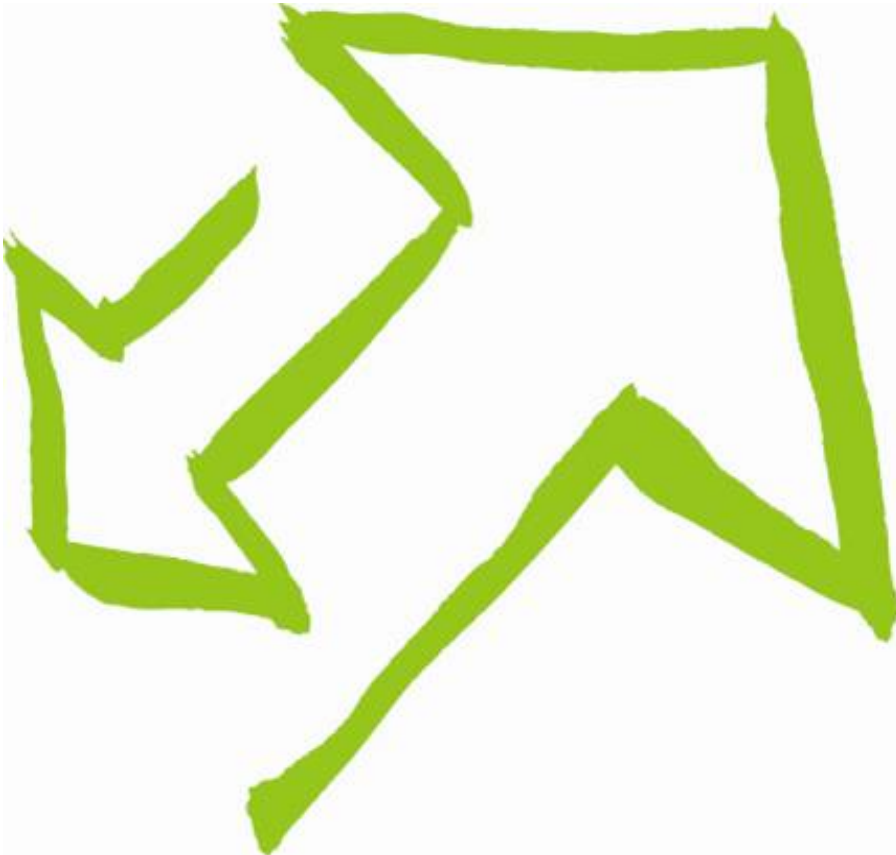


Redbridge Homes

London Borough of Redbridge

June 2009



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Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

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

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

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

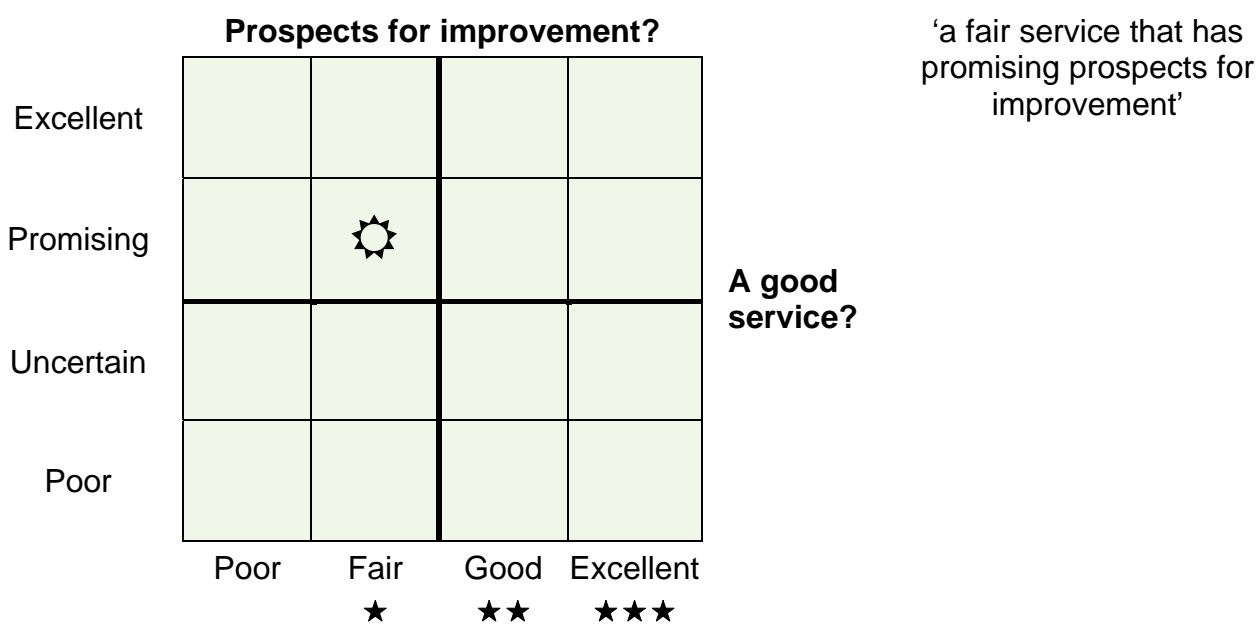
Summary

- 1 Redbridge Homes provides a fair service which has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Residents are provided with good quality information about services and their rent and service charge accounts, and support arrangements are in place for vulnerable residents. Satisfaction is high in a number of key areas such as planned improvement works, caretaking services and rent advice. Planned maintenance is to a high standard and estates are kept in a good condition. Day-to-day repairs are responded to quickly and often completed at the first visit, and nearly all tenants are receiving gas safety checks. The arrears recovery process is well managed and the number of tenants with more than seven weeks arrears has reduced since 2007/08. There is a clear focus on tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB), working in partnership with key local agencies. Victims of domestic violence and hate crimes are well supported. Tenants and leaseholders are actively involved in service developments with a wide range of opportunities for participation. Leaseholder service charges are disaggregated so residents only pay for services they directly benefit from. Redbridge Homes is making a range of efficiency savings through reviewing contracts, services and service level agreements.
- 3 However, there are a number of areas that need further improvement. The telephone system, the website and some office facilities are not meeting customer needs or not fully accessible. Customer service is inconsistent and complaints performance is not satisfactory. The level of understanding of residents' needs is low and information is yet to be used to shape services and ensure that resident involvement mechanisms are inclusive. The quality of repairs and void properties are not consistently high and the management and promotion of the aids and adaptations service is poor. The collection of former tenants' arrears is low, debt advice provision is inadequate and there is no strategy for financial inclusion. Satisfaction with the ASB service is low. Costs are high, the approach to managing value for money is not fully developed, and leaseholder service charges are not covering management costs.
- 4 The prospects for improvement are promising. There is a track record in delivering improvements in a number of areas including better information, a more responsive repairs service, improved gas servicing, caretaking and grounds maintenance services, a wider range of involvement opportunities and a greater understanding of its residents needs. Satisfaction levels have increased to reflect these improvements. Strong leadership, a skilled board and senior management team and appropriate arrangements for managing performance, scrutiny and budget setting are in place, and the organisation is investing in its staff, IT and partnerships to increase its capacity.
- 5 There are still some barriers to improvement. Performance has declined in some areas such as re-let times and rent arrears levels. Business and service improvement planning and reviews are not co-ordinated, the approach to value for money is not fully embedded and there is no improvement plan beyond March 2009. Internal communication has some weaknesses, and capacity is limited by some inadequate software systems and difficulties in recruiting permanent staff.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Redbridge Homes as providing a 'fair' one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

- 7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- there is a range of ways for customers to access the service;
 - good quality information is provided and many customers communication needs are being met;
 - residents are actively engaged in monitoring and improving services;
 - there are effective support arrangements for vulnerable tenants, including those experiencing domestic violence and harassment;
 - the condition of the stock is comparatively good;
 - planned works are being delivered and satisfaction with the works is high;
 - health and safety risks such as asbestos are well managed;
 - tenants express high levels of satisfaction with a responsive repairs service that is delivered promptly;
 - void repairs are undertaken quickly;
 - performance on gas servicing is of a high standard;
 - there is a wide range of ways for tenants to pay rent and rent statements are clearly presented;
 - rent arrears are closely monitored and rent collection and arrears levels compare well and satisfaction with the service is high;
 - enforcement actions and diversionary activities are tackling ASB;
 - estates are kept in a good condition and environmental improvements prioritised by residents are being funded;
 - there is an enhanced caretaking service and satisfaction with the service is high;
 - leaseholders have a range of payment options and clear and well produced information and service charge documentation; and
 - more ways of working, a new repairs contract and service level agreement (SLA) reviews are delivering cost savings and improved value for money.

Scoring the service

- 8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- not all offices meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
 - the telephone system is inadequate and the website is not fully accessible;
 - performance against service standards is variable and complaints performance is not satisfactory;
 - diversity profile data is not comprehensive or being used to inform service development or to ensure that resident involvement is inclusive;
 - average responsive repair costs per property is high;
 - the quality of repairs and voids work is variable;
 - inadequate information is given to tenants about asbestos in their homes;
 - the aids and adaptations service has significant weaknesses and is not promoted;
 - the level of arrears is increasing, and collection rates for former tenants arrears and leaseholder capital works are low;
 - debt advice is inadequate and the strategic approach to financial inclusion is under developed;
 - leasehold service charges do not cover the full management costs;
 - the time taken to re-let properties is comparatively high;
 - sheltered housing residents are not effectively consulted on organisational issues, and satisfaction with sheltered housing is not monitored;
 - there are several practices that are not delivering value for money and the approach to VFM is not fully developed or embedded; and
 - management costs per property are high but not all services have been reviewed.
- 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- a range of improvements have already been delivered to the benefit of residents;
 - satisfaction levels are increasing;
 - resident engagement in service development is well developed;
 - it is increasing its understanding of its customers needs;
 - there is strong leadership and skilled senior managers and board members;
 - performance management, governance and scrutiny arrangements are in place;
 - it is comparing itself with and learning from other landlords;
 - it is investing in its staff development and IT systems, and staff are motivated; and
 - it has strong partnerships with its contractor, the Council and other agencies.

- 10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- performance in some areas such as re-let times and rent collection levels has declined;
 - there has been a slow response to some key weaknesses such as aids and adaptations for disabled residents and improving the telephone system;
 - it does not have an improvement plan beyond March 2009 and service plans are of a low quality;
 - VFM service reviews are not being systematically conducted;
 - risks are not being regularly re-evaluated or identified;
 - some performance targets are unchallenging and some data is not reliable;
 - internal communications are not always effective; and
 - it is a comparatively small and expensive organisation with high management costs per property and increasing financial pressures.

