

# Short notice

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# Inspection

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**Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance and major works;  
Responsive repairs; and Void management**

Aldwyck Housing Association

June 2009



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# Housing Association Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

For housing associations our current inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41A and 41B of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003). Provisions contained in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 will amend our role and remit in due course, but are not yet in force. Our role is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the association;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Tenant Services Authority is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report.

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# About this inspection

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## The Association

- 1 Aldwyck Housing Association is based in Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire. Its stock of around 8,600 properties is located principally in the three counties of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, with some further properties in the surrounding counties of Cambridgeshire, Essex and Northamptonshire and in North London.
- 2 It provides homes for general needs, as well as supported accommodation and services for older people, young people and people with disabilities. Aldwyck employs around 450 staff<sup>1</sup>, with an annual turnover in excess of £34 million.
- 3 It is the majority shareholder of Connect Property Services (Connect), which, after a tendering exercise, it set up jointly with the Connaught Partnership, as the delivery vehicle to carry out the majority<sup>2</sup> of its improvements and repairs, from April 2007.

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## The scope of the inspection

- 4 The scope of this inspection focused on the following areas, which have been identified in consultation with the regulator, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA):
  - Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance and major works;
  - Responsive repairs; and
  - Empty homes (void) management
- 5 The inspection also included an assessment of how Aldwyck is addressing three cross-cutting themes: Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money within the services included in the inspection's scope.
- 6 We would like to thank the staff of Aldwyck, who made us welcome and met our requests efficiently and courteously.
- 7 Dates of inspection: 10 to 12 February 2009

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<sup>1</sup> In total, 385 full time equivalent. Based on the association's regulatory and statistical return, as at March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Connect uses sub-contractors for some planned work and Aldwyck uses other contractors for some specialist repairs

## About this inspection

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### Regional contact details

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# Summary of our findings

- 8 We have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are summarised below.

**Table 1 Assessment of the service areas inspected**

How good is the service?	Assessment <sup>3</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access and customer care</li> </ul>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversity</li> </ul>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Capital improvements, planned and cyclical maintenance and major works</li> </ul>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive repairs</li> </ul>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empty homes (void) management</li> </ul>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Value for Money</li> </ul>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses

- 9 We asked Aldwyck to consult with its customers on the findings of our original report on the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas we inspected; and on the preparation of an action plan to implement our recommendations. Following receipt of that action plan this final report has been published to include our assessment of the Association's prospects for improvement.
- 10 We have assessed Aldwyck as having 'excellent prospects for improvement' for the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and the short notice inspection action plan agreed with customers. These are summarised below.

**Table 2 Assessment of prospects for improvement**

Prospects for Improvement <sup>4</sup>	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Track record of improvement</li> </ul>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How well is performance managed</li> </ul>	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there capacity to improve</li> </ul>	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses

<sup>3</sup> Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money are assessed in relation to the service areas inspected only.

<sup>4</sup> In relation to the service areas inspected.

# How good is the service?

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## Access and Customer Care in the service areas inspected

**11** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area.

**12** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Aldwyck is placing a strong emphasis on customer focus. It recently achieved 'QHS' accreditation within 'maintenance', and the overall service<sup>5</sup>. Customers are now receiving services which achieve nationally recognised standards.
- Service standards in the responsive repair service are comprehensive. This gives customers clear information, including repair responsibilities and response times.
- Overall customer views about the services inspected are positive. High satisfaction is recorded in Aldwyck's own surveys, and most people we spoke to indicated services are improving to more closely match their expectations.
- Customer feedback is valued and used to improve service delivery. Aldwyck responds positively to complaints, mystery shopping and customer surveys.

