

Landlord Services

Luton Borough Council

July 2009



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Local Authority Housing 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.

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;
- 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.

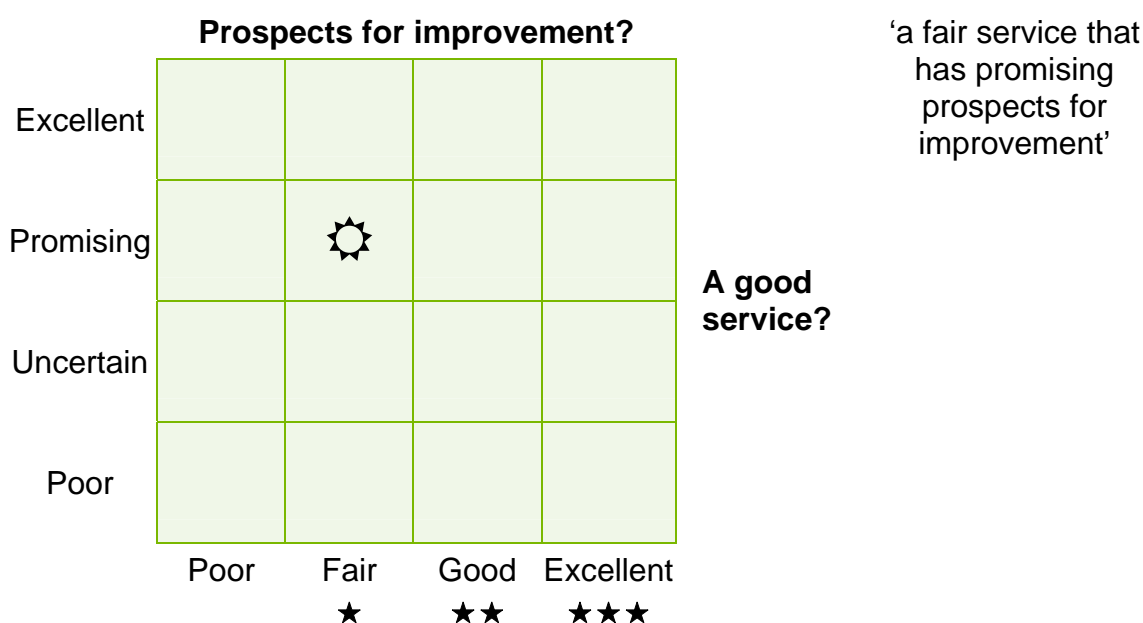
Summary

- 1 Luton Borough Council Housing Landlord Services is providing a fair, one star service, with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Widespread change has been delivered during the last three years, supported by a wholesale restructure of services, in line with improvement plans. This has delivered customer-facing improvements.
- 3 There is a strong commitment to involving residents in shaping services and this has helped to deliver improved outcomes. Information provided is customer focussed and generally easy to access, with services provided centrally and at three neighbourhood offices.
- 4 Improvement work to homes is carried out effectively and satisfaction with the repairs service is high, with homes maintained to a high standard. Reports of ASB are dealt with promptly and victims of hate crime and other vulnerable tenants receive support to enable tenancies to be sustained. Estates are clean and well-cared for.
- 5 There are areas that require improvement. The Council is not aware of who is accessing its services and what the barriers to access might be as it does not know the profile of its customers. Appointments are not available for repairs and access to services generally is limited to traditional opening hours.
- 6 There is a lack of focus for new and prospective tenants to help them understand the implications of paying rent, and customers more generally are not supported to access financial services. The most vulnerable tenants are affected by very long waiting times for adaptations to their homes.
- 7 Plans for further improvement are well-developed and reflect customers' concerns and there are appropriate arrangements in place to support management of performance. A robust approach to achieving value for money has supported the Council in making improvements to services at no additional cost and this adds to the capacity of the organisation to deliver improvements. The approach to managing the performance of staff and some aspects of the current IT system are currently limiting the capacity to make further positive changes.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Luton Borough Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising 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

- 9 We found the service to be fair because it has some strengths, including the following.
- Robust information is provided for tenants, including details of improvement programmes to homes.
 - A strong commitment to the involvement of tenants in the service design, delivering improved outcomes.
 - Detailed stock information has enabled the Council to design and deliver improvements to homes.
 - Repairs are completed to a high standard within published timescales.
 - effective arrangements in place for carrying out annual gas safety checks and servicing, keeping tenants safe.
 - Customers understand the importance of paying rent.

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.

- victims of domestic violence, hate crime and ASB are well supported.
- anti-social behaviour is tackled effectively.
- estates and communal areas are clean and well cared for.
- the workforce is representative of the local community, helping to provide insight into diverse needs.

10 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include the following.

- A lack of detailed information on the customer profile, restricting the ability to adjust services to meet different needs.
- Access to services is limited.
- Performance against all published standards is not measured.
- Appointments are not available for responsive repairs.
- There are long waiting times for adaptations.
- A lack of support for tenants to gain access to financial services through effective financial inclusion work.
- Failure to fully understand the impact of the most frequent causes of ASB.
- A lack of comprehensive comparison of all services' costs, performance and customer satisfaction to ensure that tenants are receiving value for money

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- a range of customer-facing improvements has been delivered;
- the Council has learnt from others, and from its own experiences and this is being used well to improve and develop services;
- there are detailed plans in place to improve services in line with customers' aspirations that reflect areas of weakness;
- restructuring has increased customer focus and improved outcomes; and
- partnership working is strong and ensuring positive outcomes for service users.

12 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include the following.

- Performance against some standards is not measured.
- Staff sickness levels are high.
- The impact of training is not measured.
- The approach to reviewing staff performance is not always systematic, robust and consistent.
- Inward investment to boost resources is not systematically sought.

Recommendations

13 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 Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and Councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

- R1** Significantly improve the range and quality of service information, and access to services, by:
- devising with customers a system to monitor performance against service standards and reporting service performance to tenants in a way that is effective and enables customers to challenge performance;
 - taking a planned approach to consultation exercises and establishing the means by which feedback information from a variety of sources is captured centrally to enable trends to be identified;
 - systematically gathering customers profile information to ensure that services can be adjusted to enable access, and putting targets in place to track this; and
 - agreeing with customers access arrangements to services including office opening hours, telephone access, out of hours arrangements, leaflet and information standards and contents, and website design and content.

14 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customer satisfaction will increase; and
- customers will be able to access services more easily

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

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** Improve the strategic and practical approach to diversity by:
- completing and using tenant profiling information to systematically adjust services to meet the needs of individuals and groups;
 - establishing who is unable to access services, what the barriers might be and taking steps to remove them; and
 - taking steps to ensure that customers know that written information, including the website, is available in other formats, including the most commonly used community languages.

16 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will understand who its customers are, and the needs they might have;
- the Council will be able to respond better to individual needs; and
- customers will be able to access services in a way that meets their needs.

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

Recommendation

- R3** Improve outcomes for customers by:
- implementing a system of appointments for responsive repairs, in consultation with customers;
 - taking steps to reduce waiting times for customers requesting adaptations to their homes and putting into place effective target setting and monitoring systems;
 - providing information on the implications of becoming a tenant, in terms of rent payment requirements and affordability;
 - assessing the effectiveness of diversionary activities as a means to reduce ASB; and
 - taking steps to ensure that the approaches to ASB provide quality outcomes that customers notice, including improving the approach to case management.

18 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved outcomes for customers; and
- increased satisfaction.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R4** Strengthen the approach to value for money and performance management by:
- undertaking comprehensive comparisons of cost, performance and customer satisfaction for all services and report and act on the outcomes;
 - reviewing the approach to pre and post inspections of responsive repairs to address inefficiencies;
 - undertaking an assessment of the approach to completing repairs in one visit to establish whether the approach is effective;
 - taking steps to maximise all income due to the Council, including reviewing the approach to the collection of FTAs and rechargeable repairs;
 - evaluating the effectiveness of partnerships to ensure that they add value to services;
 - supporting involved tenants through training opportunities to ensure that they are able to contribute effectively;
 - systematically evaluating the service delivery outcomes of staff training and development activities; and
 - ensuring that staff appraisals and supervisions are carried out in a systematic, robust and consistent way in line with set timescales.

20 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved use of resources; and
- increased focus on business objectives and performance improvement.

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

22 We would like to thank the staff of Luton Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

23 Dates of Inspection: 30 March to 3 April 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 24** Luton Borough Council is a unitary authority, situated 30 miles north of London. The Borough is compact and densely populated, and has many characteristics of a London Borough. Census records indicate a population of around 185,000³ people living in approximately 71,000⁴ households of which 35 per cent are from minority ethnic communities⁵.
- 25** In terms of deprivation⁶, Luton ranks 87 out of 149 unitary and county areas of England, where 1 is the most deprived. Unemployment is 9.3 per cent⁷ which is higher than the regional average of 4.7 and the national average of 4.9 per cent of the working population. Most employment is within the public sector administration, education and health sectors, followed by distribution, the hotel and restaurant industries.

The Council

- 26** Luton Borough Council is controlled by the Labour Party who hold 26 seats, the Liberal Democrats party hold 17 seats and 5 are held by the Conservative Party. The Council is run by an Executive Board of ten Councillors and is supported by five Scrutiny Committees and an overarching Scrutiny Board.
- 27** The Audit Commission assessed the overall services of the Council as improving adequately and demonstrating a three star overall performance as part of the comprehensive performance assessment which took place in 2008.

The service

- 28** The housing service manages 8,217 Council homes of which 3,687 are houses, 4,347 are flats, and 183 bungalows. There are 22 sheltered schemes. The Council has 688 leaseholders and 24 shared ownerships properties and provides land for 42 mobile homes and 20 caravans.
- 29** The Council employs 311 staff in Housing Landlord Services (HLS). Housing Landlord Services sit within the Housing and Community Living (HCL) Department, alongside Housing Strategy Services. The heads of both services are members of the Housing and Community Living leadership team, together with the Heads of Adult Social Care (ASC) and Performance and Resources.

³ Source: ONS Mid Year Population Estimates 2007 and 2004 Sub-National Population Projections

⁴ Source: Region in Figures Winter 2004/05, Defra, Census 2001

⁵ Source: National Statistics - Census 2001

⁶ Source: ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007. Note: District and Unitary (out of 354 where 1 is most and 354 is least deprived);

⁷ Source: Annual Population Survey (April 2006 to March 2007) and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2007 - ONS

Report

- 30** The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income for 2007/08 is £31.4 million. The HRA capital expenditure for 2007/08 amounted to £9.24 million, with the Major Repairs Allowance contributing £6.02 million to this.

Scope of the inspection

- 31** The inspection covered income management, asset management (not empty homes), anti-social behaviour, estate management and resident involvement. The inspection also covered the cross-cutting themes of access and customer care, diversity and value for money as well as prospects for improvement which forms our second judgement.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 32** The Council's Corporate Plan states that Luton Borough Council's objective is 'to become an excellent Council that is customer focused, delivering excellent services and contributing to the positive transformation of Luton.' The LAA⁸ sets out the principles for achieving this, by:
- reducing inequality;
 - improving access to services;
 - supporting sustainable service improvements; and
 - improving public satisfaction with their local area and increasing the number of people who feel able to influence public services.
- 33** The HLS Business Plan sets out the following overarching aims for landlord services.
- Maintaining and managing homes to the agreed standard.
 - Working with residents and partners to make communities places where people want to live.
 - Delivering high standards of customer care.

