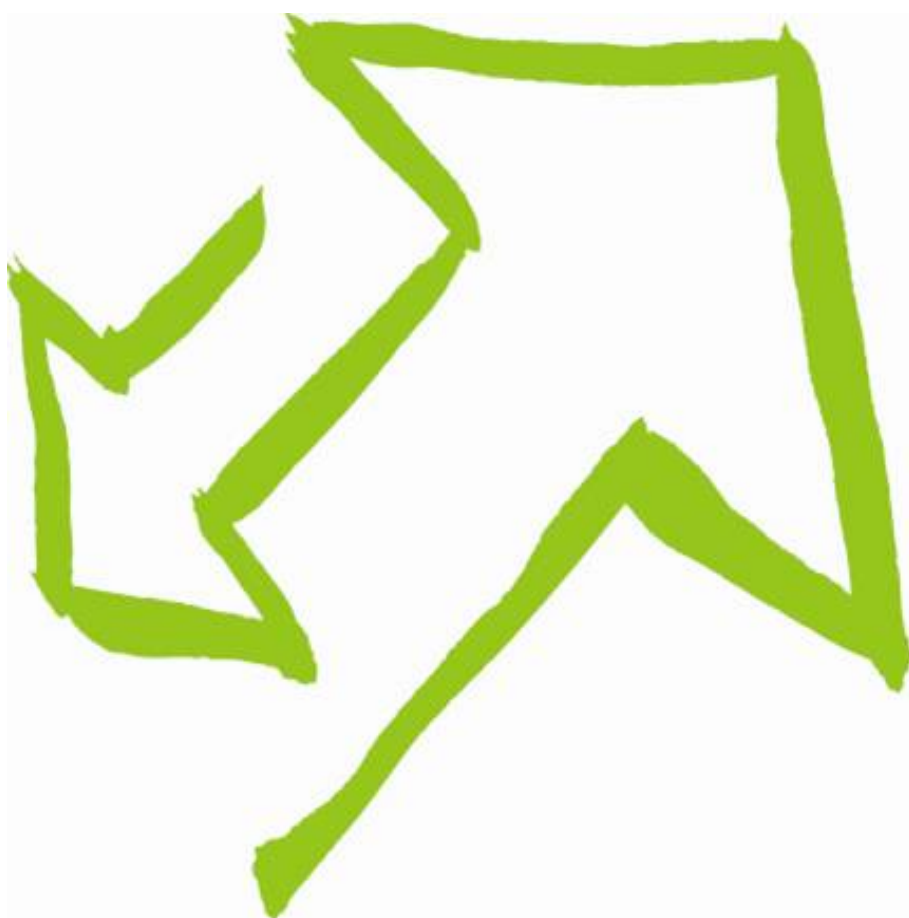


ALMO

Re-inspection

Northwards Housing

February 2009



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Arms 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, arms 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 arms 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).

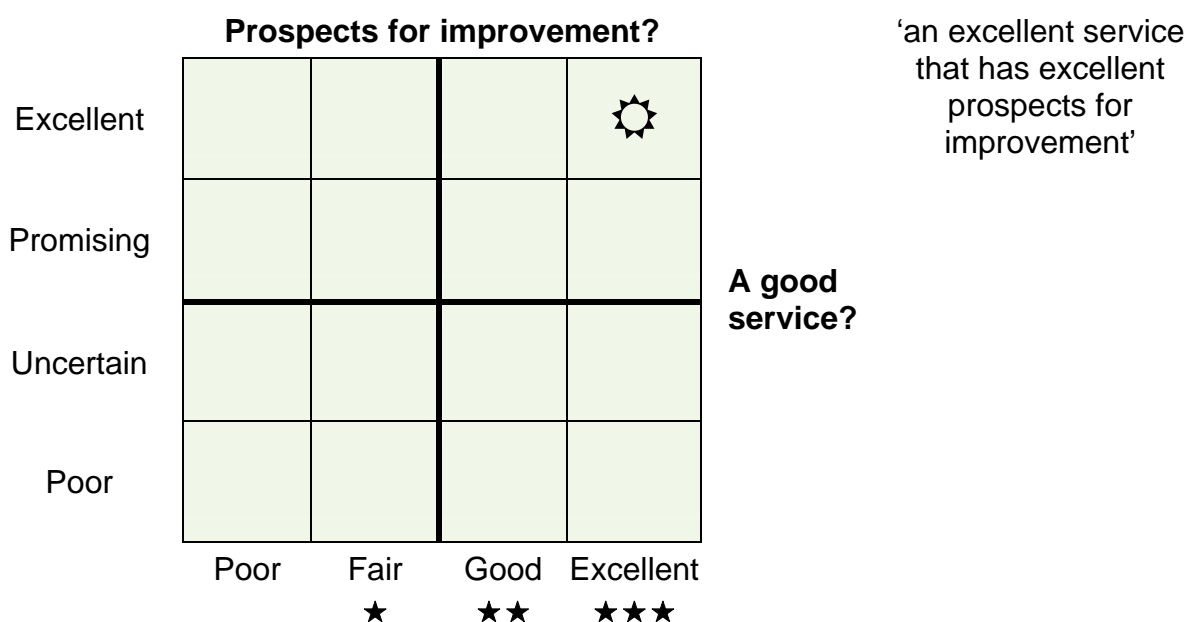
Summary

- 1 Northwards Housing (NH) is delivering an excellent, three-star service with excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 Strong outcomes are delivered for customers. Customers recognise improvements in the delivery of improvement works, repairs and anti-social behaviour (ASB) responses. Staff provide a customer focused service and services are accessible. Customer involvement is well developed in all service areas. Customers have a range of routes for engagement, are able to monitor and improve services, and customer satisfaction is high. A value for money (VFM) focus is embedded in the organisation.
- 3 Northwards has a strong corporate focus on diversity. Staff understand diverse customer needs and there is a well developed approach to delivering services that are tailored to meet identified customer needs. Strong strategic partnerships successfully support the development of cohesive communities and address wider community needs.
- 4 There are some areas for improvement. The performance in some service areas such as rents and voids is in the bottom 25 per cent when compared to similar organisations and the quality of empty properties is poor.
- 5 Northwards has excellent prospects for improvement. An improving track record across most service areas, strong and effective leadership and a strong customer focus helps the organisation to deliver improved services. Performance management and monitoring is effective and high calibre staff coupled with strong partnerships support the capacity of the organisation to continue to improve.
- 6 There are some barriers to improvement including limited improvement of performance in the areas of voids and rent collection. Some service plans lack SMART targets.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed Northwards Housing 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

- 8 We found the service to be excellent because it has a range of strengths including:
- it is easy to access services, information to tenants is of a high quality, the website is very accessible and all services are customer focused;
 - NH is likely to achieve its own target of 2010 to meet decent homes delivery;
 - satisfaction across services is high;
 - customers are effectively engaged and shape service delivery;
 - the overall appearance of estates is good;
 - NH is effective in addressing community cohesion issues through a good understanding of its customers, estates and delivering responsive ASB services;
 - services are delivered with a focus on VFM and customer priorities; and
 - performance on gas safety is strong.

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.

- 9 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- performance on reletting empty properties is weak;
 - leaseholder communication remains mixed; and
 - performance on income management is below target.
- 10 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:
- the board and leadership of the organisation is strong;
 - there are well motivated staff of a high calibre;
 - financial and resource management is strong; and
 - a strong performance culture is in place.
- 11 However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include:
- some service plans lack SMART targets; and
 - performance in some areas remains within the lower 25 per cent when compared to similar organisations.

Recommendations

12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with 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 Further develop the approach to void management by:

- implementing a robust quality checking process for ready to let voids;
- exploring the need for surveyor inspection requirement to all voids;
- increasing the number of immediate re-lets;
- setting clear targets for and reducing the number of refusals; and
- increasing the level of pre-termination visits.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to improve the condition and quality of voids for customers; and
- to increase the turnaround time for void properties.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Further improve the approach to leasehold management by:

- reviewing the way S20 notices are written to include accurate costs;
- involving leaseholders in reviewing the S20 so that it fully reflects their information needs; and
- providing information, in partnership with MCC, to leaseholders on the calculation of sinking fund amounts and the potential impact that this may have for them.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved information for leaseholders and a greater understanding of future costs.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve the approach to performance management within income management service by:

- considering payment in advance for non urgent rechargeable repairs; and
- developing, implementing and reporting on measurable targets. For example the number of tenants achieving the literacy course, targets for credit union take up and access to bank accounts through the credit union.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- measurable customer outcomes; and
- improved income into the organisation.

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

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

Dates of inspection: 17 November to 28 November 2008

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Manchester City Council is a metropolitan council in northwest England. It is the sixth largest metropolitan district outside London and the largest of the ten Greater Manchester districts with a population of 452,000³ living in 208,000 households.
- 15 The city contains areas of significant social deprivation. It is the fourth most deprived council area in England⁴. The majority of wards suffer from poor health, housing, educational achievement and employment prospects. Local unemployment remains high at 8.2 per cent compared to the UK rate of 5.2 per cent⁵.
- 16 Northwards Housing covers the north part of Manchester. The area has a population of 102,388 living in 86,000 households, which equates to 20 per cent of the city's total population and an area of 11.3 square miles. Over 12 per cent of the population are from black and non-white ethnic communities (compared to 16.9 per cent in the city as a whole). The Pakistani community is the largest single black and non-white ethnic community. In July 2008, unemployment rates across the district averaged 4 per cent (with a range of 2.9 to 5.4 per cent) which, while only 0.3 per cent behind the Manchester average, was significantly behind the regional average of 2.7 per cent and the national average of 2.3 per cent. The Index of Multiple Deprivation identifies large parts of Cheetham Hill, Harpurhey, Newton Heath and Moston is among the most deprived areas in the country.
- 17 NH is a key contributor to the Strategic Regeneration Framework for North Manchester (SRF) via the North Manchester Strategic Partnership. The Manchester and Salford housing market renewal pathfinder covers just less than half the ALMO area but even outside this area, neighbourhoods are identified for substantial investment in regeneration.

The Council

- 18 The Council has 96 elected members. The Labour Party is in political control with 61 seats. The Liberal Democrat Party has 34 seats and the Conservatives have one. In the Northwards area one seat is held by the Liberal Democrats with all other seats held by the Labour Party. Executive portfolios are structured round services and there are six Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The Authority has unitary status and has a gross budget of £1,612 million expenditure (2008/09).
- 19 Manchester City Council is improving adequately and demonstrates a three-star overall performance, under the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework.

³ ONS mid-year estimate 2006

⁴ Office of National Statistics (ONS) Indices of multiple deprivation 2007 (rank of average rank)

⁵ Those aged 16 and over. Percentage is a proportion of those economically active

The service

- 20** Northwards Housing manages 12,458 council homes. The stock includes a mix of houses, high and low rise flats, maisonettes and bungalows. NH's management fee is £19.7 million, plus £5.4 million in other income. This finances £9.1 million repairs and £16 million management costs. NH employs 336 staff. Services are provided through three local offices open to the public and one head office. Technical staff are co-located with Contractor Partners on four sites within the Northwards area.
- 21** The ALMO is governed by a Board, made up of four residents (tenants or leaseholders), four council nominees and four independents. There is a range of sub-committees and the three local area panels made up of residents. The day-to-day management of the ALMO is delegated to an executive management team, headed by a Chief Executive.
- 22** The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy - wider policy issues like promoting sustainable communities;
 - setting the level of rent;
 - administration of the choice-based lettings service;
 - dealing with claims for housing benefit and council tax benefit;
 - setting the overall rehousing policy in consultation with NH;
 - setting Northwards Housing's minimum service standards and monitoring its performance;
 - dealing with Right to Buy applications;
 - providing a service for homeless people;
 - private sector housing;
 - providing the Supporting People service; and
 - setting the overall strategy and policy for tackling anti-social behaviour in consultation with NH.
- 23** In January 2007, the Audit Commission reported that NH provided a good, two-star service, with excellent prospects for improvement. That assessment enabled Manchester City Council to access additional supported borrowing to help bring its homes up to the government's Decent Homes Standard.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24** The Council wishes to develop a city of national and international significance where people choose to live and which companies want to invest in. A city where all citizens benefit from regeneration and have equal access to the wealth, employment and other opportunities which this brings. It aims to improve the health, education, security and quality of life of its citizens by working with them to promote and support sustainable communities which are safe, friendly and clean.
- 25** Two of its nine corporate objectives are:
- Crime - to reduce crime and disorder and anti-social behaviour and help people to feel safer; and
 - Services - to provide services that are relevant, efficient, effective and best value for money.
- 26** The Council's Community Strategy links with the Strategic Regeneration Framework for North Manchester and is coordinated via the North Manchester Regeneration Partnership with which Northward Housing works. This is seeking the overall regeneration of North Manchester and NH's contribution is to regenerate the Council-owned housing while working with the Manchester and Salford housing market renewal pathfinder on the regeneration of mixed tenure areas.
- 27** The objectives of Northwards Housing are:
- warm, safe and affordable homes;
 - successful communities;
 - quality services;
 - value for money;
 - safer places to live;
 - an attractive environment; and
 - promote equality and diversity.
- 28** Northwards aims to deliver this through its key values of:
- top class customer service;
 - local services;
 - embracing equality and diverse communities;
 - tenant-focused;
 - committed to our employees; and
 - accountable.

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

Access and customer care

- 29** In our previous inspection, we found this was an area where strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a strong corporate approach, offices were welcoming and accessible and the website was well developed. There was wide use of satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping, most service standards were in place, information was available and clear and there was a new complaints procedure. However, performance on complaints was unsatisfactory, some service standards had still to be developed and NH had not analysed the costs and benefits of different ways to access services.
- 30** In this inspection, we found this was an area of significant strength. There is a strong and consistent focus on customer care which is demonstrated throughout the organisation. In particular the organisation is effective in addressing the specific needs of customers living in an area with significant deprivation. Offices are easily accessible and the website is user focused, interactive and easy to use. Mystery shopping and complaints are used effectively to improve services. However the speed of response times with the on call service are not customer focused.
- 31** There is a strong and consistent approach to customer care which is well understood and demonstrated by staff. A customer focused culture was found in all service areas and understood by front line staff, managers and board members. Communication flags on the Information Technology (IT) system, a staff communications handbook and links to an interpretation service all help to improve customer focus. Training has been delivered to support staff in understanding the challenges of the diverse customer base. This approach supports the organisation in dealing with customers in a consistent way.
- 32** NH delivers accessible services to its customers. A clear access to services strategy supports the delivery of customer choice. Three area offices are open in line with identified customer preferences. A full range of communication methods allow residents to access services by telephone, website, email, text, personal office visit and surgeries. Home visits can be provided where requested. There is a single point of telephone contact for all enquiries which is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with call centre staff able to deal with housing and repairs enquiries. Out of hours calls are dealt with promptly and appropriate responses to email requests are made within 24 hours. As a result customers have choice and accessible services that meet their individual needs, lifestyle and preferences.
- 33** NH offices are accessible. Services to customers are delivered through a main office and three well located area offices, which are fully Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant. Offices we visited have good reception areas with facilities for children and private interview rooms. A range of information posters are displayed and opening times are visible. NH offices are welcoming with friendly, knowledgeable staff who were able to deal appropriately with issues and signpost customers to other agencies as required.