**13** There are a number of weaknesses, as follows.

- Telephone calls are not always answered quickly, with only 79 per cent answered on time in the year to December 2008. Although now improving, this means a large number of customer calls have not been answered within the 20 second target<sup>6</sup>.
- Service standards in relation to capital, planned and cyclical work and empty homes are not comprehensive, so customers cannot always be clear about the service they can expect to receive.
- Aldwyck's website does not offer customers the opportunity to report and track repairs on line and has limited up to date information on the services inspected.
- Customer enquiries are not always handled effectively. Although improving, the association does not consistently return calls or provide a speedy solution to complex customer enquiries and prevent escalation to formal complaints.
- Aldwyck lacks knowledge about customers who are not accessing its services. This limits its ability to identify and address any barriers related to customer access.

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<sup>5</sup> QHS: Quality Housing Service is a subscription service, where accreditation is open to members who achieve set standards across the range of services provided. 'Maintenance' includes the services inspected and other services.

<sup>6</sup> Aldwyck's target is to answer 85 per cent of calls within 20 seconds

### Diversity in the service areas inspected

**14** Strengths and Weaknesses are balanced in this area.

**15** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Aldwyck has developed a strong focus on diversity and is working to embed a diversity culture. This is resulting in strong staff awareness around meeting the diverse needs of customers and the importance of diversity is well promoted to customers. Diversity is also actively considered in decision making.
- Profile information has been collected for 76 per cent of customers. This has given the association a good understanding of its customer base and is resulting in services being tailored to meet individual needs.
- Translation and interpretation services are good. This means that customers with language or visual impairment related needs are catered for effectively.

**16** There are a number of weaknesses, as follows.

- The association's equality scheme is not fully comprehensive. Although demonstrating a strong overall commitment to diversity, it does not ensure that all of the six nationally recognised strands of diversity are properly considered.
- Aldwyck does not fully comply with the EHRC statutory code of practice<sup>7</sup>, nor the TSA's good practice note on diversity<sup>8</sup>. In particular, this means it does not have targets in place or comprehensive measures to ensure fair service delivery.
- Only limited diversity training has been provided to actively involved customers<sup>9</sup>. This means involved customers may not be aware of the importance of diversity and cannot fully act as advocates in cascading this to other customers.
- No equality impact assessments have been undertaken. Aldwyck has not considered whether its policies have a fair and equal impact on all customers.

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<sup>7</sup> The statutory code of practice on racial equality in housing was issued by the then Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), which has since become part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), in October 2006, replacing two earlier codes of practice issued between 1990 and 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Good Practice Note (GPN) 8 - 'Equality and Diversity' (Nov 2007) was issued by the then Housing Corporation, since superseded by the TSA, to consolidate and replace previous GPNs 4 (Nov 2002) and 8 (Feb 2004).

<sup>9</sup> customers who are part of groups or forums the association meets with to discuss service delivery and/or performance

## How good is the service?

### Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance and major works

**17** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this service.

**18** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Aldwyck now has comprehensive stock condition information. This is enabling an improved strategic approach to investment decisions. An investment plan has been developed, which will ensure all homes meet a standard agreed with residents, in excess of the decent homes standard<sup>10</sup>, by December 2010.
- There is a strong customer focus in delivering improvement programmes. This helps to ensure that any concerns can be addressed and individual needs taken account of in product design and finish, resulting in satisfaction above 90 per cent.
- Customers have been able to influence decisions on the standards and specifications of improvement works. This means that work is more closely linked to customer needs and preferences.
- Aldwyck has an effective cyclical maintenance programme and inspection arrangements for health and safety related issues. This helps ensure the safety of residents, while maximising the life of equipment and materials.

**19** There are a number of weaknesses, as follows.

- While some residents have benefited from improvements to their homes, the lack of robust stock condition information until recently means programmes have not been effectively publicised or targeted and delivered on an ad hoc basis.
- The strategic approach remains hindered by the lack of a longer term investment programme beyond the current and following year. This limits customer knowledge about proposed future improvements to their homes and may reduce the potential for maximising value for money, through longer term procurement arrangements.
- Customer involvement in developing a long term strategic approach has been limited. Investment decisions have not therefore been determined from a clear understanding of the customer perspective.
- Aldwyck's arrangements for managing asbestos are not robust. This is not ensuring that health and safety risks to customers and contractors are minimised.