Recommendations

11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access and customer service by:

- finalising decisions about office locations and ensure that all offices are fully accessible to disabled customers;
- upgrading the telephone system without further delay;
- introducing processes to routinely collect and update household information survey data;
- using the HIS data to inform service development and to tailor services;
- adding accessibility functions and translated information to the website;
- introducing systems to capture all complaints and complaints learning in a single location managed by the ALMO; and
- monitoring satisfaction of sheltered housing residents.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services will better meet customers needs; and
- disabled and vulnerable customers will have equal access to services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 December 2009.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the aids and adaptations service by:

- developing an effective performance monitoring system to provide useful management information;
- setting service standards, performance indicators and targets for the service
- publicising the service more effectively; and
- working with the Council to assess the level of need to inform the allocation of resources.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is that:

- disabled and frail residents will have a better quality of life.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 October 2009.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen strategic planning and service improvement processes in conjunction with residents by:

- identifying outcome-focused corporate strategic objectives in the business plan;
- reviewing all risks including a full PEST³ and SWOT⁴ analysis;
- developing a SMART⁵ and comprehensive three year improvement plan;
- adjusting the asset management plan to reflect realistic life expectancy of major components such as flat roofs
- developing a human resources strategy setting out a clear approach to recruitment and retention with clear timescales and costings;
- improving service level plans so that they are challenging and SMART;
- ensuring that budget re-allocations are transparent and clearly reported on to the Board and the Council; and
- ensuring that all performance targets are challenging.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the plans will be effective management tools for driving continuous improvement; and
- all risks will be identified and managed.

³ A PEST analysis is a consideration of the external political, economic, social and technological environment and how this may impact on the organisations objectives.

⁴ A SWOT analysis is a consideration of the organisations strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and how they can be maximised and minimised.

⁵ SMART plans have specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed objectives and outcomes.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R4 Strengthen the approach to managing value for money by:

- developing a systematic programme of value for money service reviews;
- exploring alternative approaches to service delivery and joint procurement opportunities;
- fully engaging residents in service level and cost options;
- identifying resource needs and reducing the level of temporary staff;
- completing the analysis of repair service and management and overhead costs; and
- implementing the procurement strategy in all areas of the business.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- management and service costs should be reduced; and
- residents will receive better services that reflect their priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Improve the quality of the repairs service by:

- reviewing in conjunction with tenants the quality and costs of key components such as kitchen units;
- introducing a diagnostic toolkit for repair call centre staff and tenants; and
- reviewing the skills and training needs of operatives involved in bathroom installations in conjunction with the contractor.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants will receive better quality repairs
- the level of variations to repair orders and costs will reduce.

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

Recommendation

R6 Maximise income collection by:

- improving the tenancy termination process and ensuring co-ordination between all the teams involved;
- working with voluntary and statutory sector agencies on financial inclusion strategies and increase access to debt advice services;
- analysing reasons for non payment and regularly reviewing and setting clear priorities for arrears recovery;
- exploring a wider range of incentive and reward schemes for tenants and leaseholders; and
- publicising re-chargeable services and considering systems such as advance payment to avoid further debt being accrued.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the level of debt owed to the ALMO will be reduced; and
- residents will be supported in managing their debts.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2010.

Recommendation

R7 Engage pro-actively with communities and promote community cohesion by:

- utilising customer feedback and HIS data to identify priority issues and which sectors of the community are not accessing services;
- learning from others who are addressing community cohesion issues;
- developing a programme of out reach work to a range of communities; and
- using the newsletter and other publications to address common misconceptions and promote understanding of different communities.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- residents are less likely to feel, or be discriminated against; and
- the needs of marginalised communities will be better understood.

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

- 12 We would like to thank the staff of Redbridge Homes who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 16 February to 26 February 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Although a relatively prosperous borough, there are some areas that suffer from significant levels of deprivation. In 2007 Redbridge ranked as the 121st most deprived borough in the country, of a total 354⁶. Thirteen areas within Redbridge were listed as among the 20 per cent most deprived in England. Of these, ten are located in the south of the borough. Residents living in the most deprived areas of Redbridge tend to have a lower life expectancy than those in the more affluent areas. There are also significant variations across the borough in the level of those claiming job seekers allowance and the percentage of adults with no or low-level qualifications.
- 14 By 2016 Redbridge estimates that its population will have increased by 14 per cent from 2001 levels, to 270,700 people compared to 17.4 per cent for London. The number of primary school children in the borough is expected to continue to grow. Redbridge also has an increasing older population, which is projected to grow by 13.6 per cent between 2001 and 2011. Projections also show that, by 2012, the Black and minority ethnic population will account for 51.4 per cent of the population and that this will increase to 59.2 per cent by 2026.

The Council

- 15 The London Borough of Redbridge is a unitary authority administered by the Conservative party. There are 63 councillors with 34 Conservatives, 19 Labour, 9 Liberal Democrats and 1 British National Party councillor. The structure has a Leader and cabinet with eight scrutiny committees and seven area committees.
- 16 The Council has improved its Corporate Performance Assessment rating from one star in 2002 to three stars in December 2008 and an Audit Commission direction of travel judgement in December 2008 considered Redbridge to be 'improving strongly'.

The service

- 17 The Council established an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Redbridge Homes (RH) with effect from the 1 April 2007. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services, receiving a management fee for this service. It manages the Council's £5.5 million budget for repairs and maintenance, and £4.2 million capital programme budget. It employs over 140 staff to deliver the service, and manages 4,700 tenancies and provides services to 2,337 leaseholders, and is the smallest ALMO in the London region.

⁶ Indices of deprivation 2007, rank of average rank.

- 18 The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
 - rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
 - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
 - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
 - similar functions for leaseholders;
 - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation; and
 - estate management and caretaking services.
- 19 The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
 - managing the Supporting People programme;
 - homelessness, general housing advice; and
 - administering the Housing Register.
- 20 The ALMO is managed by a board that is made up of four tenants, two leaseholders, four council nominees and five independents. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team, headed by a Chief Executive.
- 21 We have not inspected any housing services since late 2005 when we inspected housing management and judged it to be a fair, one star service with promising prospects for improvement. At the same time we re-inspected housing repairs and maintenance and gave it the same assessment. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of what we said in the reports which we published early in 2006.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22 The Redbridge Sustainable Community Strategy has a vision that 'in 10 years, Redbridge will be a safe and clean place, where people are proud to live, work and invest. A place that is caring, vibrant and healthy.'
- 23 Its four overarching priorities are to:
- strengthen community cohesion;
 - address climate change;
 - increase community participation/engagement; and
 - harness the value of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics to raise the levels of aspiration and achievement in all areas of people's lives.
- 24 Redbridge Homes' Mission Statement is 'Working in partnership with the community to provide quality homes and services that meet residents' needs'.
- 25 It has four core values of being resident focused, accountable, accessible and effective.
- 26 The ALMO has eight strategic objectives as set out in its procurement strategy.
- To achieve 2** Audit Commission rating.
 - To achieve and maintain excellence in services.
 - To achieve and maintain the Decent Homes Standard for our residents by 2010.
 - To develop, achieve and maintain effective, inclusive relationship with community partners.
 - To continuously improve services to achieve top 25 per cent (top quartile) performance.
 - To achieve a high level of resident satisfaction by working with residents in the design, monitoring and evaluation of services.
 - To develop the internal organisation (working with staff, council).
 - To develop effective resident participation that focuses on community and tenant choice.

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

Access and customer care

- 27** In 2006, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Offices were welcoming, the repair hotline was accessible, responsive and customer focused, with extended reporting hours. There was adequate performance on the quality of call answering and high performance on responding to correspondence within target time. The Council had expanded its methods of satisfaction monitoring, and overall satisfaction levels with the repairs service were high. There were weaknesses in the provision of information on the repairs service, including service and performance information. The Council was not adequately encouraging or handling complaints, or using them as a method for improving the service.
- 28** In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are still in balance in this area. There is a strong corporate focus on customer care and staff training is being delivered. There is a good range of information including an informative newsletter that residents are involved in producing. A range of ways to access the service are provided including a well managed dedicated repairs call centre. Tenant satisfaction levels compare reasonably well with regional and national averages and residents are actively involved in monitoring and improving services. However, the main telephone system is limited, customer service and performance is variable, performance information against service standards is not regularly fed back to customers, and the complaints system has some key weaknesses.
- 29** There is a strong corporate focus on customer care. Access and customer care is central to the organisation's core values and a customer service and a communication strategy sets out the corporate approach. A comprehensive range of service standards is in place that was developed with customers. Customer care training has recently been provided to all staff and is ongoing, and a staff award scheme gives recognition to staff who 'go the extra mile' which helps to promote customer care.
- 30** There is a range of ways for customers to access the service. Services are accessed in person at three offices, by telephone, by letter, by email, text messaging or by home visits. Repairs are the most common reason for customers to contact the service, and a dedicated repairs call centre provided and managed by the contractor, is well managed with a modern telephony system. Offices have traditional opening hours of 9am to 5pm as a 2007 residents' survey showed limited interest in extended hours. There was some interest in earlier opening and telephone reception is available from 8.30am and early evening surgeries are held several times a year for leaseholders. Housing Officers are now starting to hold local surgeries, supported by laptops for remote access to the housing IT system. Customers can access the service in a way that is convenient for them.

How good is the service?

- 31** Offices provide a range of information and facilities for customers. The three offices have been refurbished and are welcoming with facilities such as plasma information screens, Minicom, induction loops, automatic doors and lowered counters. The opening times and contact details are clearly displayed outside the offices, and there are private interview rooms with hearing loops and staff alarms, and a range of literature is available, which all contribute to a welcoming environment.
- 32** Written information is of a good standard, and residents are involved in improving it. Information is provided to residents through a series of clearly written and branded leaflets and booklets, a quarterly newsletter and a website. Residents have been involved in the development of key documents such as the leaseholder and tenants' handbooks and the revised tenancy agreement. 'Redbridge Homes News' is produced via a residents' editorial panel and is an informative and engaging publication providing a large amount of information. Residents have reviewed the website and leaflets as part of a mystery shopping exercise and a residents reading panel is being established to test all information pre-publication, including the website and standard letters. Seventy three per cent of tenants feel that the organisation is good at keeping them informed, so most residents' information needs are being met.
- 33** Residents are actively consulted and their feedback is used to improve services. Customers are involved in monitoring services through a range of mechanisms, for example, mystery shopping. By consulting residents, services are more likely to meet their needs and reflect their priorities⁷.
- 34** Satisfaction with the overall service is at a reasonable level. Customer satisfaction with services is regularly requested and feedback is generally positive. Every three months 650 randomly selected tenants are surveyed to measure satisfaction with services. Satisfaction with the landlord is 77 per cent (at September 2008), which is below the best performing ALMOs nationally and ranked thirteenth out of twenty London ALMOs. The 2008 STATUS survey found that satisfaction with the repairs and maintenance service is 75 per cent, which is equal to the London average but below the average of ALMOs nationally in 2007/08.
- 35** However, the offices have a number of limitations. The office locations make access difficult for some residents, particularly in the south of the borough as they are located in residential areas away from key transport hubs, and one of the offices is not fully accessible. Residents have expressed an interest in services being delivered locally rather than just from existing offices, but only two monthly surgeries are currently in place, and not all services such as income recovery are offered. There is limited information about performance, interpreting services or services provided by external agencies, and common facilities such as a water dispenser or toys for accompanying small children are not provided in all offices. Customers may not be able to easily access the offices or find the information and assistance they need.