How good is the service?

- 34** NH supports easy access to its services and information. Information is widely available in offices and on the internet. Service literature and information is generally of a high standard. There is a strong focus on providing information for service users that is clear and jargon free. A communication and editorial forum ensures that information is only provided to customers if it has been approved by the forum and has the 'tenant friendly' customer logo. This approach ensures that information is useful to customers.
- 35** Access to information is supported by some innovative approaches. A clear DVD supplements the written tenant's handbook. NH has created a high quality DVD which explains the services that tenants can expect in an accessible and simple way. It has been developed jointly by NH, contractors and customers. The DVD refers to some of the service standards that tenants can expect and explains, for example, what goes on when rewiring takes place. This helps to ensure tenants have a good idea of the upheaval that such work can create and ensures that information is accessible to the widest range of tenants.
- 36** NH is pro-active in making information to tenants accessible. An innovative 'tea mobile' scheme takes staff onto estates. The 'tea mobile' is a moving living room which moves around estates and allows residents to stop for a drink and a chat about improvements they would like to see to their area, as well as an opportunity to access information. This approach supports equal access to information for residents.
- 37** Clear service standards are in place. These have been developed with customers and can be found in leaflets which have been designed with customers. Leaflets are available at offices, are colour coded for easy identification and form a suite that makes up the tenants' handbook. Service standards are met and are monitored in a variety of ways through theme groups, surveys, area panels, residents' associations and by tenant inspectors and reported back for action as required. This ensures that customers are effectively engaged in shaping and monitoring services.
- 38** The NH website is clearly presented, easy to navigate and use. It contains a wide range of useful information about the organisation, customer involvement, rents, local initiatives, the ongoing decent homes programme, minutes of meetings and links to local Tenant and Residents Association (TARAs). Information is available in other formats such as community languages, different print sizes, audible text and can be requested on audio tape or in Braille. Recognising that not all its customers can easily access the NH website, NH provides internet kiosks at all its area offices and the Surestart centre, Newton Heath. As a result NH presents a substantial amount of information for tenants in an attractive, user-friendly manner which is easily accessed.
- 39** The NH website has interactive facilities so that tenants can pay their rent, report a repair, book a convenient repair appointment time, request information, make a comment or register a complaint and access an easy to use on- line benefits calculator. Northwards Housing advertises this medium extensively. Data from the website usage is collated and used to identify trends. By using this option tenants can contact Northwards easily and at a time convenient to them.

- 40 The quality of the on-call service is good, but the speed of response is an area of weakness. Telephone response by the contact centre is relatively slow. Only 75 per cent of calls met the 20 second response target in October (against an 80 per cent target) while a high level of calls were abandoned (8.75 per cent against a 5 per cent target). The service has been reviewed (see details in paragraph 255) and will transfer to an alternative provider in March 2009. The annual customer survey indicated that 83 per cent of customers choose to contact Northwards Housing by telephone with 80 per cent making contact regarding repairs. Over 85 per cent of customers are satisfied with how long it takes to answer the phone, with only 7 per cent registering dissatisfaction. Overall 75 per cent reported satisfaction with the final outcome of their call. An action plan has been agreed to improve performance until the move to the new provider in March 2009.
- 41 A range of customer surveys is used to measure satisfaction. Satisfaction with ways to contact Northwards Housing, is high at 88 per cent. Satisfaction is monitored systematically throughout the main services. Aside from annual surveys which include leaseholders, sheltered residents and people living in tower blocks, there are surveys following requests for repairs, anti-social behaviour complaints, other complaints, debt advice and the completion of DH work. The results are analysed by areas and there is no variation in satisfaction levels between different area offices.
- 42 There is a clear and well publicised complaints procedure. Tenants were involved in its formulation and they review the quality of the response made by Northwards, and check that complaints procedures have been adhered to. Changes have been implemented as a result of tenants' comments. For example after being told that tenants would like a named staff contact and specific phone number, Northwards included this in the process and upon receipt of any complaint a manager phones the complainant to establish contact. Mystery shoppers and tenant inspectors periodically quality check the initial process and a complaints panel check its conclusion. This ensures that complaints are dealt with effectively for customers.
- 43 Informal complaints are dealt with effectively. Informal complaints are not recorded if they can be dealt with immediately at source. Tenants with limited literacy are helped by front line staff, as are those who need to use other means of communication such as signing. Changes made as a result of a complaint are publicised in local offices and on the website. In this way tenants can see that their complaints are listened to and acted upon.
- 44 Satisfaction with the outcomes of complaints is mixed. A relatively low 62 per cent are satisfied with the outcome of their complaint and 24 per cent are dissatisfied. While dissatisfaction may reflect that complaints were not upheld, reasons for dissatisfaction are not fully understood by Northwards.

Diversity

- 45 In our previous inspection, we found a strong approach to diversity and strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a corporate commitment and appropriate engagement with diverse groups of residents. Information was provided in a range of ways and there was a robust approach to race hate crimes and domestic violence. However, there was limited understanding of the customer base and the workforce did not fully represent the local community.

How good is the service?

- 46 In this inspection, we found a strong approach to diversity with strengths significantly outweighing weaknesses. NH demonstrates strong leadership, corporate commitment and a fully embedded approach to diversity. In addressing the significant challenges it has within its area, NH has used customer information to ensure that customers have equal access to and tailored information about all its services.
- 47 NH demonstrates leadership and a clear commitment to diversity and equality at a corporate level. 'Embracing equality and diverse communities' and 'to treat everyone fairly and with respect' are part of NH objectives and core values. Board and staff champions for diversity are appointed. All staff are required to read and use the diversity workbook which aims to raise awareness of equality and diversity issues. Employees are required to take an interactive test either online or by telephone. An employee working group, 'Fairground', raises issues of good practice and supports the development of a wider understanding within the organisation, through visits to faith groups or places of worship, for example. This demonstrates a strong corporate approach.
- 48 There is a clear focus on diversity. Equality, diversity and community cohesion is promoted in all service areas. Training on equality and diversity has been delivered to the Board, staff and offered to, and taken up by contractors. NH is responding to the diversity of the local population through its Equality and Diversity strategy, clear policies, procedures and the tailoring of services and the development of a culture of tolerance among staff and contractors. NH is represented at a range of community groups and provides strong leadership of the community cohesion agenda. Strong partnerships are in place with for example the police, fire service, contractor partners and voluntary agencies to support wider community outcomes. Staff and residents consider that there is a good degree of community cohesion among the diverse communities of North Manchester. This is assisted through events which bring the community together and by a prompt response to acts of hatred.
- 49 NH ensures staff understand the importance of equal access to services. A communication handbook supports staff in understanding the importance of writing letters and emails that acknowledge equality and diversity issues as well as providing information on the translation services available. The website, offices and leaflets all provide clearly detailed information on translation options. This approach ensures that both staff and customers are aware of protocols and equitable access to information.
- 50 Interpretation, translation and literacy services are accessible. All staff understand how to access translation services and staff and contractors carry a useful pocket sized translation card to aid prompt identification of a required language alongside information about contact details for the translation services. All NH leaflets carry straplines to allow for translation or provision in other formats. As a result information is accessible to customers.
- 51 NH has a comprehensive approach to equality impact assessments. NH has completed equality impact assessments across the majority of its areas of activity and can show how it has revised its working arrangements as a result. Examples of this include an explanation of the actual content of documents in community languages, and the arrangement of day care for older tenants affected by the improvements programme. As a result NH can demonstrate that a focus on diversity and equality is embedded in most service areas.

- 52** NH has a good understanding of its customer profile. Information across the six diversity streams (gender, sexuality, religion, disability, age and ethnicity) is collected and monitored⁶. A range of methods are used to collect further information and these include sign ups and through telephone or personal contact with customers. Involvement of tenants is monitored in terms of representation that reflects the community. For example it has surveyed the 500 tenants who have had least contact with the ALMO to ensure that they are not being excluded. This approach supports the organisation to deliver services tailored to meet individual customer needs.
- 53** Diverse groups of residents are actively involved in shaping services. NH works with a range of different traditionally hard to reach groups and involves them in developing services which meet their specific needs. A BME focus group, disability focus group and LGBT⁷ Forum actively contribute to service improvement. For example the LGBT Forum has provided contractor training in response to comments from the group that contractors felt ill at ease visiting LGBT tenants. The training will help ensure contractors have a better understanding of this group. In addition staff attend a wide range of informal meetings which includes Russian, Muslim and Eastern European groups, in order to understand specific needs of such groups. As a result changes to services more appropriately reflect the needs of this diverse community.
- 54** The capital programme has been tailored to meet the needs of diverse groups. An equality and diversity statement was created as a result of research into the diversity of tenants, staff and contractors. This has led to smaller meetings with ten residents for each stage of activity or within retirement schemes and the use of signers at Victoria Square, a supported housing scheme, where there is a high population of deaf people. Work is timed to avoid cultural events and tie in with holidays where tenants wish to avoid the disruption. Kitchens are designed to take account of cultural requirements. Where adaptations have been identified these are incorporated into the Decent Homes (DH) programme by contractors. This approach ensures that tenants understand and have access to improvements that address their specific needs.
- 55** NH is committed to local procurement and employment. It can show that it is investing in three 'local' levels and has used its additional income to promote local employment. Targets are set for the proportion/number of trainees and work placements, women, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and disabled staff employed. It has achieved success in increasing its investment in local employment and services and by working in partnership with the Stepping Stones agency has helped to secure employment or training for seven tenants claiming disability benefits. This is supporting the sustainability of local communities.

⁶ Current NH customer profile data - Age 82 per cent; Disability 84 per cent; Ethnicity 87 per cent; Gender 96 per cent; Religion 85 per cent; Sexuality 82 per cent (as at 17 November 2008).

⁷ LGBT - lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender

How good is the service?

- 56** NH is effectively supporting the Community Cohesion agenda. Together with a range of partner agencies and Manchester City Council it is working pro-actively across neighbourhoods to ensure that access to facilities is equitable. A range of initiatives demonstrate the organisations commitment to the role it plays. For example there is an effective approach to hate crimes and domestic violence. Robust policies are in place and information is provided for tenants in clear leaflets, articles in the newsletter and through the website, where there are links to agencies for support and advice. Race hate crimes are recorded and monitored. As a result tenants are well supported within their communities.
- 57** Incidents of domestic abuse are taken seriously and victims have a range of support options including a sanctuary scheme; 28 day decant place of safety; legal action; general rehousing and self help support. A partnership approach is taken between NH, MCC and Women's Aid to ensure there is a joined up approach for people experiencing domestic abuse. This ensures that there is a strategic understanding and approach to this issue.
- 58** The composition of the Board, staff and contractors does not fully reflect the composition of the wider community that NH serves. However areas of under - representation are well recognised and actions taken which aim to redress the balance. Partners recognise that women are underrepresented in the workforce and have run 'Women in Construction' events but so far have only been able to take on two women operatives. NH has assessed the diversity of its board and has set itself targets to address any weaknesses. In most of the six strands of diversity the Board is well represented, but is seeking greater representation from the younger and Black African communities.

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 59** In our previous inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in this service. There was a strong citywide approach to housing investment and regeneration and programmes of work to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS) were in place. A DHS plus standard had been drawn up with residents, the programme had been recently procured on a full partnering basis and there was a wide choice of fixtures and fittings drawn up with residents. However, improvements were needed in stock condition information, asset management strategy and managing asbestos.
- 60** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. A citywide approach to the delivery of housing, investment and regeneration remains strong. As part of a strategic approach by Manchester City Council to improve housing, NH is seen as a pro-active key partner in delivering improved homes and sustainable communities within North Manchester. NH is successfully delivering its promises to customers and providing improved housing to tenants. The programme is delivered on a full partnership basis and stock condition data supports the organisation to plan for future investment needs.

- 61** NH delivers an effective improvement programme to its customers. An accelerated programme has delivered decent homes to customers and is currently ahead of the NH schedule, with 65 per cent of properties achieving decency. NH intend to achieve the delivery of the decent homes programme by 2010 in spite of spend re profiling from Communities and Local Government (CLG). Funding from CLG after 2010 will be used to address environmental improvements to estates that have been identified by customers. Progress with the delivery of the DH programme is reported to and monitored by Area Panels. This approach means that customers can see improvements and the ALMO is delivering its promises to customers.
- 62** Partnering is used effectively by NH to deliver its repairs and maintenance services. There are two aspects to the delivery of the service. A Joint Venture Company (JVC) provides responsive repairs, voids and DH work in two Northwards Housing areas (the JVC is a joint venture between the Council and a contractor partner). A framework agreement across the city delivers the DH work to the remaining Northwards area. The partnerships are managed and monitored effectively by Northwards Housing and are delivering improvements that can demonstrate improved quality and increasing value for money.
- 63** There are high levels of satisfaction with the service. Tenants are pleased with the quality of work and consider contractors to be helpful. Customer satisfaction is high at 97 per cent, with an 89 per cent return. This high level has been achieved because of the intermediary role of resident liaison officers who carry out most surveys on a face to face basis. The survey is completed at handover (100 per cent kitchens, less for windows) and marks are awarded out of 10. This figure is reported to the KPI group, by contractor to the sub-committee and at meetings with contractors.
- 64** Northwards is working proactively to improve its homes and make them more energy efficient. Energy efficiency in homes is in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations, with a SAP rating of 77.20. A range of grants has been accessed to support this work, including a partnership with British Gas to part fund the cavity wall and loft insulation programme. This supports Northwards approach to addressing fuel poverty which links to deprivation indicators across its area.
- 65** NH has robust information on the condition of its properties. A comprehensive asset management database includes data on fire, Housing Health and Safety Rating and asbestos. The stock condition survey provides an up- to- date assessment of decent homes compliance. The 2007 survey of 20 per cent of homes was cloned by archetype. A 20 per cent survey occurs annually and so comprehensive information should be available by 2012. NH has worked on many properties now and has undertaken two surveys so it is very confident with the accuracy of the data. Information about stock condition can be interrogated with predicted attribute failure dates and estimated costs identified. The system supports the management of data and supports effective future investment planning.

How good is the service?

