

Landlord Services

Housing income management, tenancy and estate management and resident involvement

Norwich City Council

April 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.

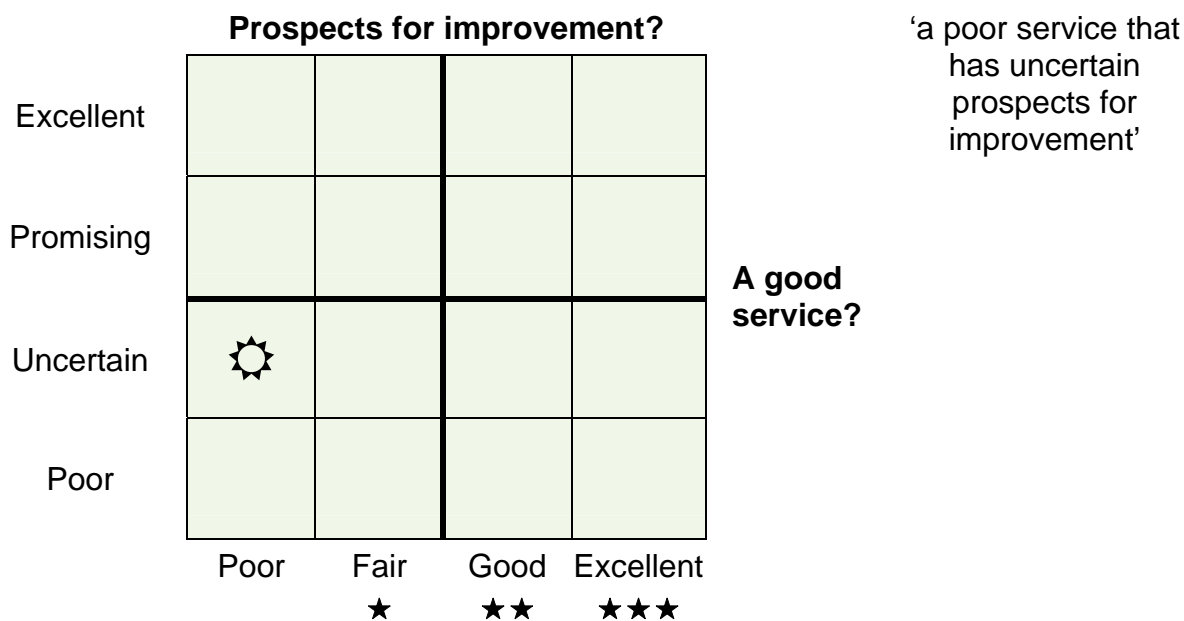
Summary

- 1 In this inspection, we have assessed the landlord services provided by Norwich City Council as being a zero-star, poor service, with uncertain prospects for improvement. This is because overall outcomes for customers are limited and there are weaknesses in Norwich City Council's track record of improvement, management of performance and capacity.
- 2 The scope of our inspection included tenancy and estate management, housing income management, resident involvement and the three cross cutting areas: access and customer care, diversity and value for money.
- 3 The landlord service is failing to ensure that it is delivering a high quality service to tenants. The Council is not aware of who is accessing its services and what the barriers to access might be. There has been a lack of systematic involvement of residents in determining the priorities for the housing service and resident involvement is generally underdeveloped. Services are not tailored to individual or diverse needs and the Council cannot be sure that services are delivered equitably.
- 4 The Council has effective systems in place for recovering current rent arrears and for responding to reports of anti-social behaviour, but cannot demonstrate that these systems are flexible enough to meet the needs of all its customers. The Council has some understanding of its costs but cannot demonstrate that it offers value for money as it does not systematically compare its costs and performance with others.
- 5 The prospects for improvement are uncertain. The Council has made some improvements to services and seeks to deliver better outcomes for the community. However, its track record of improvement is mixed, with poor progress on key areas which impact on all its customers. Overall performance is mixed and management of performance has a number of gaps, with weaknesses in strategic leadership. There are weaknesses in its capacity to improve, with uncertainty that it has the resources to deliver what it wants to achieve.
- 6 In the period leading up to our inspection the Council were conducting an internal investigation of the circumstances surrounding the letting of properties to its own staff. An external investigation was commissioned while we were on site. The scope of our inspection did not include the service areas considered by these investigations. However, our findings in the areas we did inspect found that systems in place to check staff compliance with policies are generally weak.
- 7 The Council needs to concentrate its efforts on improving the way that it ensures that services are available to all potential customers. It also needs to focus on making better use of tenant feedback and performance information, including comparisons with others, to help raise the standard of services in line with tenants' priorities. The Council also needs to focus on setting up robust systems for performance management within landlord services to identify areas of poor performance and to establish and address the causes of this.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Norwich City Council as providing a 'poor', zero-star service that has uncertain 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 poor because it has a range of weaknesses including:
- most service standards are not monitored;
 - tenant satisfaction is not systematically tested across all services;
 - there is little resident involvement in landlord services;
 - the housing service is not compliant with the former Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing, and not all public buildings comply with the Disability Discrimination Act;
 - there is no understanding of who does not use the service and what the barriers to access may be;
 - value for money is not embedded within the service;

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.

- there are no cost comparisons or benchmarking of services; and
- former tenant arrears are not recovered effectively.

10 However, there are some areas of relative strength. These include:

- translation services are available and used by staff to support customers;
- most reports of anti-social behaviour are responded to quickly;
- estates have received additional funding for environmental improvements, and are mostly attractive, clean and tidy; and
- there is strong partnership working.

11 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because there are a number of barriers to improvement.

- A culture of performance management is not embedded throughout the service.
- Performance information is inadequate and does not identify areas that need improving.
- Customers are not routinely consulted about changes that may affect them.
- The impact of staff training has not been evaluated.
- Staff changes at a senior level have impacted on the ability to deliver improvements.
- Human resource planning is not effective.

12 However, there are some strengths. These include:

- there is an emerging vision for the service, with a developing self awareness;
- opportunities to learn from others and from internal experiences are being developed;
- a revised, strengthened staff structure is in place; and
- partnership working delivers some positive outcomes for customers.

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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the 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, in consultation with tenants by:
- agreeing with tenants a framework for involvement;
 - devising with tenants a system to monitor performance against service standards and reporting service performance to tenants in a way that is effective and enables tenants to challenge performance;
 - systematically gathering tenant profile information to ensure that services can be adjusted to enable access, and putting targets in place to track this; and
 - agreeing with tenants' access arrangements to services including office and surgery opening hours, telephone access, out-of-hours arrangements, leaflet and information standards and contents and website design and content.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants will be able to influence services and their contribution to service design and delivery is systematic and valued; and
- tenants will be better informed about how to access the service and the standards of service they can expect.

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

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

Recommendation

- R2** Improve the strategic and practical approach to diversity by:
- ensuring that all the requirements of the Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing are met;
 - ensuring that all buildings used by the public are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act;
 - completing and using tenant profiling information to systematically adjust services to meet the needs of individuals and groups;
 - reviewing current training for staff for effectiveness and extending training to include involved tenants and contractors;
 - ensuring contractors comply with the Council's equality and diversity expectations; and
 - establishing who is unable to access services and what the barriers are.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- staff will be better able to respond to the needs of individual vulnerable tenants; and
- the Council will be able to strategically plan services better and provide appropriate services to meet the needs of vulnerable tenants.

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

Recommendation

- R3** Improve the tenancy and estate management service by:
- effectively involving tenants in shaping the service and regularly testing satisfaction;
 - improving information about ASB services to ensure that tenants understand the approach; and
 - reviewing the frequency and effectiveness of estate inspections.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants will feel confident to report instances of ASB and complaints will be dealt with to a high standard; and
- estates will be cleaner and tidier and incidents of ASB will be noticed earlier.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R4** Improve the approach to income management by:
- putting in place systems to enable tenants to be involved in shaping the service, by gathering and acting on regular feedback;
 - taking steps to ensure that that procedures are followed consistently;
 - developing an understanding about why tenants are in arrears; and
 - agreeing a strategic approach to the collection of former tenant arrears.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services to tenants will be improved reducing personal debt and increasing tenancy sustainability; and
- income to the Council will be increased.

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

Recommendation

- R5** Improve the strategic and practical approach to value for money by:
- agreeing a robust value for money strategy for landlord services in consultation with tenants and stakeholders with clear priorities for the future;
 - establishing regular reporting mechanisms to demonstrate that VFM outcomes are being delivered across services;
 - taking steps to ensure that staff understand VFM and how they can influence outcomes;
 - reviewing the way that leaseholders are charged for services, ensuring that charges are accurate and timely;
 - using information in respect of the costs of individual services and to assess whether alternatives could offer improved VFM;
 - taking steps to maximise VFM by ensuring that all income is collected where possible; and
 - exploring areas of inward investment.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- resources will be used more effectively; and
- value for money outcomes will be easier to track.

