

Berneslai

Homes

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

June 2009



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Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) 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, arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) 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.

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 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 Council/ALMO;
- 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.

This service was inspected as part of the Government's arms length housing management initiative, which encourages councils to set up ALMOs to manage, maintain and improve their housing stock. The Government decided that councils pursuing this option can secure additional capital funding if the new arm's length body has received at least a 'good' rating from the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate.

An ALMO is a company set up by a local authority to manage and improve all or part of its housing stock. The local authority remains the landlord and tenants remain secure tenants of the authority. An ALMO does not trade for profit, and is managed by a board of directors comprising Council nominees, elected tenants/leaseholders and independents.

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

- 'ALMO Inspections and the delivery of excellent housing management services' (March 2003); and
- 'Learning from the first housing ALMOs' (May 2003).

Summary

- 1 Berneslai Homes (BH) is providing an excellent three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 The company has a strong commitment to customer care, with clear performance standards and comprehensive feedback to customers. Leaflets and the website provide high quality information. Barnsley Connects gives customers quick access to information by telephone and in person. The company has achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and the use of equality impact assessments is well embedded. Customer representation is becoming more diverse.
- 3 Most decent homes improvement works are complete. The programme has involved customers and been effectively delivered. It is easy to report a repair and customers are generally happy with the service. Ready to let properties are clean and meet the lettable standard. Repair costs are low.
- 4 The choice based lettings (CBL) scheme is easy to understand and use, with additional assistance provided to vulnerable people. Properties are let quickly, with a very high 80 per cent of properties accepted on the first offer. Income management arrangements are sensitive to individual needs and collection rates from both current and former tenants compare favourably with top performers at a low cost.
- 5 A strong emphasis on prevention identifies tenancy issues early and supports people to manage and sustain their tenancies. Following a 'something doesn't look right'¹ policy helps to prevent issues becoming more serious. When issues do arise, there are clear and effective procedures, properly applied to deal with all eventualities. Grounds maintenance and cleaning standards are high. Service providers are held firmly to account by local steering groups, including local people, for the quality of services.
- 6 BH has a strong value for money (VFM) culture. Costs are low, and quality and customer satisfaction are high. Significant efficiencies are generated across the company, with savings invested in services that impact on customers.
- 7 The company has strong and effective leadership. Business planning arrangements and performance management are sound. BH is an outward looking organisation and has a positive track record of improving services by learning from customers and other service providers.
- 8 However, access to services is limited by traditional 9 to 5 opening hours, and there are weaknesses in responding to some enquiries. The company is also not able to monitor how quickly BH staff respond to telephone enquiries.

¹ To implement the 'Something doesn't look right policy' all members of staff, including operatives, have been trained to report any tenancy or estate issues that come to their attention in their day to day work for further investigation.

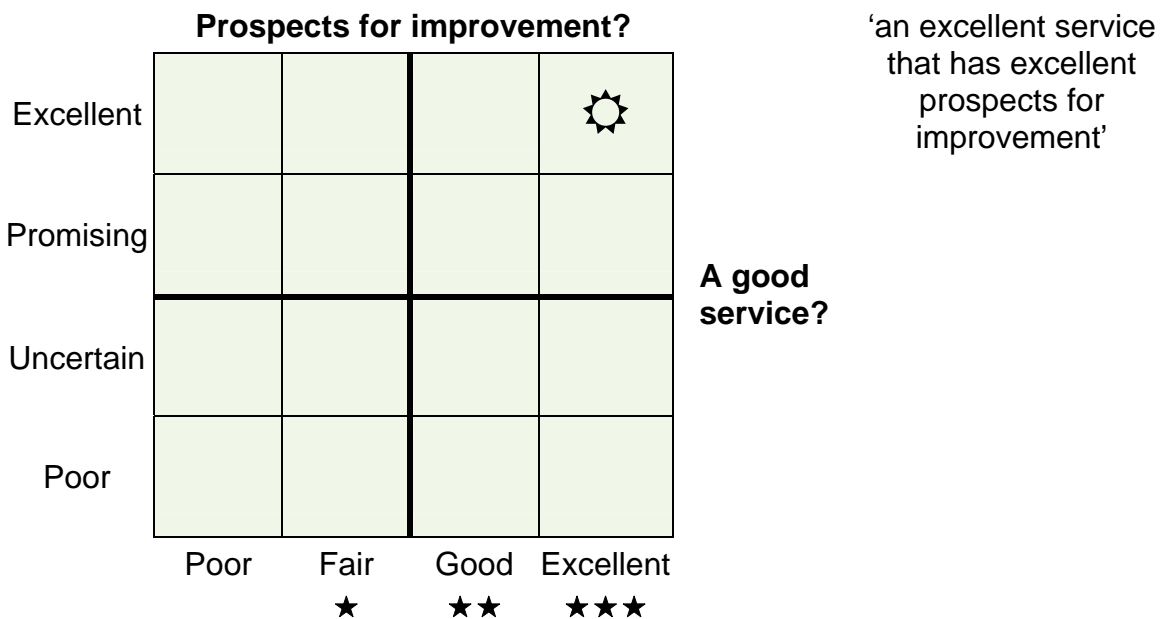
Summary

- 9 Although recognised and being addressed, BME communities and younger people remain under represented within the company. Work is still required to ensure all buildings are fully DDA compliant and that contractors apply equality and diversity policies with the same rigour as BH. Waiting times for adaptations to properties have been below the target BH sets itself for most of the period since the last inspection and have begun to improve only very recently.

Scoring the service

10 We have assessed Berneslai Homes as providing an ‘excellent’, three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 11 We found the service to be excellent because it has a range of strengths including:
- over £193 million investment raising 11,048 homes to a decent standard;
 - customers having quick and easy access to services by telephone and in person through Barnsley Connects;
 - some services such as reporting repairs or bidding for vacant properties are accessible 24 hours a day;
 - clear performance standards and comprehensive feedback to customers;
 - leaflets and the website are well designed and easy to understand;
 - policies and procedures that meet high standards of equality and diversity;
 - new, more diverse resident and tenant engagement mechanisms sit alongside traditional methods making it clearer how to get involved;

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

Scoring the service

- a new easy to use, CBL scheme offers choice for customers;
- high levels of customer satisfaction. Overall 86 per cent of customers are satisfied with services provided;
- ready to let properties are clean, meet a lettable standard, and are relet quickly minimising rent loss;
- high levels of rent and arrears are collected from both current and former tenants;
- emphasising prevention and a 'something doesn't look right' policy to identify and address potential tenancy issues early;
- a strong, co-ordinated and effective multi-agency response to anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and hate crime;
- local steering groups ensure high local standards of grounds maintenance, cleaning and action to address anti-social behaviour;
- local housing agreements clearly outlining tenants' rights and responsibilities;
- the cost of services is generally low, and quality is high;
- a high level of efficiencies generated across the company, with savings invested in services that impact on customers; and
- over 99.5 per cent of properties have a valid gas safety certificate.

12 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- access to service is limited by traditional 9 to 5 opening hours;
- written enquiries, including complaints, are not all responded to quickly;
- in resident involvement, younger people are under-represented;
- buildings are not all fully accessible to people with a disability;
- people with disabilities have had to wait a long time to have a property adapted; and
- collection rates of service charges from leaseholders are low, and little progress has been made in introducing management fees.

13 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- the company has strong and effective leadership and governance;
- key performance and customer satisfaction measures show a consistent upward trend;
- new services, such as the choice based lettings scheme, have been introduced and existing ones improved;
- significant efficiency savings have been achieved and re-invested in front line services;
- business planning arrangements and performance management are sound;
- BH is learning from customers and other service providers;
- effective training arrangements in place;

- BH continues to attract significant inward investment; and
- in general, procurement is being done effectively.

14 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- a small number of areas, where services have not improved as quickly as expected;
- staff sickness absence rates are above average; and
- future finance is uncertain.

Recommendations

- 15 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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

- R1** Improve access to services, in consultation with customers and an assessment of demand, by:
- extending the time people can access services;
 - extending the time people can report and get advice on anti-social behaviour;
 - extending the availability and range of appointments;
 - ensuring complaints are responded to quickly and within target times; and
 - ensuring written enquiries are answered quickly.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more people will be able to access services and advice;
- services will be provided at times convenient to customers; and
- customers will be more satisfied with services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by October 2009.

¹ 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.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the level of services provided to vulnerable people by:

- ensuring younger people are fully represented and views taken into account in designing and monitoring services;
- making sure the profile of all customers is known;
- making sure that all buildings and services within them are fully accessible to people with disabilities including making reasonable adjustments;
- improving the time it takes to assess and make adaptations to the homes of disabled people;
- improving access to bank accounts, credit and loans by working closely in partnership with the Credit Union; and
- providing access to gardening services for tenants, particularly those who can no longer manage their garden.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services will be designed to meet the needs of all customers;
- services can be adapted to meet individual needs;
- people with a disability can access services;
- the Council will comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
- some excluded people will be able to access banking services and there will be a reduced demand for lending from loan sharks; and
- tenants will be able to live independently in their homes for longer without the garden becoming a worry or a blight on the neighbourhood.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve the services provided to leaseholders by:

- improving the collection of service charges;
- having a clear plan to:
 - move leaseholders on to a common lease; and
 - introducing management charges.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- rental income from tenants will not be needed to subsidise the service; and
- leaseholders will pay the actual cost of the services they receive.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

R4 Improve the way services are managed by:

- ensuring the satisfaction of service users is regularly captured for all aspects of services; and
- all service areas benchmark costs and performance including quality.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- feedback can be used to identify any deterioration and inform improvements;
- each service area knows how its performance and costs compare to others; and
- service areas can all demonstrate whether they are good value for money for tenants.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2009.

16 We would like to thank the staff of Berneslai Homes and Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 16 to 27 February 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 17 Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC) services a population of 222,100¹. This has increased by 2 per cent since 1991. This is the third lowest population density among the 36 metropolitan districts in England.
- 18 The area covers 127 square miles and extends from the Pennines in the west to the Dearne Valley lowland in the east. The rural western part of the borough, with a population of just 21,000, has social and economic conditions that are similar to the national average; however there are isolated pockets of high deprivation. The more urban eastern part of the borough is more deprived with 22 per cent of Barnsley's population living in the most deprived 10 per cent of English Super Output Areas. BMBC is ranked 41st most deprived² out of 354 local authorities in England.
- 19 The proportion of residents from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities at the 2001 census was relatively low at 0.9 per cent, although the proportion has increased in recent years to roughly 3.3 per cent. Fourteen per cent of the population is aged 65 to 74, and 7 per cent are over the age of 74. The 75 plus age group has increased by 14 per cent since 1991. Notably, the number of young people aged 20 to 24 has declined by 39 per cent since 1991. Unemployment is above the regional and national averages.

The Council

- 20 The Council set up an all purpose unitary authority in 1974. It is Labour led with a majority of one. Labour holds 32 seats, the Barnsley Independent Group holds 24, the Conservatives hold six, and Liberal Democrats hold one.
- 21 The Council is a three-star authority which is improving well, under the Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework. Housing scored a four within this overall rating.

The service

- 22 As at 1 November 2008, Berneslai Homes managed 19,585 council-owned dwellings in the borough and there were 305 leaseholders. Over 12,000 properties have been sold under the Right to Buy. The majority of stock is traditional and was built before 1965. There are only three medium-rise blocks. Nearly two-thirds of the stock is houses and almost a quarter is bungalows. Sheltered accommodation accounts for 4 per cent of the stock, housing approximately 800 tenants.

¹ Office of National Statistics mid point 2006

² Index of multiple deprivation 2007, rank of average rank

Report

- 23 The gross rental income to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) in 2007/08 was £49.6 million. Capital programme expenditure was £28.7 million. The average rent in 2007/08 was £52.54 per week. This low resource base is also reflected in the Council having the second lowest combined management and maintenance subsidy allowance of any metropolitan authority.
- 24 The Council established an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Berneslai Homes in December 2002. Its management agreement for five years was renewed for a further five-year period in 2007. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services. It employs around 600 staff to deliver the service, including the Council's former in-house building service section.
- 25 The ALMO has a Board comprising an independently-appointed Chair and nine Directors. These comprise three tenants, three council nominees and three independent members. The Board is supported by three sub committees; Customer Services, Human Resources and Audit.
- 26 The Council has retained responsibility for housing strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing advice, and the central call service.
- 27 In February 2006, the Audit Commission inspected Berneslai Homes and judged it to provide a good, two-star service, with promising prospects for improvement.
- 28 Berneslai Homes is a partner in the Housing Regeneration Forum and the Heads of Agency group, which feed into the local strategic partnership. Berneslai Homes is a named partner within the Local Strategic Partnership and attend various delivery partnerships. The company is also a key player in improvements in the Housing Market Renewal Partnership area.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

29 The vision for Barnsley Council's Sustainable Community Strategy is:

A successful, uniquely distinctive 21st Century market town at the centre of a Borough that offers prosperity and a high quality of life for all.

30 The strategy has 11 ambitions, which are as follows.

- Our communities are attractive, clean and sustainable places to live.
- Barnsley is one of the safest towns in Yorkshire.
- Barnsley offers varied and exciting cultural opportunities to all.
- Barnsley is recognised for its community spirit and diversity.
- Barnsley people are healthier and live longer – adding life to years and years to life.
- Enabling adults to have healthy and fulfilling lives.
- Barnsley children and young people – aiming high, enjoying life and seizing opportunity.
- 21st century environments for 21st century learning, enterprise, skills and services.
- Building a prosperous and sustainable local economy.
- Barnsley has a high performing integrated transport system.
- Promote Barnsley, at home and abroad, as a great place to live, work and visit.

31 Each ambition has an outcome within the Local Area Agreement and for Ambition 1 it is to 'improve the quality of life in our communities including the quality of the housing stock and protecting the community from crime, disorder and other risks to their safety.'

32 Berneslai Homes' mission statement is: 'A fresh approach to people, homes and communities'.

33 Supporting this, BH has four strategic objectives linking the organisation, its strategies and plans. They are as follows.

- To deliver excellent customer services.
- To continue to deliver sustainable communities which are safe, healthy and attractive neighbourhoods which are accessible to all.
- To actively contribute to and influence partnership working within Barnsley and the sub-region.
- To be a successful well managed company.

How good is the service?