- 66 Customers can easily access information about the decent homes programme. Details of the programme are available online, which includes an on line address search facility, with internet facilities available in area offices to help customers without other access to the internet. Tenants are provided with a high quality Residents Home Improvement DVD which details what to expect from decent homes work and a clear repair work 'standards you can expect leaflet'. Customers having work undertaken are provided with a calendar of work events that will take place in their homes. This ensures that there is a clear understanding of the process, when workers can be expected and allows customers to plan effectively. As a result customers are well informed of when and how improvements will be made to their homes.
- 67 A comprehensive programme of improvement work is in place. Customers are effectively engaged in setting priorities for improvement works through the DH programme. There is a range of activities for informing and consulting tenants on choices. It was tenants who decided the way in which work would be carried out. Residents associations and forums have influenced minor and major changes. For example, the rewiring was causing a lot of damage and this led to a policy change that NH only does the work that tenants actually need rather than a full rewire and by using radio thermostats rather than damaging wallpaper around the wall thermostat. There is a wide range of choice over designs, colours and finishes (including window designs) and the range of choices of bathroom colours has been extended following tenant feedback. Residents can also purchase additional work from the contractors at the same price that NH pays. As a result customers feel involved and have a sense of ownership of the work undertaken.
- 68 Tenant liaison officers (TLOs) provide a central support and advice facility to tenants whose homes are part of improvement plans. TLOs initiate contact with tenants, ensure tenants and leaseholders are consulted, provide information about products, processes and timescales, and collate tenants' personal details to ensure that their requirements are met appropriately. They also arrange coffee mornings to discuss issues as they arise, move heavy furniture, arrange storage facilities if needed, set up respite rooms, access to day centres and have ensured medication was kept in fridges and vulnerable tenants were offered long term support. They log good practice as "lessons learned" to cascade to other members of staff. This helps to ensure services continue to improve and meet customer needs
- 69 NH has close working relationships with its contractor partners. The Home Improvement service is co-located with partner contractors, with a geographical focus reflecting Area Panel boundaries. Value engineering and procurement task groups have also delivered a range of savings through product selection, supply chain efficiencies and bulk purchase. As a result customers are benefiting from improved working arrangements.
- 70 NH and its planned maintenance contractors are using their influence and purchasing power to strengthen the local community in which they work. Large numbers of apprenticeships (26) and work experience placements are offered to young people. Partners are working with schools on careers and health and safety and take part in a range of community events. The amount of work purchased and employees living locally are monitored. By becoming well known locally, it is easier to gain the trust of tenants whose homes they need to work in.

- 71** NH has a good understanding of the presence of asbestos in its homes. It has survey information on all common areas and 20 per cent of homes (reflecting every house type). This is backed up by 10 per cent samples of every home in each decent homes project and surveys of void properties. The sample surveys show that asbestos presents a relatively low risk across the stock as a whole. A number of sources of information exist to ensure that contractors and staff are aware of the presence of asbestos. Aside from the electronic database which is integrated with the repairs system, hard copies are provided in each retirement housing scheme and multi-storey block. Additional warnings are provided by stickers in secure plant rooms where asbestos is known to exist.
- 72** Tenants are provided with useful general information on how to take care with asbestos but no specific information on asbestos in their homes. The DVD and advice leaflet provide clear information on precautions, such as contacting the Asbestos team prior to carrying out DIY work and a telephone contact number for tenants if they have any concerns. The use of warning stickers within the home is not considered to be effective, but no other information either written (based upon cloned information on each house type) or as part of the sign up is provided.
- 73** NH has a strong focus on fire safety. A member of staff manages the fire risk for NH. The stock condition survey collected information on fire risk for all communal areas. Fire risk assessments were prepared and there is a fire action plan in place to identify and address risks. The plan is being delivered and NH informs the fire service in order to comply with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2007. This focus is supported by the Fire Safety checks for homes, offered to customers. As a result tenants can feel reassured about their safety.
- 74** NH is successfully delivering alternative energy and energy efficiency projects. NH has accessed funds to support the delivery of an Energy Action Plan and is delivering various improvements through the Home Improvements Programme. For example NH has secured 50 per cent grant funding from the Low Carbon Building programme for the installation of photovoltaic panels on ten multi storey blocks and two blocks of maisonette/walk up flats, and a partnership which British Gas part funds the NH cavity wall and loft insulation programme. Further projects are being developed in respect of renewable energy, including the installation of solar panels on sheltered housing blocks.
- 75** There is a comprehensive asset management strategy. The strategy clearly sets out the organisations aims to ensure that stock meets customer needs now and in the future. An asset management plan group meets quarterly to monitor progress in delivering the strategy action plan and the Asset Management Board Champion attends meetings to ensure the Board is aware of issues arising. There is a clear focus on the sustainability of stock such as retirement housing, with option appraisals and neighbourhood plans considered. This approach is providing principles and direction for stock investment and sustainability.

How good is the service?

- 76** Community benefits are delivered through NH partnership working. NH has jointly developed the IMPACT Manchester consortium of partners. IMPACT Manchester is a client led consortium of housing clients using the Framework Agreement to share best practice and ensure continuous improvement in service delivery. A range of task groups meet to consider issues such as community benefit, customer care, performance issues and VFM. Progress of members is monitored using KPIs and a Business Plan supports the development of the Consortium.
- 77** IMPACT is delivering added value. In addition to delivering the programme, benefits to the community include opportunities to develop employment and training. Northwards is operating in an area of significant deprivation where addressing the worklessness agenda has a big focus. Contractors have all signed up to this. Partners are taking on apprentices and other community benefits delivered include holding a barbecue on an estate and work to repair a roof on a youth club.

Responsive repairs

- 78** In our previous inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in this area. The repairs service was customer-focused, information provided to residents on repairs was of a high quality, a high percentage of repairs were carried out by appointment and satisfaction was above average. However, performance in completing repairs on time was not high and efficiency and monitoring could be improved in a number of areas.
- 79** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The repairs service continues to deliver a customer focused service, with good quality information tailored to meet the range of needs of its customers. A high percentage of repairs are completed by appointment and customer satisfaction is high. Performance in completing repairs on time is good for emergency work but lower for urgent repairs and rechargeable repairs arrangements are weak.
- 80** Service performance is mixed. Appointments and emergency repairs achieved NH targets, whereas urgent and routine repairs do not achieve NH target level. The percentage of appointments made and kept was 97.24 per cent in October; emergency repairs were completed on time in 98.3 per cent of cases against a challenging three hour target; 86.8 per cent of urgent repairs and right to repair work was completed on time and 98.5 per cent on the appointed day; while performance on routine repairs was 96.2 per cent on time against different deadlines. As a result customers are receiving an inconsistent service.
- 81** NH prioritises its approach to completing repairs in one visit. This is monitored, with 84 per cent of jobs completed 'right first time' and work appears to be well diagnosed since misdiagnosis is rarely cited as a reason for dissatisfaction. Operatives are multi skilled to support this approach. As a result tenants are not inconvenienced by several requests for access.

- 82** NH delivers a customer focused responsive repairs service. Repairs are easy to report through the on call service, online or at NH offices. There is a diagnostic tool for repair call operatives which matches guidance in the tenants' handbook and on the website. Tenants benefit from a choice of appointments for repairs. There are four slots offered each weekday day plus Wednesday evening and Saturday morning options. All appointments are confirmed in writing unless they fall within two days of the report. This approach helps tenants to arrange access at times which are convenient and can fitted in around other responsibilities.
- 83** Post- inspections are targeted to areas of highest risk. Ten per cent of repairs are post- inspected and staff are expected to focus on higher value work or work that is regularly the subject of complaints by tenants. Staff select ten per cent to visit according to higher cost, high cost variation, knowledge of the local areas, by trade or by type of repair. They make an appointment and check repair details via IT before calling. This targeting of inspections maintains a focus on efficiency of staff time and the quality of the repairs service offered to tenants.
- 84** NH has trained tenants to carry out checks on housing service standards. For example tenant inspectors checking two tower blocks of flats as part of the tenant inspection programme, detailed outstanding repairs and assessed standards of cleanliness: these were reported to NH who ordered the repairs. The inspectors received a written report with details of the repairs and relevant comments and they then follow this up to ensure the repairs have been completed.
- 85** Rechargeable repairs arrangements are not fully effective. A revised recharging system was re-launched this year for accountancy purposes. Weaknesses appear to remain however; for example where repairs are non-urgent NH does not require payment in advance of the work. However payment plans are offered to assist tenants' ability to pay.
- 86** There are high satisfaction levels with the repairs service. Over 85 per cent of customers were satisfied with their repairs and this figure rose to 95 per cent in October 2008. However these figures are based on limited information with only a 10 per cent return rate. Satisfaction surveys do not yet monitor the diversity of the responses, although the annual tenants' survey does give more information and NH has concluded that that older people are more satisfied. NH is considering the use of handheld computers to collect satisfaction and diversity information but recognises the need for a full impact assessment. It is a missed opportunity that NH does not use the On Call service to supplement sample satisfaction monitoring.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 87** In our previous inspection, we found that significant improvements had been made to the letting of empty properties and strengths outweighed weaknesses. However, performance in re-letting properties was still poor and in the bottom 25 per cent of similar organisations. Part of the reason for this poor performance was the reletting of previously unlettable properties which had a short-term affect on reported performance.

How good is the service?

- 88** In this inspection, we found that weaknesses now outweigh strengths in this area. The voids process has been reviewed and a re-let standard, agreed with customers. However, the quality of ready to let voids is disappointing and performance, although much improved, remains poor and in the bottom 25 per cent of similar landlords.
- 89** The condition of ready to let voids is generally poor. Of the four ready to let properties we viewed, three did not meet the void standard and all were dirty. Some properties had engrained dirt on the stairs, walls and doors, tiles and grouting were discoloured, graffiti and paint splashes had not been removed. Newly installed electrical sockets in two properties had open gaps behind them and were neither safe nor completed. Gripper rails were left on stairs; door panels were broken and there was a dangerously split stair tread. Although the void standard states properties should be clean, Northwards has not checked or adhered to this and new tenants will view this detrimentally or be put into a situation where they accept inferior standards or judge Northwards accordingly. Managers recognise that the condition that properties are being let in does not meet the (relatively low) lettable standard.
- 90** Re-let times are slow. The average time to re-let an empty property, for October 2008, is 39.3 days (target 42 days) which is in the bottom 25 per cent of similar organisations. A review of the voids process has been undertaken and a change in procedures has seen improvement from the 65 days reported in 2006/07 (and 76 days reported at the time of the last inspection). Forty- seven per cent of properties are now re-let within 35 days of becoming empty and clear targets are in place to monitor and manage voids.
- 91** Progress on reducing voids is limited. A number of areas affect improved performance for example few homes are relet immediately by limiting the work to gas and electrical safety checks. Surveyors currently carry out void inspections and draw up specifications for work rather than requiring the contractor to bring homes up to the lettable standard and pre- termination visits are not widely carried out (currently 39 per cent.).
- 92** Refusal rates on void properties are high. Analysis of refusal rates in the first quarter of 2008/09 indicate variances across the three area panel areas with Wilton, Riverway and Fourways having refusal rates of 43, 49 and 29 per cent respectively. NH monitors levels quarterly and is working with MCC and partners, feeding information into the development of the updated CBL system, which is due to go live at the end of 2009. Challenging targets have been discussed for the updated CBL model. Understanding reasons for refusal supports NH in offering properties that more appropriately meet applicant needs.
- 93** There is a minimal re-let standard in place. However, while the lettable standard is minimal, tenants were involved in its design. The key features of the standard relate to higher cleaning standards, tidying gardens and providing air fresheners to properties. The standard is provided to prospective tenants at the offer stage in order that new tenants can understand the standard that they can expect.

- 94 Accompanied viewings are carried out with all prospective tenants. This enables the applicant to assess whether the lettable standard has been met and to raise any queries or issues. Viewings undertaken in retirement housing are supported by the scheme manager in order to develop an early relationship with the tenant and to assess any specific support needs. Safety checks are undertaken on all void properties and customers receive copies of safety certificates. This approach is customer focused and supports the organisation in improving its re-let times.
- 95 Northwards takes appropriate precautions to safeguard its vacant properties. Void properties have differing degrees of security determined by risk with alarms or metal shutters fixed in some cases or no additional security other than doors locked. This results in a level of visual security appropriate to the local area and less of a blemish to the neighbourhood.
- 96 Satisfaction with new homes is high at 91 per cent in quarter two 2008/09. Some dissatisfaction with the condition of new homes may be due to NH not carrying out decent homes work while the properties are empty. Managers fear that this will increase the void period (although other Councils and ALMOs have been able to carry out the work and still have lower void periods) but the main reason is to ensure that longer term tenants do not feel unfairly treated.
- 97 There are good links between void repairs and the stock condition survey. The DH database is verified as part of the voids survey and any work carried out is fed into the database. This approach ensures that the stock information is robust and kept up-to-date.
- 98 Robust performance monitoring is supporting improvement in void turnaround times. A voids review has led to the establishment of a dedicated voids team which is co-located with the contractors void team. There is a new set of criteria for classifying void properties in order to speed up turnaround and NH is currently recruiting a joint void manager with its contractor partner. Performance is discussed at team meetings and management team level. There is an effective working relationship between the voids and lettings teams, with systems in place to identify fit to let properties enabling lettings staff to plan more effectively. This approach is supporting the delivery of improved performance.

Gas servicing

- 99 In our previous inspection, we found that this was a strong area where strengths significantly exceeded weaknesses. Procedures were customer-focused, performance was high and there were effective access procedures.
- 100 In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to significantly outweigh weaknesses. Performance is very strong, and procedures are robust and customer focused.

How good is the service?

- 101** Performance is strong and currently 99.64 per cent of properties have a valid safety certificate. All changes of tenancies have new gas safety inspections carried out. There is a strong focus on customer service. Good quality information is provided to both tenants and leaseholders to remind them of the importance of annual gas servicing. Information provided includes a leaflet; details in the tenant's handbook and regular awareness articles in the tenants' newsletter. Staff are aware of the importance of gas servicing and alerts on computer systems ensure they were aware of overdue servicing and can arrange an appointment for the service. This approach is ensuring the safety of NH tenants
- 102** Gas engineers undertake annual gas safety checks and are focused on keeping a timely schedule. They call out to customers' homes by prior arrangement. If there is no answer they will call back repeatedly during that day and during the next week. After that a reminder letter is posted asking the tenant to contact NH to make another appointment. Engineers showed in depth knowledge of the area and of their missed appointments and were resolute on keeping these in their daily schedules. Engineers reminded tenants how important the gas check is to their safety and also reminded them that they would return next year. Because of this the safety of NH tenants is supported and there is increased accountability of statutory performance.
- 103** NH is beginning to introduce new ways of encouraging tenants to agree to gas safety checks. Currently NH carries out, on average, four forced entries a month. It does not seek a Court Order but serves a section 54⁸ notice prior to the action. The notice results in 75 per cent of recipients relenting and allowing access. Where there have been forced entries or a lack of cooperation in the past NH now installs limiters which use warning lights and temporary cut offs to force tenants to arrange the check. NH does not charge for missed appointments, which can be an incentive to help ensure that gas servicing takes place on time.
- 104** Satisfaction with gas servicing is high. Tenants receive a satisfaction survey following the annual service and results from the survey indicate a 99.2 per cent satisfaction rate. Servicing is designed around customer feedback.
- 105** NH ensures there is added value to the gas service contract. Tenants of NH are given a fire risk assessment in their homes. Gas service engineers have been trained by the Fire Brigade to undertake fire risk assessments at the same time as the annual gas service. They discuss possible hazards with tenants and offer advice about planning escape routes and helping vulnerable people in the household. A questionnaire is completed, signed by the tenant and a copy sent to the Fire Brigade so they do not duplicate the assessment. This focus on safety reduces the danger from smoke inhalation and fires for tenants.
- 106** Overdue gas safety checks are not integrated within the repairs system and so a repairs request cannot trigger an overdue gas safety check. The gas safety process does not commence until an appointment letter is sent out 11 months after the last service. Five letters and several visits take place before a 'flag' is placed on the repairs system to alert the call centre when a repair is requested. This means that the 12-month deadline will be exceeded well before this point. NH cannot do this sooner because the flag has to be entered and removed manually. However this does not appear to have impacted on the performance of the service.