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<sup>10</sup> Aldwyck's stock condition survey showed that 10.76 per cent of properties failed the decent home standard (DHS), with a further 24.8 per cent which would potentially fall below the DHS by 2010, if no improvement work was undertaken.

### Responsive repairs

**20** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this service area.

**21** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Appointments are offered for all urgent and routine repairs and 94.7 per cent of these are kept. Appointments are flexible within agreed morning and afternoon slots, so that most repairs are undertaken at a time to suit individual needs.
- Ninety-one per cent of repairs are being completed at the first visit. This reduces inconvenience to customers and means delays in work completion are minimised.
- Customer satisfaction with the repairs service is strong at over 90 per cent.
- Pre and post inspections are targeted appropriately. This helps to minimise any delay in work starting and ensures effective quality checks on completed work.

**22** There are some weaknesses, as follows.

- Although improving, overall repairs performance is low compared to others, with only 88.8 per cent of all repairs completed in time.
- Monitoring of repairs reported to the out of hours emergency service is not robust. Aldwyck has not investigated the level of repairs undertaken and those referred until the next working day, to ensure customers are receiving a consistent service.

### Empty homes (Void) management

**23** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this service.

**24** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Properties are let quickly, taking an average of only 20 days during 2008/09, which is among the best performing organisations. This helps reduce the time applicants wait for housing and minimise the level of revenue lost while homes stand empty;
- Prospective tenants are sent a copy of Aldwyck's relet standard, which has been developed in conjunction with customers. As it is provided at offer stage, prior to accompanied viewings which are undertaken on all empty homes, it helps ensure they are clear about the standard of property they can expect to receive.
- Energy performance certificates are provided through an effective agreement, at a competitive rate, with on line tracking of progress and completion. This is assisting in minimising delays and cost, while meeting the association's legal responsibilities.

## How good is the service?

**25** There are a number of weaknesses, as follows.

- Aldwyck is not always completing void works to its relet standard, particularly relating to cleanliness. This means tenants are not receiving a consistent standard when moving to their new home.
- Although properties are decorated for customers who are not able to do so themselves, financial assistance options for most new tenants are limited<sup>11</sup>. New tenants may not always be receiving financial support that they most prefer.
- Customer feedback arrangements on the void repair service are not fully effective. Aldwyck cannot be certain of customer views on the quality of void works.

## Value for Money in the service areas inspected<sup>12</sup>

**26** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**27** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- Aldwyck has good information on its costs, which it has compared against others. This has enabled it to reduce initially high repair and void costs - the latter by over 50 per cent - and to start addressing comparatively high central overheads.
- Value for money (VFM) is being embedded in the organisation through an effective strategy. This is helping to mainstream VFM and efficiency targets as an important part of all staff's roles.
- Procurement is being used as an effective tool to improve VFM. Connect and material supplier arrangements have enabled savings of around £350,000 each year, with added value through free use of the main supplier's vacant building and a discount card for residents and staff.
- The level of emergency and urgent repairs (28.1 per cent combined) compared to routine repair work is better than recommended good practice. This helps to minimise direct and opportunity costs, through more efficient planning of work.
- Budgets are effectively monitored, with strong awareness of financial performance. This has helped to ensure efficiency targets are met and identify opportunities for further efficiencies to be realised.

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<sup>11</sup> Vouchers are offered for a quantity of paint alone. It is now becoming common to see alternative options offered, based on a tenants preferences, such as purchasing other household equipment or help in physically moving home.

<sup>12</sup> In assessing VFM we are looking at two questions: 'How do costs compare?' and 'How is value for money managed?'