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

Recommendation

- R6** Improve performance monitoring and management and strengthen capacity by:
- effectively involving tenants and staff in agreeing the priorities for the service;
 - introducing local performance indicators in areas that matter most to tenants;
 - establishing clear principles for target setting;
 - ensuring that targets are in place for all staff that are responsible for service delivery;
 - establishing an effective performance management framework and culture;
 - reviewing reporting mechanisms and information;
 - working with staff to deliver effective personal training plans that meet their needs and the needs of the service; and
 - taking steps to recruit to vacant posts.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved performance management arrangements;
- a clearer understanding among staff of what is expected from them; and
- improved service delivery.

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

- 14** We would like to thank the staff of Norwich City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 12 to 16 January 2009.

Report

Context

- 15 The city of Norwich is around 4,000 hectares and has a population of 132,200¹, living in 61,700 dwellings. The demographic of the city Council area shows a higher than average proportion of young people aged 16 to 29, single person households and lone parent households. Black and minority ethnic communities make up 6.8 per cent of the population, compared with 11.3 per cent in England². The city also has significant numbers of residents from 'Other White' ethnic groups (except British and Irish). Between 2001 and 2007 there were an additional 8,900 international migrants across Norwich, with about a third from Poland. This accounts for 90 per cent of the increase in the city's population over that period.
- 16 Norwich is the only city in Norfolk, and is the largest urban economy in the East of England. The city is a centre for major employers, with around 50,000 workers commuting into Norwich each day³. As a new growth point area, Greater Norwich is also one of the fastest growing centres in the East of England. The East of England Plan has set targets of 33,000 new homes and 36,000 new jobs by 2021.
- 17 However, Norwich is also the second most deprived out of 48 local authority districts in the region, and the 62nd nationally, with 8 of its 13 wards in the 20 per cent most deprived nationally⁴. A third of all children in Norwich live in income deprived households. This figure is higher in those areas with a high proportion of local authority housing. Norwich has low levels of educational attainment, low wages and has the highest proportion of housing benefit recipients and Council tax recipients of all local authorities in the Eastern Region. Norwich has a high teenage pregnancy rate of 58.6 per 1,000 15 to 17 year olds. This is the highest in the region and well above the England average.

The Council

- 18 The current political make up of Norwich City Council is Labour 15, Green 13, Liberal Democrat 6 and Conservative 5. The Council operates an Executive (cabinet) system. Key decisions are made by the Executive comprising eight portfolio holding Labour Councillors.

¹ Source: ONS Mid Year Population Estimates 2007 & 2004 Sub-National Population Projections

² Source: National Statistics, census 2001

³ Source: Annual Population Survey (Apr 06-Mar 07) & Annual Survey of Hours & Earnings 2007 - ONS

⁴ Source: ODPM Indices of deprivation 2007

The service

- 19 In October 2008 the Council's housing management function merged with the strategic housing service to form neighbourhood and strategic housing. At the same time the Council's housing asset management function was vested in a separate service area, housing property services. Both service areas sit within the neighbourhood development directorate giving them strong links with those areas responsible for delivering services to neighbourhoods. At the time of our inspection, between them, the teams have responsibility for the management and repair of 15,991 tenanted and 2,526 leasehold homes. This makes Norwich City Council the 12th largest stock and management retained authority in England. Employing 270 staff, the neighbourhood and strategic housing service is the Council's largest single service.
- 20 The service's housing management functions are delivered through three business areas.
- Neighbourhood Housing which is responsible for the day to day tenancy management of rented homes and tackling anti-social behaviour.
 - Tenancy Support which is responsible for sheltered housing management, providing Norwich community alarm services to enable people to remain in their homes and supporting families to prevent homelessness through the families unit.
 - Business Planning which is responsible for income collection, services to leaseholders and new project development.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 21 Through its first sustainable community strategy, Norwich's Local Strategic Partnership's vision for the city is "to make Norwich a world class city in which to live, work, learn and visit".
- 22 The vision of the Greater Norwich housing strategy 2008-2011 is "to ensure there are sufficient decent homes which people can afford, in places they want to live, within sustainable and thriving communities". Managing over a quarter of all homes in Norwich, the service has a major role to play in delivering two of the strategic objectives from the strategy of 'building sustainable and thriving communities' and 'achieving decent, healthy and environmentally sustainable homes across all tenures'.
- 23 The vision for Norwich City Council's neighbourhood and strategic housing service is to alleviate housing need in the city of Norwich by providing good quality, healthy, affordable homes and support services. The service objectives are to:
 - manage, maintain and improve homes efficiently;
 - provide opportunities for tenant and leaseholder involvement in shaping services;
 - provide a safe, secure and healthy environment in which residents live;
 - secure and manage income and maximise entitlement for the benefit of all tenants; and
 - provide housing support services to help people to stay in their home.

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

Access and customer care

- 24 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. There are a number of weaknesses including inconsistent information and access, tenant profiling information is inadequate and has not been used to shape services, customers have not been systematically involved in designing services, including service standards and the website is difficult to navigate. However, customer care and contact is now managed centrally, there is appropriate IT in place, a new single point telephone number and a new complaints procedure has recently been developed.
- 25 There is a centralised approach to customer care. A customer contact strategy has been drawn up to develop a common approach to customer contact across the Council and there is a centralised customer contact team, managed by one Head of Service, aiming to ensure that services to customers are standardised and delivered consistently across the Council.

- 26** The Council has taken some steps to make it easier for customers to access services centrally. Customers are able to contact the Council via the customer contact centre at City Hall which is open from 8am to 6pm during weekdays. There is one low cost telephone number that customers can use to access all services. The out of hours service is also accessed using the same number. However, although changing to one number has helped the Council track the volume of calls and to adjust staffing levels to meet demand, 17 per cent of calls are still not answered first time and during the last financial year only 85 per cent of calls were answered within the unchallenging target time of two minutes. The target for the current year is that all calls are answered within 45 seconds, although this is a more challenging target, the Council has yet to reach it, with most calls answered in around 90 seconds. This means that the new telephone system is still not providing a good service.
- 27** Information technology enables the Council to track the progress of customer enquiries. To support the Council in its ambition to 'get it right first time, every time', workflow is managed and tracked using a sophisticated IT system that clearly shows when an enquiry has been made and whether the issue has been dealt with, handed on or remains open. Any documents received are also tracked using a document management system. Performance is currently showing that 92 per cent of emails are acknowledged within 24 hours. This helps the Council to make sure that enquiries are efficiently handled with customers receiving a timely response.
- 28** However, access to services in neighbourhoods is underdeveloped. Services are currently provided at six neighbourhood offices, located throughout the city. The offices have very recently been upgraded to include new signage and redecoration and the Council is beginning to offer services similar to those provided by the central customer contact centre. Services offered by the neighbourhood offices are supported by housing surgeries that are offered in seven other locations. Some of the neighbourhood offices are not open all day, every day. Use of the surgeries varies and they can be closed without notice or signage, limiting the opportunity for customers to make contact with the Council.
- 29** The Council cannot be sure that vulnerable customers are able to access services. The Council does not currently have a well-developed understanding of who its customers are and has not been able to shape services to meet those needs. It has taken some steps to identify customers that are not accessing services by undertaking tenancy audits using a risk based approach and visiting those tenants that have not been in touch for five years. Although this approach is recent, it has resulted in the Council identifying 12 or so tenants that require support in some way. Although there are some 'flags' on the IT system alerting staff to the particular needs of a few customers, tenant profile information is not systematically being gathered and there are currently no detailed plans in place to do this. The Council cannot therefore remove any barriers that may be preventing access to services.

How good is the service?

- 30** The quality of information is mixed. There is a range of good quality leaflets available for customers, although not all are available from the customer contact centre and neighbourhood offices. Not all leaflets have straplines in other community languages, although translated documents are offered. Changes have recently been made to make the website easier to navigate and it simple to find housing services from the home page. The home page gives details of alternative methods of accessing information available on the website or translation services, but this information is not offered in the main community languages. It is positive that a revised tenants' handbook has recently been developed which is easy to understand and contains information useful to tenants. However, by failing to maximise its opportunities for providing information, the Council cannot be sure that customers understand the services provided.
- 31** There is a suite of service standards in place that explain to customers the level of service they can expect to receive. However, performance against all the standards is not monitored and reported. Some of the standards set are not challenging. For example, phone calls will be answered in two minutes, letters and emails responded to in 15 days and visitors to the Council seen within ten minutes. It is positive that services provided by the customer contact centre are routinely monitored against standards. But by failing to monitor performance against all agreed standards, the Council is missing the opportunity to establish whether systems are not only working effectively, but are also appropriate and well-resourced.
- 32** Satisfaction with services is average when compared to other district Councils. According to the latest STATUS¹ survey 74 per cent of tenants are satisfied with services offered by the Council; this is an increase of one per cent since the last STATUS survey in 2006/07, but the same as 2003/04. According to the latest STATUS survey only 55 per cent of tenants feel that it is easy to get hold of the right person and 59 per cent were satisfied with the outcome of the contact. Although this is an increase since the last survey, it is still below average. This means that the measures adopted by the Council to centralise customer contact have not yet delivered the increase in satisfaction that it might have expected.
- 33** Customers have not been involved in shaping customer services. Although extensive consultation took place during the Option Appraisal² work in 2005, customers were not involved in the recent decisions made to set up the customer contact centre at City Hall, in shaping services delivered at a neighbourhood level, opening hours or in commissioning the low cost telephone number. Although it has used some information derived from customers during a recent mock inspection of services, the Council has not undertaken a full analysis of the services that customers may want to see and is not clear about demand. The Council cannot be sure that it is offering services in a way that customers find appropriate or convenient.