⁷ See the resident involvement section for details of resident engagement in service improvements

- 36** The current telephony system is inefficient and inadequate. Telephone is the preferred method of contact for 80 per cent of residents. There is a single access telephone number but the number of lines is limited and it can be difficult to get through. It is not possible for performance to be monitored other than through manually analysing every call received. The ALMO is trying to make the best use of a limited system, and calls are directed to Customer Services Officers (CSOs) at reception, and although the CSOs are increasingly trying to filter and answer enquiries, resolution of enquiries at the first point of contact is not being monitored. Without an effective telephony system, the organisation cannot identify where service failures occur or know whether it is meeting its service standards.
- 37** Customer service is not of a consistent standard. Performance against service standards is variable and not all service standards are regularly reported on to customers. Only 89.6 per cent of letters have been responded to within ten working days against a 97 per cent target, and below the 2007/08 performance of 93.3 per cent. Three quarters of respondents to the 2008 residents' survey found staff to be helpful and able to deal with their problem at their last contact (although this was significantly lower for leaseholders). Some residents feel that the standard of service depends on which officer deals with their enquiry, and privacy and confidentiality is not always respected as private interview rooms are not consistently used. For example, discussions with customers on ASB issues can be overheard, and customers using the repairs free-phone can be overheard discussing times when they are not at home. Customers are not receiving a consistent level of service, and the lack of privacy can potentially have serious repercussions for customers.
- 38** The approach to complaints lacks clarity. Repairs complaints are dealt with separately and differently from other complaints. The repairs contractor records repairs complaints but is not monitoring the outcomes of complaints with tenants. Systems are in place to capture formal and informal complaints, which are categorised according to type (attitude, missed appointment, etc) to identify common causes of service failures, but how these are being used to improve services is not known as this is not being recorded centrally, and informal complaints are not consistently recorded. A complaints feedback survey was introduced in 2007 but due to administrative errors has not been sent out during the current year. Customers are not having their complaints handled in a consistent manner and the organisation is not able to learn from customer feedback.
- 39** Complaints performance is not satisfactory. Staff try to resolve complaints straight away where possible, for example if an appointment is missed they try to send another operative immediately, so a small level of formal complaints are received (about 70 per year). Only 88 per cent of stage one complaints are responded to within ten working days - down from almost 92 per cent at the end of 2007/08. However, only one complaint escalated to stage two, with compensation being paid in six cases totalling £2,753. Customers are not consistently receiving a swift or full response to their complaints.
- 40** A corporate website provides a range of useful customer information, but it has limited interactive and accessibility facilities. Residents have not been engaged in developing the website although 47 per cent have access to the internet. The organisation is not maximising the potential of the website to increase customer access.

Diversity

- 41 In 2006, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in diversity. There was a systematic approach being developed within the Council and through the stock options appraisal it widened the representation of residents in planning future service delivery. However, these were in their early days and were yet to be transformed into service delivery outcomes for residents. The three housing offices were not fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. The Council had not used tenant profile information to tailor service provision, and household information was not consistently captured.
- 42 In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. There is strong leadership to raise the profile of diversity across the organisation and some equality impact assessments have led to some improvements. The organisation is broadly representative of the communities it serves, many communication needs can be met, and vulnerable residents are offered appropriate support. However, the strategic approach to diversity is uncoordinated and lacks clarity. Diversity training has been limited and understanding of residents needs is not comprehensive and data is not routinely updated or effectively used. One office is not fully compliant with disability legislation and there is limited engagement with community groups or work on community cohesion.
- 43 Redbridge Homes demonstrates a commitment to equality and diversity. It is a core value of the organisation, and a core competency within the appraisal framework. An Equalities Officer has strong support from senior managers, the Chair and two Board diversity champions in raising the profile of diversity as a priority for the organisation. Most of the board have attended diversity briefing sessions, initiatives such as a Black history month event came from senior officers to find more innovative ways to engage residents, and the board champions effectively raise issues.
- 44 Equality impact assessments have been conducted and have led to some initial improvements. Managers have had appropriate training on how to conduct them, and a programme is in place to review the initial 2007 assessments that led to improvements such as the promotion of induction loops for deaf customers.
- 45 The organisation broadly reflects the communities that it serves. The staff group and the Board is diverse and fairly representative in respect to ethnicity, faith and gender, but less so in respect to sexuality and disability, and age is still to be analysed. Some workforce monitoring is undertaken but the data has not been analysed to identify trends or target activities. Sexuality and faith are not monitored during recruitment. The A diverse workforce helps to promote the service as relevant and inclusive to all service users and potential service users.
- 46 Resident diversity profile data is being collected and where it is available, is often used to provide flexible services. Data is collected through a household information survey (HIS), and has been used to offer sign language interpreters, or to provide information in large print and translated in to other languages. Tenancy audits are being prioritised for those households where data is not yet held. Residents are receiving an increasingly responsive and flexible service.

- 47 Customer communication needs are mostly being met. A professional interpreting service is available and used as well as a language identification card and the skills of bi-lingual staff. Translated straplines are included in most but not all documents, but they do not explain what the information is about. Large print and Braille is routinely offered in publications, and the newsletter is now available on audio CD. However, key publications such as the tenant's handbook are not offered in audio format, British sign language interpreting is not widely advertised, the offices have no posters about interpreting and the website has no translated information or accessibility facilities. Customers language needs can be met but some may be unaware of the service.
- 48 Diversity issues are regularly raised and addressed with partners. An equality group with the repairs contractor regularly discusses diversity issues and diversity targets are set out in partnering contracts. Decent homes works can incorporate culturally appropriate fixtures and fittings, and female operatives can be arranged but this has not been promoted to tenants or accessed by staff.
- 49 There are effective support arrangements for vulnerable tenants. A Tenancy Sustainment Officer provides floating support and/or makes referrals to other agencies as appropriate. A protocol for referrals to a floating support service provided by a local housing association is in place, and guidance on working with vulnerable people is provided for staff. A popular, free garden assistance scheme is advertised to vulnerable residents and is currently assisting around 40 households.
- 50 Support arrangements for residents experiencing domestic violence and harassment are effective. The office is a third party reporting centre and refuge space, safe houses, a sanctuary scheme and extra security are available, and victims are supported through partnerships with relevant support agencies, such as Victim Support.
- 51 The strategic approach to diversity is uncoordinated and not fully embedded. The policy is not supported by a current outcome-focused action plan, monitoring data is not routinely analysed or reported on, and it is unclear how the diversity policy, the draft equality schemes, equality impact assessments and service plans are coordinated. The organisation is in the process of assessing its performance against the CRE Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing⁸. A clear and coordinated approach can deliver more effective service improvements
- 52 Not all offices meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. All three offices have been refurbished and have had an access audit undertaken. Two are fully accessible but the office at Tiptree Close is not although some adjustments have been made; closure of this office is being considered subject to consultation with residents and the Council as the number of people using it is low. The organisation is currently in breach of its duties to ensure its services are fully accessible.

⁸ The code is a set of recommendations and guidance published by the former Commission for Racial Equality in 2006 on how to avoid unlawful racial discrimination and harassment in housing.

How good is the service?

- 53** Diversity training is limited. Staff have only had two two-hour training sessions on disability and the CRE Code of Practice, and it has not been evaluated for its effectiveness or to identify further training needs. A calendar of faith and key cultural events and catering guidance for meetings have been published, but there is no guidance on cultural or faith-related issues as they relate to service provision, particularly visiting residents at home. Without adequate training, staff may not have a clear understanding of how diversity impacts on service delivery.
- 54** Diversity profile data is not comprehensive and is not yet being used to inform service development. Data is held on 66 per cent of tenants and 43 per cent of leaseholders. It is beginning to be used to understand how services are impacting, but the responses to the analysis have been limited. For example, an analysis of evictions identified a predominance of Black men being evicted, but no specific measures have been taken in response. Services are not yet being reviewed and improved in response to the organisations increasing understanding of its customers and their needs.
- 55** Vulnerability alerts on the computer system provide limited information and are not regularly updated. For example, an alert identified a deaf tenant but had no further information about the tenant's communication needs. The data is held on a stand alone database so the alerts on the housing management system have to be updated separately. Customers are not routinely asked if the data is up to date or complete when they are in contact with the organisation. Without regular updates and adequate alerts the data could quickly become unreliable.
- 56** Work to promote community cohesion or engagement with wider community groups is limited. Recent surveys found that some residents feel discriminated against by the ALMO. Analysis has been undertaken to profile the respondents but further action is yet to be taken to understand the community issues. A 'Promoting Inclusion Network' has recently been set up to engage with disabled and BME residents but is too soon to have had an impact, and engagement with other community groups has been limited.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 57** In 2006, we found that there is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in this area. It had taken steps to establish the level of non-decency within its stock, and had consulted residents on investment priorities and individual projects. Partnering arrangements were in place to deliver kitchen and bathroom refurbishments and some initial signs of a more strategic approach to capital work. Asbestos management was robust. There were inadequate arrangements to publicise the improvement programme and the improved strategic approach had not yet demonstrated outcomes in delivering the programmes consistently. There was a high percentage of emergencies and out-of-hours work with a low level of pro-active planned maintenance programming.

- 58** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The knowledge of and condition of the stock is relatively good with a clear strategy in place for managing it. There is a clear approach to procurement that is engaging residents who are having an influence in how major works are planned and delivered. Tenant satisfaction with works is high and communal systems and asbestos are well managed. However, the asset management strategy has some weaknesses, the estimated life expectancy of some elements such as flat roofs is over optimistic, there is no plan for maintaining the level of decent homes beyond 2010, the ratio of planned to responsive expenditure is high and residents are not given adequate information about the location of asbestos in their homes.
- 59** The ALMO has a reasonable knowledge of the condition of the stock and the condition is comparatively good. A stock condition survey in 2005 accessed 26.4 per cent of the stock covering all archetypes and areas. Current data is cloned from this survey plus a further 10 per cent was surveyed and the data validated in 2007, and monthly attribute updates are added. The 2005 survey found the stock to be in above average condition, with 25 per cent non-decent compared with 43 per cent nationally. Energy efficiency is high with an average SAP rating of 70 against a national average of 52. Energy efficiency assessments are being undertaken and all new tenants are issued with an energy performance certificate. Tenants enjoy relatively good condition and energy efficient homes, and good stock information allows for efficient programming of work and resources.
- 60** There is a clear asset management strategy that sets out the challenges facing Redbridge Homes and how it intends to address them. It includes what work needs to be done, how it will be prioritised, a range of ways in which the service is to improve particularly in respect to customer focus and clear, timetabled actions alongside the analysis for ease of reference. It has specific targets such as a SAP rating of 78 by 2012 through targeting poorly heated and insulated properties. It also seeks to minimise its environmental impact through for example the use of self-finished components to reduce the need for cyclical maintenance. A clear strategy ensures that resources are effectively utilised to maintain stock to a good standard.
- 61** There is a clear approach to procurement which is increasingly engaging residents and delivering outcomes. The procurement strategy sets out clear objectives and criteria for procurement decisions such as legislation, risk, sustainability, diversity and fair trade. It ensures this through the initial tender documentation and the quality scoring system for short listed bidders. Outcomes from this approach include a move to water-based paints and paint strippers to minimise environmental impact, and in response to tenants' feedback a change of supplier for kitchens and flooring. A clear approach to procurement can be an effective tool for delivering on wider commitments such as sustainability and deliver improved outcomes for its residents.
- 62** Planned works are being delivered effectively. A £4.2 million capital works programme in 2008/09 is on target to be completed. All planned kitchen, bathroom and door replacement work has been completed, upgrades to communication systems in the sheltered housing blocks are due to be completed in March 2009 and five external painting and repairs schemes are complete with a further five currently out for consultation. Tenants are receiving major improvements to their homes.