**28** There are some weaknesses, as follows.

- Customers have not been involved in deciding where any efficiency gains should be re-invested. Decisions about using savings released by improvements in efficiency may not be being targeted at areas customers see as a priority;
- The level of planned work compared to responsive repairs does not meet good practice levels, at only 18 per cent. This increases direct and opportunity costs;
- Recharge collection rates are poor, at 10 per cent in 2008/09. All customers are paying for rechargeable repairs which should be paid by individual tenants.
- In some areas, IT equipment is not maximising efficiency. This leads to manual processes which waste staff resources.

# Recommendations

**29** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>13</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### Recommendation

**R1** Improve outcomes for customers, by:

- improving telephone call performance to that of high performing organisations;
- improving the customer facing aspects of the Aldwyck website, to provide customers with the ability to choose this as their preferred method of interaction;
- reviewing service standards, in liaison with customers, to ensure they are comprehensive and provide a clear understanding of service expectations; and
- developing more effective and consistent ways to quickly solve complex customer queries or informal complaints.

**30** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improvements in overall service performance, leading to higher satisfaction; and
- clearer customer information and interactivity in written and electronic formats.

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

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<sup>13</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

### Recommendation

- R2** Further embed diversity and fully comply with statutory good practice and regulatory requirements of the EHRC and TSA, by:
- developing a more explicit analysis of gender equality, tools to measure customers not accessing services and arrangements to collect and analyse profile information on sexuality;
  - setting targets against key service areas and board, staff and tenant representative make-up, using profile data, which is then measured regularly as a tool to ensure fair service delivery, by positively addressing any disparity;
  - providing comprehensive training on diversity to involved customers; and
  - starting a comprehensive and prioritised programme of EIAs - including the revised asset management strategy and investment programmes - ensuring these fully include all six main diversity strands.

**32** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a more comprehensive 'equality scheme' which fully reflects best practice; and
- measurable fair service delivery for all customers.

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

### Recommendation

- R3** Improve outcomes in the maintenance services inspected, by:
- involving customers in development of the revised asset management strategy and investment plans, which are then clearly communicated to them;
  - developing robust asbestos management, incorporating best practice;
  - further improving repairs completed in target times, in line with top performers;
  - providing a more consistent and effective out of hours repair service;
  - ensuring repairs to void properties are consistent in meeting the relet standard;
  - reviewing arrangements for new tenants' financial assistance; and
  - improving customer feedback arrangements for new properties.

## Recommendations

**34** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more consistent delivery of high-quality repair and maintenance services, through better performance, quality checking and customer involvement and feedback; and
- minimising health and safety risks posed by asbestos in housing stock.

**35** The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low to medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2009.

### Recommendation

- R4** Improve value for money in the services inspected, by developing robust plans to:
- involve customers in plans for re-investment of efficiency savings;
  - set targets to improve the proportion of planned works in line with good practice;
  - improve the level of rechargeable repair collection rates, in line with best performing organisations; and
  - incorporate actions to remove IT-related inefficiency in improvement plans.

**36** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- further improvements in value for money and the efficiency in which the maintenance service is delivered; and
- investment in service improvements, in line with customer preferences.

**37** The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs, with further efficiency savings in the long term. This should be implemented by September 2009.

### Recommendation

- R5** Improve performance management, by:
- embedding robust monitoring of revised service standards within the performance framework;
  - ensuring a clear analysis of performance is recorded in report commentary, identifying reasons and action taken or planned; and
  - amending trend indicators to provide an analysis of current performance against previous years and/or the same period in previous years;

- 38** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- More comprehensive performance reports, to assist in identifying and tackling any future performance issues.
- 39** The implementation of this recommendation will have medium to high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2009.

# Prospects for Improvement

## What prospects are there that the services inspected will improve?

### Summary of our findings

**40** We have assessed Aldwyck Housing Association as having 'excellent prospects for improvement' for the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements, which are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and the short notice inspection action plan agreed with customers, are outlined below.