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

Access and customer care

- 34** In 2006 there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Under strong leadership and customer-focused staff, frontline services were improving and there was a DDA compliance plan. Satisfaction levels, however, were not universally high and the company was not fully DDA compliant.
- 35** In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong commitment to customer care, with clear performance standards and comprehensive feedback to customers. Leaflets and the website provide high quality information. Barnsley Connects gives customers quick access to information by telephone and in person. Customer satisfaction with landlord services is high. However, access to some services is limited to 'traditional' opening hours. Although access to some services by telephone are available 24/7, others are more limited. There are weaknesses in responding to some enquiries. BH is also not able to monitor how quickly its staff respond to telephone enquiries.
- 36** There is a strong corporate commitment to customer care. It is a key corporate objective, is championed by a board member and performance is closely monitored by the Customer Services Committee. A Customer Excellence Strategy for the period 2007 to 2009 provides strategic direction, and customer care features strongly in staff training. There is also a focus on customer care through the annual staff conference, induction for new staff and the annual appraisal process. This helps ensure staff understand the company's commitment to customer care and how it expects services to be delivered.
- 37** BH sets clear and challenging performance standards and provides good feedback to customers on performance achieved. Comprehensive service standards have been developed with customers for each service area. These include for example, rent collection rates that compare with other top performers and are achieved. Performance is closely monitored by the Customers Services Committee and standards are reviewed annually. Regular feedback is provided to customers, with information displayed quarterly on the website and in Barnsley Connects offices and discussed at residents' meetings. In addition, an annual report is provided to all tenants in the form of a useful calendar. The 2008 STATUS survey results show high levels of customer satisfaction¹.

¹ 2008 Status survey: Overall satisfaction with the service – 86 per cent (top quartile and up from 71 per cent in 2004/05) and satisfaction with the outcome of their enquiry – 71 per cent (marginally up from 70 per cent in 2004/5)

- 38** Customers influence the way services are delivered. Changes introduced as a result of the Service Excellence Assessment programme¹ are being captured and reported. Groups developed as part of the programme include the Customer Panel and the web review panel. Mystery shoppers have identified 64 areas where services can be improved, including: office signage; more accessible presentation of performance data on the website; and more attractive presentation of void properties for viewing. Feedback to tenants is provided in a variety of ways, such as through Barnsley Connects offices, on the website, through the quarterly 'Open House' newsletter and an annual report, and through the variety of meetings that take place. Eighty per cent of customers are satisfied with BH keeping them informed. The programme is delivering customer led improvements.
- 39** Customers can access services relatively easily. Frontline access is provided at nine strategically located, accessible and modern offices, under a service level agreement with the Council's Barnsley Connects service. Offices carry a full range of information leaflets and offer translation to assist service users whose first language is not English although personal callers have to wait an average of seven minutes to be seen. Customer mystery shopping supports the fact that offices deliver a good quality frontline service².
- 40** Access by other means is also relatively easy. Some services are available on line, including repair reporting, rent payment and waiting list registration. Others are available 24 hours a day over the phone, including repair reporting, empty property bids and alarm support services. Telephone enquiries are dealt with quickly. Over the period April to December 2008, 84 per cent of calls to Barnsley Connects were answered within 20 seconds, a low 2.97 per cent of calls were abandoned and the average wait time was 13 seconds. This means that customers can easily access services if they do not choose to visit an office during working hours.
- 41** Information is well presented. All leaflets, compacts and newsletters are written in plain language and carry useful contact information. An informative and easy to read tenant and leaseholder newsletter 'Open House' is produced four times each year, along with an annual report on performance. There is evidence of leaflets being tailored to meet the specific needs of their likely readership with, for example, the sheltered housing service leaflet being produced in large font as standard. Most literature carries a translation grid, with information on its availability in other languages and formats. This approach enables service users with special communication needs to access information easily.

¹ Includes mystery shopping telephone calls, mystery shopping visits, empty property checks, plain English communication and internal customer satisfaction surveys.

² Mystery shopping in 2008: how satisfied are you that your query was understood? – 83-89 per cent; overall how good was the visit? - 89 per cent.

How good is the service?

- 42 The website is easy to use and has useful information available to download. Navigation is aided by links on the homepage to specific information areas where data can be downloaded for future reference. The website has translation facilities and the opportunity to download translation software. The site also has an easy option to increase the font size and a 'Browsealoud' feature. This enables service users whose first language is not English and those with visual impairment to access information and services.
- 43 Access is limited by traditional office opening hours. Although trial extensions of opening hours have been undertaken, these have not been taken forward and action has not been taken to respond to the 11 per cent of customers, surveyed in 2008, who said they would like offices to be open on Saturday mornings. Telephone access to advice and information is also restricted. After 5 pm a 'goldenline' (answerphone) number is provided for people to report ASB, although people reporting emergencies are directed to call the police. These limitations mean that some customers, such as those who work during the week or are seeking reassurance that action will be taken, may have more difficulty accessing services.
- 44 Performance in responding to written enquiries and complaints is weak. Only 73 per cent of letters receive a response within the target time of five days. Also, only 63 per cent of stage 1 complaints are addressed within the ten-day standard, although an explanation is sent, advising on when a full reply can be expected, and only 75 per cent of stage two (Director level) complaints receive a response within the 15 day target. In addition, inspector checks identified that records are not always complete or accurate and that performance figures are faulty. This means a significant number of customers have to wait longer than advertised for a response to their enquiry or complaint and BH is not managing performance on the basis of accurate data.
- 45 BH does not make full use of technology to support service delivery. Its current telephony system is not able to provide automated performance information about telephone calls received directly by BH staff, despite these numbers being widely advertised and well used alongside those for Barnsley Connects, and mystery shopping checks are not sufficiently frequent to be used alone as a reliable mechanism to monitor the service. BH also makes little use of SMS text messages as a means of communication. Some use of bulk texts is made to remind customers to pay rent but customers cannot text in enquiries or responses and they are not used as appointment reminders. This means younger people are not being offered one of their preferred methods of communication.

Diversity

- 46 In 2006, we found that the ALMO had more strengths than weaknesses in this area. It had appropriate policies, had recruited a specialist officer to drive forward diversity and was profiling its customer base. Partnership working was strong and the company influenced contractor compliance. The Board, however, did not provide proactive leadership on diversity issues and work was required on impact assessments and monitoring of satisfaction data to ensure services were not being delivered in a discriminatory or differential way.

- 47 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The company has a commitment and clear framework to promote diversity, using training and effective performance management. It has achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. The use of equality impact assessments is well embedded. Customer representation is becoming more diverse although younger people are still under represented. BME communities are not well represented within the company at Board and senior management level and within the workforce generally. Work is still required to ensure buildings are fully DDA compliant and that contractors apply equality and diversity policies with the same rigour as BH.
- 48 The company has a clear framework to deliver equalities and diversity. This is based on an updated equality and diversity policy and a community cohesion strategy. Papers to the Board are required to highlight the equality and diversity implications of potential decisions and a board champion is in place. All Board members, managers and staff have received compulsory training on equality and diversity and it is part of the induction process for new appointees. BH is making good progress in assessing the impact of its policies and procedures. It has completed its first phase of fifteen key equality impact assessments, with a second lower level programme in place to do a further sixteen. In addition BH is working to comply with the code of practice on racial equality in housing. The company works effectively with a number of partnerships such as the LSP's Equality and Diversity Inclusion Partnership (EDIP) and BBEMI (Barnsley Black and Ethnic Minority Initiative). Support is offered to groups such as MARCO (Migrant, Asylum Seeker, Refugee, Community Organisation) by provision of a community base. As a result of these assessments a number of changes have been introduced. For example, sight impaired customers can be provided with a password to confirm that visiting staff are from BH and same sex visits are offered.
- 49 BH's approach to diversity has been externally validated. Assessment confirms it is achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, commending BH's positive single message and the way performance management and equality impact assessments are embedded into the way BH conducts its business. The company has agreed to meet the five commitments regarding the employment, retention, training and career development of disabled employees under Job Centre Plus's Positive about Disabled People scheme and is ranked 92nd out of 317 organisations assessed against the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index. Feedback from these validations has been used to drive change, such as the formation of an All Barnsley Public Sector LGB employee forum and a Barnsley Community LGBT group.
- 50 A comprehensive service is offered to tenants to translate information into a language or format that meets their requirements. This incorporates face to face interpretations, British Sign Language, Braille, audio and large print. All staff carry language identification cards and can use Language Line services to communicate with tenants. A guide to service standards, key contacts and the approach to translation is available in common community languages.

How good is the service?

- 51** BH has a robust approach to dealing with domestic abuse and hate crime. Its policy and details of the action it will take is well publicised. BH is an active member of multi-agency operational and strategic partnerships, Barnsley Connects offices are hate crime reporting centres and all¹ impact team staff have received training in recognising and dealing with incidents. In the period July to December 2008 115 cases were reported to the domestic abuse forum, of which 37 involved BH tenants. Appropriate action taken included six tenants being re-housed and a number of target hardening initiatives. A leaflet was distributed in one neighbourhood with a particularly high level of incidents which reminded customers of BH's position, its resolve to take action, and included details of how to report an incident. Early indications are that the number of reports is falling.
- 52** In partnership with the Council, BH is working to improve conditions for some of the most excluded of its customers. It recently led a successful bid for CLG grant to improve the Smithies Gypsy and Traveller site, which it manages on behalf of the Council. This £550,000 investment, along with a further £150,000 contribution from the Council and two further bids due for phases two and three of the work, will improve and extend the size of the site to secure an additional six pitches. Improved facilities will help to meet the particular needs of this group.
- 53** BME communities are not fully represented within the company. BME communities are not well represented within the company at Board and senior management level and within the workforce generally. BH recognises this and is working to redress the imbalance. Working with PATH² Yorkshire, BH is providing training placements for local people from minority communities in housing management as well as in construction services. Additional BME specific surveys are undertaken to ensure results are based on a reliable sample size. A BME forum has been established and six people from BME communities have been recruited as mystery shoppers. Performance results are disaggregated by diversity strands. Results show BME customer satisfaction is lower in some areas and higher in others. For example in repairs, although BME customers are generally more satisfied than average with some aspects, such as appointments and the service overall, they were less satisfied with the quality of information provided or the disruption caused³. It is too early to assess the outcomes of these initiatives.

¹ Impact teams and officers are BH's tenancy and estate officers

² PATH Yorkshire supports employers across the region to turn diversity policy into practice through Positive Action Training programmes.

³ Between April and December 2008 100 per cent of BME customers were satisfied with appointments and with the overall repairs service, compared to the average of 83 per cent and 89 per cent. Only 82 per cent were happy with the quality of the information provided and 88 per cent with the disruption caused compared to averages of 90 and 96 per cent.

- 54** BH has a basic understanding of its customer profile. Information is held for about 72 per cent of customers, covering gender, age and elements of ethnicity, vulnerability, communication needs and disability. Full information, including sexual orientation, is gathered on new tenants and those subject to surveys and tenancy checks. A full refresh of information is planned in 2009/10, including gathering fuller information on sexual orientation. The profile has been used strategically to change the way services are delivered, for example by making personal contact with people who fall into rent arrears before issuing a formal demand. Current data enables services to be tailored to individual needs to some extent, such as sending communications to 1,349 tenants in large print and recording communication requirements on job tickets, where they are known. With such limited profile data, however, services cannot always be tailored to meet the needs of customers with vulnerabilities or particular communication requirements.
- 55** Not all areas are DDA compliant. BH has not carried out an audit of DDA compliance in the communal areas of its general stock. This means it has not assessed whether entrances, halls and stairways are accessible for customers and their visitors or quantified the costs of making reasonable adjustments. There are also question marks over the robustness of some DDA assessments carried out in sheltered schemes. Entry at some sheltered schemes was by key through a door which manually opened outwards making it difficult for wheelchair users to enter. Communal kitchen fixtures and fittings were set at a height difficult for wheelchair users to use. In addition eight of BH's fifteen community buildings are not fully DDA compliant. People with mobility problems may have difficulty using these buildings.
- 56** Younger tenants, including younger BME tenants, have a lower level of satisfaction than general tenants. BH is working with customers to identify what the issues are but little progress has been made with young people so far. None attended a focus group arranged to explore the issues. BH is considering different ways to engage young people. Without their engagement, services will not be designed to meet their needs.
- 57** There is a mixed approach to managing equality and diversity among consultants and contractors. The procurement process involves reviewing the equality and diversity policies of bidders and contracts require compliance with legislation. BH has not used key performance indicators, rewards or sanctions, however, and has not set targets for contractors on the diversity of their workforces. A recent review of contractor compliance demonstrates that partner policies are less rigorous than BH's. For example, on recruitment, adverts from its main contractor partner contain no diversity statements and it does not monitor applications by diversity strands. Failure to set targets or monitor these issues effectively allows poor performance to go unchallenged, despite the fact that they are often the 'face of the company' for customers.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 58** In 2006, the company was on target to deliver decent homes before 2010 and was investing only in sustainable stock. Effective partnerships and robust performance systems were in place. There was, however, a forecast funding gap to maintain the decent homes standard beyond 2013 and systems for managing information about the location of asbestos were not being used to their full capacity.
- 59** In this inspection, we found stock investment to be an area of strength. Most decent homes improvement works are complete and done to a high standard. The programme has involved customers and been effectively delivered. Customer satisfaction with DHS work and their home is high. Wherever funding could be accessed, the work has been supported by environmental improvements, although this has been limited. Systems for managing information about the presence of asbestos have improved, but still have limitations.
- 60** Customer involvement has helped shape the programme. BH consulted all of its TARAs before deciding on a 'whole house' rather than elemental approach. Customer representatives were involved in the selection of DHS contractors and the choices of fixtures and fittings offered. They are also represented on the decent homes delivery team, which monitors programme delivery, and the communications task team which has a role throughout the programme in designing information for customers. This helps ensure that customer requirements have been at the forefront of BH's approach in all aspects of the way the programme is delivered.
- 61** The DHS programme is customer focused. The information pack for customers is comprehensive and reasonable choice is offered on fixtures and fittings, with customer input into kitchen layout. Ongoing and intensive support is provided by liaison officers throughout the process, and BH has been flexible in dealing with vulnerability issues, such as the need for respite, adapted fittings or restricted working hours in individual properties. Customers who want to refuse elements of the work have one to one discussions to try and resolve problems, and very high refusal rates on sheltered schemes in early phases were effectively addressed in this way¹. Only one scheme to date has had a significant need for decanting and this process was managed effectively. After work which generates a need for decoration, cash allowances are paid and vulnerable people are referred to a low cost community enterprise decorating company for assistance. This approach has helped minimise the disruption and distress that large scale works inevitably have on customers.

¹ Reducing initial refusal rates from 50 to 8 per cent.