How good is the service?

- 63** Tenants are influencing the way major improvements are being planned and delivered. For example, the elemental approach to decent homes work had been very unpopular and did not appear fair to tenants. As a result of tenant involvement the work is now planned on an area basis. Tenants were involved in selecting kitchen suppliers and more durable components with a longer guarantee and future availability have been selected. Tenants are involved in deciding the kitchen and bathroom layouts in their homes and any particular needs or adaptations are accommodated where possible. They have a choice of kitchen units and colours although the level of choice is not as wide as other landlords offer. When blocks are refurbished tenants can vote on five or six colours for the block.
- 64** Satisfaction with planned works is reasonable. In the most recent survey, 90 per cent of respondents were satisfied which has increased from 82 per cent in the first three months of the year. Tenants spoken to who had had their homes refurbished to meet the decent homes standard were satisfied with the quality of work as well as the attitude and tidiness of contractors who carried out the work.
- 65** Asbestos management is effective. The ALMO knows where asbestos is located in its properties from 100 per cent surveys of communal areas, and sample surveys of each property type backed up by surveys of specific properties in advance of improvement work. The asbestos database shows where dangerous asbestos is located and whether and when it has been removed, and this is shared with contractors who are required to ensure that operatives know if asbestos is present or likely to be present. Operatives have received appropriate training in working with asbestos. Where any asbestos presents a serious risk, it is removed or enclosed, and there is a flexible budget to cover any asbestos located through specific property surveys ahead of any improvement work.
- 66** Communal systems are effectively managed. Regular and thorough checks are carried out on communal systems to ensure the health and safety of residents, such as communal water tanks, gas servicing, lift maintenance, electrical testing and fire alarms. Health and safety risks are minimised.
- 67** However, the asset management plan has some weaknesses. The assumed life expectancy of some components is high, such as a 30 year life span for a flat roof. In addition, the percentage of homes meeting the decent homes standard is likely to decline in 2008/09 and 500 homes are expected to fall below the standard this year, which is more than it is likely to be able to refurbish. The combination of over estimating the length of time a flat roof will last and having more homes failing the decent homes standard than it is able to make decent, raises questions about the validity of the asset management plan and its 30 year financial projections.

- 68** Some aspects of the management of repairs do not provide value for money. The percentage of planned expenditure to responsive repairs is comparatively low and planned maintenance and major works are not informed by an analysis of responsive repairs. Expenditure on planned repairs is 67.5 per cent against a target of 77 per cent and 83 per cent achieved by the best performing ALMOs. Redbridge Homes has not yet looked in detail at the pattern of expenditure on repairs to know which components, properties or households are most likely to require repairs, and it has not clearly identified what its requirements are for the use of sustainable 'whole life' costed components by the contractor and so is reliant upon the contractor taking a lead on this. A better analysis of repairs spending can help increase the amount of planned work and improve value for money.
- 69** Inadequate information is provided to tenants about the presence of asbestos in their homes. Information is not available in leaflet form or included in the tenants' handbook, on the website or in the tenants' welcome pack or 'Handy Tips' document that encourages tenants to undertake minor maintenance tasks themselves. However some general information is included towards the end of the repairs handbook and it is usually discussed as part of the sign-up process. Without adequate information, tenants carrying out home improvements could be exposed to health risks from asbestos.

Responsive repairs

- 70** In 2006, we found that there were more weaknesses than strengths. The service was provided through an old negotiated contract which was not delivering value for money. There were significant weaknesses and poor value for money due to the high-level of emergency and urgent repairs and low level performance on post-inspections. There were weaknesses in performance data on priority times, repairs completed on the first visit, variation orders and pre-inspections that also had value for money and performance implications. Areas of strength were limited to the early stages of the repair process, with the initial reporting of the repair and maintenance of appointments.
- 71** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Repairs are easy to report and tenants are receiving a swift response with appointments being kept and the majority of jobs being completed in one visit. Resident satisfaction with the service is high and tenants are involved in driving improvements and costs are controlled through regular checking of works invoices. However, the outcome for tenants is not always a high standard as the quality of work is variable, some low quality components such as kitchen units are being used and the high level of quality checks are ineffective and inefficient.
- 72** It is easy for residents to report repairs. A freephone repairs hotline is available from 8am to 8pm during the week or there is a dedicated repairs hotline email address. Calls are answered quickly and the level of abandoned calls is within target. Repair orders can be raised and appointments made at the time of calling. Non-urgent repairs reported outside of these times are recorded and works ordered by 10am the following working day and the tenant is contacted to confirm an appointment. Estate action days are also held in partnership with the contractor to make contact with customers, deal with specific issues, and encourage stronger community relations.

How good is the service?

- 73** Resident satisfaction with the repairs service is high. 75 per cent of respondents to the 2008 STATUS survey were satisfied with the service, but from day to day surveys about 96 per cent of survey respondents were satisfied with the repair overall at December 2008, 93.7 per cent said the appointment was kept and 97.8 per cent said the staff are polite and helpful.
- 74** The responsive repairs service is efficiently managed. There is a ten year partnering contract in place with an established contractor. The average cost per repair is at a reasonable level at £99 against target of £110 and the contractor is increasingly using multi-skilled operatives who have discretion to vary work up to a cost of £100 to provide a more flexible service for customers. Performance in most areas of the service is strong. Figures for 2008/09 to the end of December 2008 show that:
- the proportion of emergency repairs completed in target times is 99.2 per cent, against a target of 98 per cent, and is among the best 25 per cent of ALMOs⁹;
 - the proportion of routine repairs completed in target times is 97.5 per cent against a target of 97 per cent, and is among the best 25 per cent of ALMOs;
 - appointments made and kept is 98.5 per cent against a target of 98 per cent, and is among the best 25 per cent of ALMOs;
 - the average time to complete a non urgent repair is 5.9 days against a target of 9.5 days and is among the best 25 per cent of ALMOs; and
 - the percentage of repairs completed in one visit is 88.6 per cent against a target of 85 per cent.
- 75** Residents can be confident that appointments will be kept and that repairs will be carried out quickly and usually in one visit. This not only delivers a quality service but helps to minimise costs, and there have been very few right to repair claims as a consequence.
- 76** The proportion of urgent repairs completed in target times for the year to 31 December 2008 is 94.8 per cent, against a target of 96 per cent. However, the target response time has been reduced from five days to three and performance for the last two months of 2008 was above target reaching 99.3 per cent in December so urgent repairs are also being carried out quickly.
- 77** Controls are in place to check the quality of repairs carried out and costs invoiced by the contractor. The contractor post-inspects 30 to 40 per cent of completed jobs, and Redbridge Homes audit team checks a further 10 per cent as well as a sample of higher cost invoices. There is also a quality management system in place which has been externally validated. Audit staff check all work where there is a variation above 50 per cent, all jobs over £500 and a small sample of those costing less. The contractor submits a spreadsheet of all works invoiced and this is reconciled with the jobs recorded in the repairs system, and any inaccurate invoices are queried with the contractor. These measures should ensure a high quality service.

⁹ Comparisons are based on benchmarking reports to Redbridge Homes

- 78** Tenant involvement in monitoring repairs is driving improvements. A repairs monitoring group meets every six weeks to review repairs performance, make suggestions for improvements and consider new initiatives. It was also involved in reviewing the lettable standard for void properties. Improvements as a result of resident input include changes to the gas safety policy and the purchase of a new time management system in response to resident feedback about missed appointments.
- 79** However, the service has some weaknesses. Contractor's checks on the quality of work are ineffective and inefficient. Despite a high level of quality checks being conducted by both the contractor and the ALMO, the quality of repairs work is variable. Our checks found that repairs were not up to the standard required, including poor work on a bath replacement, poor tiling and mastic work. Some components being installed were not of a high quality such as low quality kitchen units. The outcome is a poor quality end product for some tenants, and a costly approach to checking quality of works.
- 80** Average responsive repair costs per property are high. A 2007/08 benchmarking report shows that an average of £557 was spent on repairs for each property making Redbridge Homes the seventh least expensive out of 17 ALMOs in London, but combined with the poor quality of some repairs this does not represent good value for money.
- 81** The level of variations is high. Only one per cent of repairs requests are pre-inspected, so accurate diagnosis is important but call centre staff do not have an up-to-date diagnostic tool to improve the accuracy of repairs orders. The cost of responsive repairs orders was varied by over 75 per cent in December 2008, an increase of £66,764 on initial costs of £88,167. 88 per cent of these were variations costing less than £100 at the operative's discretion. High variations can potentially make it more difficult to manage the budget and can result in more visits being required.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 82** In 2006, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Overall re-let time and the standard of properties were good, but there were some significant weaknesses in terms of financial management and value for money. These included a continued lack of effective management of the void budget, high void costs that did not demonstrate value for money and no robust validation of decoration allowance payments.
- 83** In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Voids repairs are completed quickly, and the process is well managed with coordination between different parts of the service. Void tenant inspectors are driving up standards and a lettable standard sets out the main conditions. However the quality of new lets is variable, and the average cost of void repairs is still high.
- 84** Void repairs are undertaken quickly. The average time that empty properties are with the repairs contractor is 6.9 days, below the eight day target and the 2007/08 performance of seven days. In addition to repairs, cleaning and clearance work checks on asbestos, electrical and gas services are made¹⁰.

¹⁰ See the Allocations and Lettings section for overall re-let times and tenant satisfaction with new lets

How good is the service?

- 85** The void process is well managed and is engaging tenants in the process. A Voids Coordinator post was established in September 2008 who convenes regular liaison meetings with the repairs contractor and allocations team. A £150 'golden goodbye' incentive scheme encourages tenants to leave the property in good condition, and a pre-termination visit is made in order to raise any potential repairs with the contractor and to inform allocations and occupational therapists for adapted properties. Post-inspections, often undertaken by tenant inspectors, ensure that repairs have been completed in accordance with the lettable standard and the findings are used to monitor the contractor. Working with the probation service, ex-offenders are engaged in redecorating properties prior to viewings being held. This reduces redecoration costs and helps to ex-offenders develop new skills. A well managed voids process minimises delays in letting empty property and maximises rental income.
- 86** There is an adequate lettable standard in place but the quality of property let is not consistent. Some items on the standard are not being met such as keys for window locks and tabbing of stopcocks, and items such as external walls and gardens are not included. A recently revised standard has been approved but is yet to be implemented. Some properties that we visited were in a good condition but others were in a dirty and damp condition, or had broken window frames, walls requiring painting or cracks repaired and one had a very overgrown garden. A new tenant spoken to also said their property was not clean and locks were broken. Recent satisfaction surveys since August 2008 found that 90 per cent of new tenants are satisfied with the property, although the new tenants we spoke to said they had not been asked to complete a survey. Some new tenants are being let properties in variable states of repair and are not receiving a consistent standard of service.
- 87** Expenditure on void repairs is comparatively high and is increasing. The cost of void repairs (excluding decent homes work) for 2008/09 is £1,462 which although below the £1,500 target is above the 2007/08 outturn of £1,284, and £1,304 achieved by the best performers in London. Staff understanding of the high void costs and level of variations is limited but cost benchmarking shows that some components and common tasks are significantly more expensive such as lock replacement and plumbing checks cost twice as much. Voids repairs are not delivering value for money.