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## What is the track record in delivering improvement in the areas inspected?

**41** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area.

**42** There are a number of strengths, as follows.

- The association has built solid foundations on which to improve services for the future. Aldwyck has focussed effectively on changing its culture and ensuring firm building blocks are in place to support improvement. Although slow to materialise, improvements are now emerging.
- Customers have benefited from recent improvements in the services inspected. These include repair appointments, the level of repairs completed at the first visit and good quality information for residents receiving improvement work to their homes.
- There has been a step change in performance related to the turnaround of void properties. Aldwyck's thorough review of the service has been successful in addressing low performance, with new structures and processes in place to help ensure this continues.
- The overall direction of travel in performance is positive. Across a range of indicators related to the services inspected, with limited exception, performance has improved over the last three years.
- The association can demonstrate improvements in value for money. Aldwyck has focussed on addressing costs and improving efficiency, in large part through setting up Connect Property Services. This is having a positive effect on overall costs, performance and satisfaction, thus improving value for money outcomes in the services provided.

**43** There are a number of weaknesses, as follows.

- Overall performance in 2007/08 was poor in a number of services, including those covered by this inspection. In the latest comparative performance tables of all associations, Aldwyck was in the bottom half or worst performing 25 per cent of associations for all indicators<sup>14</sup>.
- Some performance remains comparatively poor in 2008/09, such as telephone answering and overall timescales for completion of repairs. Although, in each case performance has improved as the year has progressed, overall, customers are not yet experiencing strong outcomes in these areas.
- The association's approach to diversity is only emerging. Aldwyck is behind the best performing associations in embedding diversity and ensuring services are tailored and measured to ensure they are delivered in a fair way.
- Aldwyck has been slow to develop a robust approach to asset management. This has not ensured that it has targeted resources effectively to maximise outcomes and value for money.

### How well is performance managed in the areas inspected?

**44** Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

- Aldwyck is an ambitious organisation, with clear aims, which seek to deliver excellence. This is helping to frame its new corporate plan and proposals to amend its group structure, to achieve improved outcomes in the maintenance and wider housing service and to continuously meet the challenges presented by the external housing environment.
- Aldwyck can demonstrate strong leadership. The boards (separate boards for the association and Connect) and executive team have challenged historical performance and developed a culture which is performance and outcome focussed. This is beginning to deliver results and suggests the pace of change now in place is sustainable.
- Continuous improvement is being driven by a focus on business excellence. This includes maximising outcomes from specialist software, which is being populated to pull together performance reports, improvement plans, risk maps and self-assessment analyses into a comprehensive performance management tool.
- There is a robust performance management framework in place. This results in board and managers having a clear understanding of performance issues, with clear evidence of underperformance being addressed to deliver improving outcomes in the services inspected.
- Customers are being involved in performance monitoring. The customer scrutiny panel has decided a range of measures on which it will monitor performance, reinforcing accountability to customers.

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<sup>14</sup> TSA performance indicators for the year ending March 2008. This includes service and satisfaction performance indicators for the services inspected, other services and the association as a whole.

## Prospects for Improvement

- Aldwyck is self-aware. It has a strong understanding of performance and areas for improvement. Its existing improvement plans already incorporate most weaknesses identified in this inspection and focus on areas that will deliver high impact.
- The association has proactively involved customers in developing a SMART action plan to address our recommendations. This is now incorporated within its performance management arrangements, providing a robust tool for improving the services inspected.
- Service reviews robustly challenge performance and service delivery. A focus on performance and costs has resulted in significant improvement in the management of empty homes, with a similarly comprehensive review beginning on responsive repairs at the time of inspection.
- A quality assurance framework is in place, which is having a positive impact in developing a learning culture. This has provided a catalyst for internal and external learning to improve service delivery.