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

Access and customer care

- 34** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. Opening hours are limited, the effectiveness of access arrangements are not known and the use of feedback is not well coordinated. It is significant that the Council does not know the profile of its customers. However, services are offered centrally and customer satisfaction is strong, information and translation services are available, there are wide-ranging opportunities for involvement and complaints are used to learn from.
- 35** Customer focus is a clear corporate priority and is expressed in the Corporate Plan as one of the main values and priorities for the Council. The Council's approach to customer care is emphasised to all staff who are required to undergo customer care training as part of their induction and staff's response to customers is part of the measures used to assess performance during annual appraisals. There has also been specific training for Housing and Landlord Services (HLS) staff, and a recent managers' conference, aimed at increasing understanding of the importance of delivering services right first time. This demonstrates that the Council has taken steps to embed the importance of customer care across its services.

⁸ LAA – local area agreement – a set of targets agreed between the local authority, its partners and stakeholders

How good is the service?

- 36** By adopting a cross-service approach, the Council has made access for customers easier. The Council reviewed the way customers were able to access services in 2006/07 which resulted in a one-stop shop approach being provided at various locations around the town. Customers are now able to access services centrally at the Customer Services Centre (CSC) at the Town Hall and at three neighbourhood access points. Customers we spoke to thought staff tried hard to deal with their queries and this was confirmed by the results of the 2008 STATUS⁹ survey where 78 per cent of respondents reported that they found staff helpful. Customers are satisfied with the way they are able to access services.
- 37** The Council has not involved customers in determining opening hours. The main customer service centre is only open from 8.30am to 5.30 pm (and does not open until 10.00am on Wednesdays). The opening time was changed from 8.00am to 8.30am because of low customer usage early in the morning. The neighbourhood offices offer different opening hours ranging from 9.00am to 5.00pm (some of which are closed at lunchtime), which is confusing for customers. It is more positive that telephone lines are open from 8.00am to 6.00pm, although the Council has not made a low cost number available to customers. The position is being reviewed as part of the Customer Access Review. But until this review is complete, the Council cannot be sure that opening hours meet the needs of customers, and customers who cannot make calls or visit offices during traditional office hours may not be able to access services at all.
- 38** Key aspects of customer service are not measured. The Council has developed a wide-ranging customer care charter which sets out standards for customer service and gives detailed guidance on good practice. Although a review is in progress, current systems do not allow the performance in answering telephone calls other than repairs calls to be measured routinely at all. The initial waiting time to see the receptionist at the Town Hall customer service centre is also not measured, and from our observations at peak times this could be a considerable wait. Complaints response performance is measured but not the time taken to respond to correspondence. Although this is in part due to IT restrictions, it means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that it is meeting its own promises to customers.
- 39** Performance on responding to telephone calls about repairs is poor. In 2008 31 per cent of calls were not answered within the target time of 30 seconds and 15 per cent of calls were not answered at all. Consequently customers would find it difficult to report repairs.

⁹ STATUS surveys are standardised resident surveys based on guidance from the National Housing Federation.

- 40 There are a wide range of means through which customers can choose to be involved in service development and decision making. These include the following.
- The Tenant Consultative Committee (TCC¹⁰).
 - Nine Service Area Panels (SAPs) each looking at specific aspects of the housing service ranging from communications to tenancy management.
 - Estate-based tenants and residents' associations (TARAs).
 - The Sounding Board, a virtual panel comprising a wide group of residents with an interest in being consulted on one or more subjects.
- 41 Overall customers have a good choice of ways to be involved and can tailor their involvement to suit their interests and circumstances.
- 42 It is clear that HLS is committed to putting residents at the heart of its decision-making processes. There is a planned approach to the development of resident involvement across HLS, enabling tenants to have a direct influence on the delivery of services. Setting up the Tenant Sounding Board and developing the SAPs have enabled more tenants to influence decisions.
- 43 The Council is succeeding in ensuring most customers feel they are kept informed about what is happening. The quarterly published tenant newsletter is a useful and relevant source of information for tenants. It contains a wide range of articles covering key issues including rents, gas safety and ASB. Articles are strong on information which readers can use to follow up areas of interest. Information fact sheets covering service areas and issues of importance to tenants have been developed with customers and are available at the CSC and at neighbourhood offices and can also be downloaded from the website. Overall this helps tenants to gain an understanding of housing services and recent developments and this is reflected in the 2008 Status Survey which found over 70 per cent of respondents are satisfied that they are kept well informed.
- 44 The tenants' handbook has been designed with extensive input from the Tenant Consultative Committee (TCC). The handbook is made up of the fact sheets and while they may be useful in some circumstances such as responding to specific enquiries, the use of the wide range of individual housing fact sheets to form the handbook does not provide the structured information customers might reasonably expect. However, the TCC were very clear in their requirements and felt the loose leaf design more appropriate as it was more cost effective to update and tenants could update their own handbook with more fact sheets as they became available. The Council has taken a bold decision to depart from conventional practice in determining the form of the tenants' handbook with customers.

¹⁰ Tenant Consultative Committee (TCC) - the accountable central body for resident involvement, which links into the other consultation groups, the Service Area Panels (SAPs). It meets every 6 weeks and has 22 members of which 16 are elected. A TCC member chairs each of the SAP

How good is the service?

- 45 The Council's website is underdeveloped. The housing area of the Council's website does not yet use the full potential of the internet to help customers gain access to services. Although it is positive that it does have telephone contact information, online rent payment and the facility to report estate services issues, at present customers cannot report a repair or access rent accounts. This lack of functionality may discourage customers from making more use of a potentially effective means of communication.
- 46 It is a significant weakness that HLS does not fully understand the needs of its customer base. Due to a complete lack of tenant profile information, HLS has been hindered in its approach to ensuring that all members of the tenant community are able to access services, and that it is not inadvertently discriminating against individuals or groups. Although it has attempted to overcome this by interrogating other sources of information across the Council and is putting in to place a system of tenancy audits to help collate information, at present HLS cannot easily systematically review and amend service delivery as necessary, it does not know who is not accessing services and is therefore unable to ensure that all members of the community are able to access its services in the way that they need to.
- 47 The use of feedback from service surveys is underdeveloped and HLS is not maximising the information obtained from consultation exercises more generally. Although repairs and major works surveys are well established, feedback is not yet sought for all key service areas including estate services and new lettings. The Council can point to some changes resulting from survey work but overall the potential of systematically carrying out such surveys and applying findings routinely is not being adequately realised. Consultation exercises are not centrally managed, there is no consultation plan and findings from various surveys and exercises are not analysed for trends. Failing to take a planned approach means that there is a risk of duplication and consultation 'fatigue' amongst tenants.
- 48 Complaints are not being dealt with in a consistently timely manner. In the first half of 2008/09 responses to around one in five complaints were made after the set deadline, and initial acknowledgements were also not always made within the published timescale. Customers are not always receiving the standards of service which have been promised and have not been satisfied with the complaints process or with how their complaints have been dealt with. A survey of Housing and Community Living (HCL) customers in 2008 found only 34 per cent of those making a complaint had found it easy to complain, only 10 per cent were satisfied overall with the process, and only 20 per cent thought that their issue had been resolved by complaining. Overall the complaints scheme is not meeting customer needs.
- 49 However, complaints are used as a learning resource. A number of changes to the way services are delivered have been made recently in response to complaints. These changes include the use of overshoes by operatives working inside peoples' homes and the requirement to minimise the time the key kitchen power circuit is out of use in rewiring works. A more strategic approach to learning is being facilitated through the setting up of a corporate complaints group and use of a standard analysis template for each complaint received.

Diversity

- 50 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There is a strong corporate approach to equality and diversity supported by a robust Equality Scheme, effective reporting mechanisms ensure that priority is given to this area, the Council complies with legislative and good practice guidelines and all public buildings comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)¹¹ and the workforce and involved tenants reflect the wider community make-up. However it is significant that services are not routinely and systematically adjusted for customers with diverse needs, the website is under developed in terms of enabling access for all and satisfaction rates are significantly different between BME and non-BME customers.
- 51 The Council has a strong focus on equality and diversity. There are effective corporate governance structures in place to ensure that equality and diversity is given a high profile across the organisation. Structures include a Members' Group and Disability and Race Advisory Forums. Each directorate also has a strategic group, the Equality Board. This has been a deliberate approach that has resulted in outcomes that have helped the Council design its services. For example, the HCL Equality Board receives useful reports to help it monitor employment rates, including any trends in respect of bullying and harassment, alongside information derived from training activity, staff survey responses, complaints and disciplinary issues. Analysis of this information has resulted in the commissioning of review of diversity issues in HLS to help the council understand the impact on its customers.
- 52 There is a comprehensive Corporate Equality Scheme in place. The Scheme includes clear reference to work required across the six diversity strands and sets out the Council's response to legislation and good practice in each area. There are detailed action plans in place to support improvements in delivering services in relation to race and disability. The Scheme is regularly reviewed, with the next review due this year and work has started to embed this. The Scheme supports the Council in delivering a consistent message in terms of its approach to equality and diversity.
- 53 There is a wide-ranging programme of effective Equality Impact Assessments¹² (EIAs) in place, planned across the life of the Equality Scheme. All EIAs have taken place as planned. The process of undertaking EIAs has been drawn up to distinguish between areas of high risk which may need a full EIA, and other services that may simply need a scoping exercise. This has been a pragmatic approach that has ensured that staff fully understand the value of EIAs without being overwhelmed by the resultant workload. For example, the Estate Services Review was subjected to a second stage (full) EIA with the support of the expertise of the Equality and Diversity Officer. The EIA demonstrated that some customers were potentially disadvantaged by the review in terms of the informal support offered to them by the scheme staff and replacement support was provided to overcome this.

¹¹ The Disability Discrimination Acts (DDA) - 1995 and 2005 aim to end discrimination against disabled people and require that public buildings should be made accessible for people with disabilities

¹² Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) - assess the impact of policies and practice on different community groups.

How good is the service?

- 54** The Council has a well developed approach to equality and diversity and complies with key equality guidance. It has self-assessed as complying with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing and it has been externally validated as achieving level three of the Local Government Equality Scheme (LGES)¹³. This demonstrates that the Council is laying down the foundations to meet its ambition of achieving level five.
- 55** The approach to delivering its key value of 'dignity and respect' has helped the Council promote a consistent message to staff about delivering individual services. Staff understanding of equality and diversity has been tested through mystery shopping activities with issues relating to customers from BME backgrounds and people with disabilities scoring very highly. There is also clear leadership in challenging inappropriate behaviour with instances of racial harassment and threatening behaviour towards staff being promptly acted upon and reported to the Police. This approach has helped staff understand equality and diversity issues and to react appropriately where necessary.
- 56** However, there are very limited examples of where services have been adapted to meet the diverse needs of individuals. For example, there are no 'flags' on the IT system to enable staff to tailor services as appropriate in response to particular needs, although individual needs are sometimes noted in free text. The ability to automatically tailor services to meet diverse needs is also limited by the lack of customer profile information. This means that the Council has been unable to easily support vulnerable and diverse customers.
- 57** The Council has a well developed approach to translation and interpretation services. This includes an in-house translation and interpretation service and an instant telephone interpreting service provided by an external specialist agency. Many staff are able to speak a second language and these staff are identified for customers by wearing name badges stating their language speciality. This combined approach makes it easy for staff to access these services to support customers when the need arises.
- 58** However, standard straplines used on leaflets and housing fact sheets to set out translation options are not adequate. Where they are in use they do not describe what the leaflet or other document is about. They are not applied consistently and some leaflets such as the Repairs Booklet and Tenant Compact have no straplines at all. Customers unable to read English may therefore not know what information might be made available to them in a language they could read.
- 59** The staff is largely representative of the local community. The Council is meeting its own targets in terms of ensuring that the workforce is reflective of the wider community. In HLS, there is a target to measure the percentage of employees that are from a BME background. Targets have been met since 2006/07, with performance at the time of our inspection showing that 28.84 per cent of employees in HLS are from a BME background, against a target of 27 per cent for 2008/09. This compares well with the overall population for Luton where 35 per cent of the population are not white British.

¹³ The Local Government Equality Standard (LGES) - a tool for local authorities to ensure that their equality and diversity work is mainstreamed at all levels. The equality strands are age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, faith and disability.