⁸ S 54 EPA notice

Aids and adaptations

- 107** In our previous inspection, we found this was a strong area where strengths significantly exceeded weaknesses. It was a Council retained service and there was close partnership working and publicity, information and performance were strong. The Council ran the assessment service (MEAP - Manchester Equipment and Adaptations Partnership) and NH promoted the service and procured the improvement works.
- 108** In this inspection, this continues to be a strong area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. The service is retained by the Council but is highly effective in delivering outcomes for customers through strong partnership working. Information and publicity is good and performance in this area remains strong. The assessment service (MEAP) continues to be run by the Council with NH effectively promoting the service and procuring improvement works.
- 109** NH, in partnership with MEAP, delivers strong performance in the adaptations service. Minor adaptations are delivered responsively with 95 per cent delivered within seven working days. Average waiting times for a referral to be completed is 17.2 working days (July - September 2008). Of the 250 cases referred by NH to MEAP, 210 have been completed and the oldest pending date is July 2008. Major adaptations are taking an average of 158 days to complete work and 57 cases are not yet completed.
- 110** The quality of work is to a high standard. The work we saw during the inspection, installed as part of planned works, was of a high quality and considerable care was taken to address the needs of vulnerable customers. Satisfaction levels are collated by MCC and then fed back to Northwards. Satisfaction with the service is high at 100 per cent so far this year.
- 111** There is a strong pro active approach to delivering adaptations as part of DH programme. Wherever possible, adaptations are carried out by NH partner contractors when decent homes works are being carried out. Customer needs are actively identified both through reference to adaptations already identified by MEAP and individual identified needs. The initial letter to all residents for capital works promotes the adaptation service. Photographs are taken of completed works and these are used to illustrate adaptations to customers. Northwards requests for assessments are prioritised in order that work can be agreed with MEAP and accommodated within the decent homes works. This means that disruption is minimised, the lives of vulnerable residents are improved waiting times are reduced and improved value for money is delivered. Customers who may not have otherwise accessed the adaptation service are identified and assisted and better value for money is achieved. Additionally NH can identify other needs and vulnerability issues of customers and then refer on to care management in order that other facilities can be provided and needs addressed.

How good is the service?

- 112** There is a clear focus and pro-active approach to delivering adaptations as an intrinsic part of the improvement programme. Showers are fitted as standard during decent homes work and showers with anti scald features are fitted in retirement housing and for vulnerable customers. The knowledge built up by tenant liaison officers prior to the start of improvement works is used to assess for any adaptations which tenants may require. As well as representing value for money, it results in less disruption for tenants as building work does not have to be repeated. If aids and adaptations are urgently needed then the improvement work can be brought forward in the scheme to facilitate it. Adaptations delivered include level access showers; lowered kitchen units and ramps to meet customer assessed needs. This removes a barrier to people accessing the adaptations they require to in order to enable them to sustain their tenancy.
- 113** Northwards and MEAP are effectively promoting adaptations. Information for tenants is provided through leaflets in offices and through a joint MEAP and NH DVD. There is a section on the Northwards Housing website and fliers, newspaper, open days and road shows raise awareness and are used to provide information to customers. This helps customers to understand what help is available and how this can be accessed.
- 114** Effective partnership working supports the delivery of adaptations to customers. A range of aids and adaptations is available and includes equipment such as jar openers, door bells and kitchen equipment to the provision of adaptations such as showers. This is further supported by a common assessment approach to the delivery of equipment to tenants of retirement housing. NH scheme managers have been trained about equipment and can link into this service to order basic equipment such as grab rails and kitchen aids to support independent living. MEAP road shows come to sheltered schemes and bring along joiners and assessors for any item equipment such as grab rail etc. These are fitted there and then. This approach is helping residents to maintain their independence.
- 115** NH is efficient in recycling equipment. Northwards are recycling equipment from voids such as stair lifts. Where this cannot be fitted in another property Manchester Working are retaining these and taking for parts etc. The MEAP and Northwards Housing are delivering timely adaptations and using resources effectively.
- 116** An effective adapted property register is maintained by MEAP. This is supported by NH and there are clear, monitored targets (for example, 48 hours to identify a person and arrange a viewing) within this system to ensure properties are re-let promptly. Where rehousing is appropriate to address assessed adaptation needs, accompanied viewings by MEAP rehousing officers and support to move, such as curtain fitting, packing etc. are provided. The number of adapted properties allocated in 2007/08 was 18, with 13 allocated between July and September of 2008 with an average number of two offers per property. Where there is no suitable applicant major equipment is removed by MEAP and recycled. This approach supports an effective use of major adaptations and equipment.

Housing income management

- 117** In our previous inspection, we found that this was a service where strengths outweighed weaknesses. Income management was customer-focused, significant improvements had been made in processes, partnership working was effective and full use was made of debt advice. However, performance was mixed and still below the top 25 per cent of similar organisations. Tenants in arrears had not been profiled with benefit campaigns targeted to meet identified needs and NH did not clearly record and account for rent arrears, court costs, and other sundry debts separately.
- 118** In this inspection, we found that this is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Income management delivers customer focused services that appropriately recognise and address the specific needs of diverse customers. In particular NH is addressing some of the wider debt and financial inclusion issues facing its customers. Partnership working is strong and there is good debt support. NH has a clear understanding of its tenants' arrears and is targeting its approach appropriately. However rent arrears performance remains in the bottom 25 per cent when compared to similar organisations.
- 119** There is a range of flexible ways for tenants to pay their rent. Payment options are well publicised for tenants in the handbook and clearly detailed at the tenant sign up. Tenants can pay their rent by standing orders, direct debit (DD), pay point locations at a range of outlets, office and internet. Take up of direct debit is relatively low, although take up of standing order payments is good at 64 per cent (last year at 44 per cent) and is a cost effective way for NH to collect rent. There has been little pressure to introduce direct debit because the bank charges are the same for standing orders. This approach encourages rent payment.
- 120** The income management service is customer focused. Early intervention and prevention are a focus. Sign up is used to provide benefit advice and provide referrals to debt advice if required. As part of the sign up interview, housing officers verify tenant's income and confirm how they are going to make payments. Where appropriate they input bank or post office accounts details straight into the IT system and directly notify the Council's Housing Benefit section of the change of circumstances. Tenants can be contacted outside office hours and texting, mobile phones and emails are used to remind tenants of rent arrears. Arrears letters are customer friendly and easy to understand, recognise alternate format/ translation needs and are supported by personal visits where vulnerability is recognised. Customers receive appropriate information about the state of their rent account. Clear quarterly rent statements and are also available on request and can be accessed at any time through the NH website. This approach supports customer understanding of rent arrears and rent management.

How good is the service?

- 121** A wide range of promotional work raises customer awareness about debt and advice opportunities. NH has undertaken Christmas campaigns with letters and information leaflets going out with rent statements. Other examples include use of a revenue and benefits bus going out to provide accessible information and support on estates, close working with the Stepping Stones project⁹ to support vulnerable tenants and attending community events with partners such as the employment agency. This approach is helping to support tenants understand debt and benefit issues.
- 122** There are clear policies and procedures which focus on access to welfare benefit and debt prevention alongside income maximisation. The 'At your service' leaflets set out clearly the service standards that apply to this service. The 'Are you getting the full benefit' and 'Helping you to pay your share' leaflets give clear advice on benefits and what to do if tenants get into difficulties. For example they set out the availability of welfare benefit and debt advice services, including a 'friendly hand' phone number to contact the team and to assist tenants negotiate with creditors.
- 123** There is a focused approach to ensuring benefit and rent arrears advice is accessible to tenants. The NH money advice service supports customers in debt. NH offers debt advice on pension credits and delivers this to customers in retirement housing and the DWP has agreed to sort out backdated claims. Surgeries are held in area offices alongside Surestart and housing officers also regularly attend surgeries with Health Visitors to widen awareness. All new tenants are contacted after four weeks and managing finances/rent is an area of discussion. This ensures that tenants easily access advice, maximise income and reduce the build up of debt.
- 124** NH works proactively to address issues of financial inclusion. Significant work has been undertaken in raising the awareness of tenants about doorstep lenders and different ways to borrow money. This is particularly challenging for the organisation given that there are significantly low literacy levels in the area. A financial literacy course for tenants has been developed for 2009 and is largely visual to support the literacy needs of tenants. NH is also working with the Credit Union. Over 250 tenants use the scheme (although an aspirational target to build up to 500 tenants is not in plans at present). Positively NH staff are encouraged to save in the Credit Union and to date 40 staff do so. This supports the development of the credit union and raises the profile of the service within NH.
- 125** Work has been undertaken to target preventative work and prioritise debts effectively. NH has undertaken research to profile its arrears and understands reasons for non payment. Information indicates that the 25 to 44 age group and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are most likely to fall into arrears. Reasons identified for arrears include intermittent employment; delays in tax credit payment and benefit delays. A targeted approach includes letters sent to all people in those groups alongside a newly developed debt advice leaflet. This information will provide tenants with clear information about paying rent and how advice can be accessed.

⁹ The Stepping Stones project is funded through the Working Neighbourhood Fund (WNF). The project is managed by Jobcentre plus to support people back into work. Residents of Manchester Local Authority in receipt of benefit due to sickness, disability or bringing up children on their own are entitled to join the project.

- 126** NH has a strong relationship with partners. Opportunities are taken to signpost tenants to housing benefits, citizens' advice bureaux and other debt advice agencies as appropriate. Positive joint working with MCC Revenues and Benefits service are supporting the early assessment of benefit claims, with NH rent officers are able to verify and validate claims. Performance is regularly reviewed through liaison meetings. This approach supports tenants to maximise income and sustain tenancies.
- 127** NH can identify additional costs to the rent account. The new rent accounting system separates court costs and other accounts from rent accounts and rechargeable repairs are now identified. NH understands the cost of debt advice and can demonstrate that arrears have gone down by £126 per case, although they cannot link this to benefit pending or welfare advice outcomes.
- 128** There is a positive working arrangement with Manchester legal services. An NH rent support officer shadows on all court cases until the ALMO is granted rights of audience. NH does everything in relation to cases up to court representation. This supports the relationship between the court and NH.
- 129** A home contents insurance service is offered to tenants and leaseholders. Currently 1000 Northwards tenants have insurance, with 2,500 tenants in the scheme citywide. NH operates the home contents insurance service for Manchester CC. This generates an approximate £30,000 annual bonus to Northwards and goes into the overall NH resource pool (see paragraph 226). The scheme is well publicised through newsletters and a leaflet in the tenants handbook. However there is no target set for increase in take up of the contents insurance service which is a missed opportunity as it delivers benefits to both NH and its tenants.
- 130** Rent recovery performance remains stubbornly low. Performance on rent arrears recovery is below average compared to other providers, at 97.8 per cent rent collected (quarter two 2008/09). Performance on collection has declined and the organisation indicated that a move to new IT systems has been a major impact on this. IT problems are still not fully resolved. This brought about a review of the service and the introduction of Operation COL¹⁰ to raise the profile of the service. Collection of FTA is a Council retained function.
- 131** Rechargeable repair performance remains poor. A total of £18,500 was recharged in 2007/08 of which £545 was recovered, a 2.94 per cent recovery. From April to November 2008, £28,000 had been recharged. Rechargeable repairs are now processed through the finance system, following debt recovery rules, and strict action is now part of the recovery process.
- 132** The corporate debt policy (CDP) does not work effectively. It is undermined by the readiness of the Council Tax service to resort to the use of bailiffs. This means that when tenants are faced with the choice of paying their rent and paying Council Tax they pay the latter. It is acknowledged that the policy works for certain tenants and depends on circumstances. Referrals to CDP procedure are through advice services and rent officers refer to money advice services. However, it is unclear if tenants approaching MCC are picked up in this way and referred to advice agencies to ensure access to CDP procedure.

¹⁰ Operation COL - internal campaign with NH to support the awareness of rent collection across all sections - rent arrears difficulties linked to other areas of the organisation.

Resident involvement

- 133** In our previous inspection, we found that Northwards Housing had a strong approach to resident involvement and strengths substantially outweighed weaknesses. There was a strong corporate commitment to involvement, a wide and expanding range of ways of being involved and involvement had had a clear impact on policies and service delivery.
- 134** In this inspection, we found that this is an area where strengths continue to substantially outweigh weaknesses. Corporate commitment to resident involvement remains strong and there is a range of ways for customers to be involved, supported by a clear understanding of the needs of the wider communities served by Northwards Housing.
- 135** There is a strong corporate focus on resident involvement. NH demonstrates a strategic approach to resident involvement. A range of initiatives support this and includes a clear resident involvement agreement and a resident involvement forum oversees the resident involvement structures and is the main consultation mechanism. A dedicated budget of £41,000 provides training, and supports community facilities. The framework for resident involvement demonstrates a clear commitment to resident involvement and we found this to be central to the approach of both the board and staff.
- 136** Clear information is provided for customers. An easy to read and well presented quarterly tenants newsletter 'Northwards Natter' provides a range of useful information, which is user focused. Information to customers includes housing benefit advice; an energy performance certificate update; gas safety certificates, information about switching to digital TV and offers a range of ways for customers to get involved. Customers are involved in producing and editing the newsletter. In addition a monthly newsletter, 'Revolve' is issued to all Tenant and Resident Groups (TRGs) and Area Panel members and gives clear information and updates on resident involvement. As a result service users can understand involvement opportunities.
- 137** There is a range of ways for customers to contact the resident involvement service. Customers can access officers by telephone, email or in person. Changes in the delivery of the service has resulted in three resident involvement officers now being located, one at each area office. Routes are advertised in NH literature and opportunities to be involved and contact details are provided at sign up of a new tenancy. Positively customers are directed to a resident involvement dedicated phone number rather than through on call service.
- 138** Resident involvement is well promoted. A range of resident involvement information is provided to service users There is a comprehensive tenants handbook with a section, 'you have the power' that clearly informs service users about their rights, responsibilities and ways of involvement to influence change and service delivery. There is also accessible information on the website and the sign up process highlights opportunities for involvement. As a result interested residents are aware of the range of ways to get involved.