¹ STATUS survey - the standardised tenant satisfaction survey developed by the National Housing Federation and endorsed by the Housing Corporation and the Department for Communities and Local Government

² Option Appraisal - exercise undertaken in consultation with tenants to shape the future of Council housing

- 34** The Council cannot yet demonstrate a robust approach to complaints handling although this has recently been revised and updated. The Council has improved the process by which it manages complaints, comments and compliments. For example, each complaint is logged centrally and the customer receives one coordinated response. The Council hopes that this will enable it to track performance more effectively although the new system has only been in operation a short time, so there is limited evidence that improvements have been realised. It is easy to make a complaint and the process, including target response times, is publicised at area offices and on the website.
- 35** However, satisfaction with the complaints system is not monitored and the Council does not routinely collect satisfaction data from complainants. The Council is not maximising the opportunities to learn from the experience of complainants and customers may not be fully aware of the options available to them if they are dissatisfied with the Council's response to an individual complaint.

Diversity

- 36** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in this area. Diversity information is limited, staff have an inconsistent understanding of equality and diversity issues and staff composition does not reflect the make up of the community. The Council does not fulfil the requirements of the former Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing and has only attained the most basic level of the Local Government Equality Standard (LGES).¹ Not all buildings are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. However, clearer corporate leadership in relation to diversity is now in place and there is easy access to translation and interpretation services for staff to assist customers.
- 37** The Council has recognised that its approach to engaging with a diverse customer base is under developed. To assist in delivering improvements, there is now clearer leadership in the promotion of equality and diversity. The Chief Executive is the diversity champion and leads the corporate sponsorship group. There are equality and diversity champions within each service. This ensures that there is a route for consistent and clear messages.
- 38** Staff have a mixed understanding of how equality and diversity relates to them in their day to day work. Although most staff have received training in this area not all are clear about how to minimise the barriers to access to ensure that customers can access services equally. This means that the corporate priority in respect of equality and diversity is not consistently transmitted to staff in a way that is meaningful.
- 39** The composition of staff does not reflect the community that it serves. Figures show under-representation, less success in the recruitment process and differential earnings. For example, figures show that by racial grouping white staff earn more than those that are non-white rather than the accepted racial groupings. In attempting to address this, the Council has unsuccessfully implemented actions in regard to race in its workforce by targeted recruitment initiatives. The Council is therefore unable to demonstrate that staff are representative of the community they serve.

¹ Local Government Equality Standard - a framework to help local authorities introduce a comprehensive and systematic approach to dealing with equality issues

How good is the service?

- 40 The Council has a weak approach to diversity issues. It has self assessed as reaching only Level 1 of the LGES. There is an ambition to reach Level 2 and an action plan details the objectives needed to do this. In order to reach this, the Council needs to undertake an impact and needs assessment, a consultation process and equality action planning. To date there have been limited examples of impact assessments being undertaken across the Council, and service plans do not support this ambition at present.
- 41 Equality and diversity is not given a high priority across all services. The Council does not meet the former CRE Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing and there is little evidence that the Council is aware of who is accessing services and where the barriers to access may be. This is exacerbated by the lack of information held on the diversity of its tenants and leaseholders; for example, it only knows the ethnicity of 44 per cent of tenants and does not yet monitor against the diversity strands of sexual orientation or religion/faith. Services cannot be systematically adjusted to ensure that unintentional or indirect discrimination is not taking place.
- 42 There are some examples of where services have been adapted to meet the diverse needs of individuals, but this is not systematic. For example, there are vulnerability 'flags' on the IT system to enable staff to tailor services as appropriate and diversity 'grab bags' containing portable hearing loops are available for staff to use at neighbourhood offices. However, there is no evidence that services are tailored to meet the needs of particular groups. For instance, the Council has a higher than average proportion of Polish households for whom documents could routinely be made available in Polish. Given that the Council is aware that one in five requests for translated materials are for Polish, this is a significant omission.
- 43 Customers are able to access translation services. Landlord services make good use of the Council's translation arrangements. The Council is a member of the INTRAN¹ partnership and has access to services for interpretation, translation and the visually impaired. Landlord services has made a significant proportion of the 105 requests between 1 April and 29 October 2008, mainly via the Customer Contact team. This means that the Council can meet the translation needs of its customers upon request.
- 44 However, information is not routinely adapted for users with diverse needs. The website, for example, does not include automatic translation facilities for users for whom English is not the first language, the housing information leaflets do not include details of translation services in the most commonly used languages, and the translation facility is offered in English only. Failing to adapt information means that some tenants may not be able to access information in the way that they need to.
- 45 The Council supports some vulnerable customers. For example, the Council has developed the 3-Way Victim Support project with women's aid and the community law service. It promotes the floating support available through Stonham Homestay and this Supporting People funded service is highlighted at sign ups and leaflets are available for self referral. Customers experiencing rent arrears are routinely referred to its own Money Advice Services. These services ensure that those experiencing difficulties receive the intensive support that they need.

¹ INTRAN - the multi-agency not for profit interpretation and translation service for the Eastern Counties

- 46 The Council also works to support victims of domestic violence and other forms of harassment. A multi-agency protocol is in place which ensures that victims are either supported directly, through advice and assistance including the sanctuary scheme, or by access to refuges and legal advice. The guidance for frontline staff on dealing with victims of domestic violence is wide ranging and has resulted in advice being provided in a number of cases, with clear monitoring processes in place to track outcomes and follow up work that may be necessary. This clear process ensures that vulnerable customers are receiving the support that they might need.
- 47 It is a significant weakness that at present not all public buildings used by the Council are compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). For example, the neighbourhood offices do not have automatically opening and wide doors and some customers that we spoke to found that accessing the public meeting rooms in City Hall in a wheelchair or disabled buggy was very difficult. Although it is positive that the Council has an action plan to deal with the remaining issues at the neighbourhood offices, it means that at present some tenants may find it physically impossible to visit a nearby office to seek advice.
- 48 The Council promotes the availability of adaptations to tenants. Advice is given in the tenants' handbook at the start of the tenancy, and via a leaflet. This is a positive message and explains that adaptations will probably be carried out without the tenant needing to apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant. A welcome letter is sent to all new customers within 28 days of receiving a referral from social services. This approach encourages customers to make contact and discuss their requirements and is supported by the Council responding quickly to urgent requests for adaptations.
- 49 Work to reach less represented groups has not been successful. Managers do not have a clear view of which are the hard to reach groups in Norwich, although identifying this is part of emerging community engagement strategy work. Managers could also not readily identify major successes in addressing diversity issues in Norwich but could cite some involvement in county-wide work on housing needs and gipsy and traveller issues. At present the Council is unable to demonstrate that work with the local community has informed service provision.
- 50 Black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants are less satisfied with the service than other tenants. In 2006/07, there was significantly lower BME satisfaction rating for overall service (50 compared to 73 per cent) and participation (50 compared to 58 per cent). It is a significant weakness that this was not reported as part of the 2008 STATUS survey results and the Council has not responded with action to address this trend. Although it is positive that the Council analysed the raw data and satisfaction of BME tenants has increased to 64 per cent, currently the Council cannot demonstrate that services are delivered fairly and sensitively to all tenants.
- 51 The Council does not have a framework for ensuring its contractors comply with its diversity requirements. The procurement documents provide no reassurance that potential tenderers and suppliers take their diversity responsibilities seriously. A questionnaire asks if the organisation has a written policy regarding the promotion of equal opportunities for all, to avoid discrimination, but it is not asked to supply it for scrutiny as part of the process. The Council cannot therefore be sure that its contractors are delivering services appropriate to the needs of the customers.

How good is the service?

Housing income management

- 52** This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are in balance. There is an effective structure and procedure in place to support current arrears recovery, partnership working is successful and there is an evident payment culture in place. However, former tenant arrears are not recovered effectively, there has been a lack of customer involvement in the service and no analysis of, and response to, the reasons for non-payment.
- 53** Rent can easily be paid. Rent payment can be made in a number of ways including by direct debit (DD) on three different dates during the month, and 24 hours a day by telephone or online. DD and standing order forms are available to download. Additional rent statements can be ordered online and there is a 'handy guide' to understanding rent statements that can also be downloaded. This means that tenants are able to pay their rent at a convenient time and place.
- 54** The Council actively promotes payment by the cheapest method. The costs of rent payment transaction are understood by staff, and resources have been directed at increasing the proportion of tenants that pay their rent by the most cost effective method, DD. Although robust efforts have been made, including telephoning 800 monthly payers, approaching customers in person in the cash hall, articles in Tenant Talk and making DD the preferred payment option at sign up, the number of tenants paying by DD has not increased substantially. It is not clear whether incentives to pay by DD have been considered, but at present 23 per cent of tenants pay by this method which has kept costs down for all.
- 55** The Council cannot be sure that the arrears service meets the needs of its customers and that it can be accessed fairly. Tenants have not been involved in designing information leaflets and satisfaction has not been measured, or feedback actively and systematically sought from service users. The service is not monitored to ensure that it is easy to access for all communities and an equality impact assessment has not been undertaken. As a result, the service to tenants may not be consistent and the Council may be inadvertently discriminating against some service users.
- 56** There are effective structures in place to support arrears recovery. A specialist team was set up in 2003/04 and this was formalised as part of the restructure that took place in 2005/06. The team is effective in its task and performance at the time of our inspection was that arrears represented 2.15 per cent of the debit, which is the lowest level achieved by the Council. The team is also on track to meet its target of a collection rate of 98 per cent by the end of March 2009. Rent arrears recovery has improved slightly since 2006/07 when the Council was in the bottom 25 per cent of comparable local authorities at 96.61 per cent rent collected, and below average at 97.58 per cent rent collected at the end of March 2008.