- 62 Customer satisfaction with DHS work is high. Average satisfaction levels across the main programme¹ were 91 per cent. These have understandably dropped to 85 per cent in the past two years as customer expectations have become harder to meet as they progressively qualify for fewer elemental replacements. Overall customer satisfaction with their home has increased to a high 85 per cent (up from 74 per cent in 2004/5).
- 63 The approach to programming DHS work has been sensible. This has been based on 'worst first' in sustainable areas. Although problematic to manage, it would have been unjustifiable for BH not to address the poorest quality housing first or to have begun work in areas where pockets of investment might have been overtaken by demolition decisions. Where low demand or structural problems made improvement an unviable option, BH has demolished stock², following extensive customer consultation. This approach means 95.5 per cent of the stock will be decent by March 2009 and 100 per cent decency will be achieved by the end of 2010. It has also freed up land for development to meet needs³.
- 64 Improvement work includes more than the minimum requirements of the decent homes standard. All kitchen and bathroom replacements include redecoration and replacement flooring. Roofs, doors and windows have also been replaced and rewiring and insulation has been brought up to modern standards, if required. BH has developed effective solutions to improve thermal efficiency and address structural problems in the non-standard stock which it has retained. This includes thermal render, work to internal walls, loft insulation and re-roofing, depending on the design of the property. This approach has allowed BH to maximise the benefits for customers from investment
- 65 Despite the fact that BH has had no funding for environmental improvements, it has also tried to improve the streetscape and provide defensible space by accessing funding from other agencies in the areas where it was available. For example, in the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder area a £3.5 million grant has funded boundary walls and off-road parking at 654 properties; the Green Corridor⁴ initiative has provided £975,000 to fund boundary walls, off-road parking, fencing and landscaping to 239 properties and communal areas in another area; and boundary walls and off-road parking have been installed to 122 properties in another area, using Regional Housing Board funding, as part of a wider environmental and traffic management scheme. This does not however meet the level of need on estates. For example, because it has not had the resources to do environmental works in most areas, there are still 5,030 properties without adequate fencing. Estates are made more sustainable although more investment is needed.

¹ The programme ran until March 2007, with £193.6 million invested in improvements to 11,048 properties.

² Since December 2002 1,186 properties, of which 206 were non traditional have been demolished and a further 366 demolitions are pending.

³ 179 new units for rent, 191 for sale and 24 for shared ownership to date, with a further 590 for rent, 802 for sale and 199 for shared ownership in the pipeline.

⁴ The Green Corridor is a housing led project, developed by Doncaster, Barnsley and Wakefield for an area of Yorkshire which has a common rural mining legacy and a need for regeneration. Projects are funded from three sources: the Regional Housing Board; the Housing Corporation (now the Homes and Communities Agency) and local housing associations; and local authorities and their transfer organisations.

How good is the service?

- 66 BH has sufficient asset management information to plan and deliver investment. Its stock condition database has limitations but allows basic programming, reporting and financial modelling. Although some of the company's original assumptions about component life have proved to be wrong, there has been a balance of reductions and extensions in lifespan which have allowed each phase of the improvement programme to stay broadly in budget. Properties are fully surveyed before work commences and a further 10 per cent of properties which have not been subject to improvement works were surveyed last year to support the 30-year capital planning process. This means the company has sufficient data to inform its work until a forward surveying strategy is developed, following the outcome of the forthcoming stock option appraisal.
- 67 Cyclical maintenance and checks are generally carried out in accordance with legislation and good practice. A six year external, and seven year internal cyclical painting programme are in place. There are also arrangements for appropriate fire and smoke alarm, emergency lighting and PAT testing, for lift servicing and legionella inspections. This approach means that routine maintenance issues are addressed and the safety of customers is protected.
- 68 BH generally manages asbestos risks effectively. It is only removed if this is essential in order to do other work, or where its condition deteriorates. Asbestos awareness training is provided for most staff and specialist training for relevant staff, with partner contractors taking the same approach. Personal protective equipment is issued to anyone likely to come into contact with hazardous materials. A comprehensive register of asbestos in properties is in place, with records held on 70 per cent¹ of domestic properties. Type 2 or 3² surveys, based on risk, are carried out wherever DHS work is planned, on all voids and before all demolitions. All nine of BH's offices and the communal areas of its sheltered schemes have been surveyed and a programme of surveys on the communal areas of the general stock will be complete by December 2010. Detailed risk assessments are in place for each office, sheltered scheme and multi-story block and these are re-inspected at intervals of between three months and 2.5 years, to determine whether deterioration has taken place. This means those staff who are likely to come into contact with asbestos know how to identify and are equipped to deal with it.
- 69 There are weaknesses, however, in the quality of information about asbestos which is passed to individual operatives. Messages for operatives simply state whether or not asbestos are present in the property. This effectively makes them reliant on their managers to provide more information via a phone call which may not be made during busy periods. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the external contractor is provided with a data update only monthly, so the information may not be up to date. These various weaknesses mean there is some risk that busy operatives will not have comprehensive information about the asbestos in their workplace, despite the fact that the company holds it.

¹ 13,753

² In addition to locating the presence and extent of any suspect Asbestos Containing Materials in the building and assess their condition, Type 2 surveys collect and analyse representative samples for the presence of asbestos. Type 3 surveys take more samples including those areas that may be difficult to reach.

- 70** There is no programme for ten yearly electrical checks, despite this now being common practise among responsible landlords. Properties are checked when they receive DHS works, are void or have electrical repairs done, but a significant number of properties have not fallen into any of these categories during the last ten years. BH intends to put in place a programme of checks after 2010 but has not yet collated data on the history of its electrical installations planned or costed this programme. This means there is a risk that a number of installations may be unsafe or become unsafe over forthcoming years.

Responsive repairs

- 71** In 2006, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area of the service. Performance on responsive repairs was improving, there was effective performance and budget management and there were systems to increase the relatively low number of repairs completed on the first visit and of appointments made for non-urgent repairs.
- 72** Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. It is easy to report a repair and performance in completing repairs within timescales and by appointment is strong. The majority of repairs are planned and customers are very satisfied with the service. Customers have limited appointment options, however, and there are some weaknesses in frontline systems for ordering repairs.
- 73** Arrangements for ordering repairs are customer focused. It is easy to report a repair and most are done by appointment. One telephone number connects customers during weekdays to a call centre operated by Barnsley Connects 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Staff of both can make appointments and chase up repairs. Trade operatives are on-call out of hours to deliver a 'make safe' service. This means customers can easily report repairs.
- 74** Performance in completing repairs within publicised timescales is strong. In the first three quarters of 2008/09, a high 98.7 per cent of emergency repairs and 98.4 per cent of routine repairs were completed within target timescales. Over the same period, 95 per cent of urgent repairs met the target¹ and 93.3 per cent of appointments were made and kept, which is a small reduction on last year's 94.17 per cent figure. Around three quarters of repairs and maintenance, 74 per cent, are carried out as planned works rather than responsive repairs. BH responds quickly to customers reporting a repair.
- 75** Customers are satisfied with the repairs service. 2008 STATUS² satisfaction levels of 81 per cent³ with the general repairs service are above average. Over 90 (90.26) per cent of customers are satisfied with the quality of repair in the first three quarters of 2008/09. Properties are kept in a good state of repair.

¹ Includes only 96 per cent performance on the urgent works covered by right to repair legislation.

² This survey is a statutory requirement from DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) to assess customers' satisfaction with housing services. A Status survey must be completed every three years, as a minimum.

³ 79 per cent in general stock and 85 per cent in sheltered.

How good is the service?

- 76** There are some weaknesses in repair ordering systems. Although customer profile information is available, out of hours BC staff do not routinely check it. This means orders may not meet customer communication requirements at the point of ordering, or make appropriate arrangements for vulnerable people. BC is unable to make appointments for customers about some issues, such as gas repairs, because a lack of information about warranties requires it to refer the matter direct to the contractor's gas team. This means the customer cannot be given an appointment at the point of reporting the problem and chase-up calls can be unproductive because BC is not always able to help without referring the matter to the relevant BH department, via email. There are also only limited appointment options. No weekend appointments are offered and the 'twilight' (4.30pm to 6.00pm) slots which were introduced shortly before this inspection are only available for relatively small scale jobs. Also, daytime appointments are only offered on the basis of morning or afternoon slots. This limited flexibility means BH is failing to take account of common requirements, such as the need to avoid 'school run' times.
- 77** Weaknesses in arrangements around rechargeable repairs have only very recently been addressed. Until recently, Barnsley Connects staff have not had access to repair price lists and still have only limited access to vulnerability data, making it difficult for them to enforce the policy at the point of ordering. This has understandably resulted in staff ordering work without recharging it. Although a more robust system is now in place, it had been operating for less than a month at the time of this inspection and its impact could not yet be demonstrated.
- 78** BH does not always use data effectively to drive service improvement. BH's 'right first time' indicator only monitors jobs done in one visit, ignoring quality and cost issues and whether the job was done within target timescale and/or to the appointment. This means it is missing an opportunity to track how all the factors that demonstrate a good service from the customer perspective are operating together. In addition BH has not investigated the anomaly between customer satisfaction of 62 to 76 per cent with repairs completed in one visit and partner organisations' audited figures showing the actual rate to be closer to 95 per cent. BH has been unable to provide any trend analysis or identify common problems identified via the survey which have been used to drive service improvement.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 79** In 2006, we found that there were as many weaknesses in the service as there are strengths. Although void repairs performance was generally improving, there were a number of long-term voids which continued to blight estates, and the standard of void properties being re-let was not high.
- 80** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength. Empty properties are relet quickly and repair costs are low. Ready to let properties are clean and meet the lettable standard. A high percentage of customers are satisfied with their condition and very few properties are refused.

- 81** BH performs lets empty properties quickly and is among the best performers. A range of process improvements, the demolition of large numbers of low demand properties and the near completion of the decent homes improvement programme have helped reduce void turnover¹ and expenditure, contributing to significantly improved performance. It took an average of only 25.5 days to re-let properties in the first three quarters of this year, against a 26 day target. Performance improvement is particularly clear in the repairs element of the process, which dropped from an average of 18.34 days in 2007/08 to an impressive 9.3 days in the first three quarters of 2008/09. The average cost of bringing empty properties up to a lettable standard is also low, at an average cost of £1,079 last year. BH's approach means rent loss is minimised and funding is available for other initiatives.
- 82** Our randomly selected visits to properties ready to let confirmed they are clean, have tidy gardens and meet a basic lettable standard. A copy of the standard is provided to customers when they are offered the property, which helps them understand what to expect and allows them to check for themselves whether the property they view meets the standard. A fixed rate £100 voucher is offered to new tenants to spend on DIY materials, whatever the decorative state of the property, which helps provide clarity about the commitment they are making. This approach has contributed to the fact that 91.5 per cent of customers who accept properties are satisfied with their condition and only 8 per cent of offers were refused in the first half of 2008/09.
- 83** Performance management in this area is strong. Challenging targets are in place for each element of the process (for both major and minor works). Systems for managing individual voids are driven locally, with repairs, estates and lettings staff having access to daily 'real time' reports on performance and meeting weekly in each impact area to explore problems. Higher level issues feed into the main six weekly management meetings with partners, covering all repairs void issues. This approach helps ensure any issues are quickly identified and resolved.
- 84** The time taken to let properties once they have been repaired has deteriorated from 9.86 days in 2007/08 to 12.97 days in the first three quarters of 2008/09. This is largely the result of difficulties in letting BH's remaining low demand bedsit properties. Turnaround times of as many as 800 days in extreme instances distort global performance figures because early pre-allocation of properties through the CBL system and property viewings during the notice and repair period do not impact on these long term voids as they do on others². The global target has been set at a higher level to take these longer empty periods into account³, which means that clear messages are not being transmitted to staff and customers about how long it is acceptable for less exceptional properties to be empty.

¹ Of 410 empty properties, 104 are routine, 40 are undergoing major works, 43 are being used for decanting and 223 are awaiting demolition.

² Of 50 properties ready to let, 34 are either bedsits or 1 bed sheltered properties and 22 have been empty for over 12 weeks.

³ The 26 day target is lower than the 25 day out turn performance for 2007/08.

How good is the service?

Gas servicing

- 85** In 2006, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Performance had improved and procedural changes were in place to maximise the likelihood of further improvement over time.
- 86** Gas servicing is now an area of strength. The vast majority of properties have a valid gas safety certificate and there is strong performance in carrying out servicing in timescale. Robust arrangements are in place to gain access. However, there are some weaknesses in procedures.
- 87** Most properties have valid gas safety certificates. Only 36 properties (less than 0.5 per cent of the serviceable stock) have lapsed certificates (of which 27 have been outstanding for less than three months and the remaining nine for between three and six months). Court action is instigated shortly after certificates expire and is pending in nineteen cases. Most (99.9 per cent of 862 properties) solid fuel appliances have also been serviced within the past year and none are overdue by more than six months. This means that risks to customers are minimised.
- 88** There is a robust and customer focused process to ensure early access to service gas appliances. Servicing is done by appointment during the two months prior to the service being due, with evening and Saturday morning appointments available. Notices and over-lock stickers are used appropriately when appointments are missed, to highlight the importance of the work being done. Software 'pop ups' on the housing management computer system also prompt staff to make an appointment if the customer makes contact on another issue. Advance block bookings in the Magistrates' Court help minimise delays in obtaining warrants to gain entry using relevant legislation¹, but the dual approach of legal action alongside ongoing attempts to make contact in person and by letter means only 10 of the 187 warrants obtained last year resulted in forced entry. This approach means every attempt is made to alert customers to the need for servicing and firm action is taken to ensure the company discharges its legal responsibilities.
- 89** Associated procedures are robust. For example, risk is minimised effectively and ongoing monitoring takes place in cases where customers are sleeping temporarily in rooms with fixed, open flued appliances. Responsible use is also made of programmers which interrupt the gas supply if a safety certificate lapses. These are fitted as standard control panels on all new heating systems but are only armed if a warrant is enforced (80 are currently armed). The programmer flashes for 60 days prior to the expiry and goes into 'fail' mode when the certificate expires. Even at this stage the programme still allows customers access to sufficient hot water and heat until an appointment can be made. These systems significantly reduce risks for vulnerable households containing, for example, babies and the frail elderly.