- 139** NH effectively engages tenants as part of the annual business planning consultation process. An annual event brings together tenants and the Area Panels as part of the process. In 2008 the event was called 'pot of gold' and was used to discuss and propose ideas for the allocation of £90,000 from the resource pool to the Area Panels. It has been challenging for the panels to develop clear proposals from their priorities but there has been a commitment to the delivery of youth events.
- 140** NH has a strong focus on recognising and developing ways for diverse communities to be engaged and involved. The organisation understands the range of community needs in terms of different cultures, languages and understanding. NH has developed effective links to the wider community through its resident involvement approach and its understanding of tenants and communities which has resulted in NH developing a range of activities and groups support this approach and includes:
- a range of specialist forums influence service development and includes young people; older people; BME; disability groups;
 - examples of raising awareness within communities take place through the coffee/lunch meetings for Asian women;
 - copies of the 'Revolve' resident involvement newsletter is sent to all known groups for example the Jewish community to maintain NH contact;
 - an international day was held at Abraham Moss Centre, Crumpsall;
 - a successful GMAS partnership project engaged with young people and aims to develop a youth panel from this;
 - a flash the cash event was used to involve communities in determining area priorities; and
 - targeting under- represented groups in its involvement database by for example making personal approaches to service users from BME groups and visiting mosques. This resulted in a visit to a Sikh temple followed by an awareness cascade to NH staff.
- 141** NH is adapting its approach to resident involvement and using more innovative approaches. For example recognising gaps in resident engagement in some areas and estates, NH developed the 'Tea Mobile' initiative. Utilising a van and kettle the resident involvement team and area panel members take NH to the estates, providing a cup of tea and chat to engage in under- represented areas. NH is also working with Groundwork to improve open spaces for example on the Mill estate. As a result of these initiatives new members now attend panel meetings.

How good is the service?

- 142** Staff training has improved to encourage more imaginative approaches such as visiting temples to consult with the Sikh population and adopting entertaining ways such as the extreme sports day to engage with young people. NH recognises that some groups are in their infancy, such as the leaseholder forum, but that activities such as the creation of the handbook are being used to encourage members to look beyond their personal issues. Groups such as the disability forum are now taking leading roles in holding community events and are holding services such as Manchester adaptations to account. A young persons tenancy course, funded by Supporting People for 16 to 25-year old gives young people help to secure tenancies and live independently, although only five people have taken it up so far. Tenants are being effectively supported to engage through this approach.
- 143** NH effectively supports customers to be involved. Customers are offered a range of training that they can access. A menu of training is in place and publicised on an annual calendar of involvement, which is publicised on their website and followed up by letter. The training is offered at a variety of times including evenings in order that it is accessible to a wide range of people. The range of training is being expanded and includes a 'money matters' course which links to the financial inclusion strategy. As a result tenants are better equipped to understand and be involved in NH services.
- 144** Tenants are well engaged in the development of services. Representatives have been involved in reviewing the Resident Involvement Team plan through Tenant Involvement Group (TIG) meetings. All new documents are scrutinised by the NH Communication/ Editorial Forum, made up of service users and approved documents are given the tenant friendly logo. Tenants have been trained to undertake roles as tenant inspectors who are actively influencing and driving service improvement. Mystery shopping is undertaken and findings are fed back to the organisation to deliver improvement. Area panel members are also invited to Board training to support their development and learning. As a result of this approach the challenge from service users has been robust.
- 145** NH works in partnership with tenants and they are involved strategically in long term plans for the area where they live. They are involved through individual consultation on improvement works, through tenants associations and area panels. This involvement has resulted in a number of positive outcomes including, on one estate tenants had campaigned successfully for a communal garden instead of an intended office block. Their success was based on knowledge of the area, inclusion from the beginning and commitment to their community. Because of the support NH gave them this TARA has improved the quality of the area for tenants. Plans for a small park adjacent to one estate were discussed and the TARA has petitioned successfully to make it into a sensory garden and cenotaph and will access funding next year to start this. External funding had paid for new communal planters with a mulch of recycled glass beads to make the estate more attractive next year. As a result there are practical changes for the better to tenant's homes and environment.

- 146** Tenants effectively monitor services. NH checks housing service standards using tenants who they have trained to be inspectors. Tenant inspectors were accompanied when they undertook an audit check of two tower blocks of flats and detailed outstanding repairs and assessed standards of cleanliness: these were reported to NH who ordered the repairs. The inspectors were given a written report with details of the repairs and relevant comments and they then follow this up later to ensure the repairs have been completed. This robust process involves and empowers tenants to improve service quality.
- 147** The development of the area panels helps to increase the accountability and communications between NH and its tenants and leaseholders. The devolution of significant budgets (£900,000 over the last three years in one area alone) helps to attract people to the groups. Information on how the money is spent is communicated regularly to the panels and panel members are also taken on tours of their area, in order to help publicise that the money is being spent effectively. The panels also monitor activity on anti-social behaviour and the results of estate inspections and so, with managers of the service and tenants' groups are key to the management of the service.
- 148** Tenant and resident groups are supported effectively by NH. Computers are provided through the recycling of NH redundant computers and NH provides broadband connection to all TARAs. Travel allowance; taxis and accessible meeting venues support engagement. A Community Sponsorship scheme enables groups to apply for a maximum of £500 in part or full payment for a local project. This is agreed through a panel selection process. This approach ensures that both groups and individuals are supported to access events, meetings, funding and training.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 149** In our previous inspection, we found that tenancy management was an area where strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses. Particular strengths were tackling anti-social behaviour and the neighbourhood warden scheme. These had helped lead to significant improvements in sustainability with reduced crime levels and more popular estates.
- 150** In this inspection, we found that this is an area where strengths continue to substantially outweigh weaknesses. In particular NH understands the reasons for anti-social behaviour and is working in partnership to deliver improvements for tenants and communities. Significant improvements continue in the area of crime reduction and reduced levels of fear of crime.
- 151** A range of easily accessible information supports tenants' awareness of their rights and responsibilities. Sign ups are quite lengthy processes in which new tenants are taken through the tenancy conditions and handbook in order to highlight their responsibilities and what services NH can offer. Local advice on schools, community events and tenants groups is also provided and any support needs are identified if they have not already been, through the accompanied visits or information on the application.

How good is the service?

- 152** NH has a good understanding of the causes and locations of anti-social behaviour. The approach to addressing ASB has been supported by the creation of a specialist rehousing team; meaning that Neighbourhood Services Officers have been able to focus more effectively on tackling ASB and crime. This helps to direct the response of NH and its partners. NH uses its resources to help design out crime and anti-social behaviour. A large capital budget is spent on defensible space, walling around rear gardens, extra street lighting, the pruning of hedges and occasional alleygating. As a result tenants can see clear actions to address their problems.
- 153** NH is an active partner in an effective framework of meetings that bring together all agencies involved in tackling anti-social behaviour. This operates from the strategic City-wide level where there is a senior management drive and support for joint working, down to neighbourhood level, where anti-social behaviour action plans have been tailored to the challenges faced by each locality. By working together at the very local level information is shared regularly and joint action can be arranged promptly.
- 154** A range of strong partnerships support the approach to tackling anti-social behaviour. Strong links and joint working with the police, social services education, tenancy support services and other housing providers are supported by clear information sharing protocols. Key partnerships include:
- a range of multi-agency structures within the framework of the Manchester Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership which NH attends, include fortnightly Local Tasking Meetings (LTMs); Neighbourhood Partnership Meetings involving local residents; and Area Casework Panels which coordinate multi-agency interventions with the most challenging families;
 - other multi - agency initiatives include Respect Action Weeks;
 - strong links to the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) at both strategic and operational levels; and
 - close work with MCC Crime and Disorder team and representation on the Safer Neighbourhoods Board which works on neighbourhood policing approaches across the city. Performance across these groups is managed through the North Manchester Partnership Business Group for which NH is a key contributor. This joined up approach supports the delivery of co-ordinated responses to ASB for Northwards tenants.
- 155** The NH neighbourhood wardens provide a key link to co-ordinate action, working closely with area based environmental housing officers, neighbourhood services staff and caretakers. Neighbourhood wardens contribute effectively to support community engagement and cohesion through work with a range of community groups, young people and residents from BME communities. This approach supports wider co-ordinated action to prevent ASB.

- 156** NH supports the delivery of diversionary activities. By working in partnership at a local level NH is able to be part of a holistic approach to meeting the needs of different groups. For example there is a youth activities group within each area covered by NH and this helps ensure that activities are coordinated (so for example activities take place at different times) and gaps are identified. Bids for new services are agreed at area level and go through the Council's ward co-ordination groups to ensure a joined up approach to the delivery of activities for communities.
- 157** Clear policies and procedures provide direction for action. These comply with the Respect Standard's commitments and ensure clear guidelines are in place in relation to how to deal with different types of ASB to prevent incidents or respond promptly where they occur. There is an effective ASB case management IT system and systematic measurement of customer satisfaction in place.
- 158** NH promotes incentives for good behaviour. The Northwards Xtra tenant incentive scheme, gardening competition and annual NorthAwards competition raise the profile of, and reward tenants for maintaining tenancy conditions. Alongside successes in tackling issues of ASB, these are well publicised in the tenants' newsletter and local newspaper's to support NH's approach to tenancy management.
- 159** Strong support is in place for victims of anti-social behaviour. There is a range of witness support from regular contact through to panic alarms and staff regularly appear as professional witnesses in court and provide other evidence for Police. This approach builds tenant confidence in reporting anti-social behaviour.
- 160** A strong approach is taken to issues of domestic violence. NH takes the high level of domestic violence seriously and offers victims one of five options which include a sanctuary scheme; 28 day decant place of safety; legal action; general rehousing and self help support. The organisation works closely with MCC and Women's Aid and by doing so takes some of the pressure off the homelessness service.
- 161** NH is a key contributor to the success in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour in Manchester. Crime has fallen by 23 per cent, and there are now 14,000 fewer victims of crime in the city each year, of which a third relate to the NH area. The use of warning interviews has been successful, with 170 since 2007 (across Manchester) only leading to six ASBOs. The increased visibility of each service through initiatives such as Respect days and door knocking exercises has resulted in a reduction in the fear of crime.
- 162** NH recognises that data on satisfaction with the way that it deals with anti-social behaviour is not yet reliable. It had previously used the annual tenants' survey to research this which indicated that 55 per cent customers felt that NH was addressing ASB and crime issues. NH now surveys tenants once a case file is closed however only 20 responses had been received prior to the inspection, with an overall satisfaction rating of 80 per cent. It is a missed opportunity that this source of learning does not inform NH's approach.

How good is the service?

163 While targets do exist to address specific types of anti-social behaviour, they are not well publicised. The tenant's handbook only contains the standard for dealing with serious anti-social behaviour and does not include other targets for example to deal with less serious complaints, or what constitutes a serious complaint. It does not include the targets for dealing with graffiti, fly tipping or the removal of syringes. Managers rely upon staff to inform complainants, but without publicised targets tenants are less likely to know what to expect or whether to complain.

Estate management

164 In our previous inspection, we found that this was an area where strengths substantially outweighed weaknesses. Estates were clean, well maintained and regularly inspected.

165 In this inspection, we found that this remains a strong area for the organisation with strengths substantially outweighing weaknesses. Estates are well maintained, generally litter free and clean. Systematic inspection processes are in place and tenant priorities are being delivered.

166 NH has clean and well maintained estates. Our checks found estates to be well maintained, clear of rubbish and graffiti. Open spaces and communal areas were well maintained. Areas of concern that arise are identified through estate walkabouts or by environmental officers. Residents we spoke to indicated that this was the normal standard for estates.

167 All estates are regularly inspected and there is a clear, published programme. Our checks found that estate walkabouts are a valuable resource where tenants and staff discuss local issues, assess any current problems and relay information. Other elements are added by the attendance of housing and environmental staff and police representatives. Local tenants showed in-depth knowledge of local ASB, drug and alcohol issues as well as sustainable estates and neighbourhood cohesion. As a result tenants can actively influence standards of service where they live.

168 NH ensures a visible staff presence on its estates. Environment officers (EOs) are based at area offices and have a strong presence on estates. Officers work with local people to ensure their neighbourhoods are safe and attractive places. They ensure standards of grounds maintenance are monitored, gardens are kept tidy and that fly tipping and graffiti are removed promptly. They also lead local clean ups and support the implementation of the environmental improvement programme decided by the Area Panels. Additional environmental officers work in partnership with probation to support workless offenders to carry out environmental work programmes. Neighbourhood wardens support this approach and tackle environmental issues such as fly tipping and dog fouling, including issuing Fixed Penalty Notices. Caretakers are also accessible and have been supplied with mobile phones so that they can provide an immediate response to tenants' enquiries. This approach supports the delivery of clean places to live.

- 169** A new procedure for dealing with untidy gardens is successful. Of 160 gardens that were targeted for action, informal action has resulted in only 16 requiring work to be carried out and recharged. The approach has also helped to identify tenants who are eligible for the concessionary garden scheme as well as housing related support.
- 170** The housing management service is addressing the 'green' agenda through support for the Council's tree strategy, health walks and educational talks in schools. It has contributed to the Council's recycling strategy and is considering how to encourage further recycling on its estates.
- 171** NH recognises the important role that regeneration needs to play alongside its mainstream housing management work. Like other ALMOs operating in Greater Manchester, it employs a regeneration manager and has developed a regeneration strategy to identify what action it will take to improve the employment, health and educational attainment of local people. Its interventions are based upon the amount of funding available through the ALMO contract and external funds and are aligned to the overarching regeneration strategies and masterplans for the area. It has achieved success in increasing its investment in local employment and services and by working in partnership with Stepping Stones has helped to secure employment or training for seven residents claiming disability benefits.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 172** In our previous inspection, we found that this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. A lot of work was being done to improve the service but much of it was very recent. There was a lack of published service standards, weak performance management arrangements, no data for the collection rate of service charges, and leaseholders and owner occupiers were not offered internal DHS work. However, there were plans to address all these issues, involvement was improving, and there was an agreed protocol with the Council to ensure joined up services. There were 140 leaseholders representing around 1 per cent of the total stock of NH.
- 173** The Council retains the management of the RTB service. Leasehold management is a shared responsibility between the council and NH. The collection of service charges falls to the council while leasehold management is NH responsibility. There are 250 leaseholders which represents a small proportion on total NH stock. NH and MCC work to an agreed protocol in order to ensure a joined up approach to residents who want to consider the Right to Buy.
- 174** In this inspection, we found that this is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Customers have easy access to the leasehold service, and have a good leasehold handbook. Communication generally and an understanding of leaseholder charges was found to be an area of concern for leaseholders interviewed.
- 175** Customers can easily contact the leasehold service. Although there is no dedicated leasehold officer, contact details for environmental officers are provided. Leaseholders can also use the NH website to make contact with the organisation and there is a specific section for leaseholders with links to MCC's website giving information on rights and responsibilities, as well as the facility to get an online service charge statement.

How good is the service?