- 60 HLS has taken steps to ensure that the workforce is representative. Building and Technical Services (BTS) has used the apprenticeship scheme to help train local people and to extend the diversity of the building trades. Priority is given to local people when appointing apprentices, of which there are 25 in total, and at present all apprentices are from the local area. BTS has been aware of the lack of women and also of apprentices from a BME background and has taken steps which have resulted in the recruitment of three women last year and which are designed to achieve further such recruitment this year. Action taken included writing to all female school leavers about the apprenticeships. This approach supports the local community and helps BTS understand local needs.
- 61 BTS is also developing an appropriate approach to improving contractor performance on diversity issues. This includes agreeing and monitoring diversity targets and plans for major contracts including the Major Works Framework and ensuring employment policies are geared to facilitating improved diversity of the workforce. Contractors are required to complete and act on tenants' profiles on works affecting residents, ensuring that they are not inadvertently discriminating.
- 62 Involved tenants are representative of the local community. When the TCC was last elected, HLS took steps to help ensure that residents involved in the Committee are more fully representative of the local community. This was achieved by keeping six places vacant until elections had been held and then filling those places with candidates who had not been successful in elections but who were from under-represented sections of the community. This was undertaken in agreement with other Committee members and is an important step in ensuring that all residents have a fair say in decision making.
- 63 The Council has taken steps to ensure that all customers can access services equally. Translation services are available, all public areas of Council buildings are DDA compliant, there are hearing loops in all offices and there is an effective partnership in place with Sight Concern to support those that are visually impaired. Customers with translation, interpretation and other specific needs are supported to access services.
- 64 However, the website cannot be easily accessed by all customers. The website has no automatic translation facilities, there is no access to alternative formats for those with visual impairment and the link to translation services does not provide any information about services that are available to personal callers to the Council. This approach may be deterring a number of customers from obtaining the services they need.
- 65 The Council supports some, but not all, vulnerable customers. The Council has developed a floating support scheme that is available to provide additional support to ensure customers are able to sustain their tenancies and money advice is provided via referrals to the CAB. However, the aids and adaptations service is not well promoted and customers experience long delays before major works are undertaken.

How good is the service?

- 66 There is an appropriate response to reports of domestic violence (DV) and hate crime. All reports of DV and hate crime are automatically given a high priority and are responded to within 24 hours by the Tenancy Enforcement Team (TET). HLS has developed effective relationships using MARAC¹⁴ and a multi-agency DV forum which have enabled it to act quickly in a number of cases where management transfers have been necessary. Target hardening is also offered, along with particular emphasis on HomeSafe¹⁵ where victims do not want to move from their homes. All staff have undergone refresher training and new guidelines have been issued that assist staff in providing support to victims.
- 67 The Council has worked with hard to reach groups to ensure that their views are represented in assisting in the development of its strategic approach. For example, the BME Housing Strategy consultation included direct consultation with community groups and homeless people. This work resulted in the Strategy being changed to include emphasis in the action plan on BME customers with mental health issues. Effective joint working across the Council has also helped HLS to access groups that are traditionally hard to reach, for example working with other teams has enabled HLS to work with the African community, BME adults more generally and with faith groups across the Borough. This assisted HLS to take account of different views in service delivery.
- 68 Customers from a BME background are generally less satisfied with services. According to the results of the 2008 STATUS survey, satisfaction rates among customers from BME backgrounds are significantly lower than overall satisfaction rates. Only 66 per cent of BME customers are satisfied with the service they receive compared to 78 per cent of non BME customers. However, it is positive that this has increased from 54.72 per cent at the time of the 2006 STATUS survey. This can be attributed to additional focus given to understanding and increasing satisfaction by HLS, including making sure that involvement mechanisms are representative of the customer base and by hosting a customer conference with a BME focus. Further work is planned to take place with the SAPs that may further help HLS understand the reasons for current satisfaction levels, but in the meantime positive progress is being made.
- 69 The Council works with partners to help it to ensure services meet local needs. For example, the Corporate Equality Scheme was drawn up in consultation with a number of local groups and organisations that reflect the diverse wider community. Effective working within the Council, between HLS and other elements of HCL and Adult and Social Care (ASC), has enabled support for more vulnerable tenants to be easily accessed.

¹⁴ MARAC - Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference - meeting of several agencies to plan and respond to incidents of serious violence.

¹⁵ Homesafe - ensuring that one room in the property can be used as a sanctuary, with additional security measures provided.

Stock Investment and Asset Management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 70** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Asset management planning and programming is supported by robust stock condition information. Residents are influencing the major works programme. Works are completed to a high standard, show customer focus and the delivery of the investment programme is effectively managed. However, the approach to asbestos is underdeveloped.
- 71** The Council's Asset Management Strategy provides a sound basis for its approach in this area. The Strategy is a useful and logical platform from which to deliver the investment required and justify the decision to retain the stock. It sets out a clear investment framework and set of principles to guide further detailed planning to meet the future stock maintenance and improvement needs. It also identifies the investment needed to keep homes decent and in good repair and sets the direction for future work.
- 72** Stock information supports effective planning and programming. A stock condition survey by consultant surveyors provides a satisfactory basis for stock investment planning for traditionally built homes. The base 2004 survey included 20 per cent of houses and all communal parts of blocks of flats. Stock was found to be in good condition with only £2.6 million of catch-up repairs needed and £14 million required to meet the Decent Homes Standard¹⁶ (DHS). Investment needed to maintain the stock over 30 years has been identified and programmed. A rolling survey comprising 10 per cent of the stock each year is being delivered under a framework agreement¹⁷ by consultant surveyors and takes account of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. This ensures that up to date information is used to plan improvements and supports the Council to meet the DHS by 2010.
- 73** The approach to programme planning to deliver the investment aims is sound. A detailed property-specific five-year programme covering 2005 to 2011 is currently being delivered, based on suitably remodelled data deriving from the stock condition database. This static programme is now being developed into a five-year rolling programme which will be completed shortly. This clear forward view helps provide certainty to residents about which works will be done in the longer term and also supports partnership working with contractors.
- 74** The need to ensure major investment is not made in stock which does not have a long-term future has been recognised. This approach includes options appraisal of homes whose sustainability is uncertain. The sustainability model has been applied to specific local situations to aid assessment of the viability of stock and the appropriateness of investment. This was applied to the tower blocks before recent major investment was carried out, to ensure that the use of resources was justified, and is currently being used to inform the review of options for the future of Wolfsburg Court, enabling the Council to use effectively scarce resources.

¹⁶ The Decent Homes Standard (DHS) - the government's published standards for all social housing. This means that they are wind and water tight, and have reasonable thermal efficiency and modern facilities.

¹⁷ Framework agreement - a general term for agreements with suppliers which set out terms and conditions under which specific purchases can be made throughout the term of the agreement.

How good is the service?

- 75** Capital works budgets are managed effectively. The major works programme has been delivered on time and to budget since 2005 and in some cases savings on estimated spend have been achieved. This has allowed additional works to be brought forward.
- 76** Some progress has been made with ensuring residents are able to influence key aspects of major works. In particular, residents were instrumental in the decision to carry out all works due in any five-year timeframe at the same time, rather than within specific years, which might spread the disruption over two or even more occasions. Residents have also been included in procurement working groups which develop contract specifications, evaluate tenders and appoint contractors. This has helped the Council to develop a customer focussed programme.
- 77** There is an effective process in place for notification of works to customers. Customers can access major works programmes on the Council's website and this information has been provided to local tenant representatives and ward Members. The information is also available through the Council's CSC and through local area offices. The Council's approach to this has been recognised as industry good practice and details available to customers include the general specification, definition and description of the actual works, outlined in a comprehensive programme of planned works relating to their street over a four year programme.
- 78** Satisfaction with improvement works is high. Customer satisfaction for all major works is measured by satisfaction surveys undertaken by customer liaison staff. Current satisfaction levels are as follows.
- Baths - 98 per cent satisfied.
 - Heating - 92 per cent satisfied.
 - Kitchens - 100 per cent satisfied.
 - Rewiring - 93 per cent satisfied.
- 79** This shows that the works are in most cases meeting customers' expectations.
- 80** Customer care in the delivery of major works is evident and includes:
- the standards of works are made clear to residents through show homes where possible, and through information sheets, and for those wanting more details through published standard specifications and policies on materials;
 - customer liaison staff complete tenant profiles to identify vulnerabilities and special needs and ensure appropriate additional services are provided;
 - customers always sign off a new kitchen design in three dimensional format before works start;
 - there is some choice on kitchen fittings and on floor tiles, though this does not extend to choice of kitchen taps; and
 - decorations are undertaken after kitchen and bathroom renewals.
- 81** This contributes to the high levels of satisfaction which tenants have with major works to their homes.

- 82** Planned works are managed effectively. Apart from major works programmes covering building elements such as heating and roofs, significant use is being made of planned maintenance programmes. These include landlord lighting replacement in common parts, lift renewals, fire protection including dry risers, gutters and fascias, and refuse chutes, and the statutory planned electrical inspection programme is being delivered. This helps to ensure best use is made of funding available and reduces problems for tenants.
- 83** Cyclical maintenance is robust. Repainting of external and common parts and associated repairs is done on a five-year cycle and this cycle has been maintained. The programme includes the cleaning of uPVC surfaces and the lubrication of moving parts to windows. This has a positive impact on reducing the number of responsive repairs required.
- 84** Council homes overall are increasingly energy efficient. Past investment in new windows, insulation and heating systems resulted in a SAP¹⁸ score of 78 being achieved by 2008, putting the Council in the best 25 per cent of social landlords in terms of energy efficiency. Works include replacement of first generation uPVC windows with double glazed units and further roof insulation. Works since 1996 have reduced overall energy consumption in the stock by 35 per cent which in turn has led to reducing fuel costs by 24 per cent. This makes homes both more affordable in terms of running costs and more comfortable generally.
- 85** The approach to asbestos is mixed. Reasonable steps have been taken to identify and record the location of asbestos both in common parts and inside homes. All common parts have been surveyed using the Type Two survey standard and approximately 10 per cent of homes have been surveyed across all archetypes. Locations are recorded on an asset management database. Most operatives we spoke to had received specific training and had a high level of awareness of what action to take to identify locations of the material and what to do on any suspect building elements they might encounter. New tenants receive information on likely locations and how to avoid disturbing the material and there is an on-going awareness raising campaign. However, the current IT system does not allow asbestos locations to be routinely flagged on repairs orders which may put operatives at risk.
- 86** The Council are aware of the need to manage the environmental impact of major works and have taken positive steps in this area. There is a strong focus on recycling including old uPVC windows and on redirecting old front doors to building colleges where they are used for training purposes. All building waste removed by BTS itself is sorted and recycled at the recycling plant and contractors are required to have their own recycling plans.

Responsive Repairs

- 87** In this area we found that strengths and weaknesses are balanced. Repairs are generally completed within target times to the satisfaction of customers, the service offers value for money and arrangements support completing jobs in one visit. However, appointments are not offered, a high proportion of jobs are completed as emergencies and the approach to pre and post inspections needs further development.

¹⁸ SAP - the Standard Assessment Procedure is a measure of the energy efficiency of homes.

How good is the service?