¹ Section 81/Schedule 3 of Environmental Protection Act 1990

- 90 Management and performance management systems in this area are generally strong. A supporting database is kept up to date with information about new installations, empty property gas checks and gas servicing. Both contractors perform well, issuing gas safety certificates immediately and updating the database within 24 hours of servicing. Monthly performance meetings of all three parties explore performance trend information. This means reliable systems are in place to help BH manage the service.
- 91 There are, however, some weaknesses in procedures. For example, letters, notices and stickers in the 'no access' procedure do not carry strap lines advising customers who do not read English of their contents. This means some customers may miss these very important messages early in the process, and unnecessary and expensive legal action may be taken against them. This procedure was rectified whilst the inspection team was on site.
- 92 Limited assurance or feedback is gathered on the quality of work. Each contractor carries out a 1 per cent technical check of work in order to retain their CORGI accreditations. However there is no technical quality assurance carried out by the client or by independent external validators around gas servicing or gas repairs. Although some use is made of customer satisfaction data in discussions with operatives and in enforcing and enhancing processes, satisfaction of 96.75 per cent is based on a survey which covers both servicing and repairs and has a low 3 per cent return rate. This means BH is not maximising opportunities to satisfy itself that servicing is carried out to a consistently high standard.

Aids and adaptations

- 93 In 2006, there were marginally more strengths than weaknesses in this area, with improving waiting times and some recycling of equipment.
- 94 Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. Adaptations are carried out in a customer focussed way, to an acceptable standard and achieve very high customer satisfaction. Minor adaptations are carried out within three weeks. However customers still have to wait a long time for major adaptation and this period has only recently begun to improve.
- 95 Adaptations are carried out in a customer focussed way. Good quality information is available for customers throughout the process. Initial requests can be made by a wide range of means and minor works are ordered immediately. A partnership panel of BH technical staff, BH lettings staff and occupational therapists (OTs) meets to consider whether more major works should be approved, once an OT assessment is complete. The panel's ethos is to help customers live independently in their own homes, with minimal use of rehousing as an option. Work is prioritised in a reasonable manner, done by appointment and to an acceptable standard. This approach results in high satisfaction of 98 per cent.
- 96 BH still makes use of recyclable equipment, wherever possible. Temporary ramps are in common use and a stair lift parts store recycles scrapped lifts. The ALMO has also recently begun using 'pod' bathroom extensions which are comparative in cost to traditional extensions but can be reused for approximately one third of the cost of a new build and have a 30-year life. Although none of the five in use has yet been re-sited, there is scope for this to reduce costs in the medium to longer term.

How good is the service?

- 97** The speed of carrying out adaptations is below target. It took an average of 21 days¹ to complete minor adaptations in the first three quarters of 2008/09. More significantly, however, it took on average 138 calendar days² to carry out major works in the same period. The first half of the major works process, which is largely taken up with the OT assessment, took an average of 62 days against a 43 day target and the second half of the process, which is largely dependent on BH doing the work, took an average of 57 days against a 42 day target. Although managers have now put in place appropriate performance management systems and performance has begun to improve³, some customers have waited significantly longer than necessary. This means that BH is not performing in line with the standards it has set and publicised.
- 98** BH has missed opportunities to make this service more customer focused. Most significantly, it does not decorate after bathroom adaptations, despite the fact that these typically damage existing decoration. It would be a relatively inexpensive addition to the work and it is done routinely on improvement programmes. This means those customers least able to rectify damage caused by the work are expected to do so without help.

Housing income management

- 99** In 2006 there were marginally more strengths than weaknesses in this service. The company offered a range of payment options and gave adequate information about rent accounts. It performed in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations on current arrears recovery. It was missing opportunities, however, to make better use of partnerships through joint take-up and other initiatives, and was performing poorly in collecting former tenant arrears.
- 100** In this inspection we found that this is an area of strength. Prompt action and personal contact is delivering results. Collection arrangements are sensitive to individual needs and collection rates from both current and former tenants are high. Eviction rates are low and falling. BH works effectively with partners to promote financial inclusion. Customers are well signposted to independent debt advice, although they have to wait for specialist advice. Customer satisfaction is not yet measured however, and work with the Credit Union is not fully effective.
- 101** Good quality information is provided to tenants advocating a 'rent first' culture. A leaflet 'How much will my home cost me?' is issued with the offer letter and new tenants are advised about the consequences of non-payment at sign up. The newsletter includes articles on, for example, the importance of paying rent at Christmas and the dangers of borrowing from door step lenders. Rent records and statements show all charges separately so are transparent. The incentive of entry to a prize draw encourages tenants to maintain a clear rent account. This approach means tenants understand what they are liable for and how to pay.

¹ Against a modest 19 day target.

² Against an 85 day target.

³ 123 days for quarter 3 of 2008/09 from referral to completion.

- 102** BH actively promotes cheaper methods of paying rent. A wide range of payment options is offered, including cash payments at convenient local stores, in recognition of the fact that this is still how most tenants choose to pay. Direct debit is promoted, however, at sign up, on the web site, in the newsletter and via an annual prize draw. A campaign targeting people paying by cheque by offering high street vouchers to switch to direct debit also attracted an additional 180 people to this payment method and 30 per cent of rent transactions in 2009 are now by direct debit or standing order, compared to 14 per cent in 2005.
- 103** A strong emphasis is placed on early action and personal contact, and the recovery process is sensitive and flexible. A payment reference is provided at sign up so that tenants can start paying rent straight away, contact is made as soon as rent falls into arrears by two weeks and notices seeking possession are hand delivered. Officers are encouraged to make contact with tenants at every stage and are required to contact them before key actions are taken. Before issuing any letters, staff check whether tenants are vulnerable and adapt their approach accordingly. For example, where the tenant's profile identifies the tenant as over 65, personal contact by telephone is made before any formal demand is issued, and support workers are involved where appropriate. Large print or translated letters are issued where they have been identified as necessary. This approach helps ensure unnecessary distress is avoided.
- 104** Rent collection rates are high. Collection rates are in the top 25 per cent of performers at 98.95 per cent in 2007/08¹ and, only 2.5 per cent of tenants owe more than seven weeks rent. Comparisons through the Northern Rents Benchmarking Group show Berneslai to have the lowest arrears per property², current and former tenants, of the comparator group of eight. High levels of rent collected and low costs leave resources to be invested elsewhere.
- 105** Eviction is used only as a last resort and eviction rates are low³. The number of notices issued is rising but this is in response to representations by the CAB and judges that reducing use of notices was resulting in individual cases having higher levels of arrears. This demonstrates that BH listens to advice given by other members of the court user group.
- 106** BH is also successful in collecting debts from former tenants. These are vigorously pursued by letter, telephone and visit, once traced, and cases are referred to a local debt collection agent if this is unsuccessful. Attachment of earnings is used if a former tenant is in employment. In comparison to others, BH's performance is good⁴ and only a relatively small amount of debt is written off⁵ as uncollectable. This approach means BH is doing what it can to maximise its income.

¹ Top quartile was 98.3 per cent in 2007/08.

² Arrears owed by current tenants to BH average at £22.29 per property compared to a range of £22.29-£53.66; arrears owed by former tenants average at £1.94 per property compared to a range of £1.16 to £9.02.

³ In 2007/08 0.31 per cent of tenants were evicted as a result of rent arrears and only 0.2 per cent were evicted in the first three quarters of 2008/09.

⁴ Between April and September 2008 BH collected 11.9 per cent of former tenants arrears - 2nd out of 15 comparators and above ALMO (9.62 per cent) & LA (8.27 per cent) averages. The average value of each debt owed to BH at £240 is the lowest of its comparator group of 15; the ALMO average is £699 and LA average is £578.

⁵ Over the 6 month period April to September 2008 9.63 per cent of arrears owed by former tenants was written off. This ranked 5th out of 15 in its comparator group and well below the ALMO average (17.67 per cent) and LA average (17.19 per cent).

How good is the service?

- 107** In general, BH works effectively in partnership with other agencies at both a strategic and operational level. The Barnsley Financial Inclusion Group, which reports to the local strategic partnership, has a financial inclusion strategy in which BH is a key partner. This aims to reduce the number of working age people who are unemployed and BH Impact staff contribute by identifying potential people for work and education opportunities. BH has a positive working relationship with the Council's Housing Benefit section via regular meetings and close day to day contact and it takes every opportunity to signpost tenants to independent debt and welfare benefit advice. All new tenants and those receiving a notice seeking possession are provided with a guide to free money advice in Barnsley, all arrears letters include contact details for advice agencies and all staff have been trained by the Citizens Advice Bureau to advise on prioritising debts and benefit maximisation. BH is also working on a new loan shark initiative to support the Council's Trading Standard department and the government's illegal money lending team. Information about this has been included on the website and in the newsletter. These approaches help reduce the likelihood of the spiralling debts which could threaten rent payments.
- 108** The partnership work with Barnsley Credit Union is not as effective as it might be. Although a key partner, the credit union does not regularly attend meetings of the Financial Inclusion Group. At an operational level, staff liaise effectively with each other with positive outcomes to prevent evictions and reduce rent arrears, the services of the Credit Union are well publicised by BH and staff are encouraged to join. However the Credit Union do not regularly attend meetings of the Financial Inclusion Group that includes a number of other partners including the Council and the Citizens Advice Bureau. A key part of financial inclusion is to help people on low incomes obtain bank accounts and reduce dependence on loan sharks. Without the Credit Union's involvement and pulling together, the objectives of the financial inclusion strategy cannot be fully achieved and help will not reach some of the most vulnerable people.
- 109** Currently there is also no arrangement to help BH tenants get quick access to debt advice, other than in emergencies. With increased demand for CAB services as a result of the economic downturn, this means people have to wait two to three weeks for general advice and six to seven weeks for specialist debt advice. This has been recognised and BH is paying for the services of a specialist debt worker to work with appropriate tenants from April 2009. Action taken jointly to promote welfare benefits has also had mixed success. For example, there was a successful series of drop in sessions organised with the Benefits Advice team in community buildings and in sheltered schemes but a recent radio campaign with HB and the CAB had limited success, with only five or six people responding.
- 110** There are also some weaknesses in the way arrears work is managed. For example, the service does not gather feedback to understand how satisfied people are with it and where improvements are necessary. There is also little use of profiling debt to target additional effort in a particular area, type of debt or customer. These are missed opportunities to maximise efficiency and drive improvement in the service.

Resident involvement

- 111** In 2006 there were more weaknesses than strengths in this service area. Active decision makers were still drawn predominantly from traditional structures and there were limited resources dedicated to this work. Although the company had a range of well-publicised opportunities for involvement and training, priorities for resident involvement and a plan to deliver them were not clear.
- 112** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. New engagement mechanisms sit alongside traditional methods, it is clearer how customers can get involved and customers are influencing the way services are delivered. Customers' satisfaction rates are relatively high. However, BH does not know how representative its traditional groups are of local communities and some groups of young people are not yet well engaged.
- 113** BH supports traditional resident involvement mechanisms. Two support workers, funded by the Council and managed by BH, assist the Barnsley Federation of Tenants and Residents in challenging the ALMO. The Federation has close links with resident groups and BH's Strategy and policy review group is developing its own business plan and has its own training programme. BH also supports 23 active tenant and resident associations (TARAs) covering three quarters of the borough and attends sixteen local steering groups which contribute to the development of local neighbourhood priorities.
- 114** The ALMO has also helped develop a number of new customer involvement mechanisms. These include a customer panel of 250, with around 50 people meeting every six weeks. There is also a web site review panel, a plain English review panel, a complaints panel, specific forums for leaseholders, older people, BME groups and young people. Customers are also encouraged to get involved in estate walkabouts and mystery shopping. This mixed approach means local people have a range of opportunities to get involved, catering for those with different interests and commitment levels.
- 115** These mechanisms influence the way services are delivered. Examples of changes made as a result of customer panel involvement include: new standards for service delivery; increased detail in vacant property adverts; and revisions to ASB and CBL policies and procedures. The web review panel influences how information is presented on the web site and mystery shopping has led to improved guidance for staff and new signage at some Barnsley Connects service centres. These arrangements were externally validated in February 2009 when the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) awarded BH its kite mark, identifying 21 areas of excellence and ten areas for improvement. Because these impacts are well publicised, customers can see how they can make a difference by getting involved.

How good is the service?

- 116** Agreements clarify how tenants can get involved. In August 2008, a Customer Involvement Agreement replaced a borough wide compact. Learning from its experience in the Kendray Neighbourhood Management pathfinder, BH has also worked with local groups to review area based compacts. This has resulted in local Housing Agreements which put local steering groups at the heart of their monitoring. Customer satisfaction with tenant involvement is above average, with the 2008 STATUS results showing 69 per cent satisfaction with opportunities to get involved and 66 per cent (or 74 per cent based on the previous counting methodology) with the extent to which tenants' views are taken into account. Customers are satisfied with the opportunities they now have.
- 117** BH's approach to training for active tenants, however, is mixed. Some is offered on topics such as committee skills and chairing meetings, but this is not based on a formal assessment of training needs. This means that some skills may not be developed which would assist active customers to develop their confidence to play a fuller role. Also, some key training has not been provided for specific groups. For example, mystery shoppers have not been provided with training on equalities and diversity, which is a missed opportunity to maximise their appreciation of the needs of others in the assessments they make.
- 118** BH does not know the diversity profile of TARAs or the Federation. The profile of attendees of the new groups is captured and shows there to be a reasonable level of diversity, but this cannot be demonstrated among more traditional groups. Without this knowledge, BH cannot explore whether further action is required to balance groups.
- 119** Young people are not well engaged. Some success has been achieved in engaging children through the junior wardens scheme and a young persons' fund attracted 70 bids which has resulted in support for an out of school gardening club, playground alterations and a youth club trip. However, BH's young persons' forum is not fully effective, with declining attendances and exploration of new ways of engaging 18 to 35 year olds underway. This is a weakness because the views and commitment of younger people are critical in providing sustainable, safe and peaceful neighbourhoods into the future.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 120** In 2006, this was an area of strength for the ALMO. It had clear and well-developed policies, procedures, performance, and case management systems. Robust partnership working, appropriate support for victims and alternatives to legal action were in use to address anti social behaviour (ASB). Good quality, consistent services were delivered and customer satisfaction was high.

- 121** In this inspection, we found that this area continues to be an area of strength. There is a strong emphasis on prevention, identifying issues early, assessing tenants' support needs, and supporting people to manage their tenancies. When issues do arise, there are clear and effective procedures, properly applied to deal with all eventualities. Complainants are kept informed of progress with investigation at all stages and responses meet the standards set out in ASB and hate crime guidance leaflets. Effective partnership working delivers results. The Family Intervention Project effectively addresses the issues presented by the small number of families with extremely challenging behaviour.
- 122** A number of measures are taken to help meet tenants' needs and to help them live independently. These include an assessment of any support needs at tenancy sign up and the use of introductory tenancies, with regular visits during the first year¹. In addition, BH has introduced a 'something doesn't look right' policy, alongside training for staff and contractors to identify and report suspected support needs. Together, these practices are identifying potential problems early so that further action can be taken².
- 123** There is an emphasis on early action in cases of low level nuisance. A wide range of information helps customers recognise and report ASB. This includes information in the tenancy pack, an ASB service standards leaflet, posters in local offices and information on the website. BH has also recently updated the tenancy agreement to make sure it reflects changes in the law. Eight locally based and highly visible 'Impact' teams deliver tenancy and estate management services on a 'patch' basis, supported by eight officers who specialise in low level ASB and enforcement. The fact that 86 per cent of tenants are satisfied with their area as a place to live indicates that low level nuisance is being tackled effectively.
- 124** Staff receive appropriate training to equip them to do their job. Impact team leaders and officers receive vulnerability and domestic violence training. Training undertaken by the tenancy enforcement team including family intervention includes Respect, strengthening families and parenting, dealing with people with mental health problems, safeguarding adults, safeguarding children and mediation. This helps them carry out their duties effectively.