Gas servicing

- 88** In 2006, we found that this was one of the stronger areas of the service with high levels of servicing, improved liaison arrangements for gaining access, extended appointment availability and robust and clear practices to deliver the service. The one area of weakness was the absence of publicity on gas servicing.
- 89** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Arrangements for gaining access and ensuring the quality of service are robust with flexibility in appointment times and high levels of servicing. The service is well promoted, but there is no translated information and servicing is not extended to tenants' own gas appliances.

- 90** Effective gas safety procedures are in place. Appointments are flexible including weekends. Three attempts are made to gain access by the contractor and tenancy checks are under taken by Housing Officers if no contact is made - contacting tenants to obtain access is their top priority. The third appointment and final warning letters are delivered by hand, and if access is still not gained the case is referred for legal action to obtain an injunction for access. Gas appliances installed by the landlord are serviced and those installed by the tenant are now checked and capped off if they are found to be dangerous. Gas limiters are fitted where legal action has been taken or there has been a history of no access. Gas safety checks are now programmed on a ten month cycle, which allows time to address cases where access has been problematic. An independent contractor undertakes safety checks on a 10 per cent sample of properties that have had a service. Risks to residents' health and safety are being minimised.
- 91** The importance of gas servicing is well promoted to tenants and leaseholders. Every Redbridge Homes newsletter has a large article on the importance of gas servicing and what to do if you smell gas, and it promotes a £50 prize draw for tenants who keep the first appointment. A hard hitting poster in offices and some blocks conveys the importance of the safety checks and the tenants and repairs handbooks and the website all include information. Access is increasing due to the extensive publicity.
- 92** Performance on gas servicing is of a reasonable standard, although the improvements are recent. Performance declined from the 98 per cent at 1 April 2008 to a low of 95.5 per cent in June 2008. It has since steadily improved, achieving and sustaining over 99 per cent since November 2008. About 99.4 per cent of all tenants' homes now have a valid gas safety certificate. However, of the 26 homes without a valid certificate, six had been overdue for more than two years, but these were resolved during the inspection week. Risks from unserviced gas appliances are being minimised
- 93** However, there are some weaknesses in the approach. Carbon monoxide alarms are not routinely fitted in all properties. A rechargeable service is not offered to tenants for their own appliances and the competitive cost of the service is not promoted to leaseholders. Gas safety letters do not have translated straplines and general gas safety information has not been provided in the main community languages. The organisation is missing opportunities to assure the overall safety of the estates and all residents.

Aids and adaptations

- 94** In 2006, we found that the Council had been responsive to the need for aids and adaptations by increasing the financial resources available, but had not been pro-active in publicising the availability of the service.
- 95** In this inspection, we found that weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths. The service has not been properly managed until very recently and inadequate information is held to monitor and improve the service. Waiting times are unacceptably long for many vulnerable residents, the service is not adequately resourced or publicised and tenants are not informed of mandatory disabled facilities grants.

How good is the service?

- 96** Management of the aids and adaptations service is weak. Until very recently no records, including a single master waiting list were held on adaptation work. Start and completion dates were not monitored to show how long each job takes, and this is still unclear. There were no procedures in place, tenants were being treated inconsistently and work was not checked once completed. Procedures and a process map have now been developed, but the information to enable managers to actively manage the service is not yet fully in place. Vulnerable residents are not receiving a high quality service.
- 97** The service is not well publicised and the information does not explain the availability of the Disabled Facilities Grant to council tenants. There is no specific service leaflet or booklet and only limited information in the repairs and tenants handbook and on the website. A short article was included in one newsletter but it is not regularly used to promote the service and it did not explain that mandatory disabled facilities grants are available to council tenants. Without publicity and accurate information about their legal entitlements, vulnerable residents will not be aware that they can apply for adaptations, and council tenants may be receiving a poorer service than other local residents.
- 98** Adaptations work take too long to complete. Requests for aids and adaptations are categorised as critical, substantial and non-substantial need. Some 'critical' tenants such as those who are bed ridden or housebound have been waiting for several months for work to be complete with the longest outstanding at the time of the inspection being five months. The waiting times for 'non-substantial' work is indeterminate. The delays mean that vulnerable tenants' quality of life is undermined.
- 99** Satisfaction monitoring is not well developed and satisfaction levels are low. Satisfaction monitoring started in 2008 and at October 2008 only 7 of 35 surveys sent out had been returned. These indicate satisfaction with the occupational therapist and the helpfulness of the contractor, but only 57 per cent feel that the ALMO keeps them informed and only 71 per cent said that the adaptations meet their needs. Tenants were not asked how satisfied they are with the adaptations service overall. Tenants are not receiving a good service and there is limited feedback to inform improvements.
- 100** Resources for the service are inadequate and future funding needs and levels are uncertain. The current 2008/09 budget of £240,000 was fully committed by August 2008. This resulted in a £260,000 overspend and the budget being increased mid-year by £200,000. There are 80 people on the waiting list, and managers estimate that there is a backlog of £150,000 worth of work, but lack of publicity could mean that the need is higher. The backlog is unlikely to be met during the current financial year. As there has been no assessment of the overall level of need, there is not a complete register of adapted properties and adaptations are not being recycled, the level of resources required is unclear. Some very vulnerable tenants are not able to have the full use and enjoyment of their home.

Housing income management

- 101** In 2006, we found that this was an area that showed positive performance, where there were clear targets and leadership within the service. The focus was on debt recovery rather than property recovery. This meant that the Council was more concerned at recovering debt due, rather than taking possession action as the first action, which created additional costs in dealing with applications for homelessness and the provision of temporary accommodation while the application was assessed.
- 102** In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. There is a wide range of ways to pay rent, tenants receive clear information about their accounts and the arrears process is closely monitored with a clear focus on arrears prevention and support for vulnerable tenants. Arrears levels compare well and the number of tenants with more than seven weeks of arrears has reduced since 2007/08 and is within the 5.5 per cent target, but the overall level of current and former tenant's debt is increasing and the most expensive methods of payment are the most used. Incentive schemes have had limited impact and the provision of welfare and debt advice is limited with no clear approach to financial inclusion.
- 103** There is a wide range of ways for tenants to pay rent and the most cost effective methods are promoted. Tenants have nine payment options including over the phone by debit card, by giro card and by direct debit, and direct debit is actively encouraged. It is easy for tenants to make payments using their preferred payment method.
- 104** New tenants are able to make payments immediately and there's a clear emphasis on the importance of rent payment. Suspense accounts are now used to enable new tenants to make payments from sign up, and rent accounts are set up on the Monday following sign up. Tenants are advised at sign up of payment options and are assisted in completing housing benefit applications and direct debit forms. Income Recovery Officers (IROs) aim to take part in the sign up process to make early contact, but where this is not possible, new tenants are contacted by IROs before arrears occur.
- 105** Quarterly rent statements are clearly presented and easy to understand. They set out the date of the transaction, the amount of rent due and distinguish rent payments from housing benefit. Service charge costs and amenity charges are disaggregated from rent. Information about translation services and payment methods are included with the statement. Tenants are likely to have a clear understanding of how much they owe.
- 106** Other debts that are held in separate accounts and rent arrears are clearly prioritised. A debt policy prioritises rent arrears over other debts such as garage charge arrears, which are held in separate accounts in the income management system. Former tenancy arrears, garage management and arrears recovery procedures are in place and a new rechargeable repairs policy has been adopted but is yet to be implemented. Staff can clearly advise tenants how much they owe for rent and other charges, and residents are given separate payment cards for each debt. This makes it easier for staff and residents to manage their debts.

How good is the service?

- 107** There is a good relationship with the housing benefit service (HB). A service level agreement (SLA) was recently reviewed and the initial processing target revised down from 35 to 30 days. Quarterly meetings are held and monthly updates are provided by HB on backlogs or other processing issues. IROs and former tenancy arrears (FTA) staff have read-only access to the HB system to track progress with claims and to trace former tenants, and officers in both services meet to learn about the respective systems and processes. HB staff will deal with urgent cases to avoid legal action or eviction and IROs are able to run weekly reports of suspended or cancelled HB. Good working relationships with the HB office help tenants to keep a clear rent account.
- 108** Appropriate arrangements for taking legal action are in place. Possession claims are made online by a dedicated FTA Officer and IRO who attend court and have support from the Council's legal services. However, there has been limited involvement with the court user groups.
- 109** There is a clear focus on sustaining tenancies and preventing eviction, and addressing issues of vulnerability. The arrears policy and procedures are focused on arrears prevention and tenants are generally contacted by letter as soon as they accrue arrears, and visited once they have three weeks of arrears. Standard letters can be amended or over-ridden for vulnerable residents, and referrals are made to the Tenancy Sustainment Officer who can offer support or refer the tenant on to a specialist floating support service. Eviction is seen as an action of last resort, and around 16 evictions representing around 0.35 per cent of tenants are evicted each year which is about average among London ALMOs.
- 110** The arrears management system is adequate for the recording and monitoring of arrears. The system allows all actions and contacts with tenants to be recorded, prompts the next action required and has a range of standard letters that can be amended for each stage of the process, and runs a range of reports and analysis for monitoring purposes by officers and managers.
- 111** The rent arrears process is closely monitored and satisfaction with the service is high. Regular exception reports identify all accounts where no action has been taken in the past month, all those with over seven weeks arrears with no NOSP¹¹ and any over 13 weeks arrears that have not been to court. These are discussed with the relevant IRO at their one-to-one meetings and individual targets are set. Cases where court action is due are discussed at the pre-court stage. The quality of the service is monitored through random file checks, reviewing high level cases, and occasionally shadowing interviews or accompanying officers to serve notices. 73 per cent of tenants are satisfied with advice on rent payments. Regular monitoring can ensure arrears are controlled and the standard of service is high.