- 57** Procedures are effective. The rent arrears procedure was reviewed in March 2008 and will be reviewed again in March 2009. The current procedure is comprehensive and clearly balances income recovery with support, emphasising the effectiveness of personal contact and how this can be achieved. Timescales within which action must usually be taken are explicit, with easy to follow diagrams with prompts for staff, based on the number of weeks rent owing. The rent arrears procedure also explains for staff which groups of tenants may be more likely to experience financial or access difficulties, or be vulnerable in other ways, and methods other than legal action are routinely used to recover debts. These include the pre-court initiative, the use of Money Advisors, rent direct either from benefits or wages, mail-shots and other campaigns and regular blitzes using the 'Green Coat' scheme. Having an effective procedure in place has impacted positively on recovery rates.
- 58** The Council supports tenants to obtain other financial services. Tenants are able to access home insurance through the Council which can be paid with their rent, along with their water rates. This means that tenants can be sure that insurance and water debts do not accrue.
- 59** A rent payment culture is evident. It is clear that the Council has taken steps to establish a rent payment culture among its customers. A number of routine actions support this, including pre-tenancy awareness sessions, increasing the choice of methods of payment, regular articles in the tenants' newsletter, increased emphasis on rent payment at the sign up, expecting tenants to commit to a payment pattern and by not automatically agreeing to a repayment arrangement to clear arrears but asking for a lump sum. Staff also routinely challenge tenants' spending priorities where appropriate, and the Council also offers a shopping discount scheme to tenants with clear rent accounts and those keeping to repayment agreements. Taking steps to establish a payment culture has sent the message to tenants that rent payment is important.
- 60** However, the Council is not maximising all opportunities to recover rent arrears. It does not understand the reasons why tenants do not pay their rent and has not undertaken any specific research in this area. Anecdotally, it believes that many tenants who should be in receipt of housing benefit (HB) have not claimed and arrears staff are undergoing training to address this and procedural changes are being made to support this, but a systematic approach to collating information about existing arrears cases has not been put into place. This means that the approach to collection cannot be adapted according to the cause of arrears.
- 61** The Council has taken an innovative approach to court referrals. The rent arrears recovery procedure has been successfully enhanced by the inclusion of the Pre-Court Advice Scheme. Working in partnership with the County Court and the Law Service the Council has reached new, sustainable agreements with 74 per cent of those tenants involved. This has helped tenants who otherwise were at risk of losing their tenancies.

How good is the service?

- 62 The arrears team successfully works with internal and external partners. A pre-tenancy advice scheme is in operation for all potential tenants who are under 25 and living in supported housing. The scheme is clearly supported by partners, and other neighbouring social landlords have expressed an interest in purchasing the service. The scheme has resulted in positive outcomes for new tenants with those that have benefited from the advice more likely to pay their rent than those who have not. Other partnership working includes work with floating support providers Stonham Homestay, the Families Unit, the Housing Options Team and HB. Working in this way has increased income recovery and offers advice and support to customers.
- 63 Staff from housing and HB teams work well together. Housing staff can access HB managers to deal quickly with queries. Training has been provided to housing staff on the verification framework and other aspects of HB, including payment on two homes. The HB manager regularly attends housing team meetings to update staff on emerging issues. This relationship is underpinned by a service level agreement (SLA) which is monitored for outcomes by way of regular meetings between the two team managers. Effective relationships between housing and HB teams support tenants in maximising benefit take-up.
- 64 However, pre-tenancy determinations of potential HB entitlement are not routinely carried out, and only those potential tenants who undergo the pre-tenancy awareness sessions benefit from this service. This means that the Council cannot be sure that new tenants understand the financial implications of a new tenancy.
- 65 The Council has taken steps to ensure that advice is available and has enhanced this recently in view of the 'credit crunch'. It has identified the most common employers amongst its tenants and is therefore aware of the likely impact if any of those employers cease trading. The Arrears Prevention Officer has successfully worked with five local companies who have agreed to display information about the Council's Money Advice Service. This approach has helped to support tenants who might otherwise not have known where to turn to for help.
- 66 The Council is not effectively pursuing former tenant arrears (FTAs). The FTA debt is now greater than the total owed by current tenants. Although Councillors and senior staff are aware that resources have been directed away from FTA collection and re-prioritised elsewhere in the service, a strategic decision has not been made to adopt this approach. Performance of the collection agencies used by the Council is poor - the approach to FTAs is currently being reviewed and will consider the use of agencies as a solution to the issue. However it is not clear when this work will be completed or what the outcomes may be. In the meantime significant income recovery opportunities are being missed.

Resident involvement

- 67 This is an area where weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths. The approach to involvement lacks flexibility and innovation and tenants are unable to see where they have influenced services. Involvement opportunities are not well publicised and the Tenant Compact has not been implemented. However, the Sheltered Housing Tenants' Forum has been successful in influencing some services.

- 68** Resident involvement in Norwich is in a period of transition. The Council is trying to replace its reliance only on traditional associations with a new, community engagement (CE) approach. However, the initial impact of this has been seen by residents' representatives as almost wholly negative. The support previously given by the now deleted Tenant Participation Officer positions has not yet been replaced by the CE team and the Community Support Liaison Officer (CSLO) in housing. The time spent by representatives on a mentoring scheme with a London borough, developing a new Tenant Compact and proposals for a 'sounding board' appears to them to have been wasted, as these initiatives have stalled and no outcomes are evident. The Council has clearly not managed communications well during this difficult period. This has exacerbated the situation and the distrust experienced by tenants.
- 69** The Council does not promote a wide range of options for resident involvement. The tenants' handbook refers to a variety of options but in reality the Council only offers the most traditional way, by tenants participating in Tenants' and Residents' Associations (TRAs). Although it is positive that most tenants in Norwich can access a TRA, with associations covering about 70 per cent of tenancies in the city, non-involved residents confirmed that they knew no other way of becoming involved apart from resident associations. This approach has not encouraged tenants to become involved in shaping services.
- 70** The Council does not publicise TRAs well. Of the 16 TRAs listed on the website, only two give email addresses, and three the TRAs' website addresses. It says that customers must contact the tenant participation officers (whose posts no longer exist) to get more details. Neither does the Council maximise the opportunity available at the sign up for new tenants to become involved. This limits the number of residents who become actively involved in their local TRA.
- 71** The Council does not routinely take tenants' views into account. The latest STATUS survey showed that 57 per cent of tenants were satisfied that their views are being taken into account by the Council. Only 53 per cent are satisfied with the opportunities to get involved in management and decision making, with only 20 per cent of Council tenants having heard of the Tenant Participation Compact. The Council clearly has a long way to go to demonstrate that the views and involvement of its tenants are taken seriously.
- 72** There is some involvement of tenants at a strategic level. The City-wide Board (CWB) meets bi-monthly and is made up of tenants from TRAs, Norwich Residents Forum (NRF), Norwich Leaseholders Association (NLA), the Sheltered Housing Tenants forum (SHTF), Members and Council staff. The CWB Members are not elected and are not representative of the wider tenant body. The meetings of the CWB are not routinely publicised on the website with published sets of minutes from the February 2008 and January 2009 meetings only. This limits the impact that it has and is not being used effectively to encourage involvement from the wider tenant body.
- 73** There are limited examples of tenants monitoring performance. The CWB performance sub-group discusses service performance every two months. Recently the CWB has been involved in the 30 year Business Plan and agreed the new service standards. This has given tenants the opportunity to question and challenge staff.

How good is the service?