¹ Between 91 and 97 per cent of introductory tenancy visits have been completed each quarter this year.

² Of the 361 support needs assessments undertaken since October 2008, 42 have identified additional support needs which include referral to the community mental health nurse, assistance from home care and weekly support visits from Impact Officers.

How good is the service?

- 125** BH is part of an effective integrated approach to the Respect Agenda. It has self assessed against the Respect toolkit and reshaped services to strengthen its emphasis on prevention and intervention. It addresses serious ASB through a corporate partnership with the Council and South Yorkshire Police (SYP). BH staff form part of the Community Safety Service and BH's head of service is Barnsley's ASB coordinator. This provides a seamless service to tackle crime and ASB as the operational arm of Barnsley's CDRP, the Safer Communities Partnership. The Community Safety Service enforcement team manages the most serious and persistent ASB cases intensively. It also provides a closely integrated multi-agency response to reports of domestic abuse and hate crime. This has a significant impact, with reduced numbers of incidents being reported of crime¹, domestic violence² and racial incidents³.
- 126** The partnership uses a range of legal interventions to address ASB. These include anti-social behaviour orders, possession action, acceptable behaviour contracts⁴, extended introductory tenancies and tenancy demotions. Injunctions are the most commonly used legal intervention, replacing lengthy and expensive possession actions. In 2007/08, 82 full and 14 interim injunctions were granted and the need for reducing numbers during this year illustrate that these have proved successful⁵. Injunctions are a timely and effective remedy to address a wide variety of anti-social behaviour from environmental issues to violence and drugs. Evictions are used as a last resort and only one eviction has taken place in the first three quarters of 2008/09 compared to six in 2007/08. This confirms that preventative work and intensive management is having a positive impact.
- 127** BH is complying with its challenging service standards. Procedures are being followed. Complainants are kept informed of the process of investigation at all stages and responses meet the standards set out in ASB and hate crime guidance leaflets. Remedies include the use of in-house mediation for neighbour disputes as well as the enforcement activity outlined above and action is agreed on a case by case basis. Appropriate processes are in place to collect evidence and support victims and witnesses of ASB. These are based on risk assessments. As a result, BH achieves very high levels of customer satisfaction with action taken to address ASB, with every customer surveyed in 2008/09 being satisfied with the way their ASB case was handled.
- 128** The Family Intervention Project (FIP) effectively addresses the issues presented by the small number of families with extremely challenging behaviour. It considers wider issues such as parenting, training, education, health, nutrition and poverty. Twenty five families are currently receiving support and three have left the programme. Of those using the project, 43 per cent are no longer causing ASB and there has been a marked decrease in incidents among a further 50 per cent. Two thirds of children under sixteen are no longer excluded from school or are attending on a regular basis.

¹ Reduced by 19 per cent over the last three years.

² Reduced progressively from 213 in the month of April 2007 to 167 in March 2008.

³ Fell from a peak of over 250 in 2006/07 to 140 April to Jan 2009.

⁴ Anti-social Behaviour Orders: six in 2007/08 and six April to December 2008;

Notices of Seeking Possession Served: 178 in 2007/08: and 107 April to December 2008;

Full Possession Orders: five in 2007/08 and one April to December 2008;

Acceptable Behaviour Contracts: 20 2007/08 and 13 April to December 2008.

⁵ Only 56 and two were required in the first three quarters of 2008/09.

- 129** A variety of diversionary activities are provided for young people. These include sports activities, support for trips, and a junior wardens' scheme with schools to help children understand the cost and consequences of littering and ASB. Other examples include operation Brilliant 2008, a programme of summer activities for young people and Operation blight. The junior warden scheme is a joint arrangement between BH, the Fire Service and the Safer Neighbourhood Team, part of the integrated service mentioned above. Working with schools, officers recruit volunteers to help identify, challenge and raise awareness with their peers on issues around community safety and their environment. A full evaluation of its benefits has not yet been carried out.
- 130** Satisfaction surveys are however carried out only at the conclusion of the ASB intervention. This means that earlier dissatisfaction may have been forgotten by this time and there is no assessment of how well complainants are kept informed. Learning opportunities may be lost if feedback is only obtained.

Estate management

- 131** In 2006, we found that standards were high and there were appropriate arrangements to deliver, develop and monitor the standard of estate management services, which involved customers. We were particularly impressed by the pilot 'Junior Impact Team' work to involve local children in environmental improvements.
- 132** In this inspection, we found that estate management is still a strong service area. Grounds maintenance and cleaning standards are high. Service providers are held to account by local people for the quality of services. Initiatives effectively raise the profile of estate management and get local people involved. Local housing agreements clearly outline tenants' rights and responsibilities, and estate walkabouts are used effectively. A high percentage of customers are satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live. However, no support with gardening is available for vulnerable people.
- 133** There is effective customer involvement to ensure grounds maintenance and cleaning standards are kept high. Sixteen local steering groups provide a strong input and influence over the quality of services. These are made up of local residents and councillors, BH's impact officer, the council's neighbourhood pride officer and the tasking officer from the Safer Neighbourhood Team. They meet regularly as a forum to determine local priorities, consider ASB, litter and grounds maintenance issues, monitor the quality of services and hold staff and contractors to account. Steering groups have access to support from small local budgets for environmental improvements. Our reality checks indicate that communal areas at high rise accommodation are clean and well maintained, with operational lighting and lifts. Despite litter problems on a small number of estates, estates are well maintained and there is little graffiti. The 2008 Status survey confirmed that a high 86 per cent of customers were satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live.

How good is the service?

- 134** A range of initiatives has raised the profile of estate maintenance and increased customer involvement. One of the more successful is the '100 worst gardens' exercise undertaken three times every year. This identifies the worst gardens across tenure in the borough and targets them with intensive action ranging from legal action to a recharge to cover the cost of clearing. Other examples of initiatives include local partnership clean up campaigns led by the community neighbourhood team. Ten litter picks have been organised this year in targeted hot spots, with skips sometimes also provided to encourage local people to dump bulky waste. This approach helps encourage local people to take pride in their neighbourhoods and the involvement of junior wardens has been particularly productive in instilling ownership.
- 135** Rights and responsibilities are clearly outlined to tenants in thirteen local agreements. These have been developed with customers and delivered with the quarterly newsletter to every household. They explain clearly and simply the services offered, the standards tenants have a right to expect and their responsibilities. Local information and contact points are included to give each a local flavour and raise understanding. This approach has helped clarify the standards of behaviour expected and made enforcement easier.
- 136** Estate walkabouts are used effectively. These are well publicised in advance, with one in each larger area every fortnight and all smaller neighbourhoods covered at least once a year. Attendance levels are mixed, usually with up to three members of the local community accompanying officers from the steering group. A target of three active and one non-active resident or tenant is being introduced to monitor this more closely. Senior officers, including the Chief Executive, occasionally attend. Results are captured, graded for importance and action, and the local impact officer is responsible for following up issues. Results are reported back through the local steering group, although not to a wider audience. This approach means local people know how to get involved and can see that action is taken.
- 137** BH monitors the sustainability of estates, but does not regularly publicise the results. Regeneration staff monitor a number of indicators affecting a local neighbourhood, such as the number of ASB incidents and empty properties, the results of estate walkabouts and the number of tenants in rent arrears to identify when a neighbourhood begins to decline. Results have informed regeneration decisions and where action should be targeted. However, results are not circulated more widely or used to track the level of improvement across the district. This is a missed opportunity to demonstrate standards and the level of improvement achieved.
- 138** BH does not have a gardening scheme or close links to another low cost service provider for vulnerable people unable to manage their gardens. It may pick this issue up as part of a support assessment but there is no specific arrangement to meet any identified need.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 139** In 2006, we found that there were more weaknesses than strengths in this area. The ALMO complied with legislation but many procedures were not yet embedded and leaseholders were receiving a poorer service than most.
- 140** In this inspection, we found that strengths are balanced with weaknesses. BH understands the needs of its leaseholders and provides high quality information. They can use all the services offered to tenants and some are involved in service delivery. However, service charge collection rates are low and little progress has been made in introducing management fees.
- 141** Leaseholders are provided with clear information. A plain language guide has been issued to all leaseholders and explains their rights and responsibilities clearly. Regular statements setting out the breakdown of service charges are easy to understand and rights of appeal to the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal are stated. New leaseholders are issued with a FAQ¹ sheet and are contacted twice during their first six months to ensure they have understood their rights and responsibilities. Leaseholders can also access information through a number of dedicated pages on BH's website and there are regular articles in the newsletter. This approach helps ensure leaseholders understand how to get the best from the service available.
- 142** Leaseholders are treated in the same way as tenants, wherever possible. For example, they can use the same range of payment options, complaint processes and involvement mechanisms as tenants. Profile information is also held on all 309 leaseholders, so staff are sensitive to their individual communication and other needs. A small number of leaseholders also attend a quarterly forum and BH's wider customer panel to discuss key issues. As a result, satisfaction with the service has improved and is now relatively high. In an October 2008 survey, overall satisfaction and satisfaction with communal repairs were 75 per cent²; satisfaction with BH's response to queries was 80 per cent; ease of contact 85 per cent; and helpfulness of staff 87 per cent.
- 143** There is a mixed picture in terms of helping leaseholders manage financial issues. Appropriate arrangements are in place for statutory consultation on improvement and maintenance works, with section 20 notices³ issued in accordance with legal requirements. Training is provided to the leaseholder team on benefits and debt in order to support leaseholders who may get into financial difficulties. Interest free loan arrangements are also offered where leaseholders are unable to meet the cost of works over £250. There are some weaknesses in this area however. For example, there is no long term forecasting of major works, so leaseholders cannot plan ahead. There is also no buy back policy through the council to support leaseholders who cannot meet their liabilities. In a depressed housing market where leases are difficult to sell, BH may face the prospect of applying for their forfeiture.

¹ Frequently Asked Questions.

² Both up from 35 per cent in 2005.

³ Section 20 of the Housing Act 1985 as amended by The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 places a requirement on landlords to consult, in a prescribed format, leaseholders before undertaking major works of repair or improvement, or entering into long-term contracts for the provision of service.

How good is the service?

- 144** There are weaknesses in how service charges are managed. These reflect some of the actual costs incurred¹ but failure to bring all leaseholders on to a modern lease means that only those on the latest lease² are charged management fees or charged for upgrading fire prevention systems. There is no plan to move to a common arrangement which would allow actual costs to be recovered across all leaseholders. Service charge collection rates are also low, with only 77 per cent collected in the last year. Although average debts are relatively small³, low collection rates, coupled with failure to recover the full cost of services delivered, mean rental income from tenants still subsidises services for leaseholders.
- 145** BH does not effectively promote services to leaseholders. Low cost home contents insurance and gas servicing are available but few leaseholders take advantage of them. A small number purchase insurance but no leaseholders take advantage of the competitive rates offered on gas servicing. Appliances present a danger to neighbours as well as leaseholders if not regularly serviced, and failure to actively encourage use of the service means opportunities to manage risks have been missed.

Allocations and lettings

- 146** In 2006 there were marginally more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Applications were processed and need identified appropriately and effective use was made of refusal and performance data to drive service improvements. The review of the lettings policy had been slow to take place, however, and systems were overly complex, with insufficient published information to demonstrate transparency.
- 147** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The CBL scheme is easy to understand and use, with additional assistance provided to vulnerable people. Properties are let quickly, with a high 80 per cent of properties accepted on the first offer and adapted properties allocated to people who need them. Performance against service standards is mixed, however, and the measurement of customer satisfaction and benchmarking is not fully developed.
- 148** The 'Homeseeker' CBL scheme is easy to use and offers choice. It covers some housing association and private landlord stock. People can apply on line, in writing or at local offices and a guide to using the scheme is available. Properties are widely advertised in the local press, Barnsley Connects offices and on the website. A programme of talks about the system in local libraries also helps explain it and is followed up by weekly property advertisements in these venues. Bids can be made on line, by telephone or at Barnsley Connects offices, where assistance with bidding is available. An individual's vulnerability is assessed at the point of application and those requiring support through the process are contacted by telephone on a weekly basis to discuss bidding options. Support agencies are also advised of available vacancies via weekly emails and can express interest on behalf of their clients. This approach helps ensure applicants make use of opportunities to bid, with over 5,000 of the current 9,000 applicants having bid at least once in the last year.

¹ For example buildings insurance, use of electricity, communal cleaning and repair cost.

² Less than 50 leaseholders have the latest lease in use since 2005.

³ Averaging £79.

- 149** Homeswapper¹ further increases choice. Almost 400 local tenants have registered and ten of the 20 mutual exchanges approved since the scheme's launch in November 2008 were members. BH has widely publicised the scheme and supports applicants to access the service. This means more people are able to arrange mutually beneficial exchanges.
- 150** A robust process is in place to let adapted properties. Procedures ensure adapted properties are identified when they become vacant. All CBL adverts specify adaptations clearly. The vulnerable bidder list contains all those customers identified by the medical assessment officer as requiring adapted properties and each of these is alerted when an adapted property is advertised. Where difficulties are encountered in letting an adapted property, the lettings team checks with other agencies for potential customers who have not yet registered for rehousing before it lets the property to someone who doesn't require the adaptation. Where properties require an OT visit to confirm their suitability for an individual customer, this is prioritised by the OT service and typically only delays the tenancy start by one week. This approach helps ensure that adapted properties are matched with the customers who most require them.
- 151** Appropriate quality assurance and performance management systems are in place. Senior staff do a 10 per cent audit of allocations and must authorise any properties let outside of normal procedures. Every six months members of the Customer Services committee also review a randomly selected sample of allocations. Performance is reported to senior managers and the Board and results are also posted on the website and displayed in Barnsley Connects offices. Refusal rates and reasons² and kept under ongoing scrutiny and advertising processes amended to address problems. Appropriate monitoring systems are also in place to ensure housing association nominations are made in accordance with agreements and BH's performance in managing this process is good. These approaches ensure allocations are made fairly and in accordance with the published policy and provide transparency about how the service operates.
- 152** BH performs well against its lettings service standards. In the third quarter of 2008/09, 95.8 per cent of applications were processed and provided with details of their priority within 20 days, against a target of 85 per cent³. Annual reviews of all cases on the anniversary of the application are also fully up to date.
- 153** There is poor performance, however, in some areas of lettings. Assessment of the priority of applicants with urgent housing need is relatively slow. A target is set to process these within ten days but this was achieved in only 54 per cent of the 912 cases between April 2008 and January 2009. Delays tend to be due to the need for information from other agencies but this means that more vulnerable people are having to wait longer than advertised before being eligible to bid.