- 176** However, leaseholders have mixed views on the quality of communications. The Northwards 'natter' newsletter was not sent out to leaseholders until recently. Leaseholders do not know who to contact with their problems 'because of the turnover of environment officers' and because the 'on call' service says every time that leaseholders should take responsibility for any work reported. The call centre response to leaseholders is unsatisfactory because some staff are unaware that leaseholders are still entitled to some services. While there has been training in response to earlier complaints this remains a problem and may explain why satisfaction with on call is a relatively low 65 per cent.
- 177** Leaseholders benefit from a similarly integrated range of services as tenants. They are able to use the same forms of access and payments and can order internal improvements and gas safety checks at prices that share the economies of scale that NH negotiates.
- 178** NH is consulting and involving leaseholders in the service. There is a wide range of ways through which leaseholders are able to influence the service. Aside from the leaseholder forum, leaseholders are also represented on the area panels (with a leaseholder acting as Vice Chair on one), the complaints panel and the procurement and property sub-committee. Residents feel that they are listened to at the leaseholder forum and get the opportunity to talk to officers. However it is a missed opportunity that there is no overarching strategy to co-ordinate the delivery of this service.
- 179** A comprehensive leaseholder handbook is in place. Leaseholders have influenced the content and design and feedback on the handbook from residents has been positive, with 84 per cent finding it useful, 91 per cent finding it easy to follow, 81 per cent interested in becoming a member of the forum and 100 per cent saying that it helped them to understand their rights and responsibilities. Service standards are clearly identified and were developed with leaseholders. This information supports leaseholders to understand expectations and obligations.
- 180** The section 20 notice sent to leaseholders who are to receive major works is not well written. For example the figure for the cost of the work is based upon the target cost for the project. It is not therefore the true recharge, but this is not made clear in the notice. No breakdown is provided of the costs and no comparative figures are given and so leaseholders are unsure whether the amount represents value for money. NH has agreed to hold a meeting with leaseholders to look at the content of the letter, including providing details of the breakdown.
- 181** Although not directly attributable to NH, there is some confusion amongst leaseholders relating to sinking fund amounts. Leaseholders pay different amounts for major works because the sinking fund contributions were set historically. This means that the sinking fund will not pay for all of the cost of major works for some tenants and they will need (and may struggle) to find other sources, including borrowing.

Allocations and lettings

- 182** In our previous inspection, we found that this was an area where strengths substantially outweighed weaknesses. NH participated in an effective choice-based letting scheme, the lettings service was customer-focused and helped meet the needs of groups with a range of support needs. However, NH did not systematically seek users' opinions about the allocations and lettings process.
- 183** In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to substantially outweigh weaknesses. The lettings service is customer focused and identifies vulnerable applicants, offering appropriate advice to them. NH continues to participate in an effective choice-based lettings system and Manchester Housing register. Customer views are now systematically collected and this supports service improvement.
- 184** There is a range of ways for customers to access and contact the allocations and lettings service. Customers can obtain application forms from NH offices; council offices; email or telephone request. Application forms can be completed and submitted online.
- 185** The lettings service is customer focused. Viewings and sign ups are arranged at a time convenient to customers. Sign ups are effective and tenants are given extensive amounts of information during their sign up interview. This is supported by a pack of written information which includes a signed copy of the tenancy agreement, rent payments, benefits advice, ASB policies, local TARA activity, decoration grants, improvement plans, utilities readings, complaints procedure and an equalities checklist is completed.
- 186** Information on applicants is kept up-to-date. All applicants are required to re-register every six months to ensure their details are current. This is particularly relevant given that the Manchester Housing register had 20,232 active applicants at the end of June 2008. This approach ensures that the waiting list reflects current housing demand.
- 187** Applicants' choice is maximised through the Homefinder Choice-Based Lettings (CBL) scheme. NH properties are widely advertised to applicants through the Manchester Homefinder CBL scheme. Homefinder adverts give relevant information and are provided in electronic and paper format to meet customer needs. There is assistance for vulnerable applicants to ensure that they are not disadvantaged through this process. This approach gives wider choice to applicants about areas for rehousing.
- 188** NH promotes a range of other options to potential applicants including Manchester Advice, the rent deposit scheme¹¹ and advice on private sector housing in order that applicants are aware of all housing options. In addition NH is a member of Homeswapper¹² and has registered over 100 tenants in the first eight months of membership. This is promoted by rehousing officers and provides a further option to existing tenants. MCC is also a key partner in the Manchester City Region Sub Regional CBL scheme and NH work closely with the Council to ensuring that this choice is also available to applicants. This approach ensures wide, informed choice to applicants.

¹¹ Rent deposit scheme - scheme operated by the Council and which supports new tenants to access rent deposit funding for private rented accommodation

¹² Homeswapper - National mutual exchange service

How good is the service?

- 189** There are appropriate mechanisms for the lettings service to identify and support vulnerable customers. A range of questions on the application form identify possible vulnerability and these are further explored at viewings and sign up interviews. Customers are then signposted to appropriate support which includes two dedicated support officers, funded through Supporting People, for up to four weeks. Where communication or language needs are identified appropriate support will be offered to assist customers through the process.
- 190** NH works closely with MCC to address the issues of under and over-occupation. The Council is a member of the CLG over-occupation pilot which is examining measures to ease rehousing pressures. These include providing additional wash basins, bunk beds or support into work to reduce the need for urgent rehousing. Northwards' neighbourhood and quality sub-committee has approved a proposal to introduce an incentive scheme for under and over-occupation. In both cases it is too early to demonstrate outcomes.
- 191** NH has taken a proactive approach to raising awareness of supply and demand issues. A series of information and rehousing prospects sessions have been held. A range of partners who work with people waiting to be rehoused attended the sessions to learn about supply and demand issues in North Manchester. In addition applicants were invited to an information day held in Cheetham Hill. This was well attended by over 80 applicants and information about prospects and other housing options was provided. Recognising the diversity and language needs of the area NH used appropriate translation services to ensure equality of access. Following the success of these events, NH is planning to undertake more sessions in the future. This approach is supporting applicants to understand the reasons for delays in accessing accommodation in the area.
- 192** NH promotes customer involvement in improving the lettings service. Customers are involved through Area Panels and through the Allocations Forum. The forum acts as a consultation group for service change and monitors service improvements. The forum has discussed supply and demand issues and will give tenants a better understanding of rehousing issues.
- 193** NH has a clear understanding its applicants and identifies trends in applications. A key group is 16 to 25 year olds, and a young person's task force has been developed which links to a family mediation course. All applicants registered this year aged 16 to 25 will be invited to attend a Young Persons' Tenancy Course funded by Supporting People. This will provide information about tenancy obligations, and provide an early link to the organisation. Trends are identified and used to investigate reasons for changes. For example NH has identified a 15 per cent increase in owner occupier applicants in the last six months. NH is investigating trends through a questionnaire to these applicants. Information will be used to understand any common reasons and to explore ways to support these.

Supported housing

- 194** In our previous inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in this service. The sheltered housing service was popular, customer-focused, provided appropriate support and schemes were welcoming, clean and well maintained. However, long term plans for the service were underdeveloped and the service was expensive compared to others.
- 195** NH delivers its sheltered housing service to 546 units which have an on site Scheme Manager service, in a variety of property types, including high-rise apartments, bungalows and traditional schemes with community facilities. Positively there are no bedsits or shared bathrooms schemes and all units are self-contained having at least one bedroom. A Visiting Scheme Manager Service also provides visiting support to 134 residents outside retirement schemes.
- 196** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. The service has been developed to reflect modern needs and extend choice to tenants. Retirement schemes are well maintained, deliver customer focused services and there is a clearly developed understanding of longer term strategic direction for the service.
- 197** The Sheltered housing service performs well. A number of schemes were assessed at Level B in 6 out of 8 objectives in the Supporting People Quality Assessment Framework (QAF) and NH staff have carried out a number of briefings to other providers on how to achieve Level B. Northwards plans to achieve Level B across all services by April 2009.
- 198** NH successfully delivers additional support services which benefit both individual and scheme tenants to develop and maintain independence. These include:
- working with a health trainer fully funded and provided by the PCT, who is seconded to NH for three days a week. The trainer focuses on health issues and lifestyle for older tenants and has links to a well being centre. To date the trainer has worked with 86 Northwards individuals. This is an innovative enhancement to support the physical and mental health needs of Northwards' older residents;
 - provision of a flat in one scheme for temporary use by an older person discharged from hospital and unable to return to their former accommodation. The flat is furnished to a high standard and promotes Northwards homes. The last person to use it is now a permanent tenant of the same scheme. This supports older people to stay near to home whilst their longer term housing needs are addressed and generates extra income for NH;
 - a show flat has been set up in one scheme to display what refurbishment under decent homes looks like. It was realised that many older tenants needed to see and feel the quality to help them visualise and select what they wanted. Residents from other schemes had also come to see the flat; and
 - Northwards offer a decorating scheme to older residents without families to help them. On request they will decorate one room every two years for older tenants who would otherwise struggle to cope.

How good is the service?

- 199** NH has developed its supported housing service to reflect the needs of a modern service. As part of NH strategy to modernise the service, it has been rebranded as retirement rather than sheltered housing and the role of Wardens has been successfully changed to that of Scheme Managers, with customers effectively engaged in the process of change. Staff at retirement schemes are kept informed effectively. All staff attend cascade briefings, meet regularly with their managers and can access the internet and NH intranet through computers provided to all the schemes.
- 200** Effective training is delivered by NH to Scheme Managers. A range of training and support has been provided such as training on completing Support Plans, and a number of Scheme Managers have gained the National Certificate of Professional Practice in Supported and Sheltered Housing. This approach has brought benefits for customers with Scheme Managers able to help resident's access appropriate support and signpost to other agencies in order to sustain tenancies within the schemes. As a result NH sheltered housing services are effectively sustaining tenancies for customers with low levels of residents transferring to care homes or more intensive support.
- 201** Retirement housing is generally of a modern standard. All retirement units are self contained and there are no bed-sit units. There is a programme of improvement works. This includes work to communal facilities, decorating, new lighting, provision of scooter store spaces and improved community kitchens. Individually, flats are being upgraded with new kitchens, heating systems with redecorating provided.
- 202** Retirement housing is warm, clean and attractive. The majority of homes had been refurbished as part of decent homes process. Communal areas are neat and tidy with well used notice boards of appropriate up-to-date information. Access to all schemes was secure and tenants said they felt safe. One scheme had started to put new carpets in as an incentive to make a good first impression resulting in five properties filled in last three months.
- 203** NH provides comprehensive information to residents. Scheme managers attend accompanied viewings to ensure that support needs are identified at an early stage. Residents living in sheltered accommodation are provided with a range of useful information when they sign up for their tenancies which includes benefit advice and details of the Scheme Manager's role. This is supported by support and signposting offered to residents to ensure that they are receiving effective support to remain in their homes.
- 204** Older accommodation has been refurbished to an attractive standard. A large retirement housing scheme, Victoria Square which was built in 1896 and comprises 162 units, is successfully supporting tenants and is undergoing a programme of major improvement works. Tenants we spoke to were pleased with both the scheme and the operation of improvement works.

- 205** NH uses residents' ideas to progress innovative approaches to the development of play areas. An older persons' play area has been developed, funded through the environmental improvement scheme budget. In considering what schemes to recommend, the Area Panel identified that social cohesion, inter-generational contact, a high concentration of older people and poor health were issues that affected their neighbourhood. Based on the agreement that the Area Panel would fund the cost of the equipment, and Leisure Services would fund the cost of design, installation and ongoing revenue cost, the play area was agreed. It has attracted national and international interest. It has been placed next to an under 5's play area and supports sustainable communities for tenants.
- 206** NH supports scheme managers in promoting independence and addressing diverse needs. All schemes are DDA compliant. Portable hearing loops are in place and language translations and signing can be accessed. Scheme managers have been trained by MEAP and are able to order small equipment such as can openers, tipping kettles and bath aids in order that they can be delivered quickly to support customer independence.
- 207** NH is effectively involved in strategic partnerships relating to the future needs of older people. A wide range of groups are attended and these include Manchester's Valuing Older People strategy meetings, Sheltered Housing providers forum and the SP Provider forum This approach ensures strategic awareness to support future decisions about supported housing services and provisions to meet customer needs.
- 208** Sustainability of supported housing stock has been considered by NH. A Retirement Housing Strategy supports the future strategic planning for older people's accommodation. The wide view of future demographics and needs, together with the impact of new developments such as extra care schemes in the area, are considered. Investment in supported housing is also addressed in the asset management strategy. As a result NH can ensure its investment in supported housing meets the needs of older people in the community.
- 209** NH works with a range of partner agencies to ensure that resident well-being is maximised. Agencies such as Ageing Well, Age Concern, and HIPP (Healthy Independent People) work with residents and scheme managers to organise programmes of events at schemes. A calendar of social events has been developed to promote sheltered schemes within the community. This approach will encourage older residents to attend events and understand the role of sheltered housing.
- 210** Residents are actively involved in the retirement housing service. A quarterly retirement housing newsletter provides clear information to tenants and residents can attend a quarterly Retirement Housing Forum. At a local level tenants can attend regularly held meetings at schemes and a number of schemes have active tenant and resident groups. As a result tenants are well informed with a choice of opportunities to get involved.

How good is the service?

211 NH supports community cohesion through its intergenerational work. Children from local high schools have worked with residents to provide a sensory garden at one retirement scheme and volunteers from the unpaid work unit of the Probation service have also been involved in improving a retirement scheme garden at Apprentice Court. This work benefits both the scheme tenants but also supports the high school and probation volunteers with opportunities to improve their interpersonal and practical skills.

Is the service delivering value for money?

212 In our previous inspection, we found that there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Analysis was required by NH to fully understand the costs of the service and how these related to quality. There was little track record of improvements in value for money. However, there was a strong focus on the principles of value for money, clear targets had been set for high level efficiencies, financial management was effective and progress was being made.

213 In this inspection, we found that this is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Financial monitoring and management is strong. There is an organisational focus on value for money (VFM) and improvements are effectively resourced and delivered.

How do costs compare?

214 NH has a clear and robust understanding of its costs. Budget planning and unit cost analysis is undertaken using a clear and detailed financial plan. Clear scenario planning is used to develop financial assumptions and long term planning, allowing NH to forecast unit cost figures. NH has submitted data for corporate and frontline services to a benchmarking club and compares this with similar organisations. Although costs of the management service are relatively high when compared to other ALMOs, at £500 per unit for 2007/08, this is a reduction of 4.4 per cent compared with 2006/07 (compared to an upper quartile figure of £444.59, median £515.37 and lower quartile £618.92). NH recognises it is one of the higher cost ALMOs but is committed effectively to spending the resource available to it. Effective financial management enables the organisation to deliver services that reflect clearly identified customer priorities.

215 Resources are re-allocated to meet customer priorities. Customer priorities are clear and have been established through a range of appropriate customer consultation. However, this commitment to spending on services that make a difference to customers, is keeping unit costs higher than average. NH is effectively using benchmarking to support improvement. NH is a member of a national benchmarking club. Benchmarking reports are used to identify areas for improvement and identify that NH is close to achieving top quartile performance in back office cost percentages with costs of £177.66 (upper quartile is £176.64). This approach is supporting resources to deliver frontline, customer facing services.

