

housing inspection service annual review
in pursuit of excellence

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Foreword



As a new arm of the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate has now been operating for just over a year. For local housing authorities and ourselves, the current climate is one of momentous change. Tenants and other service users expect a high quality of provision, which places authorities under pressure to make significant – often referred to as step-change – improvements in their services.

In this first year we have started to work with authorities to bring about these improvements. We are aware there is more we can do to make our contribution more valuable, both to authorities themselves and to those who rely on their services.

In this first year, the learning curve has been steep for all parties – for us and for members and officers in authorities. The experiences of the first year will undoubtedly bear fruit in the second year and beyond, as fewer, more thoughtful reviews with more effective outcomes become more commonplace.

The results of inspections (summarised at the end of this review) show that 64 per cent of local authority housing services inspected in our first operational year were rated as fair or poor. This includes 15 per cent rated poor (compared with no more than 8 per cent for other services provided by local authorities), which is disappointing and reflects tenants' low level of satisfaction with housing services. It may also indicate that authorities have prioritised for review what they consider to be their worst services. However, over 60 per cent of these services were rated as probably or going to improve, suggesting that authorities were concentrating significant improvement efforts in this area.

The Audit Commission has recently reviewed the impact that Best Value has had on local authorities' performance in its first year, as set out in *Changing Gear* (Ref. 1). The best councils have shown that Best Value can deliver real improvements for service users. Many others are likely to deliver such

improvements this year. But too many public services are poor or fair and not enough of the effort going into Best Value reviews is leading to real improvements for service users. Coupled with this, inspection has not always acted as a catalyst for improvement and so the Commission is now considering how to adapt it to meet different councils' needs and focus their resources where they will make the most difference.

Increasingly, we will work with authorities, before and after inspections, to facilitate the improvements that all parties are interested in securing. In many authorities their good work is leading them in the right direction. This brief review of our first year rightly focuses on the work of authorities we have inspected. Their efforts need to be applauded as we start the drive for excellent housing services. This could be in the context of the much publicised arm's-length management arrangements, or in providing thoughtful and timely services for those who are homeless, the development of the Supporting People arrangements or dealing with poor quality property in the private sector.

Over the next year, the Audit Commission will be developing products that will further assist authorities in delivering their core housing services, as we in turn develop our 'learning from inspection' studies. These will include Housing Benefit (for which the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate is the lead inspectorate) and repairs and maintenance – a common theme for many housing reviews, and one that is central to the landlord/tenant relationship. In this respect the changes to the Housing Revenue Account system proposed by Government will need to be thought through carefully if the current unsatisfactory arrangements are to be successfully improved upon to secure service enhancements.

Roy Irwin, Chief Inspector of Housing

November 2001

Introduction

In July 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister confirmed the creation of a Housing Inspectorate. We were subsequently set up as part of the Best Value Inspection Service within the Audit Commission.

We formally started our work on 1 April 2000, when the Best Value element of the Local Government Act 1999 came into operation. This annual review has been prepared to mark the successful completion of our first year of operation. It has been a challenging and rewarding period. We began our first inspection in July 2000 and, in the year since that date, 111 inspections started on site and we have published 47 reports.

Published reports have generated considerable coverage in the housing press and a great deal of interest among tenants, housing staff and councillors. We welcome the interest following the publication of our reports, and the subsequent debate they have triggered. It is only by informed debate on the findings of our inspections, and about the work of authorities, that approaches to achieving excellence will be developed, identified and replicated throughout the housing sector.

Also during this first year, we have:

- set up our website, which contains information about the Inspectorate and includes the full text of all of our published inspection reports;
- contributed, as part of the Audit Commission, to responses on the Housing Green Paper *Quality and Choice: the Way Forward for Housing* (Ref. 2), and the National Assembly for Wales's framework for its housing strategy *Better Homes for People in Wales* (Ref. 3);
- established positive working relationships with the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions, the National Assembly for Wales, Her Majesty's Treasury, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Housing Corporation, the National Housing Federation, and the Local Government Association;

- ensured that we have not just met authorities in a formal inspection setting but have also organised or participated in many workshops, events and conferences as organisers, speakers and delegates;
- published our *Framework for Assessing Excellence in Housing Management*.

However, this annual review does not primarily focus on what we have done, but on how local authorities we have inspected have responded to Best Value. In particular, it highlights examples of positive practice that others should consider as they develop their housing services.



Framework for assessing excellence in housing management

In August 2001 we published *The Housing Inspectorate's Framework for Assessing Excellence in Housing Management* (Ref. 4), following an earlier consultation paper, setting out our thoughts on the approach that local authorities in England will need to take if they want to develop excellent housing management services. It applies to our inspection of English local authority housing management services; we intend to produce a similar document in Wales following the publication of the National Assembly for Wales's Housing Strategy.

Arm's-length management organisations (ALMOs) will be assessed within a framework to see whether they can deliver three-star housing management services. These bodies are being set up by local authorities primarily in an effort to secure additional capital funding from the Government. This funding will only be available if (amongst other conditions) local authorities have established ALMOs and a three star rating has been awarded by us for an ALMO's housing management service.