¹ A national exchange scheme that BH joined in November 2008.

² In the current year fifteen per cent of refusals were due to the property being too small, thirteen per cent for personal reasons and 10 per cent did not like the area.

³ This is an improvement on 80 per cent at the time of the last inspection.

How good is the service?

154 There are also weaknesses in some areas of performance management. Lettings performance, for example, is not effectively benchmarked with other CBL schemes. Although BH attends quarterly meetings of a CBL north benchmarking group, performance such as how quickly applications are processed or how many people on the list are active bidders is not compared. As a result BH is not able to accurately identify compare performance to others and use this as a means of driving up performance. There is also limited information on customer satisfaction with the CBL service. A quarterly survey is intended to be undertaken of a random sample of 250 people on the waiting list. The November 2008 survey was not undertaken because of staff absences, despite the fact that the August 2008 data showed mixed results¹. Dips in customer satisfaction will not be identified quickly if regular surveys are not undertaken.

Supported Housing

155 In 2006, we found that there were significantly more weaknesses than strengths across supported housing. Sheltered housing had a culture of care rather than housing related support, with no emphasis on flexibility to meet individual needs. There was some poor quality accommodation, generally weak management systems and significant uncertainty about future funding. A plan to address these weaknesses, in partnership with the council, was too new to have delivered outcomes.

156 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The condition of the housing stock has improved, the sheltered service offers better quality support, there is a robust approach to safeguarding and customers are involved. Customer satisfaction with the sheltered service is high. However, customer choice remains limited, and facilities in some schemes are difficult to use for people with mobility problems. The furnished tenancy scheme also has some weaknesses.

157 Stock condition is much improved. BH has taken a strategic approach to remodelling its sheltered housing stock, in line with the Council's older persons' strategic implementation plan (January 2006). This was a response to demographic change² and to poor stock quality. Implementation has involved selective demolition of low demand sheltered stock³, re-categorisation of satellite properties as 'general needs' with floating support now provided by another agency and work with the Council to provide four large extra care schemes being built by RSLs on vacated sites, two schemes are already open. As a result of DHS and follow-up communal improvement works on the retained schemes, shared bathing facilities have been addressed⁴ and bedsit numbers have reduced⁵. Customer involvement has resulted in innovative solutions including, for example, the conversion of two hard to let bedsits at one scheme into a hobby room and library.

¹ Satisfaction survey August 2008 – 85 per cent considered staff were polite and helpful; 86 per cent were satisfied with the information provided on their housing application; 77 per cent satisfied with the way properties are advertised; 68 per cent were satisfied with the service overall.

² Over 60s are the fastest growing group in the local population, with estimates that they will make up 31 per cent of the population by 2029, with a need for more intensive support solutions like extra care.

³ 215 units in eight schemes to date.

⁴ Only 23 properties still have shared bathing facilities (21 of which are in schemes awaiting demolition and the remaining 2 are in schemes where a dedicated bathroom has been provided for the resident, but it is not en-suite).

⁵ Only 78 bedsits remain (24 scheduled for demolition or undergoing option appraisal).

- 158** The support service has also been remodelled. It was recently assessed by the Council's Supporting People team as achieving minimum acceptable standards (QAF¹ level C) and the service charge for support now reflects the cost of delivery. Wardens have a clear role in risk assessment, support planning and co-ordinating individual support packages for customers, using standardised processes. They have received training on key issues, including identifying early signs of health problems in customers (particularly around mental health and dementia) and on working with customers to maximise their incomes. Traditional social activities have been supplemented by sessions designed to improve health and wellbeing, supported by local partnership funding. This means services meet the needs of existing customers.
- 159** There is a robust approach to safeguarding. Posters are displayed in every sheltered scheme and wardens have been trained in how the multi-agency process works. Several cases have been dealt with since the last inspection, with appropriate involvement of BH managers. In addition, the 'something doesn't look right' procedure is beginning to impact with, for example, several cases of operatives referring vulnerable customers for support following their training on how to identify people with potential support requirements. All schemes display posters about the complaints process and all residents have been issued with a 'living in sheltered' handbook, which outlines how they can contact BH without going through the warden, if necessary. This means risks to health and well being are effectively managed.
- 160** Customers are involved in service improvement. Quarterly inspections of communal areas are now carried out by a planned maintenance officer. These are pre-advertised on notice boards, customers are invited to join in and a list of any works ordered is displayed afterwards, so customers can track progress. Customers are consulted in each scheme on the communal improvements which follow DHS works, providing input on colour schemes, furniture choices and environmental works. BH's older persons' forum has also influenced the service by, for example, approving the 'living in sheltered housing' booklet and assisting in the development of service standards. Customer views are taken into account.
- 161** Customer satisfaction with the sheltered service is high. A survey conducted as part of the recent Supporting People review indicated that 93 per cent felt the service met all of their needs. The 2008 STATUS survey also indicates that 91 per cent of sheltered customers are satisfied with the overall service, 94 per cent with the standard of their accommodation and 88 per cent with VFM. They indicate lower levels of satisfaction, however, with some elements of the service. For example, satisfaction with repairs is 85 per cent and BH's performance in keeping customers informed about change attracted 83 per cent satisfaction, despite the mechanisms in place. Customers are happy with the service provided.

¹ Quality Assessment Framework – Community and Local Government's framework for assessing the quality of services providing housing related support.

How good is the service?

- 162** The sheltered housing service offers limited choice. It provides a specific service within a broader range of options offered by several agencies. It focuses on professional rather than peer support, however, which ignores the importance of the social life for which many people choose to enter sheltered accommodation. Customers are only offered sheltered accommodation if they demonstrate a need for warden support but this need can vary significantly. Those who move into sheltered housing principally for peer, rather than warden support can opt out of daily contacts but the inflexibility of the system means they are still required to pay for the warden service.
- 163** There are weaknesses in the accessibility of some sheltered schemes. All have been audited for DDA compliance and a programme of remedial works will be complete by the end of March 2009. Access doors and communal kitchen fittings in some schemes, however, will remain difficult to negotiate for customers with mobility problems.
- 164** Although BH offers a useful furnished tenancy scheme¹, its inflexibility has some disadvantages. This is available to anyone deemed vulnerable for health or social reasons, offers a range of furniture packages and can be a very effective means of establishing a home for some customers. Because the furniture costs are covered by a housing benefit eligible service charge and the tenancy agreement commits the customer to retaining the furniture, the prospect of paying this charge² in addition to paying rent can be a deterrent to customers who might otherwise be able to find employment, as their circumstances change. It also means customers who, for example, inherit furniture or acquire a partner with his/her own furniture are obliged to retain and pay for the furniture package alongside it. Although some priority is given under the CBL scheme to secure an alternative tenancy if financial circumstances change, this can be a delayed solution and effectively means some customers' only option for escaping the poverty trap is to move.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 165** In 2006 this was an area of strength, with policy priorities and performance in line with costs and routine benchmarking, service review systems and SLA management in place. The Board provided robust leadership on VFM and there was a developing culture of identifying efficiency savings and redirecting them into service improvement. The company used innovative procurement methods and was improving some aspects of efficiency in delivering repairs. It was failing, however, to make good use of planned repairs to reduce costs.
- 166** In this inspection, we found that this continues to be an area of strength. Costs are low, and quality and satisfaction are generally high. Benchmarking is robust and delivers improvements. Efficiencies are generated across the company, with savings invested in services that impact on customers. BH has a strong VFM culture.

¹ To 126 customers (29 are aged over 60, 13 of whom are in sheltered accommodation).

² Which can be as high as £21.43 per week.

How do costs compare?

- 167** There is a good understanding of costs throughout the organisation and these are generally low. BH's cost per property¹ for all core functions was among the lowest twenty five per cent of comparable organisations in 2007/08, based on Housemark benchmarking. CIPFA's benchmarking also indicates that management costs are the seventh lowest among the 69 ALMOs which submitted data. Performance was also among the best 25 per cent in nine, and above average in the remaining three Housemark value for money indicators in 2007/08, with other service costs all either average or below average. As a result of minimising costs, a high 79 per cent of customers are satisfied with VFM for the rent they pay².
- 168** Benchmarking is robust. BH has carried out cost benchmarking of high level indicators since 2002. These figures are tracked by the senior management team and areas of concern are identified. For example, they triggered the review of back office services planned for 2009/10. Even where costs are low, exceptions are explored. For example, very low financial management costs have triggered discussions with comparators to ensure all are monitoring in the same way. Unit cost benchmarking is done in key areas, and where this is problematic across a large group, such as on aids and adaptations, both cost and process benchmarking has been done with neighbouring authorities to explore what can be learned. This approach has helped maximise VFM.

How is value for money managed?

- 169** BH has a VFM culture. An efficient infrastructure supports this. For example, all board reports include a VFM section to help focus managers on the issue and a board champion monitors progress against the VFM action plan with senior managers. There have been a number of VFM themed events, including a board awareness workshop, a strategic managers' away day, the Customer Panel and staff focus groups. Planning and budget setting processes ensure all plans are resourced before being approved and savings are used to support budget setting. The impact of this culture is a high level of efficiencies. A total of £17.5 million has been generated between 2005/06 and 2008/09 which exceeds the 3 per cent annual savings required by the shrinking management fee. This has supported existing services and allowed additional investment in improvements.
- 170** The most significant efficiencies made over recent years are in delivering repairs and improvements. The partnership arrangement for improvements is estimated to have generated £5.4 million of reduced capital expenditure against original forecasts over the period 2005/06 to 2008/09, which has allowed additional works within the programme. The partnership arrangement for repairs is estimated to have generated £3.5 million of reduced revenue costs over the same period, which have remained in the budget and allowed BH to do more repairs at a reduced average cost.

¹ £338

² STATUS 2008

How good is the service?

- 171** Many efficiencies generated in repairs have been the result of improved management in construction services since it transferred to the ALMO in 2005. The team has been rationalised, with a reduction in the number of depots and stores from nine to one. Other initiatives include operatives working from home and using hand held or tablet PCs to receive and record work and order stores. This has allowed BH to increase the number of appointments, reduce operative down time, reduce abortive calls and reduce the need for paper storage and administration systems¹. Modernisation of the stores function delivers £350,000 saving per year by, for example, using imprest stocks on vans and delivering materials for planned works to site.
- 172** VFM is also maximised in the way repairs are done. Only 40 per cent of repairs funded from the revenue budget are carried out on a planned basis, but this figure is deceptive because some of the work which would traditionally be included in preventative maintenance schemes, like the replacement of manufactured joinery and guttering, is done as part of the residual capital improvement programme. If this were included, it would bring the planned repair figure up to 74 per cent. Within those categories of repairs still funded from the revenue budget, emergency and urgent repairs are kept to a minimum. Only 8 per cent were done on an emergency basis in the first three quarters of 2008/09 and only 2 per cent were done urgently. This means BH is doing everything possible to maximise the amount of work it plans and minimise the amount it does more expensively, at shorter notice.
- 173** Savings have been made by individual customers as a result of BH's approach to generating efficiencies. For example, the rent service undertakes its own legal work, saving £69.50 in court costs for each customer who has an order made against them². BH's use of biomass fuels with heat metering to replace coal and gas in the first two of its nine district heating systems has not only provided a carbon neutral solution³ but means customers only pay for the fuel they use, rather than a fixed service charge. The first (160 unit) scheme has saved 5,850 tons of carbon emissions since its 2006 installation and cut fuel bills by £91,586 in the first three quarters of 2008/09.
- 174** BH has also been willing to explore good practise in procurement. Its maintenance and improvement partnership was innovative when it was first established. One third of all work is delivered by a private sector partner and two thirds in house. The arrangement is based on competitive benchmarking and open book accounting, with performance payments determined by indicators of cost and quality. A best value review in 2008 after five years of operation concluded that VFM had been obtained. Its use of a social enterprise company to do environmental improvements has allowed it to invest in local labour and training and has still made a saving of at least £100 per property. As a direct result of this arrangement, 15 trainees have achieved nationally recognised construction qualifications and 25 have achieved occupational H&S qualifications.

¹ Saving £164,000 in vehicle and plant charges and £58,000 on staff costs and printing in the first two full years of using the system.

² A total of £28,000 in 2007/08.

³ Using locally grown willow wood chip.

- 175** BH has a generally robust approach to managing its service level agreements with the Council. It has retained 16 of the original 21 and all have been reviewed twice, with an ongoing rolling review programme in place. Reviews include cost benchmarking, exploration of performance and surveys of either staff or customers about quality. Each review has resulted in either reduced costs or improved service levels and ongoing annual cashable efficiencies have been achieved of £443,000, along with one-off savings of £221,000 since 2005. Appropriate procurement processes have been followed where reviews have led to market testing and several services or elements of service have either been brought in house or awarded to other contractors¹. Ongoing monitoring of SLAs is done in each service area but co-ordinated centrally, with greater involvement of central staff where risks emerge or where the SLA is high value. Several examples exist of slippages in performance which have been rectified speedily and in partnership. There is significant customer involvement in managing customer facing SLAs, with mystery shopping and regular surveys informing performance meetings. This approach allows BH to demonstrate that its SLAs generally deliver VFM.
- 176** There has been a lack of robustness in the management of the Council's Neighbourhood Services SLA. This covers grounds maintenance, void garden clearance and sundry other environmental issues at a cost of £1 million per annum². The SLA has been extended on two occasions, following only limited benchmarking and without market testing. Although there is some possibility of more robust benchmarking data being available next year via Housemark, the contract will, by then, have been operating for seven years. Although 86 per cent of tenants are satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live, more specific quality surveys about the service have not justified this approach by demonstrating that the SLA delivers VFM.
- 177** Not all areas are able to demonstrate that they are delivering value for money. It is not clear how BH's level of investment in tenant involvement compares to other similar providers. It is clear that investment has increased. Some benchmarking in 2007 identified that investment at that time was similar to neighbours. However this does not reflect current levels of investment, make broad comparisons or take account of what is provided and what is achieved with resources available. A similar situation applies to leaseholder services. BH understands the cost of its service to be £19.66 per leaseholder or 0.51 per cent of the management fee. BH's informal comparisons suggest this is around average. However, although BH leads on the Yorkshire Leaseholder Benchmarking Forum, benchmarking is still in its formative stages and sound comparisons of the cost and quality of services have not yet been undertaken. Tenants and leaseholders do not know whether they are getting good value in these areas.