¹¹ Notice of Seeking Possession, the legal notice given to a tenant that the landlord intends to repossess the property

- 112** The rent collection level and level of arrears as a percentage of rent roll compares reasonably well. To the end of January 2009, 97.5 per cent of rent had been collected compared with 97.43 per cent in 2007/08 among the best performing landlords in London although slightly below the best performing ALMOs in London and nationally. In 2007/08 arrears as a percentage of rent due was two per cent, which made Redbridge Homes the best performer among its London peer group. The percentage of tenants owing more than seven weeks rent has declined. At the end of 2007/08 5.4 per cent of tenants owed more than seven weeks rent but in the current year to date it is 4.6 per cent compared with 7.6 per cent among the best performing London landlords and 4.3 per cent among ALMOs in 2007/08.
- 113** However, there has been limited success with payment incentive schemes to promote regular payment and the most expensive payment method is the most commonly used, although this is being phased out. Prize draws have been trialled to encourage payment by direct debit, and for tenants to clear their rent accounts. 150 accounts were cleared, but this was not significantly higher than that achieved with previous end of year efforts to clear accounts. Thirty four per cent of tenants pay by giro card which represents 54.3 per cent of transaction costs, but only 31.7 per cent of the income collected. In comparison only 11 per cent are paying by direct debit, but this is only 0.65 per cent of transaction costs and 19.7 per cent of the income collected. In effective incentive schemes and expensive payment methods do not represent good value for money.
- 114** The level of debt owed as rent arrears is increasing. The total amount owed has increased to £404,148.17 (at 16 February 2009) which is above the start of year figure of £379,669 and the target level of £302,147. Arrears decreased in December 2008 due to a concerted effort to encourage tenants to continue to make payments during the rent free period, but this has not been sustained. The organisation is not maximising its income.
- 115** The use of diversity profiling data is limited in income management services. The information has only been collated in the past few months and is being input to the rent system. It has been used to provide larger or coloured print for residents with visual impairments but standard letters do not offer translation services, and arrears letters are still sent in English where it is known the tenant needs a translation. FTA staff are not accessing profiling data and rely on any information in the HB system instead. Tenants may be at risk of losing their homes because they cannot read arrears letters. Some vulnerable tenants with language needs are not receiving the same quality and level of service as others.
- 116** Some analysis of reasons for non payment has been undertaken but has not been used to target the approach to arrears recovery including setting priorities for caseload management for officers. Officers receive a weekly report of all arrears cases in their patch and decide how to prioritise the cases. Some prioritise by the most recent first and some prioritise by the highest arrears, but this is at the discretion of the officer. A lack of understanding of reasons for arrears and clear priorities for targeting action can limit the impact of efforts to prevent and reduce arrears.

How good is the service?

- 117** Former tenancy arrears (FTAs) are increasing, former tenants are not given adequate information about their debts and recovery is low. Despite a 10 per cent reduction target, FTAs have increased by £62,000 in the current year and by £109,036 since the ALMO was established. The total amount owed is £610, 580.66 and the number of accounts has increased from 580 to 659. FTA collection (excluding write offs) is 7.96 per cent, which is an improvement on 6.83 per in 2007/08 but below a peer group average of 12.1 per cent. FTAs are recovered via three debt tracing and recovery agencies. Former tenants are sent a statement when contact is first made and issued with a payment card but are not sent any further statements unless they request one. Former tenants may not prioritise this debt as they do not receive regular reminders of what they need to pay.
- 118** Welfare rights and debt advice is limited. CAB surgeries have recently been introduced in the Orchard office but these only provide three appointments per week and are fully booked more than a month in advance. The Council's welfare benefit team provides a surgery one morning per month at the same office but no other referral arrangements to independent local debt advice or counselling services are in place. Our own checks indicate that tenants are not routinely signposted to such services either by staff or in standard letters. Protocols with CAB and the welfare rights team are too recent to have any monitored outcomes, but there have been some anecdotal successes such as one older tenant who received £3,000 in backdated pension credit. Tenants are not being fully supported to maximise their income and manage their debts.
- 119** The strategic approach to financial inclusion is underdeveloped. There is limited evidence to demonstrate that the organisation is developing partnerships with the voluntary and statutory sector services to ensure that a wide range of specialist support, advice and initiatives such as energy saving measures are being developed and promoted. Rents are due to increase by 3.1 per cent and amenity charges for heating and hot water by 37 per cent. There is a draft financial inclusion strategy, but this has not been finalised. Without a clear approach to supporting residents, then income management and arrears recovery is likely to become increasingly challenging in the current economic climate.

Resident involvement

- 120** In 2006, we found that weaknesses just outweighed strengths. There had been no resident involvement in planning, monitoring and reviewing current delivery of the repairs and maintenance service. While there had been progress in expanding the level of involvement through the stock options appraisal and procurement for a repairs partner, these related to future delivery of services and had not delivered current service improvements. The Council had reviewed its tenant participation framework, but again this was in the early days of implementation and was not yet delivering outcomes for residents.

- 121** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. There is a strong corporate commitment to engaging residents and a clear strategic approach with a wide range of opportunities for residents to be involved. Involvement in repairs and maintenance is particularly strong and residents have had significant influence. Residents are being supported by training opportunities and satisfaction levels have significantly increased. However, diversity profiling data is not being used to target efforts towards under-represented communities, funding for residents associations is low and value for money of the service has not been assessed.
- 122** There is a strong corporate commitment and clear strategic approach to resident involvement. Resident involvement is central to the organisation's core values and a comprehensive resident engagement strategy has recently been produced in consultation with residents which aims to put 'tenants at the heart of everything we do'. The Tenants' Compact is being reviewed and the draft is clear and comprehensive, with an action plan to support the continuous development of the approach to resident engagement. There are six resident members of the Board, and satisfaction with opportunities to participate is regularly measured and reported on. A resident involvement team develops involvement opportunities and supports the formal engagement structures; other staff such as Housing Officers and caretakers, have resident involvement integrated into their jobs and attend resident association meetings, local area forums, and actively encourage resident involvement. Delivering improvements to residents is well integrated in to the organisational culture.
- 123** Residents have a wide range of ways to be involved that are resulting in some positive outcomes. There is a menu of opportunities for resident involvement that are regularly published in the residents' newsletter. Options range from informal opportunities, such as fun days where views are sought, to participating in focus groups, mystery shopping, estate inspections, resident void inspectors, participating in contract reviews such as grounds maintenance, an estates guardian scheme, the residents' repairs panel, the 'Quality of Life' panel to allocate funds for estate improvements, editorial involvement in the newsletter and review of other publications, plus more traditional arrangements such as tenant and leaseholder conferences, residents' associations, four local housing forums and the borough housing panel. Residents are increasingly influencing the development and delivery of services.

How good is the service?

- 124** Resident involvement in repairs and maintenance service and decent homes work is a particular strength. A residents' repairs panel is attended by six residents who represent the views of tenants and one represents the views of leaseholders. Their role is advertised in the newsletter so that residents know who to contact. They are provided with mobile phones so that they do not incur the cost of calls. Service performance, complaints and policy matters are discussed and issues are reported directly to the contractors' management team through the attendance of a Tenant Liaison Officer at the group. Examples of changes driven by this group include:
- a shift to an area-based rather than elemental approach to the decent homes programme, as the elemental approach was seen as unfair by residents, and the respective costs of the two approaches were made clear to tenants in making their decision;
 - the purchase of a new IT appointment system as a result of problems with missed appointments;
 - changes to the gas safety policy and procedures; and
 - involvement in scoring tenders for the procurement of the new decent homes kitchen contract.
- 125** Satisfaction with opportunities to participate is now at a reasonable level. Recent monthly satisfaction surveys show satisfaction with opportunities to participate at 73 per cent which is a significant improvement from 45 per cent in the 2008 STATUS survey. This improvement reflects the increased range of well promoted opportunities to engage at a local, service and strategic level within Redbridge Homes.
- 126** Effective support is provided to residents involved in participation structures. Support is provided by two specialist Resident Involvement Officers and a residents' training programme is in place for 2009, which is based on a sounding from residents. This is publicised through a high quality booklet for residents, and the investment in training is seen as particularly positive by residents. Training and support develops residents' skills to effectively influence and shape services.
- 127** However, there are some weaknesses in the approach. Resident engagement is not inclusive of all communities. Diversity profiling information is not yet being used to ensure that all sections of the community are involved or to target approaches and develop contacts with local communities who are not involved or under-represented. There is one example of a youth forum being supported via a residents' association and a new Positive Involvement Network has been established to promote inclusion, but this is a recent initiative with few outcomes to date. The organisation does not yet know how inclusive its approach is and the more marginalised communities may not be able to influence the service.
- 128** Financial resources to support residents associations are small. The annual support grant for resident associations is £200 per year which is significantly less than neighbouring London Boroughs, although an allowance is provided for larger estates. Some external funding has been secured, for example for a fun day, but generally it has been limited. Without adequate funding resident association activities are limited.

- 129** Value for money in the resident involvement service is not effectively managed. Although there are examples of where costs are being controlled and budgets being managed to avoid an overspend, there is a lack of benchmarking on cost and quality, and there are no efficiency or savings targets, and no measure of whether the £38,000 budget (excluding staff costs) is adequate.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy Management

- 130** In 2006, we found that the Council as a whole was making efforts to respond to resident concerns in relation to ASB but that there are weaknesses in certain areas.
- 131** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. New specialist teams have a clear focus on prevention and enforcement, and the approach to ASB and domestic violence is victim-centred and responded to quickly. Partnership working is improving the response including the provision of diversionary activities to prevent ASB. However, some long standing ASB issues remain unresolved on some estates and resident satisfaction with the response is low. Tenancy audits and visits to new tenants are not being carried out to the required level.
- 132** There is a clear and pro-active approach to tenancy management. Housing management services have been restructured to create specialist teams and revised procedures reflect the move from generic to specialist roles. A programme of tenancy audits is in place and households that have not responded to the household information survey are prioritised. Approximately eight properties have been recovered where illegal occupation has been identified and the ALMO participates in the National Fraud Initiative¹² in conjunction with the Council which has highlighted some incidents of housing benefit fraud. Referrals to the Tenancy Sustainment Officer are made where vulnerable residents are identified and action is taken where abandoned properties or illegal occupation are identified. Regular meetings with other teams ensure a joined up working. For example, if the repairs service is erecting scaffolding for maintenance work other resident issues such as pigeons are addressed. Individual and team targets and service standards are in place, and performance against the standards is publicised to customers. The organisation is managing the use of its stock and assisting tenants to sustain their tenancies.
- 133** Redbridge Homes works effectively with the Tenants' Management Organisation (TMO). There is only one TMO within Redbridge, on the Ray Lodge estate. Effective support is provided and joint working such as joint estate inspections helps to ensure a quality service is provided to its tenants.

¹² The National Fraud Initiative is an exercise undertaken by the Audit Commission to match electronic data within and between audited bodies to prevent and detect fraud.

How good is the service?

- 134** New anti-social behaviour (ASB) procedures are victim-centred and ASB is being effectively responded to. The ALMO responded to resident dissatisfaction with ASB services by establishing a new specialist ASB team following a peer challenge review by another London social landlord. The specialist team provides a single point of contact for customers and partners and greater consistency through established procedures and standard forms/letters. The new approach has an appropriate balance between prevention and enforcement and officers agree actions and support plans with victims, and use diversionary activities and tools such as injunctions and mediation. The number of enforcement actions has increased, and in the current year to date it has taken 28 cases of enforcement action consisting of injunctions, acceptable behaviour contracts, ASBOs¹³, mediation and notice of seeking possession. About 96 per cent and 82 per cent of priority one and two ASB cases were responded to within the target time. Redbridge Homes publicises its ASB successes in the local press and newsletter and gives feedback to customers in areas where the ASB occurred. Residents can have greater confidence that their concerns are being addressed.
- 135** Effective partnership working is supporting the approach to ASB. Redbridge Homes actively works in partnership at both an operational and strategic level with the Council, the police and other agencies to jointly promote community safety and tackle ASB. It is a member of the community safety partnership and protocols are in place to enable the sharing of confidential information relating to ASB. It has worked with partners to target work on ASB and crime hotspots and to provide support to vulnerable perpetrators, such as young people or people with drug dependency or mental health problems. It has signed up to the Respect Standard and has integrated this into its multi-agency approach. For example, it convened a public meeting involving all the key agencies to address ASB perpetrated by young people at Buckthorn House in Hainault. Partnership working is a more effective use of resources and increases the impact of initiatives to reduce ASB.
- 136** Domestic abuse, hate crimes and racial harassment are dealt with effectively and are the highest priority for action. Action is agreed with the victim and the response is flexible depending on the situation and wishes of the victim. Options include referrals to refuges or to temporary accommodation elsewhere via the Council, additional security measures under a sanctuary scheme, or seeking an injunction against the perpetrator. Officers work with a range of partners such as Victim Support and action is co-ordinated, and joint training has been held with partners on dealing with hate crime. Victims of domestic abuse and hate crimes are quickly and effectively supported.
- 137** ASB and domestic violence case records are well maintained. Each file contains standard forms that clearly show the details of each case and the chronology of actions, as well as a range of written evidence and key paperwork, such as statements and court papers. Well maintained records can be critical in securing successful legal action.