The framework sets out what we would expect to see in an excellent housing management service. Such a service will:

- be user focused and responsive to tenants' needs. Tenants will also have shown, through surveys and other means, that they are satisfied with the services being delivered for the rent they pay;
- be led by people who offer vision for the housing service and enable their staff to do their jobs efficiently and effectively; and
- be meeting its statutory obligations and complying with relevant regulations and guidance.

The final framework is available on our website, as is a commentary on the key points raised during the consultation process.



The Housing Inspection Service

The size of the services we inspect is significant. The annual turnover of local authorities' housing services is more than £12 billion, and these services are paid for by tenants, local taxpayers and central government. Our business is to inspect these services and assess them within the framework of the Audit Commission's approach to inspection and improvement (see Key References, page 25).

Inspection aims to report on how local housing authorities:

- understand and influence their local housing market;
- provide direct services to tenants and the communities in which they live;
- fulfil their role in the private sector within the local housing market;
- respond to those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness; and
- enable quality housing and housing services to be provided by others in support of the housing needs of their community;

but above all the purpose of inspection is to help local authorities improve their housing services.

In approaching the task of inspecting housing services, we have been guided by the Audit Commission's eight published principles of public inspection (Ref. 5):

1. Inspection should inform the public about the performance of local services now, and their likely performance in the future, and so enhance local accountability.
2. Inspections should focus on services as users experience them.
3. Inspections should take into account the use of money, people and assets, and promote economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
4. Inspection should act as a catalyst for improvement.

5. Inspection should identify what works, to inform policy nationally and practice locally.
6. The scale of inspection should be proportionate to risk.
7. The methodology and criteria on which judgements are based should be explicit and based on evidence of what works in improving services. This principle should apply to inspection itself, which should assess its own effectiveness.
8. Inspection should be carried out without fear or favour.

These eight principles underlie everything we do.

Developing a user focus

During the year to July 2001, we recruited 55 Tenant Inspection Advisers. Looking at housing services from a user perspective is a crucial and developing part of inspection, and involving Tenant Inspection Advisers has been invaluable in providing new insight into services.

One of our earliest recruits was **Peter Marron**. His account of his first year working with us follows.

User focus: Inspection from the perspective of a Tenant Inspection Adviser

I joined the Housing Inspectorate over a year ago, following four years of intensive tenant participation with Carrick District Council in Cornwall. This involved work with Carrick as a Best Value pilot, a Beacon Status council, and on a community regeneration project.

Having service users in the inspection teams is important; it is not just window dressing. Each inspection team I've worked with has encouraged me to play as full a part as possible when assessing and evaluating the services councils provide to their tenants, and team members have welcomed my contribution to reports and to presentations to councils.

I see my role as an influential and unique form of tenant participation. And because we have direct experience of what it's like to be a service user, advisers bring a wealth of knowledge to underpin the work of the housing inspection teams.

Using advisers clearly adds credibility to an inspection, but they can also add impact to the presentations of evidence that support the Inspectorate's judgement of a council's service performance – especially the evidence gathered through listening to tenants.

The service user's experience works particularly well when capturing evidence on, for instance, how well signposted the council offices are; how easily accessible the offices and services are; and the quality of information in housing reception areas.

While it is important to gather and evaluate the facts and figures about the nature of the services delivered by a housing authority, it is equally important to understand how tenants experience service delivery, and also to establish how effectively tenants and their representatives have been consulted by councils undertaking their Best Value reviews.

The key questions that an inspection team address are:

- 1. How good is the service?*
- 2. Will the service improve?*

Two pertinent skills that inspectors use to help them reach their judgements on these questions are listening and observing. This means listening to the key players who are responsible for delivering a Best Value service to tenants, and observing the outcomes of their policies and strategies. Reality checks also help. These can include mystery shopping, estate visits, focus groups and interviews with tenants. Reality checks are the main way of determining the quality and effectiveness of the outcomes. They also help to assess the level of tenant satisfaction with service delivery.

Facilitating focus groups for tenants or their representatives is a particularly enjoyable and rewarding reality check. The tenants involved also say they enjoy them.

At focus groups for tenant representatives, issues that seem to come up regularly are service standards not reflecting tenants' views, tenant representatives being overloaded with paperwork and too many meetings, and poor access to information.

The most satisfying reality check for me is to meet tenants where they live. This offers an opportunity to gather examples of good practice they are benefiting from, which can then be shared with communities and housing management organisations elsewhere. It also enables us to raise tenants' awareness of good practice, tenant participation and Best Value. There is a real feeling of empowering tenants when raising their awareness of activities that could benefit them.

*I have become increasingly aware of two issues: **tenant participation** and **tenant participation compacts**.*

Those responsible for delivering tenant participation can use 'tenant apathy' as an excuse when they fail to convince tenants of the benefits of tenant participation. Many landlords and tenants are locked into the traditional ways of tenant participation that can, when overburdened with 'process' and 'bureaucracy,' overshadow tenants' aspirations and their influence on the service outcomes they desire.

Local authorities do not tend to see tenant participation compacts as an integral part of Best Value and therefore arrangements for reviewing compacts that address the changing needs of tenants are not always being agreed beforehand with tenants, which undermines the whole approach.