¹ The £450,000 drainage contract was tendered in via an e-auction, saving an estimated £267,000 over its three year life.

² £700,000 of which is charged to the HRA.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

178 In 2006 there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. There had been an improvement in most of the services which mattered most to customers and the decent homes standard was being delivered.

179 In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength. Key performance and customer satisfaction measures show a consistent upward trend. Major home improvements have been delivered. New services, such as the CBL scheme, have been introduced and existing ones like repairs, income collection and ASB services improved. Significant efficiency savings have been achieved and re-invested. In a small number of areas, however, services have not improved as quickly as expected.

180 Particular improvements in services include:

- investment of £193.6 million on the DHS programme to improve 11,048 homes;
- visible and local staff presence on estates, with better co-ordinated action to deal with anti-social behaviour, including a cross-tenure Family Intervention Project;
- improved access to services with, for example, extension of the repairs hotline to 24 hours per day, seven days per week and the availability of more on-line facilities; and
- increased customer choice through a new CBL scheme, with well advertised properties that users can easily bid for.

These have all impacted on customer satisfaction. For example, overall satisfaction with BH as a landlord improved by 19 per cent from 65 per cent in 2004 to 84 per cent in 2008 and the number considering that rent represents value for money rose by 13 per cent from 66 per cent in 2004 to 79 per cent in 2008.

181 Key performance indicators show a strong improvement trend. For example, in repairs, average costs have reduced¹ and performance in meeting target timescales has improved². The speed of letting empty properties has also improved significantly, with a resultant reduction in lost rent and average void repair costs have also reduced³. These indicators are particularly significant, because these are areas of higher expenditure and also tend to be of high priority to customers. Satisfaction with the repairs service rose 23 percentage points from 58 in 2004 to 81 per cent in 2008.

¹ From £98.32 in March 2005 to £79.69 in the third quarter of 2008/09.

² In March 2005, only 77 per cent of emergency repairs, 79 per cent urgent and 85 per cent routine repairs were done in timescale, but in the third quarter of 2008/09 these figures were 98, 97 and 98 per cent.

³ Average void turnaround times reduced from 57 days in 2004/05 to 25.5 days to date in 2008/09 and average costs from £1918.32 in March 2005 to £808.20 in the 2nd quarter of 2008/09.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 182** There is a particularly notable improvement in the quality of the sheltered housing service since the last inspection. A thorough review of the service has taken place, with significant customer involvement in both the stakeholder working group which led it and via surveys. The review took place in the context of the multi-agency vision for older persons' services in the borough. It resulted in reduced sheltered stock numbers (now 22 schemes), a more professional warden service, stricter allocations criteria and improved stock quality. Most of the retained stock has now had DHS works, enhanced heating, fire alarm and warden-call systems. The outcome has been that most schemes now offer modern facilities and appropriate support services and the customers we met were positive about them.
- 183** As an organisation BH has attained high service standards against externally set criteria. For example the company has achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, Investors in People status, accreditation by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service and was ranked in the top 100 companies in Stonewall's Workplace Index. BH received a highly commended award for Most Effective Partnership Project for its Kendray Blueprint in the NFA 2008 awards and has developed award winning biomass district heating schemes. These assessments recognise achievements made in different areas of business.
- 184** BH is an active partner in regeneration. The £100 million Kendray scheme began in 2003 and has involved significant resident involvement. Over 500 properties have been demolished, to be replaced by 283 mixed tenure ones and plans for a further 230 new-builds on infill sites. Public services, such as the health centre, police station, park and school have been improved and decent homes work has been supported by significant investment in environmental improvements, such as boundary walls. A 2008 survey indicated that 86 per cent of residents believe their housing was better than five years ago and 83 per cent believe their environment was better.
- 185** Regeneration, improvement and tenancy sustainment work has had a positive impact on the number of empty properties. There have tended to be around 400 void properties awaiting demolition at any one time for most of the ALMO's life, as successive phases of stock disposal have taken place. However, this has reduced over the past year and only 289 properties were being held for demolition by December 2008¹. In addition, tenancy turnover has dropped as estates have become more sustainable. Void rates of 8 per cent in 2005/06 fell to 6.9 per cent in 2007/08 and 6.4 per cent for the first three quarters of 2008/09². Although this partly reflects more difficult economic circumstances, it also demonstrates higher satisfaction with tenancies and neighbourhoods.

¹ 1.4 per cent of the stock.

² Empty properties awaiting reletting in December 2008 represented only 0.7 per cent of the stock.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 186** Partners use BH support to address localised problems. The Housing Market Renewal Team, for example, uses BH as its agent to help improve properties on a poor quality private sector estate. Using the Council's section 215 planning powers, BH has dealt with 245 cases of neglect¹, levered in £690,000 of investment in improvement works and brought 59 empty properties back into use. BH also responded effectively to the floods of 2007 by supporting not only its own tenants but other residents, on behalf of the Council. Over 50 of its properties were flooded and all but four customers were returned home within a week. Senior managers had roles in the emergency planning team and the ALMO helped distribute sandbags, delivered free white goods and carried out electrical checks for owner occupiers, with costs covered by the Council. This demonstrates that BH is seen as a reliable partner organisation.
- 187** BH demonstrates excellent year-on-year improvements in value for money. Benchmarking data² comparing combined cost and quality indicators in twelve areas over the period 2005/06 to 2007/08 shows BH has maintained performance among the top 25 per cent of comparator organisations in four areas, achieved it in a further six and improved performance to above average in the remaining two. Results clearly demonstrate that BH is delivering improvements.
- 188** BH has made significant efficiencies which have been invested in customer priorities. In total £5.3 million efficiencies were realised between 2005/06 and the end of 2008/09. Most significantly, cashable savings of £2 million were achieved by reducing void rent loss, £370,000 by reducing car allowance payments, £200,000 by restructuring the sheltered service and £297,000 by restructuring the Impact teams. Over £500,000 savings were also achieved through SLA reviews. Through the financial and planning process, these efficiencies have supported a number of initiatives such as the tenant reward scheme, improvements in resident involvement, the setting up of the repairs hotline, funding for an in-house occupational therapist and a contribution to CAB.
- 189** A small number of areas have improved less well. Waiting times for major adaptations increased from 158 days at the time of the last inspection to 165 in 2007/08. Although it had fallen to 138 days by the third quarter of 2008/09, this was still well above the target of 85 days. The speed of responses to letters and complaints also fail to achieve the high levels expected of a mature, top performing ALMO.
- 190** BH has not delivered all the recommendations from the last inspection. These are set out in detail in Appendix 4. Of the 16 elements that make up the seven recommendations, three have not been implemented in full. These relate to outstanding DDA compliance surveys, failure to comprehensively monitor repair work done 'right first time' and undertaking only limited partnership work on welfare benefit take up campaigns. This means customers are not benefiting from positive action in these areas.

¹ Of which 91 per cent have been successful.

² From Housemark's ALMO Performance Improvement Club where 57 ALMOs submitted data.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 191** In 2006 this was an area of strength. Systems were mature and embedded, with effective mechanisms producing generally SMART plans. There was appropriate arm's length monitoring by the Council, strong leadership from managers and the Board and a robust performance management framework. Planning, however, was relatively short-term.
- 192** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength. Business planning arrangements and performance management are sound. The delivery plan and asset management strategy provide clear direction and address the right areas for improvement. Financial planning is closely integrated. BH is an outward looking organisation and has improved services by learning from customers and other service providers.
- 193** Business planning arrangements are sound. The delivery plan 2008-2012 clearly sets out the challenges that BH faces. Priorities are reviewed annually as part of the business planning process, in consultation with customers and other stakeholders. There are clear linkages between plans, finances and budgets. For the current year's budget an interactive session was held with the Customer Panel to establish spending priorities. As a result, investment was targeted towards improving decoration and accommodation in sheltered schemes. Plans address many of the current weaknesses identified, such as funding of a dedicated CAB worker to provide money advice and employment of an OT to speed up assessments for aids and adaptations.
- 194** The delivery plan is supported by a number of fit for purpose strategies. For example, the VFM strategy provides a definition of VFM, indicates where VFM reviews are being carried out and how outcomes will be measured. A short-term action plan comprehensively itemises the benchmarking, procurement and VFM management actions due to be undertaken during the first year of the strategy's life. The procurement strategy provides guidance as to the range of procurement methods which can be used. In the main, action plans attached to strategies are SMART although some, such as the procurement action plan are output focussed. This means measurement of achievements or outcomes is more difficult.
- 195** The asset management strategy is robust. Updated in August 2008, it provides links with wider company and Council strategies and is based on a good analysis of the housing market and of stock condition. It forecasts thirty year investment needs, outlines risks and sets out both the capital and revenue funding positions. A sufficiently large capital allocation has been made to carry out work on properties where improvements have been refused when they become vacant.
- 196** BH also has ambitious development plans for the future. It has HCA approved developer accreditation and is currently working up two schemes for funding bids, using HRA land.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 197** Well developed regeneration plans are in place for two challenging local areas, New Lodge and Worsborough. Master planning has been ongoing for three years, with residents and other local stakeholders identifying their priorities for these areas. These focus on improving the tenure mix and diversity of communities, improving the reputation and sustainability of the areas and addressing specific issues such as fuel poverty, worklessness and crime. Plans emphasise selective demolition, new-build, and a 'neighbourhood management' approach. Resources are in place to deliver plans for New Lodge and some funding is in place for Worsborough although the outcome of a HCA bid for new-build is awaited.
- 198** BH has a robust performance management structure. Appropriate information is provided regularly. Quarterly board performance reports cover key achievements and exceptions, and update members on the top 20 headline service improvement actions contained in the Delivery Plan. More detailed monitoring is carried out at Committee level. For example the Customer Services Committee receives quarterly reports on the Service Excellence Assessment Programme¹ and Your Comments Count. Monthly performance meetings use a balanced scorecard approach and include a breakdown of performance by diversity strands. The Tenants Federation receives quarterly reports and up to date information on performance is available on the website, newsletter, in the annual report and displayed in Barnsley Connects offices. This means key people can see how the company is performing.
- 199** Performance development reviews² effectively link individual performance to business objectives. Each annual performance development review highlights BH's strategic objectives and the contribution the individual will make towards achieving them. In the main, these include SMART targets to measure individual performance achieved and progress made.
- 200** Financial and risk management systems are robust. All board reports consider the capital and revenue implications and any potential risks inherent in proposals. Budget holders receive regular reports and are spending is overseen at senior levels. Corporate and departmental risks are managed through risk registers which are reviewed quarterly, overseen by the audit committee and reported annually to the Board. The strategic risk register identifies actions to mitigate 43 identified risks and actions to mitigate most key risks, such as the investment funding gap, are covered in plans. This means business is less likely to be disrupted by unforeseen events.
- 201** BH is an outward looking organisation. It seeks to learn from others to improve its services. In addition to membership of benchmarking clubs, it has invited another housing provider to undertake a peer review to identify potential areas for improvement and it has developed plans to address any shortfalls identified when it has sought external validation of systems. It also learns from its partners and customer feedback. Examples include construction services adopting some of its partner's processes to improve void turnaround times, lettings taking on board feedback about poor descriptions in adverts to reduce refusal levels and feedback from customers about the difficulty of using fire controls resulting in their redesign.

¹ Includes mystery shopping telephone calls, mystery shopping visits, empty property checks, plain English communication and internal customer satisfaction surveys.

² The system of staff appraisals.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 202** BH makes good use of complaints to improve services. Managers are required to summarise any learning points at the conclusion of each complaint. A quarterly review identifies any common issues or trends. In the year to date fifteen service improvements have been implemented. These range from the introduction of a pop up alert notifying staff pursuing rent arrears that the customer is vulnerable to notifying neighbours when scaffolding is to be erected so any obstructions can be moved. In addition BH feeds details of these improvements back to customers so that they can see the difference their complaints made.
- 203** There are some gaps in future plans. For example, BH does not yet have a medium or long term plan for its sheltered housing service, showing how it will raise quality standards above the minimum acceptable level and it has no marketing strategy to address harder to let properties¹. Progress in these areas is therefore less certain.
- 204** A key risk has not been fully considered. There is a lack of clarity in terms of delegation of responsibility for gas safety. Policies do not identify where individual responsibility will lie if a serious incident occurs and criminal litigation follows. This lack of clarity in delegation represents a risk which is not currently highlighted.
- 205** BH does not always use data collected to drive service improvement. For example, BH has not explored the anomaly between customers' perception that only between 62 and 76 per cent of repairs were done on the first visit compared to partner claims that 95 per cent were carried out. Also, although it has begun to analyse repairs satisfaction returns by ethnicity, BH has not acted on its findings by exploring returns further or considered what improvement action is required. These are missed opportunities to drive further service improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 206** In 2006 this was an area of strength. Although the company had not effectively addressed the issue of Board representativeness, and had no formal HR or training strategy, it had strong governance, good ICT systems, an effective procurement strategy and was attracting substantial inward investment.
- 207** In this inspection, we found that that this remains an area of strength. The company has strong and effective leadership and governance. There is a clear strategy to develop human resources and effective training arrangements. BH continues to attract significant inward investment. In general, procurement is effective. The company continues work to ensure its Board, management and workforce reflect the local community and is tackling low satisfaction in construction services. However, capacity is reduced by high sickness rates and low morale in some areas and future finance is uncertain.