- 216** Planned maintenance is delivering value for money. Contractors have a good understanding of their costs as well as those of other contractors and are confident that the cost of purchasing and fitting components compares well. For example, joint procurement by all four of the contractors working for NH has brought down the cost of a boiler from £920 to £650. All partners have worked together to 'value engineer' the different improvement work that takes place. This has resulted in the sensible programming of work, for example carrying out rendering after, rather than before boiler replacements.
- 217** NH has most of the information that it needs to assess the value for money of different housing management services. It measures outcomes and has developed a sustainability index to compare the challenges faced by each estate. Residents have a good degree of influence over the budget and so it is more likely to be spent in the ways that most matter. There is also a good degree of cost awareness and a consultant has been employed to produce cost comparisons.
- 218** NH can demonstrate value for money in its supervisory costs for the capital programme. This stands at seven per cent of the programme and compares favourably with other three-star ALMOs. One of the savings is a reduction in agency staff and this also helps to provide continuity and familiarity to residents. It is also monitoring staff costs to help manage future staffing requirements.

How is value for money managed?

- 219** There is a strong focus on improving value for money. The Board has a clear focus on improving value for money by driving up standards and reducing costs where possible. A clear value for money strategy supports the approach to delivering VFM and efficiencies across services. The action plan within the strategy sets out targets to improve value for money and has a vision to 'obtain Value for Money through the planned and skilful management of procurement and supply chains'. There is clear awareness and understanding of value for money across staff and board members. A staff value for money suggestions scheme is raising the profile of VFM, with 11 suggestions received to date, nine of these are being considered further and three have been implemented and received the £25 award. This approach is embedding value for money in the organisation. However, although NH has a clear focus on VFM it does not specifically identify VFM considerations separately on Board reports (financial implication section currently covers this area) which may be a missed opportunity to further reinforce the VFM approach.
- 220** There is a strong organisational focus on VFM. An effective VFM project group assesses new VFM issues with a view to adding value to processes or reducing costs within the organisation. The VFM project group meet monthly to collate suggestions and monitor SLAs. They are a lively, enthusiastic group who centralise knowledge from extended areas of the organisation and during one meeting discussed issues ranging from fax usage to recruitment methods and costs. For example it was quickly agreed at a session we observed, that information about support on financial pressures which is due to be sent to customers would be posted out with the quarterly rent statements; not only would this save on postage but would be linked symbiotically. The Group has also led a staff session in June to communicate the VFM message and to capture further ideas and initiatives through an internet based form.

How good is the service?

- 221** NH has a robust approach to procurement. There is a sound procurement strategy which is based on modern principles of procurement and the use of effective partnership working. NH is using partnering effectively to deliver its decent homes and responsive repairs services. Efficiencies can be demonstrated through the delivery of adaptations during the decent homes work.
- 222** NH demonstrates its commitment to delivering VFM through its strong partnership approach. Investment programmes both through decent homes and responsive repairs support this approach, delivering strong customer focused services and efficiencies. For example:
- a joint procurement exercise was undertaken by NH with MCC for the delivery of maintenance services and Decent Homes work. This is delivered through a Joint Venture Company into which MCC transferred its direct working, City Works business. A further procurement exercise was carried out with MCC and three other social landlords to procure additional contractors for Decent Homes Work. There was active engagement from both senior managers and tenant representatives from NH throughout these procurement exercises. These partnership framework contracts generate year on year savings and focuses on VFM improvement and strong management of performance; and
 - the longer term contracting arrangements with IMPACT Manchester in delivering decent homes programme is supporting the delivery of external funding for training and wider labour market initiatives. For example the learning skills council are funding online training. An on-line skills academy will be developed through IMPACT, a feasibility grant has already been received and the full implementation grant of £40,000 has just been received. Driving VFM through value engineering and lean systems thinking is a key focus of the Impact Manchester contract.
- 223** A clear guide for staff supports the organisation in its VFM focus. The Procurement Strategy, Guidelines and Rules have been developed to protect the interests of the organisation and support VFM across procurement activities. The guide ensures staff are aware of their responsibilities in respect of purchasing. This is good practice in demonstrating that public money is spent appropriately.
- 224** NH achieves improved value for money within the capital programme. This is being achieved through meetings with contractors to programme the work as efficiently as possible. £1 million of savings has been achieved in this way. To date 50:50 shared savings have generated £1.6 million. NH has been able to tap into other sources of funding from British Gas and Low Carbon Building Programme. The service is also generating income from private owner occupiers. Around £1.5 million has been generated in the three years to date from external sources. The savings are being used to fund other activities such as the creation of the extra care sheltered housing scheme.
- 225** NH has established a 'Resource Pool' to ensure that savings and efficiencies are put back into tenant facing services and benefit the community. Individuals, groups and teams can bid for funding to support ideas, over and above original allocated budget. Requests are judged by a panel which in turn makes a recommendation to the Board to vary the budget to enable additional funds to be spent. A total of £482,000 in surpluses and efficiencies have been reallocated through this route.

226 Savings are used to deliver customer priorities. For example efficiency savings enabled the neighbourhood warden service to be mainstream funded in the 2008-09 Budget (£800,000). This ensures that the service will continue to be delivered to benefit tenants and communities. Service users are engaged in VFM and efficiency discussions. Local area panels are aware of costs and budgets and manage environmental budget spending effectively.

227 There are a number of examples where NH can demonstrate that costs have been reduced or income increased, resulting in the same or better services for customers. These include:

- good examples of value for money have been secured within the repairs service. These include a better asbestos service for same cost, better scheduling of inspections and the creation of patches to reduce the time (and cost to the environment) of driving, an improvement in work completed 'right first time' and increased multi-skilling notably on bathrooms and voids;
- a range of efficiency savings have been achieved in the housing management service. These include reduced payments for the same ASBAT and mediation services, a cessation of expenditure on relief caretaking since it can now be resourced from within the service, increased income for the same costs by extending the mobile sheltered service to other landlords and the extension of the role of caretakers to include minor work such as painting which would otherwise have had to have been completed by contractors. NH also regularly reviews the effectiveness of its partnerships and has been able to reduce the length (and cost) of casework panels by restructuring the agenda;
- controls exist to ensure that repairs are not carried out unnecessarily. There is a flag on the system to highlight work that is within warranty periods and information is held at the call centre to show if it forms part of the DHS programme. In emergencies NH carry out work and pursue the original suppliers;
- NH receive a small management fee for managing the Health Trainer;
- improved value for money has been generated in the capital programme. The change of supplier for the decorating voucher service has gained an improved discount and also is less costly. NH has achieved a higher value service by not procuring through Procurement for Housing (PfH), but by using a local company, Johnstones, offering a similar range of products with delivery but at a 40 per cent saving. Increased choice of bathroom units was also achieved with a reduction in cost;
- ongoing reviews have resulted in changes to translation services, printing and mobile phones. The latter was moved away from MCC contract onto a new arrangement through Procurement for Housing (PfH); and
- NH operates the home contents insurance service for Manchester. Currently 1,000 Northwards tenants have insurance with 2500 tenants in the scheme citywide. This generates a £30,000 bonus to NH and goes into the overall resource pool.

How good is the service?

- 228** A range of efficiency savings has been achieved in the housing management service. ALMOs and Large Scale Voluntary Transfers (LSVTs) now provide a greater challenge to the costs of the direct labour and support services provided by MCC. This was less likely when the housing management service was provided in-house. These include a cessation of expenditure on relief caretaking since it can now be resourced from within the service, increased income for the same costs by extending the mobile sheltered service to other landlords and the extension of the role of caretakers to include minor work such as painting which would otherwise have had to have been completed by contractors. NH also regularly reviews the effectiveness of its partnerships and has been able to reduce the length (and cost) of casework panels by restructuring the agenda.
- 229** Managers have a good understanding of the value for money of different forms of access. They have taken an intelligent approach to deciding which methods to use. For example they have rejected the option of an in-house call centre since this did not represent value for money and instead have negotiated a revised service at 20 per cent less cost in the first year. The possibility of a £40,000 free phone service was rejected since tenants expressed satisfaction with the existing service and increasingly owned mobile phones for whom freephone services are not available.
- 230** NH has a robust understanding of its Service Level Agreements (SLAs). This is a key area of expenditure for the ALMO and NH has undertaken a review of its SLA, making substantial savings as a result. At the time of transfer there were 34 SLAs in place. Six SLAs have been terminated and a further 11 have been converted into on demand agreements which enable NH to determine how much it uses and spends on the services. The remaining 17 form a current list of SLAs with a value of £2.8 million which is a 17 per cent reduction (£579,000) on the 2006 value. Further reviews are underway to terminate four (IT Network, Mobile Cleaning, On Call and Repairs Chasers) with services replaced either in-house or with an alternative provider offering better VFM.
- 231** NH can demonstrate clear efficiencies through its Annual Efficiency statement which provides details of cash recurring efficiencies. In 2007/08 efficiency savings of £1.3m (6.4 per cent) were delivered against a target of £799,000 (4.1 per cent). The main areas of savings were identified as in year reviews (£517,000), improvement in rent loss performance (£294,000) and the move of agency staff onto fixed term contracts (£467,000).
- 232** Financial management is strong. A clear Budget Book is produced each year by the finance team, there are monthly budget review meetings between Finance Officers and Managers responsible for budgets. Performance is monitored through regular reports to the Resource and Audit Committee each month with further reports to the Board on a quarterly basis. Annual budget setting is used as an effective tool to improve value for money. Managers are encouraged and supported to develop budgets based on proposed activity for the year and to consider how costs compare with others. This approach is supporting the development of further efficiencies and for resources to be directed at priorities.

233 NH has failed to demonstrate improved value for money in some aspects of the voids process. Void quality is poor and performance is not in the upper quartile. Allied to void costs being high this service area is not delivering value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 234** In our previous inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in this area. There had been a number of significant improvements which directly benefited service users, trends in many performance indicators (both national and local) were positive, significant progress had been made against previous Audit Commission recommendations and the speed of recent improvement was impressive. However, there were still a few recommendations from a previous inspection which had to be fully completed and some performance indicators were declining, especially those which measured repairs completed within target times.
- 235** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in the track record of delivering improvements. A range of improvements has been delivered which reflect customer priorities, and as a result directly benefit service users. Performance trends are in the main, positive and recommendations from the previous Audit Commission inspection have been addressed.
- 236** NH has made strong progress in delivering the recommendations from our previous inspection. Details of progress against earlier recommendations can be found in appendix two. Of the seven recommendations, all have now been completed. NH has used the outcomes of the previous inspection as a tool to drive improvements and deliver outcomes for tenants.
- 237** NH has made strong progress in delivering measurable outcomes in services for tenants. It has used previous inspection outcomes and feedback from customers to prioritise areas to tackle and plans clearly identify these priorities. The overall picture is one of continuously improving services being delivered to customers. A raft of improvements have directly benefited tenants and include:
- shaping services to meet the needs of individual customers, using profile information;
 - delivering the ALMO promises, a key focus for tenants, through effective management and maintenance of housing stock which is delivering good quality improvements to tenants homes;
 - an excellent gas servicing service;
 - extensive support services for customers with debt problems;
 - strong performance in involving tenants and communities in the way that services are developed and delivered and providing resources that communities can use to shape and improve their communities;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- a clear focus on improving value for money which releases resources which are benefiting customers and partners; and
- strong action on addressing ASB issues, harassment and hate crimes and good support to victims of domestic abuse.

238 The direction of travel of performance indicators is mixed. The time taken to re-let properties has reduced to 39.3 days, the proportion of repairs carried out at first visit has improved to 84 per cent, SAP ratings have improved to 77.20 and satisfaction with the service has increased to 92 per cent. However, some PI's do not show improvement, including rent arrears collection at 97.8 per cent.

239 NH is improving performance in bringing void properties back to re-letting quickly. Void performance has improved significantly. Void rent loss has reduced from 2.4 per cent to 2.0 per cent in 2007/08 and stands at 1.6 per cent at the end of the second quarter in 2008.

240 Residents are positive about the changes NH has made to the delivery of services. NH has developed a clear identity and brand for itself. Customers were able to identify NH as a separate organisation. Changes to involvement opportunities, and a perception that they feel valued, were seen as particularly strong. Delivery of promises on decent homes, and effective communication demonstrate trust and openness, giving customers a confidence in the organisation.

241 Direction of travel with value for money is positive. A value for money approach is largely embedded across the organisation and in ways that services are being delivered and developed. A strong approach to efficiency is generating resources that are redirected effectively to address priority areas for tenants.

242 A number of initiatives have been introduced recently to support service improvement although it is too early to measure outcomes. These initiatives include:

- working in partnership with MCC, NH has secured £6.75 million in Department of Health funding for the development of an extra care scheme at Whitebeck Court. The scheme will incorporate properties for rent, for sale and shared ownership, and will deliver greater choice to older people; and
- a tenant incentive scheme, Northwards Xtra has been introduced and has been well publicised to tenants through the Northwards Natter. The scheme started in September and recognises and rewards the tenants who maintain clear rent accounts.

How well does the service manage performance?

243 In our previous inspection, we found that performance management was a strong area where strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses. Aims and priorities were clear, and plans were comprehensive and well integrated. There was a strong performance management framework, work on value for money was developing quickly and NH was a learning organisation. However, local performance information could be improved, outputs could be monitored and detailed efficiency targets developed.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 244** In this inspection, we found that this is an area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Strong performance monitoring and management is supporting the delivery of improved services for customers. Value for money is well integrated into performance structure and a hierarchy of plans supports the aims of the organisation.
- 245** NH has an effective performance management framework. Local PI's have been introduced in some service areas such as rent recovery and voids with performance activity at local level being reported to Area Panels. Neighbourhood sustainability indicators are used with additional information, such as ward-based data to support service planning and measure actions.
- 246** Systematic benchmarking is developing across services. NH compares itself with other high performing organisations to improve services. Benchmarking is undertaken to compare organisation, management costs, back office costs and costs per function. A number of routes are used for comparison including national and local benchmarking clubs and ALMO specific groups. Staff are encouraged to visit other organisations to learn from best practice.
- 247** A comprehensive hierarchy of plans is in place. NH has clear aims and objectives which flow from the organisational delivery plan, through to service plans, team plans and link to individual objectives. These are monitored regularly through team meetings and individual appraisals. Performance Improvement Officers work with teams in identifying and implementing service improvements, and supporting the delivery of improvement.
- 248** Plans are co-ordinated and deliverable. The business plan has clear links to other plans and strategies and with the performance management system, supports effective planning and improvement within the organisation. Appropriate budget information is provided to managers. Managers are supported to develop budget needs alongside team plans and there are regular monthly meetings between managers and finance staff to support understanding of finances and budget position. Monthly budget information is developed and provided for managers with variances highlighted and discussed. This approach supports a focused and accountable approach to managing financial performance at all levels and allows for early corrective action to be taken.
- 249** However, the financial inclusion plan is not fully SMART¹³. There is a lack of measurable targets in the plan. For example is there is no target for additional money generated; tenants achieved financial literacy course; target for credit union members; tenants accessing basic bank accounts through credit union etc. Targets are needed to demonstrate the impact of the service.
- 250** Effective performance monitoring is used to inform and manage services. Information is presented in an understandable format and is relevant to support service improvements. Performance is managed through a series of meetings at all levels of management. Summaries are produced which track performance against targets across a quarterly period, with tracking of trends to indicate reasons and actions where performance dips. Quarterly reports are published on the website. This approach supports staff, board members and customers to understand how effectively services are performing.