¹³ ASBO is an anti-social behaviour order issued by a court in England.

- 138** However, there are some weaknesses in the approach. The ALMO has been slow in responding to some long-standing ASB problems and satisfaction with the service is low. On some estates there is ongoing ASB by young people, including gangs of youths using drugs on one estate. It is now starting to tackle these in partnership with the Police and the Council but residents have had to suffer from the ASB for a considerable period of time without any resolution, which is reflected in the satisfaction levels - only 27 per cent of service users were satisfied with the ASB service at December 2008. Only the initial response time to ASB is being monitored and not the level of successful outcomes, which is of most importance to residents.
- 139** Diversionary activities are limited and their effectiveness has not been assessed. Redbridge Homes works in partnership with the Council's youth service to support a 'youth bus' to visit estates with ASB 'hotspots'. It provides an opportunity for young people to participate in activities such as making music and surfing the internet. It has also worked with Leyton Orient football club to provide 'Kicks', a summer football training programme for young people on one estate. However, whether these initiatives have had any impact in preventing not reducing ASB has not been assessed. So while such activities can potentially prevent ASB, if they are not effective they make little impact on residents' quality of life.
- 140** Performance of the tenancy services is below the established targets. Housing officers have a target of nine tenancy audits per month each which includes a visit and tenancy file review. However, at March 2009, only 75 per cent of the tenancy audits due have been carried out (522 out of a planned 700) although audits are also undertaken in the course of other work such as arrears visits. Only 53 per cent of new tenants are visited within four weeks against a 100 per cent target. Opportunities to prevent tenancy and ASB issues occurring, and to offer support to new tenants are being missed.
- 141** The tenancy agreement has some weaknesses. It does not recognise the equal rights of civil partners in accordance with the Civil Partnerships Act 2005, and does not reflect current practice on succession and all issues relating to domestic violence. For example, succession rights of unmarried couples are not included. Some tenants may be unaware of their legal rights and responsibilities and potentially may face unlawful discrimination.

Estate Management

- 142** In 2006, we found that services provided to estates were well received by residents, but we did note some inconsistencies.
- 143** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Estates are in good condition and residents are benefiting from an enhanced caretaking service and satisfaction is high. Residents are involved in estate management and improvements and grounds maintenance contracts are well managed. However, the costs of the service are high, issues such as car parking on estates are yet to be addressed and cleaning is not always to a high standard.

How good is the service?

- 144** Estates are kept in a good condition. Estates have very little litter, graffiti, bulk refuse or abandoned vehicles. Grass and shrubberies are trimmed and well kept. A scoring system has been developed to measure the quality of estates, and these are checked every two months by the caretaking team leaders and independently by residents on estate inspections. Over 97 per cent of estates inspected have achieved an A or B rating. Estate action days are held in a number of areas to allow residents to raise estate issues with the contractor and Housing Officers. The 2008 residents' survey found that 73 per cent of tenants and 66 per cent of leaseholders are satisfied with their area as a place to live. Residents generally enjoy a well maintained living environment.
- 145** A well-resourced caretaking service provides an enhanced service across all estates and satisfaction with the service is high. Redbridge Homes has invested in a comprehensive caretaking service including a 'Blitz team' that undertakes cleaning of communal areas, the rapid removal of offensive graffiti, free removal of bulk refuse, the monitoring of grounds maintenance, window cleaning and communal repairs, recording ASB with digital cameras and responding to emergency drainage problems. Caretaking staff are provided with the right equipment to do their job, such as tipper vans, and they also attend residents' meetings, fun days and estate inspections. There are numerous examples of caretaking staff 'going the extra mile' to assist vulnerable customers. Satisfaction surveys are undertaken on a weekly basis and overall satisfaction with the service is at 93 per cent. Residents are enjoying cleaner and better maintained estates as a result of this customer-focused service.
- 146** Residents are effectively engaged in estate management through monitoring and feedback. A programme of multi-partner estate inspections are publicised in advance and regularly conducted. Estate inspection outcomes are given to attendees and the local residents' association, and notice boards in all blocks and estates are used to feedback on the outcomes and to keep customers informed about a range of issues, such as cleaning schedules and communal repairs. An estate guardian scheme is operated to ensure small estates or single blocks possess a tenant representative who champions the maintenance of the estate - there are currently seven estate guardians across the borough. Residents are influencing the standard of estates as their issues are being raised and responded to.
- 147** Additional resources have been made available to respond to residents' priorities for estate improvements. An annual estate environmental budget of £275,000 called the 'Quality of Life Fund' is used to tackle local issues. Allocations are agreed in by a panel of residents that is chaired by a tenant Board member. £7,500 is top sliced for each Housing Officer to fund local measures, such as additional security, signage, and environmental improvements. Improvements have included the provision of small children's play areas. Residents are benefiting directly from improved estates.

- 148** The grounds maintenance contract is effectively monitored. Grounds maintenance services are provided as part of the Council's wider corporate grounds maintenance contract. Redbridge Homes has taken over monitoring the housing elements of the contract and both tenants and leaseholders are involved in a resident grounds maintenance procurement group. Monthly meetings are held with the contractors to discuss performance, progress against the programme of works, and address feedback from customers. Joint site meetings are held with the contractors to observe and agree action where issues arise, and rectification notices have been served to a total of £30,000 where work has been below the standard specified in the contract. In between meetings, ongoing informal contact with contractors helps to quickly address issues as they arise. Effective monitoring helps to ensure a good standard of service and value for money.
- 149** Redbridge Homes is facilitating recycling on its estates. It has participated in Council consultation on the location of recycling sites on the estates, and where possible it recycles the bulk and garden waste it removes.
- 150** Although the outcomes for residents are positive, the costs of the service are high. Cost benchmarking showed Redbridge Homes' tenancy and estate management costs as almost the highest, ranked as 16 out of 17 among ALMOs in London and 66 out of 68 among all ALMOs. A separate contract is to be re-negotiated with the contractor towards the end of 2009 which residents are influencing through a working group to look at the new specification which is to be consulted on. Residents are paying above average amounts for the service.
- 151** Redbridge Homes is yet to effectively tackle the problem of car parking on its estates. Too few car parking spaces are available on the estates and while there are examples of ad hoc work in some streets devised in consultation with residents, the ALMO is constrained by the lack of resources, and an exercise to identify the needs, options and costs has not yet been undertaken. Parking remains a problem for residents.
- 152** Cleaning of communal areas is not always to a consistently high standard. Most blocks are well kept and very clean but some have very dirty paint work in the stairwells and communal drying areas and cobwebs on the communal light fittings. Also, despite the free bulk refusal removal service which is helping to reduce fly-tipping and illegal dumping of obsolete goods, this still remains an issue on some estates. For some residents the immediate environment around their home is not of a high standard.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 153** In 2006, we found a mixed picture in terms of the delivery of services to leaseholders. For example, while there was a view that communication has improved, services that affected the immediate environment had not done so. The service was still in development, in that services were still split between departments. The housing management service was responsible for the Right to Buy (RTB) process, consultation on major works and the Payments and Benefits Department was responsible for service charge billing and collection and positive work had been undertaken to date.

How good is the service?

- 154** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses in this area. A dedicated home ownership team is making an impact in improving the service and a wide range of clear and useful information is available. Service charges are separated out for each service that is charged for, and estimates and actual bills are clearly presented and regularly sent out. There is a range of flexible payment options, referrals are made to debt advice agencies, a competitive repairs service is offered and the leaseholder's forum is increasingly influencing the service. The right to buy service is meeting the needs of applicants. However, service charges have not always been accurately calculated, major works collection rates and service costs do not compare favourably, and the level of leaseholder satisfaction is not satisfactory.
- 155** A dedicated homeownership ownership team (HOT) delivers a 'one stop shop' service for leasehold and RTB issues and is improving services. Service standards are in place for responding to tenants' letters and emails and performance against the standards has increased significantly in the past six months with 100 per cent of correspondence now being responded to in time. The leaseholders' forum has commended the HOT for having delivered a lot of improvements.
- 156** Information and documentation for leaseholders is generally clear and well produced. Leaseholders were recently involved in developing and reviewing a new leaseholders' handbook that is available in different formats and provides relevant and useful information on all aspects of being a leaseholder and the services that are provided. A service charge handbook provides a detailed explanation of how charges are calculated and apportioned. A summary of rights and responsibilities, the newsletter and the website all provide useful information.
- 157** Service charges are identified and attributed appropriately. About 91 per cent of all costs are attributable to blocks or estates as appropriate, the exception being the overhead costs of cleaning and caretaking services where these relate to equipment utilised in all areas such as vehicles and protective equipment. Grounds maintenance services are disaggregated to estate level, and block specific services such as servicing door entry systems are attributable to the particular block. Disaggregated charges help to ensure that leaseholders are only charged for services that they directly benefit from.
- 158** Service charge documentation is clearly presented and regularly sent out. In response to leaseholder feedback the documentation was reviewed and revised in conjunction with leaseholders. Statements clearly set out separate accounts for service charge, ground rent, major works and insurance. Schedules of estimated and actual charges give a break down of the charges for different services, overheads, and the management fee and indicate if they are apportioned by estate, block, sub block or to an individual and the fraction used for calculation. Estimates are sent annually in April, and final bills are sent 18 months later. All major works are billed within 14 days of the start and a breakdown of communal repairs is sent out every three months to inform residents of work completed. This helps leaseholders to raise any queries at the time and to plan ahead and budget appropriately.