Many of the compacts I have studied (around 30 so far) lack an inspiring vision. Also, where there should be action plans containing 'measurable and challenging milestones', these are too often vague aspirations.

However, I have seen plenty of good practice in tenant participation while inspecting local authorities, such as at Canterbury City Council. Here, the council:

- *distributes housing service committee reports to the Tenant Consultative Group well in advance of its meetings, which gives the group the opportunity to discuss issues with the communities they represent and to comment on the reports;*
- *involves tenants in the recruitment of housing officers; and*
- *invites tenant representatives to shadow housing officers at their workplace.*

Although I've undertaken many inspections, I'm still very much at level one of a huge learning curve. Each inspection is a new experience, but a highly stimulating one where there is a spirit of collaboration to do well and a determination to deliver continuous improvement in performance.

Peter Marron
Tenant Inspection Adviser

Positive practice we have highlighted in our reports

'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 (Ref. 6)

It is still early days for us; we have yet to inspect many local authorities. So we are reluctant to try to identify *good* or *best* practice as we do not yet have a large enough base from which to draw examples. Instead, in this annual review, we will identify *positive* practice that we believe would be useful to local authorities and other housing organisations to consider.

Positive practice may be an initiative that is strongly driven by an authority's commitment to change and improve. It could be a different way of performing a common administrative task that takes less time and is more effective; or it could be a way of working imaginatively across traditional boundaries. However it is defined, we see positive practice as something that makes a service more effective



and ultimately more able to deliver what the customer wants – something that makes a difference to the quality of the service provided.

Many councillors and staff who work in local authorities are strongly motivated by the desire to improve public services. This commitment, by tens of thousands of individuals, to the delivery of good local services is reflected in the body of many of our reports. A significant number of these reports comment on the hard work and dedication of staff and the commitment of local authorities to achieving Best Value.

However, our inspections have also identified services where performance is below par. So, as well as highlighting areas that are innovative and examples of positive practice, we believe that lessons can be learnt by reporting on services that are failing.

This section summarises some of the examples of positive practice we have identified. We have a publicly stated commitment to publish this information in order to celebrate it and share it. We are exploring the strengthening of our links with other organisations to disseminate these examples of positive practice.

From the inspections that started on site in September 2001, we will be including a section on positive practice in each of our reports, to make it easier for other authorities and agencies to identify that they will want to consider in developing their own services.

All our reports on local authority housing services, and other information about us, are available on our website at: www.housinginspectorate.gov.uk

Customer-focused services and good communication

We aim to act as a catalyst for the improvement of services. Improvement is often associated with opening up a service to include involvement of local people in setting standards, making choices on what to prioritise and monitoring service delivery. Local authorities need to have effective mechanisms for reporting to tenants and other service users on how well a service is delivered, and then to use any feedback to make improvements. Local authorities that use new and innovative means of involving local people and listen to what they think is important, are more likely to deliver services that are both needed and valued.

The provision of relevant and timely information enables people to make decisions appropriate to their needs and circumstances. Some housing authorities have been seen as paternalistic – making unclear decisions, based on information that is not available to tenants and other service users (such as applicants for housing). One of the themes in the Government’s housing strategy for England, *Quality and Choice: The Way Forward for Housing* (Ref. 2) is to increase the choices available to social housing tenants by giving them more relevant information.

This section also identifies some positive practice in communication that has helped tenants and other users evaluate the basis for decisions and assist with the monitoring of service delivery overall.

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Customer-focused services

- A good example of improved customer care arrangements is being developed across all **Kingston upon Hull City Council** offices. Regular weekly staff training and briefing sessions have been in place for some years, and 34 customer care staff workshops are being progressed.
- Covering a wide geographical and mainly rural area, **Uttlesford District Council** operates a special rent collection service for its older and more vulnerable tenants; this means they don’t have to worry about making regular trips to a post office or bank, which may be some distance away.
- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council’s** urban renewal service uses complaints as a positive experience to learn from and therefore improve services. The service also looks at complaints involving other service areas. For example, by examining satisfaction surveys, it found problems in street cleaning. Littered streets can negatively affect perception of other council services, so the urban renewal service included these comments in its plans.

Cross-cutting work

- **London Borough of Brent's** housing officers use the Viewstar system linked to the council's Housing Benefit system. This means that officers can maximise benefit take-up for tenants by accessing their details and case histories and identifying gaps in what they are claiming.

The council also maintains a list of vulnerable tenants, whom officers try to visit twice a year. These checks also enable them to take orders for repairs and deal with any other problems when they make the visit. This gives vulnerable tenants a better service and enables maintenance problems to be tackled in good time, helping to safeguard the stock.