¹³ SMART - specific, monitorable, achievable, resources and timebound.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

251 A performance culture is evident across the organisation. Progress with service improvement is monitored regularly by the Board. We found a focus on service improvement at Board level, senior management team and staff generally. This approach supports change and keeps progress on track. A range of examples demonstrate this approach and include:

- housing management targets are well thought out. The targets for the service relate to customer satisfaction in areas that contribute to the LAA targets that NH has signed up to. An example is the target to increase satisfaction with the environment by two per cent each year;
- there is a zero hazardous waste target and NH is so far achieving 90 per cent locally (100 per cent being equal to the zero target). There is a group target to reduce emissions by 10 per cent each year. NH is piloting the recycling of UPVC windows with the first products being manufactured;
- a sound performance management framework is in place for the repairs service. Monthly management meetings and reports to the procurement and property sub-committee and quarterly board meetings and area panels are all involved in the scrutiny of the service; and
- local performance indicators are used to effectively monitor gas servicing and these are routinely reported.

252 NH is prepared to challenge the way it provides services. This includes, for example, challenging the way that void process and income management services are delivered. The following details demonstrate this approach.

- A focused approach has been taken to support the improvement of income management. Clear step targets have been introduced alongside enhanced service working. Effective support has been delivered in identifying reasons for lower performance and linking this to development of plans and step targets to deliver change.
- Void managers have clear targets to return properties into use and a performance management system manages each part of the void repairs service. This has led to month on month improvement in spite of an increase in the number of homes becoming void. Over 98 per cent of voids now come back on the due date which means that the lettings process is smoother. However the improvement in time taken is not reflected in the quality of work.
- Performance within the On Call service has been challenged. The current service delivery approach has been reviewed and the Manchester CC SLA with the current service providers will be terminated in March 2009. Following an extensive review the service will be provided by Manchester Working Limited on a three year contract which contains robust standards and performance targets and monitoring to support improved services for customers and potential efficiency savings for NH.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 253** NH uses modern and effective IT systems to create and manage its hierarchy of plans and performance targets. The new CIVICA system enables closer performance monitoring and management; while Contact Manager is used to provide communication needs details for customers. All improvement plans are contained on an accessible IT system and all managers can access this system although it is not yet available to all staff. NH has developed a data warehouse which holds data that is appropriate for the organisation ensuring that NH is no longer wholly reliant on MCC data. This approach supports an accountable and transparent performance monitoring system.
- 254** NH has established a comprehensive approach to monitoring performance on staffing matters. A set of 30 indicators has been agreed and individual targets have been negotiated with each team leader. The top ten indicators are reported and monitored through the Covalent IT system to managers, the Board and the unions. NH monitors the diversity of staff and board members through its workforce profile.
- 255** NH has effectively raised the profile of performance monitoring and management. A Performance Improvement Groups covers the range of service areas and information from this group is provided to staff through an internal newsletter, STY news.
- 256** Northwards Housing has effective decision-making structures. A Board and sub-committees structure works well for the ALMO. Four sub committees covering areas of Human Resources and Equality, Resources and Audit, Property and Procurement and Neighbourhood and Quality Services have been established with clear terms of reference. The sub committees focus on detailed proposals, allowing the Board to address overarching and strategic business issues. Both officers and members indicated that the structure worked well in meeting both the interests of the organisation and customers, with appropriate terms of reference.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 257** In our previous inspection, we found a very strong capacity to improve. There was a strong Board, clear leadership and an effective relationship with the Council. Staff were well managed and motivated, with a strong approach to human resources management, partnership working was well developed, modern procurement methods were in place, financial resources were understood and there was strong financial management. The existing ICT (information, communication, technology) system was weak but plans to replace it were nearing completion.
- 258** In this inspection, we found that capacity to improve is very strong. The Board is strong and mature, there is clear leadership and well developed partnership working. Financial resources are well understood and ICT improvements are now effective in supporting capacity.
- 259** NH has strong leadership and is effectively managed. The Council and NH have confidence in the CEO and the management team. Partnership working is a particular strength and supports the delivery of strategic outcomes for customers. The senior management team has a range of appropriate skills to support leadership and the delivery of improvement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 260** The Council, NH and its Board have a clear joint vision of the role of the ALMO. This vision supports the delivery of improved, accessible and responsive services for its customers alongside delivering wider community based objectives, through its work in all its services, on delivering community cohesion and sustainable communities.
- 261** Partnership working is strong within NH. NH works with a significant number of partners to deliver a range of initiatives across the district. The partnerships cover a range of areas and include smoke detector fitting with the Fire Brigade; delivery of extra care housing; low carbon options and the delivery of sanctuary schemes. Advocacy groups regard NH highly and say that as a result tenants, particularly older residents, are referred to support more promptly and in greater numbers than those of other landlords. It is seen as a leading player by advocacy organisations and one that is welcoming and open to innovative approaches. NH's commitment to the wider agenda is also acknowledged by its partners and reflected in the way that LAA and PSA targets are reflected in the NH business plan. NH is supporting partnership working to deliver strategic and community cohesion outcomes.
- 262** The capacity of the management team is strong. It contains a mix of managers recruited from both the city council and external organisations. Leadership development including 360 degree appraisals and a leadership programme has helped to improve self awareness and the team ethic. Managers also sit on the boards of other ALMOs and housing associations in order to develop themselves and learn from other organisations. Senior managers have a clear focus on delivering customer focused services.
- 263** The capacity of the Board is strong. Board members have dealt with the changeover of Chairs in a mature and constructive way. Board members are both respectful and challenging. Meetings have become shorter in length as NH has achieved a steady state. Observation of the Board indicated that it operated effectively, was well chaired, had appropriate information provided, informative input from officers and that issues discussed remained at a strategic level. As a result it was difficult to tell which organisation or group each Board member was nominated from.
- 264** NH has effective leadership from the Board. The needs of the organisation are responsively addressed and the Board has made a number of difficult business decisions. These include the job evaluation process and the remodelling of the neighbourhood wardens service. Similarly it is alert to the risk of losing surveyors in the final year of their fixed term contracts. This approach is strengthening the capacity of the Board.
- 265** NH effectively supports staff to undertake their roles. There is a clear commitment to training and development of staff. An annual appraisal process identifies individual training and development needs with corporate training for all staff in key areas such as diversity and customer care. Regular 'Cascade' team briefs, support service focused training. Feedback from staff indicated that they felt that NH and managers were positive about training opportunities, had managers who 'walk the job' and supported their development needs.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 266** Staff are well informed about what is happening. Information on the work of different sections and the achievements of individual staff is disseminated and managers are approachable and have an open door policy. They are consulted when progress is behind schedule and have made suggestions such as the specialisation of the asbestos management post to help resolve problems.
- 267** Staff suggestions have been exploited well to help improve the service. A staff suggestion scheme allows staff to make suggestions through an accessible form on the intranet. If these are explored further there is a reward of £10 and if implemented then a further reward of £25 is given. Suggestions to date include the creation of tenant packs for multi storey blocks, youth diversionary activities, for example, shimmer and shine and less costly translation services.
- 268** Human resource management is strong. NH has adopted imaginative ways of retaining staff. There are 14 family friendly initiatives and a 'No Quit' policy to handle resignations has helped to retain four people. NH has been able to do so by offering training, introducing temporary measures for a member of staff with personal pressures and using mediation to address differences between managers and an employee. There is also an intelligent approach to workforce planning. Most changes are likely to be in the area of capital works as the decent homes programme reduces. To address this it has used fixed term contracts and is also aware of probable retirement dates. As a result it should be able to avoid the need for redundancies as the programme reduces after 2010.
- 269** NH is alert to and is identifying ways of addressing its potential funding gap. The gap is predicted for post decent homes, with minimal risk to the capital programme for 2009 to 2012 and delivery of decent homes by 2010. Options include requesting additional funding from the CLG, the use of efficiency savings, increased revenue and seeking out new funding sources for environmental work. The outcome of the HRA review is also awaited and discussions about the ALMO's future have commenced.
- 270** There is a good working relationship between MCC and NH. There is a good relationship with the regeneration team, with the CEO being a member of North Manchester Board. NH is an important partner of the Crime and anti-social behaviour partnership. It values some MCC support services, such as publications, highly. Regular monitoring meetings take place as well as engagement between the parties on the delivery of strategic reviews. A clear approach to monitoring underperformance between MCC and NH is in place. Reasons for decline in performance are identified and appropriate action agreed. For example in response to poor performance on voids which resulted in a review of the process.
- 271** NH has been proactive in raising the profile of financial inclusion. NH organised and ran a Financial Inclusion Conference on behalf of the Northern ALMO Group. A range of speakers from the CIH, DWP and an ALMO discussed issues around raising awareness and the current agenda. The conference was attended by 40 delegates and enabled both the profile of the organisation and the topic to be raised with similar organisations in the area.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 272** A 'heads up' culture is developing amongst staff. Staff do not view their role as having limitations and focus on a teamwork approach to housing support and compliance. A surveyor followed up a report of a tenant damaging property. He made a point of passing the house and took a photo of the damage which he then forwarded to a local housing officer to take action on. As a result tenants are given a united and unconstrained quality service delivery.
- 273** IT is helping to improve the capacity of the service. NH is an advocate of using new technology to support capacity for example through its interactive website and TARAs being given internet access. Repairs takers benefit from a diagnostic tool and surveyors will shortly be issued with PDAs to help schedule trades. NH makes use of a modern and effective IT system to create and manage its hierarchy of plans and performance targets and new IT is helping NH to manage the database of information on asbestos.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Northwards Housing 2006/07 to 2007/08

| Performance indicator (BVPI ref) | 2006/07 | 2007/08 unaudited | Mets top quartile 2006/07 |
|---|----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 63 Average SAP rating | 70.5 | 75.5 | 67 |
| 66a Percentage rent collected | 94.52 | 92.19 | 97.74 |
| 66b Percentage tenants with > seven weeks arrears (gross) | 9.43 | 14.02 | 3.98 |
| 66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served | 32.52 | - | 22.75 |
| 66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears | 0.38 | 0.05 | 0.41 |
| 74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service | 80.9 | 78 | 77 |
| 75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP | 71.6 | 66 | 67 |
| 184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year | 45 | 44.29 | 23 |
| 184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes | 1 | 13 | 29.2 |
| 212 Average re-let time (days) | 71.6 | 65 | 37 |

Appendix 2 – Recommendations from previous inspection

Table 2 Recommendations of previous inspection

| Recommendation | Progress |
|--|--|
| R1 Fully comply with the statutory requirements on asbestos by: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the current external assessment; and | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the actions in the existing action plan. | Completed |
| R2 Develop a robust stock condition database by: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring existing plans for a comprehensive survey (including assessments of Decent Homes standards compliance, the Housing, Health and Fitness rating System, and occurrence of asbestos) are complete; | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring plans to link asset management and responsive repairs databases are implemented; and | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extending the collection of stock condition data to maximise the availability of current and future stock condition information. | Completed |
| R3 Improve the efficiency of response repairs by developing the asset managements strategy and delivering existing action plans in order to: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to reduce the proportion of repairs ordered as emergencies; | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • redirect expenditure from responsive repairs to planned maintenance and to evaluate the value of one day urgent repairs; | Completed. Part of continuous approach to increase planned expenditure |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more accurately measure and record the percentage of repairs completed within the time limits; and | Completed NH record end to end repairs times. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implement a robust procedure for collecting recharged repairs which are tenants' responsibility. | Completed. Recharges can be identified but low collection levels. |

Appendix 2 – Recommendations from previous inspection

| Recommendation | Progress |
|---|-----------|
| R4 Improve performance management by: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • further developing a range of local performance indicators at neighbourhood level; | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • measuring and reporting on the impact and outcomes of a range of actions on sustainability and service improvement; and | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing detailed efficiency targets linked to budgets. | Completed |
| R5 Ensure an effective leasehold management service by: | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involving leaseholders in the delivery of the service building on the recently formed forum; | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing service standards with leaseholders and publishing them; | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing procedures to enable leaseholders and Right to Buy owners to benefit from joining into appropriate major works programmes; and | Completed |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with the Council on the recovery of service charges. | Completed |

Source: AC inspection report January 2007

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks 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:
 - mystery shopping of office reception areas; estate visits and void inspections;
 - focus groups with front line staff, customers and partners;
 - observation at Board meetings, Area Panels and Sub-Committees; and
 - a range of file checks for ASB and Complaints.

Appendix 4 – 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)

Diversity workbook

- 1 All NH staff are required to read and use a diversity workbook which aims to raise awareness of equality and diversity issues. Employees are then required to take an interactive test either online or by telephone. On successful completion employees receive a certificate to indicate that they have achieved this organisation standard.

Resource Pool

- 2 NH has established a 'Resource Pool' to ensure that savings and efficiencies are put back into tenant facing services and community benefit. In a continual process, individuals, groups and teams can bid for funding to support ideas, some of which come from tenants, over and above the budgets originally allocated. A panel, from the Board, judges the requests and makes a recommendation to the Board for a variation of the budget to allow additional expenditure to be spent. To date £482,000 of surpluses and cash recurring efficiencies have been reallocated in this way.

Pot of Gold Resource Pool

- 3 As part of the annual Business Plan consultation process each year, NH holds an event for tenants and the Area Panels to input into the process and reflect back on issues. The 2008 event was entitled 'Pot of Gold' and included the allocation of £90,000 of funding from the Resource Pool to the Area Panels (£30,000 per Panel area) for them to propose ideas for the budget. As the money was one off expenditure it has not been easy for the Area Panels to come back with firm proposals but these are now developing and the first commitment to three youth consultation events and community days (one in each Ward in the Panel area) have been agreed.

Communications handbook for staff

- 4 To drive improved communications with customers, NH produced a communications handbook to remind staff about the importance of the way in which letters are written, the do's and don'ts of emails and how to make the best use of publicity. The handbook contains easy to find information about translation services and suggests 'better' words to use which will be more easily understood.

Older persons play area

- 5 It has been placed in close proximity to an Under 5's play area children are often seen using their play area and parents and grandparents using theirs! It is frequently used by both young and old. Local residents are delighted with the facility itself and the opportunities it has presented to meet other residents from all over the UK and Europe who have come to visit the site, giving them the opportunity to discuss all sorts of neighbourhood issues, ranging from Anti Social Behaviour to Home Improvements.

'Northwards Natter'

- 6 Northwards Natter is the tenants' newsletter. This exemplar quarterly newsletter is well presented and provides very clear information for customers. It is easy to read, engaging and provides a range of useful information, which is user focused. Information to customers includes housing benefit advice; an energy performance certificate update; gas safety certificates, information about switching to digital TV and offers a range of ways for customers to get involved. Customers are involved in producing and editing the newsletter.

The Audit Commission

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