**45** There are some weaknesses, as follows.

- Service standards are not a robust part of the reporting framework. This means that Aldwyck can not be sure customers are receiving consistent outcomes, within a framework customers have agreed.
- Performance reports do not always provide a clear analysis of the reasons for current performance or trends over time. This will become more important in future, to ensure that incremental improvement in performance can continue.

### Do the areas inspected have capacity to improve?

**46** Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

- Board members at Aldwyck and Connect have a wide range of skills and experience, which is reviewed annually. This enables any potential gaps or needs to be addressed.
- Aldwyck's executive management team is strong. It has driven through improvements in the service structure, to address fundamental weaknesses, demonstrating strong and visible leadership to staff.
- Staff development is strong, driven by a competency based framework around Aldwyck's aims and values. This has resulted in 'Aldwyck Diploma' training for all staff. Its HR function is now being remodelled, to create a more holistic approach to organisational development.
- Aldwyck has redirected resources to priorities within the maintenance service. Changes in structure, relating to repair reporting and delivery of the services, along with creation of Connect, has increased capacity to deliver improvements in performance, service and value for money.

- Financial resources are available to deliver improvements in service delivery<sup>15</sup>. This is supported by its strong approach to value for money, which is helping to maximise the outcomes delivered.
- ICT is acting as a driver for improvement. Though there are pockets where it is not fully effective, Aldwyck has made significant investment in hardware and software, which is improving service delivery, efficiency and performance management.

**47** There is one weakness, as follows.

- The make-up of the Aldwyck board does not match the local community, with only one BME and one female member. This does not ensure the community is reflected in strategic decision making.

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<sup>15</sup> Aldwyck has the resources to deliver its 30 year property investment requirements, including £21.8 million to achieve the decent homes standard over the next two years

# Appendix 1 – 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)**

## **Legal Services Advocacy for Customer Complaints**

- 1** Aldwyck offers all of its customers access to a legal helpline, to assist them in making any complaints of service failure. The service, which is free, provides advice to enable customers to construct their complaints effectively and can also be used to give advice before a customer decides whether to proceed to the next stage of the complaints process. The helpline will also offer customers legal advice in relation to incidents which do not involve the association, such as cases resulting in personal injury. This demonstrates the service encourages effective customer feedback and shows customer focus in trying to assist customers to use the complaints process effectively.

## **Robust arrangements for production of Energy Performance Certificates**

- 2** Aldwyck has a robust Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) contract, which provides an efficient and effective approach to minimise delays in void turnaround. Its contractor is notified in advance of voids becoming empty and is given five calendar days from being advised that the property is empty to produce an EPC. The contractor's progress can be tracked on line and certificates are stored electronically once produced. The association has also negotiated a price of £50 per EPC, which is very competitive against the private sector cost. This helps to minimise delays in providing this information to prospective tenants and in overall turnaround time. It also helps to pre-empt proposed legislative changes, which will require organisations to undertake an energy performance assessment, before the property is marketed, from October 2009.

### Involving customers in responding to Short Notice Inspection Recommendations

- 3** Aldwyck has proactively involved customers in developing its short notice inspection (SNI) action plan. It sent a special edition newsletter to all customers outlining the nature of the SNI and invited them to help develop its action plan in response. This information, also promoted through its website, struck a balance in explaining there were both strengths and weaknesses identified in our findings, while being careful not to pre-empt the publication of the interim inspection report. Customers were offered a comprehensive range of ways to get involved, including focus groups, which were extended to accommodate individual needs, email, telephone and written feedback. Open questions were asked, enabling customer views of current service delivery and ideas for improvements to be explored and fed into a draft action plan. This was then finalised with the association's customer scrutiny panel, before being finally approved.
- 4** This approach, achieved within the challenging SNI timescale<sup>16</sup>, has enabled the action plan to demonstrate a strong focus on the outcomes for customers it aims to deliver.

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<sup>16</sup> We ask associations to produce an action plan, after consulting residents, within two months of receiving the draft inspection report

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# The Audit Commission

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As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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