- Joint working approaches being developed within **Darlington Borough Council** include partnerships with the Community Safety Team (including the Youth Offending Team) and Drugs Action Team. We also identified positive practice in the introduction of estate handypersons at the Firthmoor estate to maintain environmental standards and the development of neighbourhood wardens in conjunction with the Best Value review of community safety.
- **Kirklees Metropolitan Council** exemplified an effective way of joint working between teams: the building services and housing services teams work together to reduce bureaucracy and streamline working. By carrying out joint post-inspection visits, the teams learn from each other and take back relevant messages to team members.
- **Westminster City Council** uses staff such as community and mobile wardens to contact older people, deal with routine problems and respond to emergency call outs. The council is looking at innovative ways to re-commission services for older people and to establish new partnership arrangements to modernise the sheltered and supported schemes it operates to support this aim.

Good communication

- **London Borough of Barnet** carries out weekly telephone surveys to establish satisfaction levels with repairs. Many authorities carry out post-inspection visits to a sample of repairs, or send out returnable satisfaction slips. However, telephone surveys are more immediate and they elicit higher response rates. They also enable investigations to be carried out quickly if a tenant is dissatisfied, and ensure rapid action to resolve problems.
- **Braintree District Council's** welfare rights service produces a range of high-quality publicity material, some of which is targeted at those groups that are more likely to need the service – such as tenants in sheltered housing and people over 60 in rural areas who may qualify for disability benefits. The material is also available on the council's website.
- In autumn 2000, **London Borough of Brent** held an evening surgery to allow leaseholders to discuss their bills with the council before they were issued. This enabled tenants to check the accuracy of their bills and raise any queries and also improved the chances of the bills being paid on time – a real benefit for the council as well as the leaseholder.
- To ensure that residents are properly informed and consulted on planned work to improve the fabric of their homes, **London Borough of Camden** uses new ways of contacting local people. For example, a community steering group was set up to make links with the local community, and a festival was held to mark the successful completion of a particular construction project. Also, a programme of visits and bus tours has been planned to familiarise councillors and local tenant representatives with the whole of Camden rather than just their own area.
- **Canterbury City Council** identifies tenants with special requirements on its information database. This enables staff to be more aware of any special circumstances relating to individual tenants.

- **Carrick District Council** produces easy-to-understand, quarterly rent statements which include additional information – for example, reminders about certain events (such as office closures for public holidays).
- To make sure there is a public record that communal areas have been cleaned, **Dacorum Borough Council** has introduced a sheet that has to be signed by operatives each time they clean. This is then publicly displayed as a quality control measure. Although a simple idea, this is an easy way of letting residents know that a proper service is being provided.
- **Derby City Council** has actively promoted the need for home maintenance by producing a booklet that is distributed to all those enquiring about maintenance problems, and those who have benefited from group repair schemes. The booklet gives guidance on arranging repairs and instructions on how to carry out simple repairs. This is important because, in addition to helping to safeguard the stock, proper maintenance is key to ensuring that a renewal area remains sustainable.
- Hermitage Housing Association, the Large-Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) housing organisation that works with **Havant Borough Council**, produces an annual newsletter that includes information on the number of points needed to rehouse someone on each of the major estates in the area. This is a good example of providing customers with relevant information that will help them to choose those areas to which they are prepared to move.
- **Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames** circulates clear pictorial images – illustrating examples of good, fair and poor cleaning – to all tenants and leaseholders. These show the standards they can expect in both lawned and communal estate areas. This is an innovative way of producing information in an accessible, easily understood form.

- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council's** urban renewal service has developed a service charter so that customers know what level of service they can expect. Challenging targets are set and monitored, and performance against these targets is regularly reported in a graphic and easily digestible way. This is an excellent example of a service setting challenging targets and of a local authority being honest enough to admit when these have not been achieved.





Partnering

- **Canterbury City Council** has developed a good partnering arrangement with the contractor responsible for most responsive repairs. The contract is let on a fixed-price basis, avoiding the need for single job-invoicing – an expensive and time-consuming process – and tenants were involved in setting the quality standards for the contractor. There is an opportunity to redirect any surpluses generated within the contract to the planned maintenance programme, and tenants telephone repairs to a helpdesk run by the contractor. The real benefits of this contract are the focus on completing a repair to an agreed quality first time round and the authority and contractor working together to diagnose and complete a repair that will last, for the benefit of both the tenant and the council.
- At the time of the inspection **Gosport Borough Council** was one of the few authorities that had developed partnering arrangements for the delivery of planned maintenance work. Tenants, the council and the contractor work together to improve services.
- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council's** urban renewal service has helped to develop strategies against antisocial behaviour, which recognise that stock condition is only one of the factors that deter people from living in a particular area.

Tenant involvement

- Following the Government's *Modernising Government* (Ref. 7) programme, new governance structures for local authorities give tenants the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes in new ways. We were impressed that the **London Borough of Barnet** had set up regular consultation meetings between the council's scrutiny committee and a steering group of tenants to discuss issues about the local authority's housing services. This is a thoughtful way of making new structures more directly accountable to service users.
- Tenants can contribute to **Canterbury City Council's** repair strategy specification through a sub-group of the Tenant Consultative Group. This group has been heavily involved in the selection of new repairs contractors. Tenants are also members of a Contract Development Group, which monitors implementation issues following contract completions. This is a good example of direct tenant input into an important service area that is often seen as the concern only of officers.
- The relationship between building contractors and the tenants whose homes they are repairing can be problematic. Contractors see their primary relationship as being with the local authority rather than the tenant, as the authority gives the instructions and pays the invoices. **Carrick District Council** has taken steps to address this by arranging meetings between contractors and representatives of tenant forums to iron out problems. This is a useful way of strengthening a relationship that is very often given little importance by local authorities.