¹ 22 out of its 50 ready to let voids had been empty for over 12 weeks at the time of this inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 208** The company has strong and effective leadership. It has been willing to take risks and challenge established modes of operation. The Board operates effectively, supported by a proactive and well established senior management team with a good balance of operational and strategic management skills. It has a track record of addressing challenges, such as modernising Construction Services and restructuring the sheltered housing warden service. It also has an understanding of the challenges ahead and plans in place to address them, including the need for a further stock option appraisal, the move to new premises and the need for the business to change after completion of the DHS programme.
- 209** Robust governance arrangements are in place. These were introduced in December 2007, following a review. A remunerated board was established, along with a streamlined committee structure. Members meet a competency threshold, go through annual appraisals and have a range of skills. An independently appointed chair brings extensive relevant expertise and experience and an annual training programme addresses collective development and training requirements. A series of governance indicators measure performance, such as attendance, to ensure the focus remains on strategic issues and decision making. The Board is kept accountable by holding meetings in public, attending local events and acting as ambassadors for the business. Members have a clear understanding of what is expected, decision making is transparent and performance well communicated to tenants.
- 210** BH has an effective and mature working relationship with the council. There is a positive, open and challenging relationship between the two organisations with quarterly performance meetings and reports provided on key measures, and regular progress reporting against business plan objectives. Formal arrangements are supplemented by less formal 'big picture' issues and discussions at a senior level with an open dialogue on any specific issues as they arise. An agreed decision making framework provides clarity over delegations and who is responsible for decisions in key areas. This means that BH is able to operate at an appropriate arms length from the Council, with freedom to make decisions who to procure services from, yet maintain a clear partnership approach to wider community issues such as worklessness and regeneration. The council has a high degree of confidence in BH.
- 211** Some work has been done to make the company more representative of the community it serves. The board is moving towards the model profile developed in 2007 and is diverse in terms of age, disability and gender. In recognition of the low level of BME representation at senior levels within the organisation, BH is taking positive action to build individual capacity for possible future recruitment. TPAS is providing mentoring to help thirteen interested individuals understand the business better and develop the competencies needed for board membership or other positions. The organisation will set a positive role model for people living in the area.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 212** Construction Services makes a contribution to a more diverse workforce through its positive approach to recruiting female apprentices. Promotions and talks in schools have helped Construction Services to employ a female electrical supervisor, a gas engineer, two apprentice electricians and four driver/labourers. It also employs eight disabled operatives and encourages placements for disabled people in its window manufacturing plant. Around 5.6 per cent of the workforce has a disability, compared to 11.4 per cent of the economically active population, and 1.4 per cent is from BME communities, compared to an estimated 2.8 per cent in the local community.
- 213** BH's HR strategy is robust. The strategy identifies areas for improvement and an in-house team is delivering the actions necessary. The company has completed job evaluation to introduce an equal pay structure and future plans include the introduction of workforce planning, employer branding and reviewing the reward and recognition arrangements. There are also a number of small scale schemes in place to help motivate staff, including prize draws for full attendance and employee of the month and apprentice of the year awards. Improved workforce planning and low staff turnover of 4.2 per cent¹ contribute to BH's continued capacity to deliver high levels of service.
- 214** BH is investing in its workforce. The PDR process is used² to identify and review individual training requirements, which are collated into a company annual learning and development plan. In 2007/08 BH invested an average of £355 in training per employee³. An e-academy offers a range of modules to supplement in house and external training. All staff have received compulsory equality and diversity training, a rolling programme of training is offered to help staff use the new electronic document management system and mentoring and job shadowing is also offered. A leadership and management programme has been introduced for 55 managers, which aims to embed management competences and assess progress by 360 degree feedback before and after the programme. This means staff and managers are equipped with the knowledge and skills the need.

¹ Which compares favourably with peers in the benchmarking group who have rates of between 6 and 7.9 per cent.

² 94.1 per cent of staff had PDRs in the last year.

³ Compared to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development average of £305.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 215** BH has taken all the action within its scope to establish a secure future for the housing stock in Barnsley. It has put together robust capital and revenue forecasts¹ and brought pressure to bear on the Council to reconsider its options for the future of the stock. Prudential borrowing of £9 million and use of the major repairs allowance will only support maintenance of the decent homes standard until 2011/12. The Council's priority for capital expenditure is its schools programme and, although efficiencies are likely to be generated to support the revenue shortfall in the medium term, this may not be sustainable without loss of service quality, so an alternative delivery model or funding stream(s) will be required from 2012/13. BH has been preparing customers and stakeholders for a stock option appraisal since the summer of 2008 and the Council will begin the formal process in April 2009².
- 216** BH is successfully leveraging in additional funding to support its current business objectives. In partnership with a range of other agencies, BH has secured over £6 million of external funding to support tenancy and support services and a further £5.5 million to support wider neighbourhood services and improvements. An additional £2.6 million for tenancies and support and £7.2 million for wider neighbourhoods are either committed or are the subject of pending bids for the period to 2010/11. This funding has helped to develop services such as the family intervention project and deliver energy efficiency and environmental improvements. BH is also exploring how it might diversify its business to increase its income stream in future. For example, it has business development objectives to build new affordable housing and has two schemes at pre-planning stage. Also, in addition to plans to expand its existing private sector housing management service and exploit its developing capacity to provide energy performance certificates in-house, it has bid to provide a mixed tenure neighbourhood management service in one area and hopes to expand this into a borough wide approach in future.

¹ Capital shortfalls: 1. Reduced right to buy sales receipts have led to the need to raise £9 million prudential borrowing to protect the DHS programme to 2011/12. 2. Longer term, the 30 year capital plan (from 08/09) identifies a shortfall of £750 million to maintain decency and £1.5 billion to achieve and maintain the decency plus standard, with the shortfall beginning in 2011/12.

Revenue shortfall: Ten year HRA financial forecasts identify a revenue shortfall beginning with £2.2 million in 2010/11, increasing to £4.4 million by 2018/19.

² Options are limited, because the status quo can only be maintained (if the DHS plus aspirational standard is abandoned) with an increase of 60 per cent in the Council's MRA. Self financing might be an option at current subsidy levels (less so as they reduce) but this will only allow BH to achieve 75 per cent of its DHS plus standard without reprofiling the 30 year programme. Stock transfer might also be an option but the stock currently has a negative valuation, so this will also only be viable with a significant reprofiling of the 30 year programme.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 217** BH's effective partnership working boosts its capacity to deliver improved services. Working together, the police, council and BH are successfully tackling ASB, removing silos and delivering a joined up service for customers. By working in partnership with the Council and RSLs BH is contributing to the development of a new supply of affordable housing. It is also delivering against wider local strategic partnership and housing strategy objectives, such as tackling worklessness, increasing the number of local people obtaining qualifications and addressing issues around empty private sector property. BH has strong links with the voluntary and community sector. For example, by signposting tenants into initiatives such as 'Food Aware' to offer excess supermarket food at a small charge to local people through community centres and into initiatives by the financial inclusion group to help vulnerable people obtain bank accounts, avoid doorstep lenders and maximise benefit income. Through working together, additional benefits are provided to local people.
- 218** A robust ICT strategy is in place. This is based on meeting the requirements of service departments and plans are refreshed annually. The strategy is supported by detailed project plans in BH and Construction Services. A number of key initiatives are currently being implemented and are on target, including the 'paperless office' document management system which will minimise the space BH requires in its new offices. Key initiatives for the next 12 months include implementation of the next release of the Northgate software, development of a three year programme of hardware replacement and enhancements to the interactivity of services for customers. On moving to Gateway Plaza in the summer of 2009 a new digital telephone system will provide performance information. This approach supports BH's developing business needs.
- 219** BH is generally making effective use of procurement to secure value for money. Its procurement strategy provides a flexible framework of options, including partnering. Consortia procurement via 'procurement for housing' and 'efficiency north' is increasingly being used. For example, 13 per cent has been saved on the void decoration voucher scheme by procuring it this way. E-procurement has been also used on a small scale, for example in letting the new drainage contract. More traditional approaches are used where particular quality or skills are required, for example in appointing specialist consultants.
- 220** Plans to retender repairs services have begun. Under the chosen approach, one third of the work is to be tendered and the in house service will be tied to the same rates and performance requirements as the successful external bidder. The business case however for choosing a one and two third split is not convincing and it is unclear how this approach will offer the best value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 221** BH is responding appropriately to some low staff satisfaction rates. These are generally high across a range of indicators¹ but are markedly lower in Construction Services than elsewhere. Only 44.4 per cent of these staff are satisfied with BH as an employer, compared to 82.4 per cent across the rest of the company. Construction Services staff have been at the forefront of major changes in working practices, including the introduction of new technology and mobile working, which has impacted on their satisfaction levels. An action plan has been drawn up to address the issues and regular 'toolbox talks' have been introduced, where frank exchanges of views are held on issues such as the quality of materials being used and new ways of working. Changes are being managed.
- 222** Staff sickness levels are high. Recorded absences have increased from an average of 12.6 working days last year to a projected 15 days to the end of this year, largely as a result of short term sickness in Construction Services. Sickness management processes have been tightened and there are improved links with occupational health and physiotherapy services. These are beginning to impact, with the balance of short to long term sickness within Construction Services improving² and both having begun to drop. Absences still reduce the company's capacity, however, to deliver services.
- 223** The longer-term funding arrangements for the service remain unclear. As has previously been discussed in paragraph 215, this depends upon the Council and tenants selecting an option that will provide access to investment to meet the capital shortfall from 2011/12 to maintain the homes to the decent homes standard.

¹ The 2008 staff survey show satisfaction at 81 per cent plus against a range of measures such as working conditions, know the standards of work expected, feel empowered and say communication is good.

² From 59:41 to 40:60 although still short of the industry guideline of 30:70.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Barnsley performance 2005/06 to 2007/08

Performance indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Mets top 25% 2007/08
63 Average SAP rating	60	66	67	72.8
66a Percentage rent collected	99.3	99.1	98.95	98.3
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	4.06	3.12	2.96	3.2
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	34.32	34.55	25.28	22.3
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.26	0.23	0.31	0.3
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	71	76	82	79.2
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	55	59	68	69
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	27	14	9	18.8
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	47.5	41	27.4	29.7
212 Average re-let time (days)	33	24	25	32

Source: Audit Commission

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:
 - a review of key documents including the ALMO delivery plan; customer information and board performance reports;
 - a review of the ALMO's website;
 - interviews with a cross-section of Berneslai Homes staff;
 - interviews with key Berneslai Homes managers and the portfolio holder for housing;
 - focus groups with tenants; leaseholders; frontline staff; repair operatives; and partners;
 - observation of a tenants meeting;
 - observation of a committee meeting;
 - reality checks of customer access points, both in person and by telephone; and
 - visits to tenants whose homes had received major works and to vacant ready to let homes.

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)

Tenancy management - capturing and acting on early warning signs

- 1 Berneslai Homes capitalises on the company's unique position to identify early warning signs. With staff and operatives going behind the front door of tens of thousands of homes every year, they witness symptoms that may go un-noticed by the police and social services. BH has trained staff to capture and report these symptoms to Impact Officers who investigate the issue in more depth, making referrals where necessary to appropriate support agencies or simply keeping an eye on the issue by making planned and unplanned visits. Issues are identified early preventing them developing into more disruptive anti-social behaviour.

Responding to domestic violence and hate crime hot spots

- 2 Action is being taken to raise awareness and act as a deterrent in areas where there has been a particularly high incidence of domestic violence or hate crime. In addition to covering other local issues, a neighbourhood newsletter highlighted the issue, expressed the company's commitment to tackle these issues and describing what action will be taken against perpetrators. It includes details of how to report an incident, what happens next and what support is available. One thousand copies were hand delivered in the neighbourhood. Early indications are that the number of incidents has fallen.

Estate management - local management of services

- 3 Local steering groups provide a strong local input and influence over the quality of services delivered. Across the district there are 16 local steering groups made up of local tenants and residents, representatives of Tenant and Resident Associations, local councillors, BH's Impact (estate) officer, the council service representatives covering estate management and responses to anti-social behaviour. They meet at intervals varying from four to eight weeks and provide a forum to discuss local issues, determine local priorities, prompt action and monitor the quality of services being delivered. Steering groups have access to a small local budget and in some areas additional funding has been levered in. These groups raise any local ASB, litter, grasscutting, maintenance or other local concerns. They also monitor action taken in response to issues identified through estate walkabouts. Representatives are held to account for the quality of service delivered.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

Building BME capacity

- 4 In recognition of the low level of BME representation at senior levels within the company, BH is taking positive action to build individual capacity for possible future recruitment. Consultancy services have been procured to provide a mentoring scheme to help 13 interested individuals understand the business better and develop the skill set needed for board membership. This will improve their confidence and chances of success applying for Board or other vacancies in future.

Governance - performance indicators

- 5 BH has introduced a suite of governance indicators to monitor governance performance in a number of areas. Indicators measure a range of aspects including attendance, the balance of reports for decision, information or discussion, administration, diversity and attendance of the public. They were developed and agreed by the Yorkshire ALMOs and provide a good mechanism to ensure the Board is representative of the local area, everyone contributes, meetings are properly advertised and administered, and business is focused on strategic issues and decision making.

Estate management - 100 worst gardens

- 6 A high profile '100 Worst Gardens' exercise is run three times every year. Each exercise identifies and targets the 100 worst gardens across all tenures with intensive action ranging encouragement to improve to a recharge being raised to cover the cost of the work completed on the tenants' behalf. Results are impressive with a resolution and improvement in the majority of cases within a four-week period.

Sustainability - use of renewable energy

- 7 BH is striving to reduce its carbon footprint by introducing alternative energy solutions. The company has introduced a programme of biomass fired community heating schemes providing cheaper energy for tenants from a renewable energy source. In addition the company is piloting the use of a ground source heat pump. Results show a reduction of 46 per cent in fuel costs.

Appendix 4 – Progress against recommendations made in 2006

Table 1 Recommendations from 2006 inspection

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Complete the DDA compliance survey on the common parts of residential buildings.	Partially complete
R2 Develop the diversity action plan:	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a stand alone improvement plan for targeted recruitment of Board members from under represented groups; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> review the approach to collecting and using feedback from excluded groups for service development; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> analyse all satisfaction data by diverse categories. 	Complete
R3 Develop existing service improvement plans for repairs and maintenance:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> implement systems to increase the number of repairs done 'right first time' and to monitor and manage performance against this indicator; 	Partially complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> review the quality of the current lettings standard with a view to defining 'reasonableness' and to raising the standard of decoration; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> review the approach to issuing decoration allowances and the staff training and guidance available in this area. 	Complete
R4 Develop existing service improvement plans on income management:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carry out work to appropriately separate out rent account debits; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop partnership approaches to targeted take up campaigns, using data already available; and 	Partially complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide training and guidance for staff on the use of budget sheets. 	Complete

Appendix 4 – Progress against recommendations made in 2006

Recommendation	Progress
R5 Review the resourcing of resident involvement work with a view to ensuring it is adequately resourced and coordinated.	Complete
R6 Develop existing service improvement plans for supported housing:	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate opportunities for developing a dedicated supported housing team; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • address weaknesses in processes for delivering support services, in line with QAF guidance, to achieve a level C assessment (including development of support plans, addressing of Freedom of Information and data protection weaknesses and risk assessment); 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a monitoring framework for supported housing, using Supporting People guidance; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate the provision of mobile phones and answering machines for wardens. 	Complete
R7 Develop a comprehensive human resources strategy.	Complete

The Audit Commission

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