- 74 TRAs are provided with some support. The Norwich Residents' Forum (NRF) is a relatively new body which has offered support and networking opportunities to the TRAs. Housing officers attend TRA meetings to update attendees on current issues and to signpost them to other teams and agencies. The impact of TRA work has been felt very much at local rather than strategic level. Various TRAs reported successes with environmental projects such as gardens, cleaning and anti-speeding.
- 75 However, involved residents that we spoke to were disappointed with the lack of support they received, particularly since the removal of the Tenant Participation Officer posts in 2008. The responsibilities of the new Community Engagement team in this regard have not been made clear to tenants. The Council runs the significant risk of losing the benefit of the considerable experience and abilities of a committed group of people.
- 76 The Council has invested, to a limited degree, in resident involvement. In 2006/07 it reported no delegated spending to tenants groups for one-off capital projects or for training. In 2007/08 there was a small budget of £21,730 for tenants' groups, and one-off training on presenting their accounts. In late 2007 there was also a short programme of lunchtime talks on, for example, Community Services and Housing Development. However, there is no specific training programme for tenants and no part of the budget has been clearly identified for training. This limits the capacity of tenants to get involved in a meaningful way.
- 77 There are some positive examples of involvement in sheltered housing, even though this remains traditional in nature and based on resident involvement through Associations. Eighty-nine per cent of schemes are represented at the SHTF, with high levels of attendance. Sheltered tenants have been involved in developing the new sheltered laundry service since September 2008, and focus groups have contributed to NHS Norfolk's End of Life Strategy and the Housing Options newsletter. This approach has resulted in higher satisfaction levels with sheltered residents being generally satisfied that the Council takes their views into account (75 per cent) and that they are informed (80 per cent).
- 78 There is little evidence that Norwich has been committed to meaningful resident involvement. While some involved residents spoke positively about individual officers and frontline staff, all felt that there was a tradition of officers deciding things, which they were reluctant to give up. This applies, for example, in approving the AIM¹s projects mentioned below and the areas to be subject to estate walkabouts each quarter. The Tenant Compact has not been implemented, and recent developments such as service standards and office changes had not involved tenants to any significant degree. In addition, the Council did not advise tenant representatives of the HRA review, or discuss a response. This resulted in Members of the CWB passing a motion of no confidence in the Council during our inspection.

¹ AIMS - Areas of Intensive Management

Tenancy and estate management

79 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There are comprehensive procedures to support staff in dealing with reports of anti-social behaviour (ASB), positive work is undertaken by the specialist ABATE team, by the wardens and by partnership working and there are a wide range of actions and remedies used. Performance management information is not easily available, information for customers is variable and arrangements for estate walkabouts are not robust.

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

- 80** The response to ASB draws on a current and modern approach. There are appropriate policies and procedures in place to address ASB. The Council has resourced the tackling of ASB both at a neighbourhood level and corporately, with complainants able to report ASB using a number of methods including a 24-hour hotline. The Council has signed up to the Respect Standard and was awarded Respect Area Status by the Home Office in 2007. This means that the Council recognises the importance of the role of the community in reducing and tackling instances of ASB.
- 81** Response times to reports of ASB are inconsistent and vary depending upon location. Outside the City ring road, Neighbourhood Wardens are likely to be able to respond to complaints within 15 minutes, between the hours of 10am and 10pm. Within the ring road the neighbourhood housing officers (NHO) will respond but their target response times are five days unless it is hate crime. Although this means that services are not delivered equitably and customers receive an inconsistent service that is solely dependant on where they live, and not the nature of the complaint, 96 per cent of tenants live outside the inner ring road and so the implications of are limited to a very small proportion of tenants.
- 82** A wide range of methods are used to tackle ASB. The Council routinely uses introductory tenancies, mediation, ABCs¹, ASBO²s, ASBI³s and evictions. Support is also offered by way of referrals to a tenancy support service provided by Stonham Homestay. There are some examples of diversionary activities being provided, including holiday activities for young people, although this approach is under-developed. Using a range of resources has enabled the Council to tailor its response to ASB according to differing circumstances.

¹ ABC - Acceptable Behaviour Contract

² ASBO - Anti-Social Behaviour Order

³ ASBI - Anti-Social Behaviour Injunction

How good is the service?

- 83** The Council has a range of schemes that help with diverting young people away from ASB, but does not systematically evaluate their effectiveness. The Council supports and coordinates a range of activities to encourage residents, particularly young people, to participate in positive activities. These include events and activities in the arts, sport, school holiday schemes and entertainment. It also makes use of other service providers for diversionary activities, such as NR5 in Earlham, who engage with young people via music projects, and the Youth Inclusion and Support Project along with the youth offending team. The Council's ABC officer is currently working with officers from Broadland District Council and Norwich City Football Club on a joint project to provide young people with sport and a separate fishing project. The wardens have estimated that they spend about seven per cent of their time on diversionary activity but schemes are not evaluated against what they aim to achieve.
- 84** Referrals to the Families Unit¹ (FIP) help the Council to address ASB. In 2007/08 housing referred one third of the 33 active cases, more than any other source, and 31 of the 33 rented their homes from the Council. During the last year over 90 families received support to maintain their tenancies by attending parenting programmes which are delivered by a variety of partner agencies. This has resulted in increased school attendance and improved behaviour.
- 85** Although the Council's general approach to dealing with ASB is strong, the messages to residents are not always delivered consistently. Reports of ASB can be made at any time of day or night, seven days a week, a wide range of remedies are used, and the aim is to deal with 99 per cent of ASB through early intervention. However, the tenants' handbook makes limited reference to the support available. For example, it does not mention the possibility of professional witnesses giving evidence, with the onus being on the complainant. The service standard leaflet does emphasise support for complainants but does not, however, emphasise the speed with which NHOs are expected to respond. This means that customers may be confused and not be confident to report instances of ASB.
- 86** Joint working enables the Council to target resources at ASB hotspots. The ASB analyst co-located with the Community Safety team produces a range of reports identifying where different types of nuisance are most frequently reported. This has been used to identify specific issues, or families in need of intense support, and focus on them.
- 87** Partnership working has helped the Council to tackle ASB. Real improvement began with the launch of the ASB hotline, which became a major starting point for other work. The Partnership Tasking/Coordinating Group is a high level tactical meeting of partners, which meets every fortnight. Housing is well-represented at this group along with Children's Services, the Youth Offending Team (YOT), Trading Standards, the County Community Safety Team and the Police. The ABATE team has been training NHOs and Community Wardens, running weekly advice surgeries in neighbourhoods and doing joint visits with Environmental Health. This has resulted in a strong collaborative approach.

¹ The Families Unit was established by the Council in July 2006 to support families that were in danger of losing their tenancies through ASB and social exclusion. It is partly externally funded by partner agencies.

- 88** The quality of casework monitoring of ASB reporting is mixed. While first line supervisors in ABATE check individual cases with staff, and agree case sign off, there is no additional auditing of cases to ensure that procedures have been correctly followed. This is exacerbated by the fact that the IT system does not easily enable managers to obtain reports on officer performance, or to develop systems to gauge customer satisfaction. For the same reasons, the performance of the ASB hotline is not easy to assess. The Council cannot be sure that staff are following procedures in a consistently high quality way.
- 89** Neighbourhood managers are unable to effectively manage low level ASB. Although individual cases are discussed at regular one-to-ones, there are no routine reports on casework, performance or satisfaction levels. One manager had obtained a one-off report to show that at 5 January 2009, NHOs had resolved 657 cases between 1 January and 31 December 2008, and referred 115 to ABATE, but this information is not routinely gathered or used. It is therefore difficult to determine the overall scale of low level ASB, which are the most successful remedies and where there may be pinch-points in service delivery.
- 90** Satisfaction with tenancy and estate management is not routinely tested. The Council is not effectively and systematically gathering tenant feedback on the tenancy and estate management service as customer satisfaction data is not readily available. For example, general ASB complainants are not surveyed to determine whether their complaint was managed satisfactorily, although it is positive that referrals to ABATE are tested for satisfaction with positive responses. Tenants are also not surveyed frequently about estate and neighbourhood issues such as grounds maintenance. This means that the Council is missing the opportunity to learn from the experience of tenants to improve the service.
- 91** The Council cannot be sure that it is taking the right approach to ensuring that customers can access services to help them address ASB or that the services offered by the Council are the right ones. The 2008 STATUS survey shows that 44 per cent of tenants who reported ASB found it difficult to get hold of the right person and 17 per cent of tenants found staff unhelpful. Thirty-six per cent of tenants felt that staff could not resolve the problem and 40 per cent of tenants were dissatisfied with the final outcome. While it is not uncommon for some complainants to be dissatisfied with outcomes, it is clear that many tenants feel that staff either cannot be contacted or are unable to deal with ASB.

Estate management

- 92** Common areas are generally well kept but not consistently so. While most estate paths were tidy and litter free, we regularly encountered pram shed and garage areas and some paths which had not been swept for some time, allowing the build up of piles of rotting leaves. Signage on the estates we visited was not consistently good, and blocks were not clearly named, although 'no ball games' signs were prominent. Failure to effectively maintain areas does not encourage residents to do the same and has a negative impact on the overall appearance of estates.

How good is the service?