Tenants may have difficulty assessing how good a service is, particularly when there is no comparative information. **Carrick** has given tenant representatives access to HouseMark, a subscription-only service that shows the comparative performance of a wide range of local authorities. With access to this system tenants can ask questions based on the performance of other landlords, enabling Carrick's tenants to assess their landlords' performance against the best.

- Encouraging examples of tenant involvement by **Darlington Borough Council** include the development of estate-based compacts, the creation of the Firthmoor Partnership Board, the Summer Funday, and efforts to engage younger people in the consultation process. There were also positive steps to obtain the views of the next generation of potential tenants, through a series of face-to-face interviews with young people visiting the 'blitz bus' at several different schools. This was a joint project with the education department.
- Tenants of **Exeter City Council** were closely involved in selecting a new repairs contractor. They also suggested amendments to the contract specification, visited short-listed contractors and took part in selection interviewing. As a result of the Exeter's Best Value review, the lettable standard for empty properties and the standard of vacated properties was reviewed in consultation with tenants, and an improved specification was agreed.
- **London Borough of Greenwich** has a comprehensive programme of tenant satisfaction surveys. When a repair order is issued, questionnaires covering quality of response, speed of appointment and quality of and satisfaction with the repair are sent out to the tenants.
- We commended **Havant Borough Council** for effective community consultation in developing regeneration plans for the Wecock Farm estate, which included 'Planning for Real' sessions. These helped tenants gain a real understanding of the proposals for their area.
- **Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames** has developed a tenants' involvement network – a contact list of people, ranging from those who are interested in receiving information, through to people who are prepared to be tenant and resident representatives. This is an interesting initiative and could be used more effectively to involve tenants who do not wish to become involved in tenants' associations, but who do wish to participate.

- We commented in our inspection report that 'in Kirklees tenant involvement underpins all aspects of the housing service'. Due to input from tenants, **Kirklees Metropolitan Council** has:
 - employed estate caretakers;
 - improved customer care, including introducing ID badges and uniforms;
 - organised joint inspections by housing and building services officers of a sample of repairs per week, leading to improved feedback of quality issues to the relevant department;
 - improved the quality of materials used in kitchen units; and
 - allowed operatives to carry out additional works in tenants' homes, without pre-inspection, for orders up to £50.

These developments show that the council has a real commitment to tenant involvement.



Strategic and service planning

The Government's *Modernising Government* (Ref. 7) programme has three aims:

- to ensure that policymaking is more joined up and strategic;
- to make sure that public service users, not providers, are the focus, by matching services more closely to people's lives; and
- to deliver public services that are high quality and efficient.

During our inspections we identified many examples where local authorities had thought through ways of working with other agencies, and of partnerships that had developed more effective working and had found new ways of using their resources to help people access services run by other organisations.

Good service planning is an essential part of a local authority's strategic role. Local housing authorities now have a statutory duty to produce annual business plans, and the resource accounting framework requires authorities to work in a more businesslike way.

However, a good business plan is in itself not enough. In order to be successful there need to be clear links between the business plan and individual performance plans. The business plan itself needs strong and effective political support in order for it to be successful. And lastly, but very importantly, there needs to be effective involvement with and input from service users who can provide a sounding board and direction for the service.

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Innovation

- To help diagnose repairs **Barrow in Furness Borough Council** has introduced 'Repair Finder'. This is a sophisticated software system that takes non-technical staff through a series of screens and diagrams based on the information they get from the tenant. This leads to a more accurate diagnosis of the repair, the materials for which can then be ordered from the contractor. This enables the repair to be correctly prioritised, and saves time and resources on pre-inspection.
- **London Borough of Brent** has introduced an arrears award trophy, for which arrears teams compete on a quarterly basis. The trophy is based on a points system devised by team leaders, and staff have responded to its introduction in a spirit of friendly competition.
- **London Borough of Camden** launched its New Deal for Leaseholders in 1996 because the council recognised that these service users had not been receiving a good service. Leaseholders can be treated as peripheral to the core business by some housing authorities and it is encouraging to see the efforts that Camden has made to engage the service user. The council is introducing a leaseholders' guide, has published newsletters and guides, serviced a leaseholders' forum, and held leaseholders' conferences in 1998 and 2000. Initiatives such as these have tangibly improved the relationship between leaseholders and the housing department.
- When an empty home owned by **Darlington Borough Council** is being inspected for void (empty property) work, the inspecting officer takes photographs of any damage by the previous tenant and prepares a witness statement. This is held on file so that if the former tenant challenges the amount charged, evidence can be produced. A recording system has also been introduced by Darlington to monitor the use of each of the neighbourhood offices. This uses a system of bar codes and light pens for quick and easy inputting by staff. The system has identified several rural tenants who are

finding it more convenient to use the main town centre area office than their own neighbourhood office.