- 88 A major weakness in the repairs service is the lack of an effective appointments system. At present tenants can ask for a morning or afternoon call and also for operatives to avoid the school run periods. However, appointments on specific days of the week are not available. This is not popular with tenants and also prejudices effective delivery of services as in many cases tenants are not at home when operatives call and cards asking for an appointment to be made have to be left. This further ties up staff time in BTS in dealing with tenants' calls. This weakness is acknowledged and plans are in place to address it when new IT is in place.
- 89 Work is completed to a high standard. The 2008 Status Survey found that 85 per cent of respondents thought the overall quality of work was good. Satisfaction with individual repairs is measured by way of customer satisfaction slips that are completed at the end of each job. Satisfaction at the time of our inspection showed that 94.84 per cent of customers were satisfied against a target of 95 per cent. Performance at the end of 2007/08 was 95.15 per cent.
- 90 Performance on competing responsive repairs within target times is strong. At the time of inspection, around 99 per cent of jobs in all priority categories were being completed on time. This compares well with the best social landlords in this area and means promises to customers on the speed of repairs are being kept.
- 91 However, some aspects of the repairs services are inefficient, including:
- a high proportion of jobs completed as emergencies (39 per cent in 2007/08) and urgents work (44 per cent), while good practice is 10 per cent and 20 per cent;
 - variations are high at 12 per cent of estimates; and
 - the proportion of jobs which are completed at the first visit is not yet measured.
- 92 These inefficiencies impact on planning and scheduling work, as well as potentially inconveniencing customers.
- 93 Working arrangements are in place to support the completion of jobs at the first visit. While BTS does not currently measure this, works arrangements help to ensure that work is completed without the need for a return call. Most operatives have good local knowledge of the stock and the operative productivity scheme is aimed at getting the job right first time, with operatives empowered to make decisions on site in varying works ordered if needed. Where additional costs are involved in such variations, these are authorised by phone to £500 so the operative can continue with work. There has also been an improved approach to carrying of imprest¹⁹ stock on vehicles, and many operatives are multi-skilled which supports the delivery of a 'right first time' approach.

¹⁹ Imprest stock - carrying a comprehensive stock of materials

- 94 The responsive repairs service provides value for money. The BTS in-house workforce provides repairs services which generally compare favourably in terms of costs and efficiency with other similar services. A well-established consultancy with wide experience in this field carried out a recent analysis of BTS operations and concluded that tenants receive value for money from the service. For example, performance on repairs done within timescales falls within the best quartile of the comparator group. In terms of use of resources, each operative completes an average of 4.6 jobs a day compared with a best 25 per cent threshold figure of four. Overheads are comparatively low at 12 per cent of turnover, as are vehicle and plant costs at 5 per cent, and very little work has to be sub-contracted out. This has resulted in savings that have been re-invested in services.
- 95 The approach to pre and post inspection of responsive repairs is mixed. While only 6 per cent of jobs are judged to warrant a pre-inspection (complying with good practice, which is less than 10 per cent), the target timescales for completing the inspection is over-long at 15 days. Although post-inspections are also carried out they are not recorded and there is a lack of analysis by operative or job type, to see if there are common or recurring issues which could be addressed. Opportunities to further improve quality are being missed.

Gas Servicing

- 96 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Performance is strong and the service is well promoted and customer focussed. However, records are not easily accessed, satisfaction is not measured and little use is made of good practice to drive further improvements.
- 97 Current performance on gas safety checks and servicing is strong. At the time of our inspection there were twelve homes without a current safety certificate, which represents around 0.15 per cent of the total stock. In each overdue case the appropriate designated action was in hand to ensure access would be achieved. This ensures that a high standard of risk management is being provided in this area.
- 98 The Council uses appropriate tools to achieve access. All new boilers installed have calendar reminders built in which temporarily shut down the boiler when a check is overdue and flash a message on the control panel which the customer sees when they turn the boiler back on. All addresses which are overdue for the ten months cycle of checks are flagged on the front-end screen for the repairs call centre so that operatives can discuss with customers the need to make an appointment, should they call for other matters. Housing officers have recently started to visit properties where services are overdue, to work with customers to arrange a convenient appointment. Legal action taken involves obtaining injunctions in the county court and this has proved effective in helping customers to understand the importance of allowing access, with none of the injunctions being enforced. This has helped the Council ensure that its legal duties are being met.
- 99 Gas safety is well promoted. There is a gas safety feature in every newsletter and regular local radio campaigns run every year. These include broadcast advertisements in each of the ten most used minority languages to ensure the importance of gas safety is appreciated by people who may not fully understand messages in English.

How good is the service?

- 100** The service is customer focussed. Servicing can be undertaken at weekends and during the evening to fit in with customers' needs. Appropriate arrangements are in place to minimise risks to tenants who may be sleeping in rooms which have gas appliances. The Council will fit carbon monoxide (CO) detectors when situations make this a priority or where customers have a particular fear of CO poisoning. The Council also ensures the safety of gas appliances installed by residents by undertaking safety checks on a routine basis. This complies with safety guidelines.
- 101** However, satisfaction with the service is not measured. The Council does not record satisfaction with gas servicing or with gas safety checks. It cannot therefore be sure that gas servicing satisfies customers and fully meets their needs in that way it operates in terms of appointments, notices, giving advice and similar features.
- 102** Gas records are not currently kept on a basis which provides adequate management data reports. The system is based on a spreadsheet and paper certificate records. We checked a number of such records and while all were found to be in existence, several were not in their correct place. Managers acknowledge the limitations of the system, and plan to replace it with a suitable new all-electronic record system, but in the meantime the current system does not provide easy access to documentation.
- 103** Partnership working helps to support an effective approach to gas servicing. The Council is making effective use of its partnership with a specialist independent gas consultant to verify its performance and procedures on works to gas appliances. Consultant engineers spend four days each month doing work in progress audits and post completion audits to ensure technical standards are met. The approach is targeted to ensure that standards among the Council's gas operatives remain consistently high and has resulted in performance in the third quarter of 2008/09 in meeting technical standards above average nationally.

Aids and adaptations

- 104** This is an area where weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths. The service is poorly promoted, budgets are inadequate and although waiting times have been reduced, customers still wait too long for major works. Customer satisfaction information is not fully collated or utilised and stock information is not readily available. However, minor works are completed quickly and there are positive links between adapting properties and the completion of Decent Homes works and other programmed improvements.
- 105** The aids and adaptations service is poorly promoted. There are no satisfactory written sources of information on adaptations and service standards have not been agreed. At present, customers needing such work have to rely on verbal advice which risks inconsistency and an incomplete understanding of what is available and the timeframes they can expect. As a result, customers may be missing out on services that would make their lives more comfortable.

- 106** There is currently a gap between budget and the estimated demand. The Council does not have a sufficient budget to meet demand and this is affecting the time that customers wait. While it is acknowledged that needs are likely to increase, funding cannot meet current needs and is not likely to meet potential future increases in demand. In 2009/10 there will be around £795,000 available while the cost of carrying out works to people on the current waiting list is around £880,000. Needs of service users who are among the most vulnerable customers are not currently being met.
- 107** However, the Council has recognised its weak performance and has started to take steps to address the problems. This has taken the form of a dual approach, by increasing funding available for works and by increasing the emphasis on making better use of existing housing stock. This work has resulted in the waiting list reducing from 245 in August 2008 to 120 at the time of our inspection. Additional funding of £120,000 has resulted in increased expenditure: to the end of Jan 2009, expenditure amounted to £260,000 (compared to £130,000 in 2007/08), with £359,000 committed (£260,000 in 2007/08) and a further £100,000 where estimates are being obtained. This has helped to reduce waiting times to some extent and is likely to contribute to further improvements in future.
- 108** However, there is no current target for the overall timescale for providing major adaptations. Apart from service users who have special clinical priority, at January 2009 some customers had to wait 30 months for a major adaptation such as a walk-in shower or stair lift. Delays remain lengthy despite the improvements made which impact on the ability of the vulnerable customers to live comfortably and are outside the guideline of 12 months set by the CLG²⁰.
- 109** The Occupational Therapy (OT) service is making a significant positive contribution to the adaptations service. The 18 months waiting time for an OT assessment in 2007 has been reduced and at present two thirds of assessments are completed within the 28 day target. OTs also work with allocations staff to ensure that there is a proper match between people's needs and adaptations where an already adapted home is being relet. This is helping the Council to start to meet needs more quickly and more appropriately.
- 110** Minor adaptation needs are met. The approach to minor adaptations and equipment provision costing less than £1,000 is positive. For straightforward adaptations, such as grab rails, customers are assessed through a quick guided self-assessment system, and an agreement with the Joint Equipment Store, run with the NHS, ensures that work is done or equipment delivered within two weeks. For more complex works under £1,000, works are assessed by OTs in most cases within 28 days and budgets are available to deliver the works within a further similar period. An innovative aspect of this service area is a pilot scheme with the Homes Improvement Agency, in which a handyperson completes small adaptations at no cost to the service user for those who do not qualify under the standard criteria for mainstream works.

²⁰ CLG - Department of Communities and Local Government.

How good is the service?

- 111** The use of customer satisfaction information with adaptations is underdeveloped. A feedback survey was introduced early in 2009 but there are not enough results yet to form any conclusions on outcomes for residents. Although it is positive that all service users who have received a service through OT are sent a customer satisfaction questionnaire, results of these are collated within Adult and Social Care and are not used by HLS to inform future service. In addition to this, the equipment service carry out a telephone review of 20 customers each month and have received positive feedback particularly regarding minor adaptations such as stair rails, grab rails and simple items of equipment. But current gaps in satisfaction monitoring mean that the Council cannot be sure that it is providing a service that meets the needs of all its customers.
- 112** The Council does not have complete information on adapted properties. While data on past and current adaptations works is available this is not systematically recorded on the stock data base due to system limitations. The introduction of new systems will address this issue, but until then a full and up to date record is not accessible which hinders the Council in making the best use of its stock.
- 113** Adequate account is taken of adaptations issues when homes are refurbished internally. Programmes are checked against the waiting list for works and such works brought forward. Any unidentified potential needs are notified to the OT service and an assessment carried out. This approach has recently been strengthened by fast tracking adaptations for customers living in sheltered schemes to bring forward compliance with the DHS for sheltered properties. This supports customers as well as maximising value for money.

Housing Income Management

- 114** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. It is easy to make rent payments, performance on rent collection is improving and the rent arrears procedure is robust. There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment and a vigorous response to the 'credit crunch'. However, the lack of customer profile information has hindered targeting support, not all income is maximised and at present there is no financial inclusion strategy to support those in need.
- 115** Income management is a strategic priority for the Council. Performance in this area is widely reported, with rent collection being one of two Council-wide Business Indicators from HLS. Rent collection rates have improved from 96 per cent (at the end of 2007/08) to 97 per cent at the time of our inspection. Although this is performance leaves the Council in the bottom 25 per cent of comparable organisations, it demonstrates that maximising income collection is important.

- 116** The Council has not maximised the use of the most convenient and cost effective method of payment, direct debit. There are currently a number of payment methods available including payment online, using the 'Do It Online' facility on the Council's website. Rent can also be paid in person at the Customer Service Centre, at post offices and at shops across the town. The importance of rent payment is well promoted through a number of sources of information available to assist customers, including a 'Paying Your Rent' fact sheet that clearly explains how payments can be made. The same information is available online and also to download. However, due to IT limitations, the Council is unable to offer flexible payment dates for customers who wish to pay by direct debit and currently only offers one date each month. As a result, only 12 per cent of customers choose to make their rent payments using this method. This may mean that at present not all tenants are able to pay their rent at a convenient time and place.
- 117** There are appropriate arrangements in place to recover current tenant arrears. A restructure took place in 2007 creating a specialist team that focuses on income collection. The team contacts tenants in arrears early on and this is supported by the procedure which encourages personal contact at many stages of recovery. The new structure of the income management team has enabled a more focussed approach to sustaining tenancies and enabling customers to pay their rent. This has resulted in fewer applications to court (95 cases in quarter 1, 2007/08, reducing to 46 in quarter 4) and fewer evictions (30 cases in the same period, reducing to 16), against a backdrop of a reduction in the number of cases owing over £2,000 and over £1,000. This approach has supported tenants to retain their tenancies and helped to maximise income.
- 118** There is a clear process in place to guide staff in the recovery of rent arrears. Staff are guided by a flow chart that simplifies the written procedure. Actions are reflected in the automated arrears recovery process provided by the IT system. There are also clear guidelines against which team leaders assess the qualitative performance of income officers. The criteria sets out the expectations of managers, including:
- taking proactive steps to offer support to vulnerable customers;
 - where income/expenditure information has been recorded;
 - where appropriate advice is provided; and
 - where the case history is properly recorded.
- 119** This helps staff understand actions that contribute to the delivery of a high quality service.
- 120** The IT system supports income recovery. The system automatically generates the next stage of recovery action, which then needs to be accepted or rejected. Actions are only identified if arrears have increased or a re-payment agreement has been broken. Income Officers use the IT system to select their workload according to a variety of bands, including sum outstanding, action taken, method of payment and action recommended. Any recommended action that is rejected must be accompanied by a clear reason for rejection. Rent arrears recovery is supported by IT enabling staff to easily identify and track cases that need further support or intervention.