- 93 Estate walkabout arrangements are not robust. Although areas are meant to receive four walkabouts a year, areas we sampled only received one. It is positive that the Safer Neighbourhoods Teams undertake walkabouts of estates, these are ad hoc and issue led. The reports of the formal estate walkabouts were clear and held people to account, but work was not always ordered promptly, in one case 8 of 14 orders were raised two weeks afterwards. The focus of the inspections seems to be on grounds and highways, with much less focus on common stairwells, doors, lighting, lifts and tank rooms. The overall condition of an area is not 'scored', and dates of last and next meetings are not recorded. The system is currently under review but in the meantime the Council is missing an opportunity to proactively and quickly respond to estate management issues
- 94 The Council has taken steps to design out crime and ASB on its estates. Areas of Intensive Management (AIMS) provide a way of improving the environment and addressing ASB issues. In 2008/09, a budget of £200,000 has led to improvements in 65 locations, including fencing and lockable gates to prevent fly tipping and renewing entry doors to schemes preventing unauthorised access. These improvements have led to increased feelings of security by tenants and have also reduced expenditure on repairs and clearance.
- 95 The Council helps tenants who are unable to look after their own gardens. It has introduced a 'Mow and Grow' scheme run by a social enterprise started in Suffolk. The scheme is offered at low cost to vulnerable and disabled tenants and others most in need and therefore unable to maintain their garden. At the time of our inspection 154 homes were in the scheme and this has been a factor in enabling some tenants to remain in their homes as well as enhancing the general appearance of the estates.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 96 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. There is no corporate VFM strategy, the costs of services are not known and benchmarking has not been used to full effect. In addition, leaseholders have not been charged appropriately, customers have not been involved in delivering VFM, income is not being maximised in key areas and there is a lack of inward investment. However, there are clear targets in place to achieve efficiencies and budgets are well managed. Managers have received training and support to deliver VFM and the new approach to procurement has delivered some savings.

How do costs compare?

- 97 The Council does not have complete information about costs and quality within landlord services. Although the Council subscribes to an external benchmarking service, this involvement is recent, and there are no outcomes yet to inform service delivery and efficiency savings. The Council lacks detailed understanding of how elements of landlord services costs compare with others, and this undermines its ability to tackle inefficient elements of service delivery. The lack of cost comparison data for services over time means that the Council cannot demonstrate a clear track record of improving efficiency and effectiveness in landlord services or that services offer value for money.

- 98** The overall cost of delivering landlord services is average when compared to others. Although benchmarking arrangements are basic and have not included costs of individual services, the Council has used a 'Strategic Compass' derived from information from the Audit Commission's VFM Tool¹, satisfaction surveys and BVPIs to compare its performance with that of its peers.
- 99** There is some evidence to show that resources are linked to areas of high priority and further work is taking place to make this clearer. The Leadership Team is resubmitting budgets to show clear links to the Council's 53 Corporate Priorities and analysis of expenditure on particular areas will take place to test whether high priority areas are benefiting from appropriate levels of expenditure. At present this means that the Council may be directing resources inappropriately and priority services are therefore not being supported to reflect the needs of the community.
- 100** Some steps have been taken to reduce costs. The average weekly management cost has reduced from £14.85 in 2006/07 to £9.37 in 2007/08 per head, largely as a result of setting up the customer contact centre and overall costs associated with the housing management service have been reduced within the Housing Revenue Account² (HRA) by £199,000. This has enabled investment in other aspects of the service.

How is value for money managed?

- 101** Although the approach to VFM has recently improved, it remains under-developed. The Council has failed to take action to ensure a sustained approach to VFM has been maintained over time. This has led to a weak approach to delivering VFM outcomes that have impacted across services, including failure to ensure income is maximised. This has been affected by the lack of a Council-wide VFM strategy and until recently clear guidance, reporting of outcomes and target setting. However, it is clear that efficiency savings are now built into the budget setting process and the medium-term financial strategy. Service plans are linked to available budgets and there is a clearer approach to procurement that has delivered some savings.
- 102** A VFM culture is not embedded throughout the organisation. However, it is positive that the Council has recently improved the way it manages financial matters with the housing finance team now being part of the corporate finance service. This has led to consistency in financial reporting and in management of budgets. The HRA is clearly expected to deliver savings and all budgets are agreed with clear targets for efficiencies, with money reinvested in services. Although fundamental principles are established at a manager level, work still needs to take place to increase awareness among frontline staff which will result in improvements to services.

¹ Audit Commission VFM TOOL - tool enabling various local data sets from local authorities to be compared

² Housing Revenue Account - funds available for spending exclusively on Council properties derived from rents and government subsidies

How good is the service?

103 VFM outcomes are not reported regularly. Although there are plans in place to review some performance related projects, VFM does not feature and it is therefore unclear how performance against any VFM targets will be monitored. At present every report to Executive includes the financial implication of the proposal and Scrutiny has received reports on arrears and voids performance, but to date the Annual Efficiency Statement (AES)¹ and performance against NI179² are the main tool by which Members are informed about VFM outcomes. Failing to report performance in this area may lead to VFM and targeted efficiencies not being achieved.

104 There are signs that there is an increasing awareness that frontline staff need to understand VFM in order for them to be able to contribute to delivering VFM outcomes. A briefing paper has been issued to staff and a poster explaining the procurement top ten tips has also been distributed. The Council has highlighted to staff the VFM outcomes that are emerging from various new initiatives including the customer contact centre, reporting ASB online and the new complaints system. This will help staff develop their understanding of VFM generally.

105 There is evidence that efficiency savings have been made widely across landlord services. Efficiency gains amounting to £650,000 were achieved last year, including the following.

- Housing staff undertaking their own court work.
- Ending cash collection and increased take up of payment by direct debit.
- Multi-agency clean ups of estates.
- Use of pool cars by housing staff.

It is positive that all Heads of Service have efficiency targets built into their budgets and they are expected to take action necessary to deliver on target and this is supported by more effective budget management. It is recognised that this needs further development and that staff and tenants need to be involved in the process.

106 The Council is failing to maximise income. There are examples where the Council is not ensuring that, where possible, all income is recovered. It is not making best use of its garage sites and estimates that it is losing over £400,000 each year in rental profit from its 22 per cent vacancy rate (based on 2006/07 figures). In addition, the majority of leaseholders do not make any interim payments towards service charges, which means that the Council will not receive any income from these leaseholders until several months after it has completed its expenditure for the year as it will have not raised charges. The approach to the collection of FTAs is under developed and has resulted in more than £1 million remaining un-collected. The Council is therefore not maximising the opportunity to ensure that services are supported.

¹ Annual Efficiency Statement - all local authorities are required by central government to forecast efficiency gains and the work undertaken to achieve those gains

² NI179 - part of the National Indicator set representing the total net value of ongoing cash-releasing value for money gains that have impacted since the start of the financial year

- 107** Procurement systems support the delivery of VFM outcomes. A specialist corporate procurement team supports the Council in sourcing the best possible services and products, at the best price. This is achieved partly through membership of local consortia, and although the repairs and maintenance service has benefited most from this expertise, efficient procurement has led to savings in landlord services more widely. Savings achieved include a 25 per cent reduction in the cost of household insurance offered to tenants.
- 108** Some work with partners has delivered VFM. There are a number of examples within landlord services where partnership working has delivered VFM by enhancing services offered by the Council, including some initiatives that have received external funding (Families Unit, Neighbourhood Wardens) and other schemes (Mow and Grow, Mediation Service, PACT¹) where the Council has worked with partners to deliver positive outcomes for customers. However, the value of the mediation service has not yet been fully realised. The Council has committed £17,500 in the first year of a new two year contract on the basis that 50 cases would be referred each year, but it has referred just ten cases in the first nine months. Of these eight were successful, but more cases are needed to justify this level of funding. However, it is clear that customers have seen the benefits of the Council working in partnership.
- 109** Customers are not yet fully involved in value for money decisions, and are not involved in deciding or prioritising where and how money is spent on an ongoing and consistent basis. This may be addressed as the new strategic approach to resident involvement is implemented. However it means that customers are not yet actively involved in this level of scrutiny on an ongoing basis and their input is therefore not recorded or used.
- 110** There are some limited examples of inward investment that have been achieved to support the Council in its delivery of services. However, it is unclear how performance in this area will be improved as there is no strategy in place to ensure further future opportunities are not missed.

¹ PACT - Partners Against Crime Taskforce - the 'safe and secure scheme' which provides increased security to homes, such as five lever mortice locks, security bolts, eye viewers and door chains, free of charge to residents in receipt of means tested benefits or over 60 or disabled