- **Havant Borough Council** has introduced tenancy deposits for households living in temporary accommodation, to cover any damage that might occur during their tenancy and sets aside a budget for these each year. The council pays the deposit and if any damage does occur, the landlord keeps all or part of the deposit; if there isn't any damage, the deposit is returned. This scheme has allowed the authority to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation because private landlords are more willing to take people on benefits with this additional guarantee.
- **Manchester City Council's** current work on developing a private finance initiative scheme to tackle the problem of poor-quality temporary accommodation and provide a more appropriate range of accommodation is ground-breaking. This is a challenging attempt to draw funding into an area that is not generally seen as attractive by financial institutions, and is an imaginative approach to a widespread problem.
- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council's** urban renewal service has developed the Wigan Empty Homes Challenge Fund, which encourages the private sector to invest jointly with the Council in bringing long term empty homes back into use. The service also works with an accountancy firm to identify any VAT being incorrectly charged on grants work.

Enabling

- **Derby City Council** has developed a joint housing register with 14 registered social landlords (RSLs) who have accommodation in the city. Despite initial problems, the council has shown ongoing commitment to the establishment of the register and has secured funding from the Government to pilot a choice-based lettings scheme. Additionally, the council has a clear lettings policy and is seen by the RSLs it works with as having a clear strategic direction.

Derby also has a well-developed strategy for improving standards across the private rented sector, adopting a dual approach of encouraging good landlords and enforcing standards for others. The council recognises that private sector landlords are a diverse group and has accordingly developed a variety of approaches to dealing with them. These include advice surgeries for landlords and tenants, bond schemes for rent deposits, and a scheme for registering houses in multiple occupation.

Derby recognises that a high proportion of homelessness in the city is caused by domestic violence. It has therefore developed a Domestic Violence Charter and has in place a Domestic Violence Partnership involving several external agencies.

- **Havant Borough Council** commissions a partner organisation to act as 'matchmaker' between homeless people aged 16 to 25 and private homeowners who want to let a room in their properties. Although it is a small-scale initiative, this approach has made an enormous difference to the people it has helped.
- **Manchester City Council** works with a women's aid voluntary organisation to provide counselling and support and also with a private sector hostel that provides facilities such as a nursery, a trained nurse, 24-hour security and an after-school club.

- **Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council** worked with a local housing association to bid for funding from the Housing Corporation under its Safer Communities Supported Housing Fund, and provided match funding by selling a property to the association at discounted value.

Sefton's homelessness service has also co-ordinated the provision of a Christmas shelter by bringing together different agencies and using the shelter as a contact point to put homeless people in touch with statutory services such as the National Health Service.

- In partnership with local people and the Cheshire constabulary, **Vale Royal Borough Council** has been developing a pilot scheme providing support to residents who are experiencing antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhood. The scheme, called 'Eyes and Ears', is also intended to deal with problems at an early stage; residents can refer potential issues on a report form actioned jointly by housing staff and the police. There is a resident co-ordinator for the scheme in each locality, to help promote the approach and ensure continuity.
- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council** has developed working partnerships with firms of contractors, to encourage better relationships. The council provides training events for contractors on issues such as health and safety and party-wall legislation. By actively working with contractors to increase their skills in areas that are particularly important for improving the council's housing stock, the council is ultimately investing in a better service for tenants.



Service planning

- **London Borough of Camden** aims to incorporate the delivery of specialist services within its capital programme. A set of criteria called 'Raising and Maintaining the Standard' seeks to improve all stock to a standard that can then be sustained through planned maintenance. Under this programme, all building elements with a life of less than ten years are renewed. Mechanical and electrical renewal are included, as well as some elements of community safety. The objective is to deal with as many elements of a capital works programme as possible at one time, so that tenants are inconvenienced as little as possible.
- **Derby City Council** has ensured that there is adequate provision for street sleepers, that the number of people in bed and breakfast accommodation are there for a minimum period, and that people who become homeless have adequate advice and support. Additionally, the council employs a Young Person's Housing Officer to deal with the specific needs of 16-24 year-olds, helping them to sustain their tenancies and ensure that they are receiving appropriate welfare advice.
- **Kirklees Metropolitan Council** approaches its stock condition problems in an informed and strategic manner, by changing the way it allocates the budget, from an historic basis to one based on stock condition data with a unit cost per property allocation. Kirklees also takes a strategic approach to maintenance and is pursuing a policy to increase planned maintenance to 70 per cent of the repairs and maintenance budget. This ratio (30 per cent reactive and 70 per cent planned maintenance) is exemplified as a good practice ratio by the Commission (Ref. 8).
- **Ryedale District Council** has set up a Best Value support group and has a clear rationale for selecting services for review. It also has a Best Value procedures manual, which provides a framework for service managers leading reviews. Staff are being trained in the European Foundation for Quality Management Framework principles as part of the Best Value review process, and the council has strong links with other councils in North Yorkshire to share examples of good practice.
- **City and County of Swansea** has an effective system for targeting applications for renovation grants to those in greatest need. It used the results of its 1998 stock condition survey to develop a clear approach to the targeting of grants. The council works to an annual grants policy document, which clearly sets out priorities for grant-aided projects.
- **Westminster City Council** plans for demographic changes and has devised new ways of working in partnership with other organisations in order to modernise its sheltered and supported schemes.
- **Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council** drives service improvement by using data and intelligence to analyse problems and devise a way forward. It has also developed clear procedures and process maps for staff, covering all areas of grant and enforcement activity. A detailed time-recording system is used by urban renewal staff to produce detailed unit costings for each element of work. These unit costs are analysed by managers to enable management to track performance over time and to identify how tasks might be undertaken in a more cost-effective way.