How good is the service?

- 121** However, the IT system used to recover rent arrears does not have the capacity to flag up vulnerabilities or special needs of customers. The system does, however, alert staff to any health and safety issues that may concern them and the free text area is used by staff to record any other pertinent issues. At present, services cannot be automatically adjusted.
- 122** The Council cannot be sure that it is providing equality of access to the income management service. HLS does not have complete tenant profile information and does not monitor the profile of those tenants in rent arrears (other than evictions). This has hampered HLS in determining who it is that is most likely to be in arrears and it has not been able to target resources appropriately. It cannot be certain that it is not inadvertently discriminating against any particular group.
- 123** Customers are influencing the income management service. Performance is reported to the TCC on an annual basis and this includes an update on the action plan for the forthcoming year. The structure of the service was discussed with tenants by way of a focus group in 2007 and at the annual conference in 2008 a focus group was held to consider the action plan for improvement. It is positive that in February 2009 an Income Management Service Area Panel (SAP) was set up. There have been two meetings to date and discussions have been held around the arrears policy, and a survey of tenants is planned to establish the experience of users of the income management service. It is anticipated that the SAP will receive quarterly performance reports which will enable a more frequent challenge than the TCC is able to offer.
- 124** There is some evidence that HLS is working towards establishing a rent payment culture. HLS has successfully used media campaigns to highlight the importance of maintaining rent payments during the Christmas period. Comparing arrears levels over the same periods in 2007/08 and 2008/09 shows a decrease in arrears of £22,000 in 2008/09 compared to an increase of £13,000 in 2007/08. This approach has helped customers understand the importance of paying rent.
- 125** HLS is not taking all steps to improve income collection rates. For example, income officers do not undertake estimates of likely housing benefit (HB) entitlements to enable tenants to start making payments pending assessment of their HB claims. In addition to this, affordability and the implications of rent liability are not discussed with potential and new tenants to minimise future arrears. Although some income officers are able to use small handheld computers to calculate potential HB payments, thereby enabling tenants to start payments of a notional amount, pending their actual HB assessment, not all staff are able to do this, resulting in inconsistency of service and a missed opportunity to maximise all income due to the Council.
- 126** Delays in assessment of HB have impacted on collection rates. Issues with the performance of the Revenues and Benefits teams have impacted on the Council's ability to quickly assess HB claims. The impact on current arrears has been calculated by HLS in terms of the effect on weekly income and has shown income from HB increasing by approximately £10,000 per week in the last quarter as the service improvements have delivered outcomes for customers as well as for HLS.

- 127** Some, but not all, partnership working is helping HLS to deliver effective money and debt advice. HLS has accessed Supporting People²¹ funding to provide a floating support post dedicated to supporting HLS tenants. Although the post holder has only been active for the last two months, already £8,000 in additional rent payments has been generated by the 75 cases currently being supported. However, HLS believe that the advice provided by the Citizen's Advice Bureau is having a more limited impact. Although a new protocol has recently been signed, liaison arrangements are not working effectively and HLS is unsure whether referral arrangements are delivering positive outcomes for customers. At present, not all partnership working is as effective as it should be.
- 128** There is a good relationship between the HB team and the HLS income collection team, supported by a Joint Working Protocol²². Cases are discussed at monthly meetings between staff, but urgent matters are addressed by the use of a dedicated e-mail address for HLS staff to query urgent cases. This is checked hourly by HB staff and has resulted in quick responses to matters relating to evictions and delays in processing claims. Income officers are provided with opportunities to join in training organised by the HB training officer, along with other partner organisations, to ensure that all stakeholders working with the HB team have a common understanding of policy and practise. This has resulted so far in some income officers being trained in HB verification. Income officers are also able to view the HB IT system. This is a useful resource that helps income officers to understand the current circumstances of customers and to assist them in providing information that may be relevant to an on-going claim. Effective relationships between housing and HB teams support customers in maximising benefit take-up.
- 129** However, the approach to benefit uptake campaigns is under developed. To date HLS has only worked with the HB team to increase benefit uptake by including HB leaflets in rent increase letters. This has had a limited impact.
- 130** The approach to financial inclusion is under developed. Although a financial inclusion policy is not in place, there are signs that the Council is using cross team working to more effectively support customers, for example by developing budget awareness sessions for new tenants by way of a partnership between Adult and Community Learning and HLS. However, work to ensure that customers are able to access financial services, including debt advice, budget awareness, affordable loans and savings (including promotion of the local credit union) has not taken place and the lack of a well defined policy or strategy has hampered this. At present the Council is not assisting all customers in accessing financial services.

²¹ Supporting People - a programme which funds services that help vulnerable people live independently in their accommodation

²² Joint Working Protocol - an agreement with each partner, or in some cases more than one partner, to identify roles and standards each can expect. These enable clear expectations to be clear and clear delineation of responsibility.

How good is the service?

- 131** The Council has acted positively to determine, and to address, the local impact of the current recession. A 'Summit of Luton' event was held in February 2009 which brought together key statutory and voluntary agencies with local businesses, to establish the local effect using empirical and anecdotal data to help identify solutions. In addition to this the Council has been working internally to determine the impact on its customers and has taken some steps to try and minimize its effect. For example, the Council, in conjunction with the TCC, successfully lobbied central government to decrease the formula rent to a 3.1 per cent increase, against a government original guideline increase of 6.1 per cent. This has resulted in rents at a local level being more affordable.
- 132** The approach to the collection of Former Tenant Arrears (FTAs) is weak. At the time of our inspection former tenant arrears amounted to over £1.2 million, in excess of current tenant arrears. Efforts have been concentrated on maximising income in terms of current tenant arrears collection and the sustainment of existing tenancies but this has impacted adversely on FTA collection. Although there are plans in place to review FTA collection processes, the target date for completion by December 2008 has not been met due to the late implementation of the new IT system. At present the FTA service is not effective.
- 133** Leasehold charges and service charges generally are appropriately charged. HLS is currently charging for actual costs in respect of estate services, combined with a fixed management fee. Fees are charged according to costs incurred for each block for leaseholders, but are pooled for tenants, which has resulted in a disparity of costs at present. An external review has recently been undertaken of leasehold charges, complete with a series of recommendations, which when complete should help HLS to deliver an improved service.
- 134** The collection of leasehold charges is strong. Collection rates have remained strong for some time with collection rates for 2008/09 showing that of a total of £581,000 raised in invoices, £414,000 was collected within 90 days. HLS has encouraged leaseholders to pay in advance by introducing an incentive payment of £50 if service charges are paid in advance. Over 20 per cent pay in advance and over 60 per cent of all leaseholders pay by direct debit. This shows that collection methods are working.

Tenancy and Estate Management

- 135** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The structure and policies support an effective response to reports of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB), a mixture of remedies and support is used to reduce ASB, victims are well supported, partnership working is strong and estates are well managed. But performance monitoring is under developed, which has impacted on case management, early intervention work is limited and the impact of the main causes of ASB have not been analysed.

Tenancy Management including dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB)

- 136** The Council has developed a modern and responsive approach to dealing with ASB. Appropriate policies and procedures have been put in place to support a revised staffing structure that helps customers to report incidents of ASB easily and conveniently. Reports can be made by telephone, by visiting the CSC or any of the neighbourhood centres and by using a dedicated ASB email address. Out of hours reports can be made up to 11pm via the central control centre, after this time a dedicated answer phone is available for messages, which to date has proved satisfactory. The Council has signed up to the Respect Standard for Housing Management²³ demonstrating that it understands the importance that the community play in tackling and reducing instances of ASB.
- 137** There is a strong and effective approach to dealing with reports of ASB. Senior Housing Officers receive initial reports of ASB and prioritise according to how serious they are as well as directly dealing with minor complaints. Any serious cases involving violence, intimidation, domestic violence, hate crime or property damage are referred to the Tenancy Enforcement Team (TET), who are co-located with the Police and the Community Safety Team. This supports a co-ordinated approach.
- 138** The approach to ASB is supported by a detailed procedure. The procedure clearly sets out the expectations placed upon staff and guides them through action that they need to take. Staff have been assisted to follow the procedure by being provided with training opportunities. For example, several members of the TET are currently receiving training to achieve a post graduate diploma in ASB and other team members have received training in mediation. This has enabled staff to deliver an effective service.
- 139** HLS has increased the availability of its own staff to provide a fast response to reports of serious ASB and to be able to offer more support to victims. The Tenancy Enforcement Officers (TEOs) are mobile staff who provide a reassuring presence for customers and witness support, and direct resolution of lower level ASB and surveillance. The team operates on a two shift system with coverage from 7am until 11pm, as well as Saturday mornings. The team has been increased in size and have been supplied with laptops and wireless access. This enables a faster response and effective mobile working to take place.
- 140** HLS has developed effective strategic partnerships to help it address ASB. HLS is represented on the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP)²⁴ which has successfully facilitated positive relationships with the Police at a senior and operational level. This has resulted in the close working relationship being supported by co-locating staff from both teams, and by enabling HLS staff to have direct access to Police computer records.

²³ Respect Standard for Housing Management - The Respect Standard outlines the core components essential to delivering an effective response to anti-social behaviour and building stronger communities

²⁴ CDRP - Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, multi-agency strategic group

How good is the service?

- 141** Indicators of ASB activity are collected effectively and used to target resources. Information is shared across the CDRP through the Partnership Tasking Group (PTG) by accessing information held on shared and individual IT systems. The PTG examines reported activity by way of a fortnightly report and this has resulted in hotspots being identified with appropriate action taken as a result. Examples of this include a dispersal order being obtained at Hockwell Ring and a reduction in burglaries elsewhere.
- 142** However, limited work has been undertaken to collect information to identify early warning signs that an area may be becoming a hot spot. As well as information sharing activities already described, the Community Cohesion Group also looks for trends and contributes to intelligence, but this has had a limited impact so far. This means that HLS has not been able to maximise opportunities to plan ahead to direct resources effectively and address ASB before it becomes a serious issue for the community.
- 143** HLS uses a number of enforcement measures to address ASB, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Enforcement Measures

Type of activity	2007/08	2008/09
NSP	15	18
Injunction	2	2
ABC	23	20
ABC Notice	0	2
Possession	3	9
Demoted Tenancy	1	0
Crack House Closure	1	0

Source: Luton Borough Council

- 144** The Council has developed a wide ranging approach to dealing with ASB, not relying on intervention in all cases. There are a number of diversionary activities that HLS has been involved in, including the following.
- Development of a corporate approach through the Youth Offending Service and Youth Intervention Group.
 - Working with residents to provide facilities for young people.
 - Summer scheme for young people to include basketball/football.
 - boxing scheme with local boxing champion.
 - Provision of the 'Boom Bus'²⁵ in the evening.
 - Football tournament focussed on reducing knife crime

²⁵ Boom Bus - bus fitted with facilities enabling young people to play music

- 145** A budget of £30,000 has been made available to support these activities. Although the impact of these activities has not been assessed, it is clear that HLS understands the importance of combining its approach to ASB to include a mixture of responses.
- 146** The range of tools used to tackle ASB includes the consideration of mediation in all cases. A Joint Working Protocol has recently been signed with Luton Mediation Service which is supported by a grant of £25,000. Staff have received training in mediation in order to understand the opportunities that it offers.
- 147** The outcome of referrals to the mediation service has so far been mixed. During the last quarter 20 cases were referred. Of these, seven may have been inappropriate referrals as the customers either declined further support or did not respond and two other cases were completed but unsuccessful. While it is positive that six cases were completed successfully and a further five are ongoing, our review of case files showed some that some staff are not routinely referring suitable cases for mediation and this may have impacted on the success rates to date.
- 148** Monitoring HLS performance following reports of ASB is underdeveloped. HLS is aware of this and has recently put in place systems to monitor performance against service standards. A system of monitoring performance against published timescales was developed in January 2009 as shown in table two below and shows that resources are mostly meeting standards set:

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Table 2 ASB Service Standards

Service Standard	Target	Performance January 2009	Performance February 2009	Performance March 2009
Reports acknowledged in three days	90 per cent	100 per cent	100 per cent	100 per cent
Complainants contacted every 14 days	75 per cent	80 per cent	70 per cent	70 per cent
Satisfaction achieved	60 per cent	60 per cent	100 per cent	100 per cent

Source - Luton Borough Council

- 150** Witnesses to and victims of ASB are offered support in a variety of ways. For example HLS has in place a Witness Protection Plan that offers physical protection including window film, metal letter boxes and other examples of target hardening. The TEOs offer a physical presence and victims are able to call on the services of a TEO via the central control centre until 11pm every night. This approach ensures that witness and victims feel reassured.

