club

Cost per property

Sample 2005/06	Rent arrears	Tenancy and estate	Empty properties	Responsive repairs	Major and cyclical repairs	lettings	Rent collection and accounting	Total core
Upper quartile	57	115	27	74	82	22	28	467
Median	72	129	43	91	107	29	39	528
Lower quartile	84	153	59	113	138	41	49	591
Russet 2005/06	65	80	35	84	103	17	25	409
Ranked of 99	40	6	43	37	47	12	19	11

## 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:
  - interviews with some of Russet's frontline staff, managers and Board members;
  - visits to a range of the housing estates;
  - telephone interviews and focus groups with tenants;
  - inspection of some homes ready for letting and recent repairs;
  - reviews of anti-social behaviour cases;
  - checks of the rent account system; and
  - reviews of performance appraisals and one-to-one records.

## Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

- 1 Within Russet Homes website there is a 'tenants' website' that can be entered using a unique password. This facility allows tenants to check their rent history, pay rent and report repairs. Approximately 110 tenants are using this facility, helping them to get easy access to services from their home or workplace.
- 2 Russet's home support officers provide a floating support service, including advice on welfare benefits and income maximisation and support for people with physical and sensory disabilities. A recent external review of the service by Kent County Council's Supporting People team rated the services provided by the HSOs as excellent and continually improving. The service helps older and more vulnerable tenants to stay independent and maintain their tenancies.