Learning from inspection

The Audit Commission is developing the way we share the lessons from Best Value inspections (Ref. 9). We plan to publish a series of positive practice guides to help local authorities, and service managers in particular, to achieve levels of service close to that of the best performers.

We have already learnt a lot about how housing services are delivered by housing authorities. This annual review has been produced to show some of the positive practice we have identified. However, our inspections have also revealed examples of where services are far from a positive experience for users. In some cases, we have discovered the same areas of concern in more than one authority. Publicising these examples will minimise the possibility of repetition.

- The importance of having published **service standards**, readily available to the public and set in conjunction with users, is clear from many of our inspection reports. In an era of customer charters, it is reasonable to expect service providers to produce information on service standards for their customers. Service users will not be able to assess whether the service they receive is adequate unless they have this information. Similarly, without published standards there is no framework for the council to measure the success of its service in meeting its objectives, plans or statutory duties.
- Some of our inspections found **inconsistent practices** between offices in some local authorities. Although written policies and procedures may be in place, custom and practice have sometimes overtaken them. If discretion is allowed, the framework for its operation should be stated in written procedures, such as local policies, which are explicit about why there are local variations and what they are.
- We have found that **performance indicators** are not necessarily correctly calculated or understood by the staff responsible for calculating and then reporting on them, which could mean that the authority is under- or over-reporting its performance. There may also be instances when the basis on which indicators are calculated is wrong – an example would be when an authority starts timing a repair from the point it places an order with a

contractor, rather than from the point at which a tenant reports it (which is how it should be).

- Examples of good communication are highlighted in most of this annual review. However, we have also discovered instances where services were **not being advertised** to potential client groups – for example, where grants for renovations in the private sector were not publicised, so that those in most need might not know about them. In these cases, public money was only being spent on those who knew how to access the service.
- We also believe that an important communication tool is a good **complaints procedure** whose use is encouraged by the authority, which should then use the information provided not only to solve the individual problem but also to review and improve services.
- The scope of **Best Value reviews** are sometimes narrower than they could be. Reviews should be designed to facilitate a step change in the service by fundamentally examining it. This sometimes means that an authority must go beyond internal organisational boundaries, where aspects of another department's working affect the service being reviewed – an example would be examining rent collection without looking at the Housing Benefit service provided. Looking at services from a customer perspective should result in an overview of the linkages that should exist across services and service providers, and suggest a natural scope for the review.
- In the **'Challenge'** part of the Best Value review, the most frequently omitted element was that of the 'critical friend' – an independent outsider able to challenge, without fear or favour, the assessments local authorities undertake of themselves. This is an important part of the Best Value review process.
- If customer satisfaction with a service appears to be high, the review process may result in complacency. For the **'Compare'** part of the review, we found that some authorities did not work hard enough to compare a service with that of other comparable authorities (or organisations). The increasing use of benchmarking services and benchmarking clubs make comparisons easier,



producing data that gives an objective measure of efficiency and facilitates learning from best practice elsewhere. Best Value is about quality and price, so authorities need to look at both when comparing their services with other providers. Having 'compared', there is not always evidence of the effect of such a comparison. If better performance has been achieved elsewhere, authorities need to consider how they emulate it, not merely note it.

- The '**Consult**' part of Best Value reviews has usually been carried out well, involving consultation with both internal and external stakeholders, but it is not always clear what difference the consultation has made in shaping the review itself. It is essential that the results of any consultation exercise are fed into discussions about policy choices and fed back to consultees.
- The '**Compete**' part of the Best Value review is not always applied as imaginatively as the other three 'Cs'. Including competition in the review process – as the Government's Best Value guidance makes clear – helps to ensure diversity in the way services are delivered and genuine plurality among service providers. Reviews should analyse the structure of the supplier market for the service under review and the benefits that could arise from bringing new providers into the market. Consideration should also be given to breaking up services in order to stimulate innovation. Sustained improvements are unlikely from a service review that does not recognise this and gives insufficient weight to the potential benefits of a healthy and genuine partnership between public, private and voluntary sectors.
- In too many cases, **improvement plans** are lacking in significant areas. These should be the basis for continuous, not one-off, improvement. But sometimes they are too short term, with targets only extending for a year; they fail to identify appropriate and adequate resources to undertake the desired changes; do not state clearly who will be responsible for the intervention; or lack proper timescales, targets and milestones for assessing success. Plans need to be outcome-focused and accountable and not dominated by internally focused considerations of structure and job design.

Information

In the year 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2001, we:

- began a total of 111 inspections (15 of which were on site during June); and
- published 47 of these as inspection reports.