How good is the service?

- 151** The support offered to witnesses, victims and perpetrators is effective. By providing a number of well developed support routes, HLS has been able to encourage witnesses to come forward and provide evidence. Internal and external partnership working also supports this approach. For example, young people at risk of offending are provided with support by the Youth Intervention Group, referrals are made through SOVA²⁶ processes, close working arrangements are in place with Adult and Social Care colleagues to provide intensive support and Victim Support receive referrals from HLS to support witnesses through the court process. This has resulted in all cases referred to court reaching a successful outcome.
- 152** HLS knows the main causes of ASB, but does not systematically monitor the implications on its own resources. In addition to this, HLS does not analyse the effectiveness of the remedies that it uses. This means that it cannot be sure that the most appropriate remedy is being used and that there is likely to be a sustainable outcome. Although it is positive that some resources are available to respond to incidents, including CCTV and noise monitoring equipment, HLS cannot be sure that it has the right resources to deal with the most likely causes of ASB.
- 153** The approach to case file management is mixed. Of the cases we looked at, most had the origin of the complaint clearly detailed, timescales were met for responses and confirmation letters were sent. However, in some cases of low level ASB, the quality of file notes were poor, actions taken were not necessarily appropriate (including no reference to mediation and over reliance on issuing diary sheets), there was limited reference to working with partners to resolve issues and it was clear that there had been no systematic quality assurance checks undertaken by managers. This means that HLS cannot be sure that its staff are responding to reports of ASB in the most appropriate way.

Estate Management

- 154** Estate management services are delivered effectively. A wholesale review has been undertaken over the last 18 months and is now complete. The review has resulted in all 400 blocks of flats being covered by a named Estate Officer who monitors the cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts, reports repairs and undertakes inspections of all blocks on a regular basis. Estates that we visited were generally clean, tidy and well-managed.
- 155** However, there is a confusing approach to monitoring the appearance of estates. A number of inspections take place, including:
- quarterly estate walkabouts (attended by HLS, tenants and members);
 - member neighbourhood tours (36 tours every year);
 - fortnightly inspection of low rise blocks;
 - twice daily inspections of high rise blocks;
 - monthly soLUTiONs²⁷ walkabouts; and
 - quarterly estate blitzes led by BTS.

²⁶ SOVA - Safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults

²⁷ soLUTiONs - a targeted week of intensive multi-agency action in a priority ward to tackle crime, anti-social behaviour and environmental issues.

- 156** While inspecting the appearance of estates is clearly a corporate priority, findings from these inspections are not collated in one place and there is therefore a risk of duplication of effort, and a clear lack of a strategic approach.
- 157** Satisfaction rates are high. Seventy-three per cent of customers are satisfied with their neighbourhood according to the 2008 STATUS survey, an increase from 66 per cent in 2006. This shows that the work undertaken to improve the appearance of estates is recognised by customers.
- 158** There are effective partnerships in place that deliver estate management services. For example, Joint Working Protocols have been entered into with other teams in the Council that are delivering improvements for tenants. These include faster response times for fly tipping removal and improved shrub bed maintenance. Partnerships with external contractors are also delivering improvements, including communal cleaning and grass cutting. Other partnerships include accessing services provided by the Youth Offending Team and probation services to undertake one-off grounds maintenance projects, and working with Groundwork to refresh some communal gardens. Partnership working is delivering improvements that customers would recognise.
- 159** Customers have been involved in designing estate management services. The estate services review was carried out in response to feedback from customers that services were inadequate. To obtain customers' views about the design of future services, HLS involved them in collecting baseline information and in deciding the options for delivery. This included running focus groups, telephone surveys, postal surveys and door to door canvassing. The response rate to this was markedly higher than usual (30 per cent compared to 10 per cent). Customers designed the service standards and were fully involved in the tendering process and selected the contractor partners. Although outcomes of the review have not yet been formally assessed, early feedback shows that customers are happy with the new arrangements.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 160** This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are balanced. There is a developing corporate focus on value for money, efficiency targets have been met year on year, the approach to procurement supports efficiencies and savings are reinvested in line with customers' aspirations. However, there is a lack of understanding of the Council's own costs which has hampered benchmarking activities and its ability to be sure that it is delivering efficient services, some income is not being maximised and some partnerships do not provide value.

How do costs compare?

- 161** The Council does not have complete information about its costs and the quality of its services to enable it to effectively benchmark with other organisations. It therefore cannot demonstrate that, when compared to others, it offers value for money (VFM) and that the systems it uses are the most effective and efficient.

How good is the service?

162 The approach to using financial data to compare costs of services with others is underdeveloped. HLS does not understand the costs of services it delivers and cannot therefore be sure that it is delivering services in the most efficient way. The development of cost and performance benchmarking is largely dependant on the introduction of the new ICT system, both in terms of being able to support the delivery of more efficiencies (including mobile working, responsive repairs control centre and increased payment methods) and also to enable the accurate recording of costs that will allow HLS to benchmark in future. HLS has undertaken some service area benchmarking exercises to help it understand its own costs, including a comparison exercise of the resident involvement team. This showed that, when compared locally to similar sized organisations, the HLS budget for resident involvement is smaller than others and satisfaction ratings are mid-range. However, at present the Council cannot be sure that it compares well with others across all services.

How is value for money managed?

163 There is a developing focus on VFM within the Council. The Service Excellence Change Plan initiated in 2006 has had a clear focus on improving services and streamlining processes, which has resulted in a number of positive outcomes being delivered. The Council has also taken steps to embed a culture of delivering VFM throughout the organisation by setting up the Luton Service Excellence Team (LEx) in 2008. The team was set up following the success of HLS' work on their service excellence project with an external partner in 2006 to support operational teams to adopt a 'lean' approach in delivering services. This team has particularly supported BTS in developing its understanding of the need to operate efficiently to ensure that the team remains viable, with a focus on increasing both the productivity of employees and satisfaction ratings. This approach was further supported in 2007 by the Corporate VFM strategy being refreshed, requiring all services to self assess their VFM outcomes each year since then. As a result of this the Council has achieved an overall Use of Resources²⁸ score of three in 2006/07.

164 The VFM vision for HLS is set out in its VFM Strategy. The HLS VFM Strategy was approved in January 2009 and clearly articulates the basic long term goals of HLS and identifies the resources. The VFM Action Plan which supports the strategy sets out the actions necessary to deliver the goals outlined in the VFM Strategy. The Plan is divided into two areas that explore the high level activities required to embed VFM throughout HLS and also sets out detailed actions that will deliver VFM and efficiencies. The plan is outcome focussed and clearly sets out the anticipated benefits. There are now robust arrangements in place to support the delivery of VFM.

²⁸ Use of Resources - an assessment by the Audit Commission of various financial elements of the CPA framework, including value for money and financial management and reporting.

- 165** There are a number of opportunities for VFM outcomes to be challenged by both executive and elected Members. These opportunities include quarterly performance and finance reports to both Executive and Scrutiny, monthly reports to the Corporate Improvement Board (including service plan updates), and quarterly meetings of the Performance Board (PB) where each service head is required to provide comparative data to enable internal challenge. The Portfolio holders for Housing and Finance have both challenged in a number of areas, including outcomes from BTS and the estate blitzes and this gives a clear message to officers that improved performance is expected, but at no extra cost.
- 166** The Council understands that there is a clear link between performance and efficiency. The PB regularly challenges process as well as outputs and this has included raising awareness of duplication on the process of agreeing DFGs. The PB is currently monitoring the income collection process, following changes in ways of working. Reporting arrangements have enabled effective challenges that have delivered outcomes for customers.
- 167** The approach to VFM has delivered a number of efficiencies to the HRA. The Council has taken a pragmatic approach to reviewing the costs of centrally supplied support services. Shared services such as HR, IT and Legal and Democratic have been subjected to VFM reviews which have included using the Audit Commission VFM tool to identify areas of higher cost than peers. This has resulted in savings being re-directed back to the HRA:

Table 3 Impact of central support costs on HRA

Year	2007/08	2009/09	2009/10 (projected)
Savings per year	£65,000	£99,000	£115,000

Source - Luton Borough Council

- 168** Efficiency gains have also delivered cashable and non-cashable savings and have enabled HLS to meet its efficiency targets year on year. Savings made in 2007/08 include:
- £181,000 as a result of the restructure;
 - £24,000 resulting from the removal of investigations agent;
 - £27,000 from process redesign;
 - £26,000 from reductions in office space; and
 - £375,000 from improved procurement arrangements.

How good is the service?

- 169** The corporate approach to procurement has helped to deliver savings. Staff are required to use corporate framework agreements and this has helped them to understand the implications of small value orders and savings that can be made by more effective batching of goods and services. The Procurement Strategy sets out the basis for modernising procurement of major works and involves the use of a tendered framework agreement through which a number of partnering contractors will be awarded work on a component basis. Such arrangements elsewhere have proved effective in ensuring improved value for money and standards are achieved.
- 170** The adoption of partnering principles within contract management is delivering savings. BTS operates as a commercial and competitive organisation in terms of major works which they deliver and in terms of providing services outside of the Council. They are now one of four partners appointed through the recent Major Works Framework tendering project. All future work awarded is subject to further tendering among the partners. Previously BTS tendered on the measured term contracts under which major works have been delivered. BTS also carry out work for other social landlords amounting to 8 per cent of their turnover, which provides a further commercial platform and spreads overhead costs and increases returns to the Council.
- 171** The Major Works Framework is a sound model for delivering savings. The Framework has already delivered some savings through lower tender prices on a 'mini bid' process for contracts issued using the mechanism and HLS has tracked and compared costs with historical and benchmarking data. For example, in an assessment of a window replacement contract where the average unit cost was similar to that of rates obtained over five years previously and was therefore in real terms 25 per cent cheaper than recently tendered high rise window replacement works.
- 172** The Council is making effective use of planned maintenance. The ratio of revenue monies spent on planned and responsive programmes is close to the Audit Commission good practice benchmark. This helps to ensure that the best use is made of the greater efficiencies generated by undertaking maintenance work on a planned basis.
- 173** The Council's approach to maximising all income is mixed. Relatively little income is obtained from the policy to recharge tenants for repairs required through their negligence or other reasons. In the first three quarters of 2008/09, nearly half of the £21,000 recharged was written off and only £7,000 had been collected at the end of the third quarter. A revised policy is in draft form. Until this is applied robustly tenants generally are paying for repairs which others should be responsible for. In addition to this, the weak approach to the collection of former tenant arrears is minimising the Council's opportunity to ensure that income from all possible sources is maximised, which impacts on the resources available to deliver services.
- 174** HLS understands the importance of involving customers in delivering VFM, and its approach to this is developing. The estate services review involved tenants and their role in the process included developing the new specifications for cleaning and grounds maintenance, selecting the contractors and monitoring performance. The review has resulted in improved services being delivered at no additional cost.