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 111** This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Some improvements have been made from a very low base, but the Council has not successfully met some of its obligations determined by regulators in areas that would be noticed by tenants, especially more vulnerable tenants. Significantly, although most have been actioned, the Council has failed to implement all of the recommendations from our last inspection and in key areas progress has been poor.
- 112** The Council has a mixed track record in meeting the needs of regulators and external bodies. For example, not all buildings accessible by the public are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant, which states that service providers have a statutory obligation to take reasonable steps to remove physical barriers to disabled people or to provide services by other means. The DDA states that this aspect of the Act should have been complied with by 2006 which the Council has failed to do. The service is not compliant with the former CRE Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing and has no plans to address this. Clearly these areas have not been given sufficient focus by the Council and barriers to equitable service delivery still exist.
- 113** There are key areas where progress has been poor. There are significant weaknesses in each of the cross-cutting areas of diversity, VFM and access and customer care. Aspects of each are absent in all services, in part because of a weak strategic approach in key areas such as resident involvement. These are significant areas, which reduce the impact of the improvements that have been delivered, as they affect the outcomes delivered to all customers.
- 114** The Council has a weak track record in its approach to diversity. While there has been a long standing and as yet unrealised target to achieve Level 2 of the LGES, its failure to carry out impact assessments means it has barely achieved Level 1 and Service Plans do not explicitly include equality and diversity considerations. This has clearly impacted to date on the Council's ability to demonstrate that it is able to deliver all services equitably.
- 115** There is no corporate VFM Strategy. Lack of a clear unified corporate approach has meant that the Council has been slow to make progress in this area. There is now a draft Housing VFM Strategy in place, but this is incomplete. Although the draft Strategy sets out how the housing service needs to link costs, performance and service delivery, it is not clear when or how the Strategy will be launched or how outcomes will be measured.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 116** Despite this, some improvements to VFM have been achieved. There are clear systems in place that have ensured budgets are appropriately managed and that efficiencies are clearly identified and delivered. Managers have received training and a new approach to procurement has delivered some savings. Although there remains work to do to embed a VFM culture throughout the organisation, a positive start has been made.
- 117** The Council does not know if it is meeting its promises to customers as it does not monitor this. Although service standards are now in place, the Council does not monitor its performance against them and it is therefore unable to be certain that its performance in key services experienced by customers is improving.
- 118** Some improvements have been made that customers would notice, including:
- the Mow and Grow scheme;
 - new tenants' handbook;
 - pre-tenancy and pre-court advice schemes;
 - single point of contact;
 - new complaints system; and
 - improvements in call-handling; there has been an increase to 83 per cent of calls answered first time during the current year, compared to 52 per cent last year.
- 119** It is not clear whether the Council has learned from customer feedback. Although some improvements have been made that customers would notice, a clear link between these improvements and feedback from customers cannot be made. The Council cannot be sure that it is improving the right things, at the right time.
- 120** Recommendations from previous inspections have not all been completed, such as the recommendations in respect of compliance with the former CRE Code and other research into the housing needs of BME and other hard to reach groups. A key weakness raised during our last inspection was the lack of strategic approach to the future use of the neighbourhood offices. Although this was raised in 2005, the Council only responded to this immediately before this inspection.
- 121** Performance indicators show a mixed direction of travel. Performance against key indicators including income collection and satisfaction with opportunities to participate remain weak. But, more positively, customers have reported increased satisfaction with the ease with which they can contact the Council and their telephone calls are answered more promptly. This reflects the focus that the Council has given to resolving issues with the way that customers contact the Council.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 122** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a clear vision for the service and a developing self awareness and there is evidence of learning from others and itself. However, performance management is not embedded throughout the organisation, performance information is mixed and customers are not routinely consulted about changes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 123** The Council has a developing understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses. This can be linked directly to its failure to achieve Housing Corporation Housing Management Accreditation early in 2008, which was unexpected. As a result, the Council commissioned a 'mock inspection' in the summer of 2008, which helped the Council to understand its position further and the scale of change needed to deliver a quality service. The Council developed plans while we were on site to set up a Housing Improvement Board (including tenants and other external challenge) to drive through the necessary improvements identified by the mock inspection and to implement the recommendations included in this report.
- 124** The Council has set out its vision for neighbourhood housing by setting specific service objectives. The service plan for Housing Management (2008 - 2010) sits within the Community and Neighbourhoods' Directorate Service Plan. The Plan links the objectives of the housing service together with the strategic objectives of the Council and includes the vision, drivers and context that the service operates within, as well as its key objectives for the forthcoming year. The plan includes a high level action plan to deliver the objectives that is partly outcome based. Staff that we met could clearly link individual targets they had been set in their appraisals with the corporate strategic objectives. This shows that the vision has been well communicated to staff.
- 125** The Council is clearly working towards delivering services at a neighbourhood level and there are plans in place to ensure that staff are equipped to meet the Council's neighbourhood agenda. The Council is working as part of LEAP¹, a partnership with other agencies across the County that has designed a programme of training and support for managers to understand how to improve outcomes for individuals and communities. To also support its neighbourhood agenda, the Council is trialling a new way of working in the Mile Cross area. Two 'patches' are being managed differently to the norm to establish whether a more generic approach to management is more effective in delivering outcomes that customers will benefit from.
- 126** However, there is no evidence that the Council is currently addressing the issues that currently matter most to tenants. It is positive that the Council used the findings from tenant consultation during the Option Appraisal in 2005 to help inform the structure of services and staffing at that time. However, a more recent restructure has recently taken place and there is no detail to say that this reflects the aspirations of service users. The Council has recently recognised this and it has plans in place to use the most recent STATUS survey more effectively than in the past to ensure that it addresses concerns raised. There are also plans in place to address the issues raised by the CWB in their vote of no confidence in the Council, which include revisiting the constitution, examining the contribution of the NRF and developing a forward plan. Taking a more systematic approach to using customer feedback will ensure that services are driven by customer expectations.
- 127** Staff are not always involved in decisions that affect them. This has resulted in many staff not initially understanding or supporting new initiatives, including the generic working pilot and neighbourhood agenda in general.

¹ LEAP - Norfolk Local Leadership Programme, a programme designed to build a strong and cohesive leadership community.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 128** The Council has used information from similar organisations to help set its own targets. For example rent arrears performance information was collected from other local authorities to assist in setting targets for rent arrears collection. Despite this, performance targets are of mixed degrees of ambition. NCAS¹ targets match the Telecare Service Association Code of Practice requirements but are not challenging, aiming to answer 80 per cent of alarm calls in 30 seconds and 96.5 per cent in 60 seconds. Although the tenant satisfaction target of 85 per cent in 2009/10 is ambitious, given the current levels of satisfaction, this suggests that the Council is taking an approach that may not be realistic, given its own resources.
- 129** Performance management information is used effectively. The Performance Management Improvement Board (PMIB)² receives reports to ensure that improvements to services are on track. For example, a report was given in May 2008 to explain action taken to improve rent arrears recovery, which included an update on the arrears improvement plan. Performance information is also collated and reported in the Housing Performance Report. It is unclear how this information is used and where it is reported, other than for managers to identify performance of their own areas. Although there is no evidence that a particular level of poor performance triggers remedial action it is clear that Councillors have the opportunity to challenge outcomes.
- 130** Performance management arrangements are underdeveloped. The Council is working towards establishing effective performance management arrangements and understands that it needs to embed performance reporting and monitoring across all services. Various actions have taken place and are planned that will assist with this including the creation of a formal performance management framework (PMF) and manager training to ensure that information can be collected effectively and reported. This will help staff more generally to understand the importance of effective performance management to drive improvements.
- 131** The lack of an embedded performance management culture has resulted in an underdeveloped approach to the monitoring staff performance. In the period leading up to our inspection the Council were conducting an internal investigation of the circumstances surrounding the letting of properties to its own staff. An external investigation was commissioned while we were on site. Both reviews concluded that some staff had acted outside the Council's staff relocation policy. Although the scope of our inspection did not include the service areas involved, our findings in other service areas found that systems in place to check staff performance against policies are generally weak; for example, there is no additional auditing of ASB cases to ensure that procedures have been correctly followed and the Council's own audit report of housing rents found that staff on many occasions went outside the procedure. Weaknesses in performance management undermines confidence that staff are working within agreed policies and procedures.

¹ NCAS - Norwich Community Alarm Service, providing 24 hour year round monitoring and response service for people considered vulnerable or at risk in the community.

² PMIB - a group of senior staff and Members that meet monthly to oversee improvement plans and challenge progress