The scores for these were:

All reports

How good is the service?	Is this service likely to improve?				
	No	Unlikely	Probably	Yes	
Excellent	–	–	–	2	36%
Good	–	4	9	2	
Fair	1	9	11	2	64%
Poor	1	1	4	1	
	34%		66%		

Staffing

As at the end of June 2001 we had recruited the following:

Housing inspectors

The complement of housing inspectors is 33. We had recruited 31, including one secondee.

Affiliate housing inspectors

We had offered 24 contracts.

Tenant inspection advisers

We had offered 55 contracts.

Support staff

We had recruited 11 support staff.

Appendix

Authority	Subject of inspection	How good is the service?	How likely is it to improve?	Month published
Housing Strategy and Service				
Exeter City Council	Housing Service	Fair	Probably	Dec-00
Havant Borough Council	Housing Service	Fair	Unlikely	Nov-00
Housing Management and Tenant Participation				
Braintree District Council	Estate Management Service	Fair	Probably	Jun-01
London Borough of Brent	Housing Management Services	Good	Probably	Jun-01
Canterbury City Council	Housing Tenancy and Property Services	Good	Unlikely	Mar-01
Carrick District Council	Housing Services	Good	Probably	Mar-01
Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council	Housing Rent Service	Poor	Probably	Jun-01
Dacorum Borough Council	Housing Cleaning and Caretaking Service	Good	Probably	Sep-00
Darlington Borough Council	Housing Services	Fair	Probably	Jun-01
Denbighshire County Council	Housing Rents Service	Poor	No	May-01
Kingston upon Hull City Council	Housing Front of House Services	Fair	Probably	Feb-01
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames	Caretaking Services	Good	Unlikely	Mar-01
St Edmundsbury Borough Council	Rent Collection	Fair	Probably	Jun-01
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Rent Arrears Recovery	Fair	Probably	Jun-01
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	Tenant Participation	Fair	Probably	Jun-01
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council	Housing Allocations	Poor	Probably	Jan-01
London Borough of Sutton	Housing Services	Fair	Probably	Sep-00
Uttlesford District Council	Housing Landlord Services	Good	Probably	Jun-01
Vale Royal Borough Council	Tenancy Management and Repairs and Maintenance	Fair	Unlikely	Jun-01

Authority	Subject of inspection	How good is the service?	How likely is it to improve?	Month published
Homelessness and Advice Services				
Braintree District Council	Welfare Rights Service	Good	Unlikely	Apr-01
Broxbourne Borough Council	Homelessness	Fair	Probably	Apr-01
Manchester City Council	Homelessness	Good	Yes	Oct-00
Sefton Metropolitan District Council	Homelessness	Fair	Yes	Jun-01
Private Sector Housing and Urban Renewal				
London Borough of Camden	Home Ownership	Fair	Probably	Dec-00
Derby City Council	Private Sector Housing	Excellent	Yes	Jun-01
London Borough of Harrow	Renovation Grants	Fair	No	Jun-01
Neath Port Talbot County Borough	Council Renovation Grant Service	Fair	Unlikely	Apr-01
City and County of Swansea	Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy and Administration of Renovation Grants	Good	Probably	Apr-01
Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council	Urban Renewal Service	Excellent	Yes	Jun-01
Repairs and Maintenance				
London Borough of Barnet	Repairs and Maintenance	Fair	Yes	Dec-00
Barrow in Furness Borough Council	Housing Repairs	Fair	Unlikely	Feb-01
London Borough of Camden	Capital Programme	Good	Probably	Dec-00
Cannock Chase District Council	Repairs and Maintenance	Poor	Probably	Jun-01
Gosport Borough Council	Repairs and Maintenance	Good	Probably	Dec-00
London Borough of Greenwich	Housing Repairs and Maintenance	Fair	Unlikely	Mar-01
Harrogate Borough Council	Housing Investment Strategy	Fair	Unlikely	Feb-01

Authority	Subject of inspection	How good is the service?	How likely is it to improve?	Month published
Repairs and Maintenance (continued)				
Kirklees Metropolitan Council	Responsive Repairs	Good	Yes	Jun-01
Preston Borough Council	Housing Maintenance Service	Poor	Probably	Jun-01
London Borough of Redbridge	Day to Day Repairs	Fair	Unlikely	Jun-01
Three Rivers District Council	Repairs and Maintenance	Poor	Yes	Jun-01
London Borough of Waltham Forest	Repairs and Maintenance	Fair	Probably	May-01
Supported Housing				
Bridgend County Borough Council	Sheltered Housing Service	Fair	Unlikely	Apr-01
Carrick District Council	Community Alarms	Good	Probably	Mar-01
Ryedale District Council	Ryecare	Good	Unlikely	Feb-01
Slough Borough Council	Supported Housing Service for Older People	Fair	Unlikely	Mar-01
South Derbyshire District Council	Sheltered Housing and Warden Services	Poor	Unlikely	Jun-01
Westminster City Council	Housing with Care	Good	Probably	Mar-01

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Documents marked with an asterisk (*) can be downloaded from the Housing Inspectorate's website (www.housinginspectorate.gov.uk)