- 175** Efficiencies have been re-directed in line with tenants' aspirations, alongside corporate ambition. A surplus made by BTS in 2007/08 was re-directed to support a number of initiatives including the estate blitzes in response to tenant concerns about neighbourhoods expressed by low satisfaction rates in the 2006 STATUS survey. There has also been an increase in staffing levels to address ASB in response to the 2008 STATUS survey indicating that ASB is an area of increasing concern for customers. Further efficiencies made by the HRA supported an injection of £62,000 into the adaptations budget to assist in reducing the waiting list, along with a major contribution from the general fund. Other examples of re-directing efficiencies have covered increased fuel costs and enabled the Council to keep rents as low as possible. The Council is responding to tenants' priorities without incurring additional cost.
- 176** Significant inward investment has been achieved which has had a positive impact on tenants, and further investment is being sought. This includes regeneration schemes such as that undertaken at Marsh Farm, and a major joint venture multi-site regeneration and development project currently in the planning stage. Other investment has included funding for a sub-regional choice based lettings scheme and a long term research programme with a university on housing needs. In addition, although additional work undertaken outside HLS by BTS does not benefit the HRA, the economies of scale experienced by the size of BTS in response to the provision of this work has resulted in an estimated 10 per cent reduction in costs rechargeable to the HRA. This shows that HLS is outward looking in its approach to achieving VFM.
- 177** Budgets available to deliver estate management services in partnership with others are used effectively and deliver VFM. There is now one estate services budget managed by the Housing Manager that has pulled together all smaller budgets previously held separately. Some of this budget has been used to deliver improved fly tipping response times by agreeing a fixed annual sum payable to the Street Services Team, who will respond to all instances of fly tipping during the year. This approach has resulted in significant savings being made (£63,000 pa), and improved response times (99 per cent responded to in 48 hours, which is the standard, and 96 per cent in 24 hours).
- 178** However, not all partnerships offer VFM. For example, the Council funds a specialist advisor at the CAB, from the HRA, at a cost of £50,000. Current working arrangements are not demonstrating that this is delivering an effective service for customers as liaison arrangements do not include the outcomes from referrals. The contract is due for renewal in 2010 and consideration will be given to refreshing the approach to debt advice. In the meantime, HLS cannot be sure that the arrangement with the CAB is delivering VFM.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 179** This is an area where strengths are balanced by weaknesses. A number of improvements have been made that customers would notice, both to services and in performance. Efficiencies are being achieved to support the resources needed to deliver improvements. However, many areas are still not performing strongly, with the adaptations service in need of further improvement and the approach to understanding how costs of services compare with others has not improved.
- 180** The Council has delivered widespread change in HLS over the last three years. This has included restructuring the income management, ASB and estate services functions to better meet customers' needs and deliver improved performance. The restructuring has already delivered some service improvements that are directly recognised by customers. These include the following.
- Cleaner and better managed estates.
 - improved waiting times for adaptations.
 - Increased opportunities for involvement.
 - Providing more systematic support for vulnerable tenants to help sustain tenancies.
 - Increasing the capacity of the ASB team to enable a speedy and flexible response to reports of ASB, and to support witnesses.
- 181** These improvements impact on all residents but in particular help vulnerable tenants to sustain tenancies and improve their quality of life.
- 182** Improvement in performance has been made in areas that are important to tenants, as follows.
- Performance on completing responsive repairs within targets has been strong over the past three years but improved further in 2008/09. In 2006/07, performance across priority categories was in the region of 96 to 99 per cent completed on time, but in 2007/08 the range is 98.5 to 99.5 per cent.
 - There has been improvement in some telephone answering. There have been five rounds of mystery shopping to test the speed of telephone answering and the effectiveness of the greeting. Performance has increased from 62.2 per cent (good performance) in round one, to 85.6 per cent (very good performance) in round five.
 - Improvements to HB assessment delays have also been made with an improvement in assessment times from 46 days at the end of 2007/08 to 37 days at the end of 2008/09 (unaudited figures).

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- Improvements sustained over a number of years have led to increased energy efficiency of homes, where the Council is now in the top 25 per cent of performers in this area.
- 183** However, overall performance targets are not being met. Of the 21 Key Performance Indicators monitored by HLS, only five can be described as on target. Of the remainder, 10 are off target and others require the target to be reviewed. This shows that further work needs to take place to embed changes.
- 184** The Council does not know if it is meeting its promises to customers as it does not monitor this. Although service standards are in place, the Council does not monitor key aspects of some areas performance against them, including waiting times at the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and it is therefore uncertain that its performance in some key services experienced by customers is improving.
- 185** The overall approach to value for money is mixed. The Council can demonstrate a track record of improved value for money over the last three years and has exceeded its efficiency targets. It has also improved existing services and developed new services, without increasing expenditure. However, the Council cannot demonstrate an improvement in value for money when compared to others as it does not have details of its own costs in all areas. This is preventing the Council in being sure that its approach to services offers the most value.
- 186** While the focus on improving the aids and adaptations service has improved, this is recent and a number of key weaknesses remain. Waiting times are still too long, there is a lack of customer information about the service and satisfaction information is not fully collated or utilised. The Council has recognised this and there are plans in place to improve performance with work already underway.
- 187** The Council quickly responded to issues raised during our inspection and made a number of immediate improvements. These include making changes to the website to assist customers experiencing debt, putting in place plans for servicing solid fuel heating systems and improving performance management arrangements in the ASB team. These changes will benefit many customers.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 188** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Plans reflect customers concerns as well as local and national issues and are robustly managed and reported upon, performance management arrangements are in place with effective challenges taking place, weak areas have been prioritised for improvement and the Council actively learns from others and itself. However, performance management in some areas and of staff is mixed and routes available for staff to contribute to service improvement are limited.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 189** Improvement plans reflect customers' concerns. The Council has used information from a variety of sources to develop its improvement plans. A large scale corporate consultation exercise was undertaken to develop the Sustainable Community Strategy, and the issues that emerged from this were reflected by STATUS surveys - specifically to deliver an improved repairs and maintenance service, to improve the quality of neighbourhoods and to reduce ASB. Other feedback opportunities were used to supplement this information, including issues that have emerged from the TCC and expressions of dissatisfaction via complaints and involvement mechanisms. This information has been used to inform plans, along with the Council's own ambition to improve performance management, customer involvement and manage finances better.
- 190** Plans also reflect local and national priorities. There is a draft HRA Business Plan (BP) in place that demonstrates clearly the links between national and local issues and how the Council intends to respond to these, corporately and by HLS. The BP includes robust information that shows how the Council will maximise the use of existing properties and ensure that they, and neighbourhoods, are maintained to a high standard.
- 191** Action plans are generally SMART²⁹. The plans track performance against targeted actions, and include overall performance when compared nationally. This makes it easy to see clear outcomes.
- 192** Plans to deliver improvements are well coordinated. The HLS Service Plan directly links to the Corporate Priorities set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy and outlines aims for the forthcoming year that are articulated in more detail in the Team Improvement Plans. Actions in Team Improvement Plans are translated into individual targets for staff and are agreed as a part of their annual appraisal, ensuring that all staff understand their roles.
- 193** Progress against improvement plans is reported. For example, progress against targets to improve void performance and increase rent collection have been identified as of significance to the effective operation of the Council and these aspects of service performance have been classified as Key Business risks. Action to improve performance in these areas is tracked by way of separate Action Plans that support the HLS Service Plan. The plans are clear and include detailed work undertaken and a commentary and are outcome based. The Action Plans use an easy to follow system of identifying trends and usefully include comparative data. This helps to drive improved performance.