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 132** Critically, leadership to ensure that key cross-cutting themes are embedded, in particular diversity and VFM, has been poor. The Council has not ensured these areas have been incorporated into the heart of the decision-making process and neither Councillors nor senior managers have championed their importance effectively in order to raise their profile. For example, there is no Corporate Equality Scheme or Corporate Diversity Strategy in place. This has resulted in poor or inconsistent outcomes for customers, including those who are most vulnerable.
- 133** The key objective of improving resident involvement is well understood but not yet embedded. Although the Council recognises that it needs to focus on improving resident involvement, it lacks a comprehensive approach or strategy to improve this priority area. The organisation knows where it wants to go on this key issue, but not how it is going to get there which will reduce, but not prevent, progress.
- 134** The Council can demonstrate learning from others. There are some examples of this in the arrears team, including the design of rent statements, texting software and campaign literature. Staff are also encouraged to attend conferences and to use the Audit Commission websites to look for good practice. Looking outward and learning from others will help the Council to improve its services.
- 135** The Council is also taking steps to maximise the opportunity to learn from its own experience. The Staff Survey of 2007 was not used effectively as a tool for change and this resulted in many responses in the 2008 survey showing deterioration. There are now plans in place to ensure that managers implement changes to address some of the issues raised by staff feedback, including externally facilitated action-planning workshops to deliver a consistent approach across all services. Managers and team leaders have recently been reminded of the importance of the Code of Governance and of probity in general following the issues emerging from the inappropriate letting of Council properties to some staff.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 136** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The staffing structure has been revised, training opportunities are made available, internal and external learning is being applied and working in partnership has delivered positive outcomes for customers. However, changes of staff at a senior level have impacted on frontline staff, there is a lack of a clear plan to improve resident involvement and human resource planning is under developed.
- 137** There is an appropriate staffing structure now in place. The Council has put in place a revised staffing structure at a more senior level to meet the challenges it faces to deliver improvements. A restructure was approved by the Executive on 29th October 2008 which has brought together both strategic and landlord functions under one Head of Service, and to separate this from property services. This has been implemented because the Council has recognised that there have been significant barriers that have prevented it from improving services in the way that it would have liked, including ineffective budget and performance management. By doing this, the Council believes that it has in place leadership to coordinate improvements identified partly by the recent mock inspection and to deliver positive outcomes for customers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 138** The Housing Improvement Board (HIB) builds on capacity. The Council has recently set up a HIB with external members to assist it in focussing on the things that need improving. This has been in response to a developing and improving level of self awareness. This recognition that services are not being delivered to a high enough standard and willingness to improve is being led by the Chief Executive who is operating in a highly visible capacity.
- 139** However, some elements of Human Resource (HR) planning are underdeveloped. A fully effective strategic HR framework is not in place. Although a People Strategy was drawn up in early 2008, this is overdue for review. Although the actions in the Strategy have been completed, without a full review the differences that these actions may have made have not been evaluated.
- 140** The strategic approach to staff training is mixed. Training budgets have been devolved to directorates to enable allocation of training according to the needs of the service and of staff. At present arrangements for the management of budgets are temporarily in place due to a number of changes in line management, especially in housing. It is positive that cross-functional training is offered by HR by way of training events and through the resource centre that staff can access directly. The difference that training makes to customers has not been evaluated and although the Council is aware that outcomes of training need to be measured more appropriately, there are no plans in place to do this. This means that at present the Council cannot demonstrate that the training that it offers is effective.
- 141** However, it is clear that staff can access training. Training available includes vocational, skills-based training and developmental training including leadership and post-entry training to achieve formal qualifications. Staff in some teams have individual training plans in place, for example every member of the arrears service has a bespoke training plan that has been designed to meet their individual needs by identifying further training and development required, and how and when it will be delivered. The plans vary according to the skills and experience of the individual and are comprehensive. This has helped them develop their capacity.
- 142** Staff receive support to undertake their roles. Staff in general feel supported by line managers and colleagues to undertake their roles and that the Council has supportive structures in place to deal with personal issues. However, staff that we spoke to felt strongly that repeated changes to staffing structures and to management roles and responsibilities at a higher level had impacted on their understanding of the direction of the service. This has also resulted in decisions being made slowly.
- 143** The Council has systems in place to communicate well with staff. There are a number of ways that the Council communicates with staff, including the ROAR¹ awards which recognise achievement and contribution, staff road shows and staff surveys which are carried out annually. A staff newsletter is published every week. The newsletter is informative and includes updates on initiatives, profiles of particular roles and adverts. Staff that we spoke to felt that these systems kept them well informed about corporate matters.

¹ ROAR - Recognition Of Achievement Rewards, recognising staff contribution and ideas

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 144** Middle managers are starting to work more effectively together, and to realise the ways in which they can help to improve services. A cross-service group of team leaders and middle managers has been set up to share information and consult each other before introducing new procedures and policies. A development and training package is also in development for middle managers where none has existed before. This should ensure changes are more effective and that staff throughout the Council are better informed in advance.
- 145** However, staff have had little confidence in senior management. Staff we spoke to said middle management works well and are very supportive. They said senior staff were difficult to get hold of, inconsistent because of staff turnover and that changes in management made it difficult to form relationships, particularly when the post holders are temporary, and that senior managers are not visible enough. This reflects the findings of the last staff survey and links with the outcome of the independent investigation of Council properties being let to staff, which recommended that vacant senior posts were recruited to quickly. Meanwhile, capacity is being affected by vacancies and temporary staff.
- 146** Staff satisfaction is mixed. The 2008 staff survey shows that although 75 per cent of staff are generally satisfied with working for the Council, there are areas where responses from staff to questions about managers, training and communication showed a marked deterioration when compared to the 2007 staff survey and to local government benchmarking data. For example, only 18 per cent of staff felt that managers provide effective leadership, a deterioration from 31 per cent in 2007; only 24 per cent felt that managers were open and honest and 20 per cent felt that managers were aware of issues faced by staff. Some of these are areas for improvement that were included in the action plan following the 2007 survey, showing that the action plan has been ineffective.
- 147** The approach to performance appraisals is mixed. Staff we spoke to about this had up-to-date appraisals, which had been completed thoroughly and thoughtfully both in terms of backward and forward looking. A minority of staff seemed to struggle with ideas for the learning and development planning section. However, it is a weakness that not all members of staff have been appraised and fewer appraisals were undertaken in 2008 than in 2007, demonstrating that action taken by the Council to ensure managers understand the importance of appraisals has been ineffective.
- 148** The Council is able to recruit appropriately. Staff turnover rates are average at 12 per cent and although there have been a number of changes in the housing service in the last few years this has not been influenced by recruitment difficulties. Staff have been recruited with the necessary skills and ability to undertake the roles required of them.
- 149** Sickness levels are robustly managed. Absence due to sickness in landlord services varies slightly when compared to the Council as a whole, but overall the Council's sickness rates compare favourably with other local authorities. For landlord services in 2006/07 the average numbers of days that employees were absent totalled 5.71, in 2007/08 it was 6.07 and in 2008/09 3.78. The figures for the Council as a whole are 4.52, 5.87 and 4.18 respectively. This has enabled the Council to maximise the numbers of staff available to deliver services and ensure that the effect that sickness rates have on capacity is limited.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 150** It is not clear whether the Council is able to fund the improvements that it needs to deliver. A recent external analysis of the current HRA shows that the Council is unable to sustain, beyond the short term, the level of investment necessary to meet the Decent Home Standard¹ and to improve properties in line with the Norwich Standard². The report also suggests that services are being compromised in order to support capital works. Although this is not an unusual position to be in, it is not clear whether the Council has maximised all opportunities to secure alternative forms of income to support expenditure from the HRA. Weaknesses in the Council's approach to VFM are also reducing potential resources. This approach has not ensured that the Council is maximising better quality and cost from its arrangements, and has thereby reduced the potential for extra capacity.
- 151** IT systems generally provide adequate support to staff to enable them to undertake their roles. However, IT is limited in some areas and there are examples of different systems not integrating information, which is limiting capacity. This includes the ABATE system not interfacing with the arrears system, although it is positive that IT systems support the capacity of the arrears team to recover debt. The arrears system assists staff in managing their workloads by recommending actions necessary for each case. The team has devised its own system to complement this, where cases can be batched according to various factors including recommended action, amount due and stage of recovery. Consideration is being given to the purchase of an additional application to assist with identifying cases according to risk. Improvements to IT will further enhance capacity.
- 152** Partnership working is effective. There are a number of examples where the housing team has engaged in partnership working, including the Mow and Grow scheme, working with PACT, the HB team and the Families Unit. Stakeholders we met were generally positive about working with housing. There were more strengths than weaknesses, including commitment to partnership working, communication, training and development and having and using information-sharing protocols. Weaknesses related mainly to an inconsistent approach between and within sections. Working in partnership has enabled the Council to provide better services for customers.
- 153** The involvement of customers has not impacted positively on capacity to date. However, the cultural weaknesses in the organisation in respect of resident involvement may now be changing. Several managers attested to the recent realisation that genuine resident involvement was important to the development of the service and positive practice is actively being sought from top performers in the field, including using tenant inspectors and mystery shopping. It was recognised that communication, trust and residents' expectations were issues that needed addressing although it would take time to do so. This will enable the Council to develop the capacity of residents to support the development of services.

¹ Decent Home Standard - a minimum standard for housing set by the Government, covering basic legal definitions of fitness, reasonable state of repair, modern facilities and services and thermal comfort.

² Norwich Standard - improvements to properties in excess of the Decent Home Standard

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

154 The Council also shows some commitment to wider engagement. As well as setting up the new community engagement team, it is developing a corporate consultation toolkit. This is positive, although managers are not yet clear who they will consult before it is finalised. The Council has also been involved in work with the greater Norwich Youth Forum which has developed a Youth Sounding Board. Working with the forum has helped to develop a youth homelessness toolkit for providers to take to schools, helping to increase capacity in the community.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	District average 2006/07	Norwich City Council 2005/06	Norwich City Council 2006/07	Norwich City Council 2007/08*
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	68	69	70	71
BVPI 66a % rent collected	98.02	97.17	96.61	97.54
BVPI 74a % tenants satisfied with overall service	81	74	73	-
BVPI 74b % BME tenants satisfied with overall service	75	50	50	-
BVPI 75a % tenants satisfied with participation	66	58	58	-
BVPI 184a % LA Homes which were non decent at start of year	24	37	34	22
BVPI 184b % Change in proportion of non-decent homes	17	1.6	38.4	0
BVPI 212 Average relet time in days	39	44	56	-

* 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:
 - focus groups with staff, tenants and partners;
 - interviews with staff and Councillors;
 - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
 - observation at customer contact centre;
 - visits to local offices;
 - visits to estates;
 - tour of the district and housing stock;
 - talking to tenants;
 - observation of meetings and tenancy sign up;
 - various file checks;
 - review of the Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.

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