²⁹ SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 194** Future plans are wide-ranging and robust. The Council is effectively prioritising weak elements of the service for improvement. The aids and adaptations service has been prioritised for change and there is a clear plan in place, with some actions already completed, including evaluating the current process, with the remainder of the work scheduled to be completed by the end of January 2010. It has also recognised that the CSC is not working effectively and is not providing a 'One Stop Shop' service. An improvement project is due for completion later in 2009 with implementation scheduled for mid June. This will be supported by the customer access strategy which is being developed. The strategy is focused on identifying how best to reshape services to reduce the large volume of non-productive enquiries received, thus freeing up resources to deal with enquiries which result in positive outcomes for the customer. Once delivered, improvements in these areas should directly benefit customers.
- 195** There is a developing understanding of areas that need further work. For example the Council accepts that more needs to be done to address the impact locally of the recession; to build on the successes of the estate services review by ensuring that other teams in the Council understand the new way of working; and to drastically improve the aids and adaptations service. The Council fully understands the impact that the lack of customer profiling information is having on its ability to shape services to individual needs and anticipates that improved IT will support it to improve in this area. These improvements are articulated in service plans and demonstrate that the Council is developing its self awareness.
- 196** The vision for the service is supported by aims that are stretching. There are clear targets in place that support the Council in achieving its aim to reach performance that puts it in the best 25 per cent of similar organisations. Some indicators aim to deliver improvement over a period of time. For example, the rent arrears target where improvement is planned over three years. Taking this approach enables the Council to ensure that targets are more likely to be met.
- 197** Tasks are clearly prioritised. Progress with improvements in HLS for the period 2008/11 is on track and each task has been assessed as high, medium or low priority. Although it is unclear what factors have influenced priorities, those with the highest priority are generally completed or on track.
- 198** There are mechanisms in place that support improvement. For example, there are effective systems that enable the Council to quickly respond to performance issues. Performance is reported bi-monthly to Landlord Services Management Team and this has resulted in corrective action being taken in a number of areas including further investigation into STATUS survey results reflecting dissatisfaction with the ASB service. HLS responded to this by introducing its own satisfaction surveys at case closure to establish true satisfaction levels of those that had experienced the ASB service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 199** There are also some opportunities for customers to challenge performance. For example, the TCC has taken an active interest in analysing the results of the mystery shopping exercises. This has resulted in the TCC challenging the level of service provided by the CSC in terms of calls not being answered and a lack of detailed knowledge and understanding expressed by staff. This has led to staff training in weaker areas and further mystery shopping exercises being commissioned to determine whether changes have taken place. Customers are clearly able to influence performance.
- 200** Senior managers provide leadership. Staff generally feel able to approach senior managers with concerns and in some cases managers have made their open door policies explicit. For example in BTS there is a clear route, known as 'Make Myself Heard' for staff to access managers and communication is well promoted through individual supervisions, team meetings, drop in sessions and employee briefings. To complement the drop in sessions held by BTS managers, the Director and Head of Service also hold frequent drop in sessions to ensure that they are available to staff.
- 201** However, routes available for staff to contribute to service improvement are limited. While staff can make suggestions to improve services on an ad hoc basis there is no scheme in place through which suggestions are encouraged or facilitated, ensuring each suggestion is fully considered and feed back provided, and best suggestions rewarded. Effective use is not yet being made of the potential for staff to contribute to service improvements.
- 202** Performance management in some areas is poor. Service standards are not monitored, ASB case file management is weak and some elements of the responsive repairs service are not measured. This has prevented the Council from delivering some improvements that customers would benefit from.
- 203** The approach to staff performance is mixed. The appraisals and supervision scheme has not been operating effectively. Of staff we spoke with at a focus group, although all had undergone an annual appraisal, within the policy timescale, only two had received the full mid-year appraisal review. Of the same group of staff only half had received supervisions in the same period and none of these met the policy frequency. This has a negative impact on the delivery of the organisation's objectives and means staff activities may not be fully aligned to the service priorities.
- 204** There are some effective performance management arrangements in place. For example, the Team Leaders in Income Management have set targets in consultation with staff that enable them to track qualitative aspects of performance as well as the quantity of tasks undertaken. Over a 10 week period, staff are expected to take action on 90 per cent of their cases, and within this 80 per cent should meet agreed qualitative criteria. Individual targets to assist staff further sit underneath these overarching targets applicable to all. This approach has supported HLS in its policy of not targeting cases by financial bands, as it feels that taking a banded approach risks cases being missed, and has resulted in improvements in rent collection performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 205** The Council learns from its own experiences. For example, there is a robust action plan to address the issues raised in the 2007 staff survey. Actions include improving the system for appraisals and recognising contributions from individual members of staff. Actions are on track, with plans to survey staff again later in 2009. In HLS, the Staff Charter has been developed and a more robust system of supervisions has been introduced, which will help to ensure that the links between improvement plans and individual performance are more explicit.
- 206** HLS has been quick to respond to feedback from customers. For example, in response to the 2008 STATUS survey (which showed a marked decrease in satisfaction with the approach to ASB) focus groups were held and surveys undertaken of those customers that had experienced ASB. Although the results of this exercise showed that satisfaction rates were higher than the STATUS survey indicated, HLS nevertheless realigned the structure of the Tenancy Enforcement Team (TET) to increase staff numbers recognising the importance of responding to customers' concerns.
- 207** The Council also learns from others. A number of improvements to services have been derived from other organisations including:
- the introduction of quality audits;
 - the Christmas rent payment media campaign;
 - the rent arrears policy; and
 - the new fact sheets.
- 208** This demonstrates that the Council is outward looking and seeks out best practice from others.
- 209** HLS has responded positively to findings from internal audits. Of the 26 recommendations in a recent rent arrears collection audit, all are on track for completion within timescales, and 13 are already completed. The action plan to address concerns was signed off by the Council's Audit Committee, showing that it is quick to respond to advice from others.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 210** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Capacity has been enhanced by the restructure of services, training and development opportunities are available and IT generally supports day to day working arrangements. Partnership working has brought added benefits to the customer experience and a prudent approach to VFM has enabled improvements to be made. However, staff show mixed levels of commitment, sickness levels are high, training is not routinely analysed for impact and involved tenants' capacity is not being fully utilised.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 211** Capacity for improvement has been increased through organisational restructuring. There is a comprehensive People Strategy that has supported HLS in delivering improvements to services by restructuring. The five main themes have enabled HLS to focus on transforming services. For example, by focussing attention on improving organisational effectiveness, HLS has been able to undertake a wholesale restructure of services including new posts and job descriptions. The creation of the HLS Business Development Team, the realignment of services in BTS and the management restructure have all contributed to delivering improved outcomes for customers.
- 212** HLS has the right staff in place to deliver services. The service has taken steps to ensure that skilled staff are encouraged to stay with the Council by introducing a retention package for some key posts. This has been as a result of a comparative exercise undertaken to establish whether, in particular, BTS was paying market rates. This has helped to create a stable environment that has assisted delivering improvements.
- 213** Staff show mixed levels of commitment to services. Morale amongst BTS operatives is high at a time of significant change for the organisation, and they are prepared to engage with the further changes involved with the introduction of new IT. They have a high opinion of progress made to date and of the current quality of their services and are willing to learn new skills, such as those required by mobile IT technology, to help to make further improvements. However, there is evidence that overall, staff do not feel valued. The 2007 staff survey showed that many staff felt that they were missing out by not having regular individual supervisions and appraisals, and that communication with managers needed improving. There are clear plans in place to address the results of the survey, but in the meantime the Council cannot be sure that staff are fully committed.
- 214** The approach to training is positive. Training plans are established by gathering information from a number of sources. This includes discussing service requirements with managers and the Business Development Team, by looking at more widespread organisational needs and by linking in to the Business Planning cycle. Training that has been identified as being a high priority for HLS includes customer service, Equality and Diversity, VFM (for managers), appraisal and capability training and a programme to support the introduction of the new IT system. However, by not ensuring that appraisals and appraisals are undertaken routinely, HLS is not able to maximise opportunities to establish individual training needs and respond to any emerging trends.
- 215** Staff perceptions about and experiences of training are positive. All staff we spoke with at a focus group had received some training in the last year, averaging over four days, and all felt that they were encouraged to do training. Training available is relevant and has helped staff to deliver improved services.
- 216** Not all training is systematically assessed to gauge outcomes that customers would notice. Analysis that has taken place shows that the Safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults (SOVA) training resulted in an increase in referrals and an Older Person's Mental Health project resulted in an improvement in understanding issues about people with dementia and recognising when support might be needed. Until training is systematically analysed in this way, the Council cannot be sure that the outcomes delivered are the right ones.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 217** Capacity is affected by high levels of sickness absence. Although the Council has put in place new procedures to address sickness absence, including coaching and training managers, sickness levels in HLS remain above average at 6.5 per cent during 2007, increasing to 7.4 per cent in 2008, against a target of 3.9 per cent. Despite this, HLS is confident that the target will be met by the end of 2009 as the revised approach has already delivered positive outcomes in Adult and Social Care. However, in the meantime staff sickness rates are draining resources.
- 218** The current IT system has prevented the Council from delivering improvements across a range of services. These include offering appointments for repairs, increasing rent payment options and collating customer profile information. It is positive that the Council is implementing a new system which will enable HLS to provide these services, although its implementation has now been delayed until late 2009. For example, the new system will better track and record tenant profile information. As well as the introduction of the new system facilitating the storage of, and access to, profile information; a 'read across' mechanism will also integrate existing profile information currently available on other IT systems with HCL. This will help to populate profile information and enable HLS to then focus on systematically meeting the needs of individuals and groups, which it is unable to do at present.
- 219** However, some IT systems currently in place support existing working arrangements. HLS and Environmental services both use an access-based system to record all cases of ASB. Although other community safety partners do not use the same system, co-located police officers are able to access it. It is easy to use, links to documents and can be set to automatically alert staff to take action. The system can also be used to generate reports using any search category, including type of ASB. Using this facility would enable HLS to understand the most common causes of ASB, the type of perpetrator and other useful information to assist in planning work more effectively. The rent arrears recovery system enables Income Officers to manage their own workload and for Team Leaders to easily identify performance of individual members of staff. Letters and notices are also automatically generated, saving time. Although this is positive, further improvements are planned when the new system is in place.
- 220** The approach to financial management and VFM has enhanced capacity. Cashable and non-cashable savings have been used to improve services in a number of ways, many of which have delivered improvements that customers would notice. It is clear that the culture of the Council is to deliver improved services for the same (or reduced) expenditure and this approach has enabled it to remain firmly on track to meet the Decent Homes Standard by the target date of 2010.
- 221** Partnership working is enhancing capacity. Effective partnerships on the construction side are helping to improve capacity to deliver repairs and improvements. Partners we spoke with were generally positive about working on both supplies and service delivery and considered the Council to be overall an above average client to work with. There were more strengths than weaknesses, including commitment to partnership working, a proactive and innovative 'can do' approach to resolving issues, communication, and having and using information-sharing protocols. Weaknesses related mainly to differing priorities and lack of resources.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

222 Working in partnership has delivered improvements, including:

- the development of diversionary activities to reduce ASB;
- providing effective support to witnesses of ASB;
- successfully sustaining tenancies through the provision of floating support; and
- enhancing the appearance of estates

223 HLS is not maximising the capacity of tenant involvement. Although there are a number of wide-ranging opportunities for customers to be strategically involved in shaping and monitoring services, involved tenants have only had basic training in 'soft' skills (such as minute taking and chairing meetings) and have not had detailed training in areas that they are expected to be involved in, such as procurement. They have been unable to offer an effective challenge, and their capacity to influence has been limited.

224 Some inward investment has been achieved. HLS does not have a well-developed strategic approach to levering in additional funding. Nevertheless, significant inward investment has been achieved for regeneration schemes, funding from utility companies has funded some energy efficiency works and Supporting People funding has been secured to support vulnerable customers. The Council has recognised this as an area that needs improvement.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 4 Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	All England top quartile 2007/08	AIB 2006/07	AIB 2007/08	AIB 2008/09*
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	73	75	78	78
BVPI 66a Per cent rent collected	98.6	96.8	96	97.0
BVPI 74a Per cent tenants satisfied with overall service	83.0	77.0	77.32	74.0
BVPI 74b Per cent BME tenants satisfied with overall service	83.0	68.0	68.33	66.0
BVPI 75A Per cent tenants satisfied with participation	70.0	59.0	59.36	58.0
BVPI 184a LA Homes which were non decent at start of year	9.0	12.0	17.0	14.0
BVPI 184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	32.7	-33.1	16.3	
BVPI 212 Average relet time in days	25	38	33	36

* unaudited figures

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included the following.
 - Focus groups with staff, tenants and contractor.
 - Interviews with staff, Councillors and partners.
 - Viewing property improvements and repairs.
 - Shadowing staff carrying out their activities.
 - Observation at customer contact centre.
 - Visits to local offices.
 - Estate inspections.
 - Tour of the district and housing stock.
 - Talking to tenants.
 - Observation of meetings and tenancy sign up.
 - Various file checks.
 - Review of Council's website and leaflets.
 - Mystery shopping.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Representative workforce

- 1 HLS has taken steps to ensure that the workforce is representative. Building and Technical Services (BTS) has used the apprenticeship scheme to help train local people and to extend the diversity of the building trades. Priority is given to local people when appointing apprentices, of which there are 25 in total, and at present all apprentices are from the local area. BTS has been aware of the lack of women and also of apprentices from a BME background and has taken steps which have resulted in the recruitment of three women last year and which are designed to achieve further such recruitment this year. Action taken included writing to all female school leavers about the apprenticeships. This approach supports the local community and helps BTS understand local needs.

Recycling materials

- 2 The Council are aware of the need to manage the environmental impact of major works and have taken positive steps in this area. There is a strong focus on recycling including old uPVC windows and on redirecting old front doors to building colleges where they are used for training purposes. All building waste removed by BTS itself is sorted and recycled at the recycling plant and contractors are required to have their own recycling plans.

Promotion of gas safety

- 3 Gas safety is well promoted. There is a gas safety feature in every newsletter and regular local radio campaigns run every year. These include broadcast advertisements in each of the ten most used minority languages to ensure the importance of gas safety is appreciated by people who may not fully understand messages in English.

Quality checks during arrears recovery

- 4 There is a clear process in place to guide staff in the recovery of rent arrears. Staff are guided by a flow chart that simplifies the written procedure. Actions are reflected in the automated arrears recovery process provided by the IT system. There are also clear guidelines against which team leaders assess the qualitative performance of income officers. The criteria sets out the expectations of managers, including:
- taking proactive steps to offer support to vulnerable customers;
 - where income/expenditure information has been recorded;
 - where appropriate advice is provided; and
 - where the case history is properly recorded.

This helps staff understand actions that contribute to the delivery of a high quality service.

Customer involvement in designing services

- 5 Customers have been involved in designing estate management services. The estate services review was carried out in response to feedback from customers that services were inadequate. To obtain customers' views about the design of future services, HLS involved them in collecting baseline information and in deciding the options for delivery. This included running focus groups, telephone surveys, postal surveys and door to door canvassing. The response rate to this was markedly higher than usual (30 per cent compared to 10 per cent). Customers designed the service standards and were fully involved in the tendering process and selected the contractor partners. Although outcomes of the review have not yet been formally assessed, early feedback shows that customers are happy with the new arrangements.

The Audit Commission

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