- 159** Leaseholders are offered a range of payment methods, including flexible payment options for major works, and advice and support with paying their bill. Direct debit is actively encouraged for service charges, and although the number paying by this is still relatively low (approximately 580) it is increasing. Dedicated surgeries are held during billing periods and major works bills can be paid on an interest free basis over 12 months. Referrals are made to the Council's debt advice services or to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) or CHAS Central London¹⁴. The Council also offers a loans scheme but the take up has been low. Leaseholders over 60 years old are referred to 'Houseproud', an equity release scheme for securing relatively low interest loans. The ALMO is making it easy for leaseholders to pay their bills.
- 160** Service charge collection is effective. The level of collection has improved from 92 per cent in 2007/08 compared with 96 per cent nationally, to 104 per cent in 2008/09. Income from service charges is being maximised.
- 161** A responsive and competitively priced responsive repairs service is offered to leaseholders. This is provided by Redbridge Homes' repairs contractor which charges a call out fee of £45 and provides the home owner with an estimate of costs before works commence. Works charges are tied to the repairs works codes, so leaseholders are paying the same price as that charged for tenants' repairs.
- 162** Leaseholders are actively engaged in influencing the development of services. A monthly leaseholder forum and annual conference are having an influence, for example the team set up a database for managing correspondence in response to complaints and response rates improved from 75 per cent to 97 per cent, service charge documentation was improved, they were able to influence the grounds maintenance contract, and there is regular consultation on major works. Services are improving as a result of leaseholder engagement.
- 163** Homebuyers receive a good level of advice and information about the right to buy and responsibilities of home ownership. A guide to owning your own home provides useful information on points that potential applicants should consider, the discount entitlement and leaseholders responsibilities, and other forms of home ownership. This and the RTB application form are available on the website. Since 2008 each prospective purchaser is offered a free consultation with a member of the Home Ownership Team at the Offer Notice stage of the application, and post-sale inductions for right to buy and open-market purchasers, that cover rights and responsibilities under the lease, service charges, section 20 consultation and resident involvement opportunities.
- 164** Performance on issuing offer letters (section 125 notices) is high. All notices were issued within the statutory eight weeks for freehold leasehold applicants in 2007/08, although for freeholders this dropped to 94 per cent in the current year to date. This helps tenants to swiftly progress their plans to buy their home.
- 165** Satisfaction with the right to buy process is high. All of those who responded to the survey are generally satisfied with the way the home ownership team deals with applications.

¹⁴ CHAS Central London is a charity providing free and independent housing and debt advice across London.

How good is the service?

- 166** However, leasehold service charges have not been accurately calculated and do not cover the full costs of leasehold management services. The 2007/08 actual bills and the 2008/09 estimated bills contained a management fee of 15 per cent instead of 10 per cent. This has now been resolved and credited to the 2008/09 accounts, but 10 per cent does not reflect the actual level of management costs. Some leaseholders did not have communal window cleaning charges included in the 2007/08 bills but this has been corrected, and some aspects of grounds maintenance were also not included. Leaseholders have been advised of these changes and Redbridge Homes has apologised for its errors. By not managing charges well, there is a lack of trust and confidence among leaseholders, and by not covering all service costs, tenants are effectively subsidising leaseholder services through their rent and service charges.
- 167** Collection levels for capital works are low. Bills are generally issued on time but at 30 September 2008 only 63 per cent of capital works charges had been collected against a target of 80 per cent. A new debt management strategy has recently been adopted which aims to ensure more robust collection of charges, and has included the appointment of two specialist income recovery officers. The organisation is not effectively recovering its costs for major works, so leaseholders are being subsidised by tenants' rents.
- 168** Leaseholder satisfaction is not at a satisfactory level. The 2008 status survey found that 41 per cent of leaseholders are satisfied with overall service. Although this compares favourably with some other ALMOs in London it is below that of other similar sized ALMOs nationally. Leaseholders are experiencing inconsistent customer service such as waiting for calls to be returned, with some leaseholders requiring several attempts to get a full answer to their query. Only 23 per cent of leaseholders think the service charge is good value for money, and cost benchmarking data is not being shared with residents. The ALMO is not being transparent about how well the service compares which is fuelling their dissatisfaction.
- 169** Leasehold management services are comparatively expensive. In 2007/08, the cost per property was £279 which is one of the most expensive among ALMOs and the 9th most expensive out of 17 London ALMOs. The end of year forecast for 2008/09 shows an increase in cost per property to £401 which would make the service one of the most expensive in London and nationally.
- 170** Performance on serving response notices to applicants (RTB2s) within the statutory timescale is unsatisfactory. Performance has declined from 73 per cent in 2006/07 to around 57 per cent in the past two years. It is now improving, but is still among the worse performers of London ALMOs. Only 28 applications were received in the current year to 18 February 2009, but for those applicants a delay in knowing if the application is accepted can cause inconvenience in arranging a mortgage and making other plans and the ALMO is not meeting statutory requirements.

Allocations and lettings

- 171** In 2006, we inspected the choice-based letting (CBL) scheme, which was operating satisfactorily though the number of properties available to the Council's partners was limited. Access to the scheme was good with kiosks in two of the housing offices, a freephone hotline, via the website, and a widely circulated magazine.

- 172** In this inspection, we inspected the lettings service managed by Redbridge Homes (the CBL system is retained by the Council) and found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses. The ALMO is working closely with the Council to manage lettings and to ensure that the needs of vulnerable applicants are addressed. The letting process is customer focused, satisfaction with new homes is high and under-occupation is being tackled. However, re-let times and the number of refusals are high.
- 173** There is an effective working relationship with the Council's allocation service. ALMO staff can access the Council's allocations system to monitor progress with lettings and identify potential needs of potential new tenants. Multiple viewings have recently been agreed in response to delays in approaching the next applicant after a refusal. Existing tenants seeking a mutual exchange are encouraged to apply through a national mutual exchange programme. Close liaison improves the speed of re-letting properties.
- 174** Vulnerable applicants are effectively supported through the allocation and letting process. Tenancy sustainment officers in both services liaise closely on potential support needs of vulnerable applicants such as young people leaving care and people with mental health needs, so that referral and support arrangements can be put in place from the start of the tenancy. A protocol is also in place with the Council, with a target of ten working days for an occupational therapist to assess the suitability of a property and reduce the time taken to re-let adapted properties. Close partnership working ensures that a suitably adapted property is allocated, and vulnerable tenants receive appropriate support.
- 175** The lettings process is customer focused and satisfaction with new homes is high. The lettable standard is provided to prospective tenants during accompanied viewings, and applicants have the option of retaining fixtures and fittings such as carpets left by the outgoing tenant. Storage of goods is offered for applicants to encourage offers to be accepted and help reduce the time taken to re-let properties. Satisfaction with newly let properties is high at 93 per cent although the response rate has been low so new tenants are now being contacted by telephone to obtain some qualitative feedback.
- 176** New tenants are provided with appropriate support to settle in. Introductory tenancies are used, supported by a useful welcome pack that includes a range of information on their tenancy, their home, and the local area. A 'Handy Hints' booklet provides guidance on basic household maintenance with diagrams and step by step guidance. New tenants are also offered a decoration allowance which is based on the existing condition of the property. To ensure the allowance is used for decorating material, the payments are made in two stages after the property has been checked.
- 177** Redbridge Homes has very few properties that are difficult to let and so it has focused on tackling under-occupation to assist the Council in meeting housing needs. A grant of £2,000 per bedroom and removal costs is offered to encourage under-occupying tenants to exchange to a smaller property. Since its introduction, it has freed up 29 affordable bed spaces at a cost of £60,000 and has potentially saved the Council a significantly larger amount in temporary accommodation costs.

How good is the service?

178 The time taken to re-let properties is comparatively high and there are a significant number of refusals. The average re-let time is 30.4 days at January 2009 against a target of 25 days and compared with a 2007/08 average of 24.9 days. 73 properties have been refused in the year to date up to January 2009, and multiple viewings have been introduced to minimise the impact of refusals. The major reason for refusal is 'location/area' and only eight were because of the condition of the property. If empty homes are not re-let quickly, those in housing need are waiting longer and the organisation is losing rental income.

Supported Housing

- 179** This area was not inspected in 2006. In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Redbridge Homes manages two sheltered housing schemes with a total of 124 units. Residents are engaged in issues affecting the schemes through regular meetings and bi-monthly estate inspections that have had positive outcomes. However, engagement in wider organisational issues is limited, resident satisfaction with the service is not measured, some units still have shared bathrooms and engagement with the Council at a strategic level to address longer term needs for supported housing has not yet taken place.
- 180** Regular meetings with residents of the two sheltered housing schemes have resulted in positive outcomes. The meetings are attended by staff from the ALMO, the Council and the repairs contractor and provide a good opportunity for residents to raise any issues of concern. Issues are responded to quickly and Quality of Life funds have been used to make improvements requested by residents such as an improved patio and garden furniture. Tenants are involved in decisions about the refurbishment of the schemes, for example laundry facilities were retained and adapted in one scheme at the tenant's request. Residents are receiving an attentive and responsive service.
- 181** However, sheltered housing residents are not effectively consulted on wider organisational issues. Scheme meetings are not used to consult on wider issues such as the organisation's approach to ASB even though residents have reported ASB issues. The borough housing panel and area housing forums are open to sheltered housing residents, but these are held in other locations and may not be easily accessed by frailer residents. Residents may not have an equal opportunity to have a say and the views of some of the most vulnerable residents are not being considered.
- 182** There is no separate satisfaction surveying of residents, but the schemes are popular and have a waiting list.
- 183** Engagement with the Council at a strategic level on the provision and management of supported housing is lacking. The Council is responsible for the provision and allocation of supported housing and care services, and the ALMO is responsible for housing management including repairs and maintenance and resident involvement. Quarterly meetings have recently been agreed but are still to be held. This means that there is a lack of longer-term planning to address levels and types of need and future provision.

184 There are a small number of units that still have shared bathing facilities. These are currently used to support hospital discharge patients who need additional personal care. There are plans to remodel these units to self-contained units as part of the decent homes programme. Some residents do not have an acceptable level of privacy and service.

Is the service delivering value for money?

185 In 2006, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in this area. The Council had started to show an awareness of the value for money principles and compared its costs with other providers. Savings had been made through the kitchen and bathroom partnership, and some initial savings had been seen in the new out-of-hours contract. However, significant weaknesses remained that had a fundamental impact on day-to-day service delivery. These included the high level of emergency and urgent repairs, lack of consistent and targeted post-inspections, not monitoring variation levels, high void costs and no robust framework for awarding decoration allowances. Contract management had also been weak and this had impacted upon the level of performance data available and the delivery of the capital programme. It had used the services of an external organisation to produce an annual efficiency statement and a value for money strategy during the period that we were on site.

186 In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. There is a good understanding of how costs and quality compare and a lot of progress has been made in developing a VFM framework and a number of efficiency savings have been made through reduced costs or improved practices, partnering and joint procurement. However, many costs are comparatively high, VFM is not fully embedded as use of benchmarking data is limited, not all SLAs have been reviewed and there has been no systematic approach to VFM service reviews. Some practices are clearly not good value for money and the ALMO is required to return end of year surpluses to the Council rather than re-invest them in tenant priorities.

How do costs compare?

187 Redbridge Homes, as a relatively small ALMO, is a comparatively expensive organisation as the management costs per property are generally high. Core costs, average repairs and repairs management costs per property are among the highest in London and nationally. Benchmark ranking for the management costs for responsive repairs in 2007/08 is 16 out of 18 London ALMOs and 66 out of 68 ALMOs. After salaries, this is the highest single area of expenditure and so has a significant impact on overall costs. The ALMO has been working with the contractor to identify ways of reducing overheads and about £130,000 cost savings have been identified to date. Costs are also very high for tenancy and estates, arrears and leasehold management services.

188 However, there are some areas of the service where costs compare favourably. For example, the average cost of responsive repairs at £99 per repair is low, rent collection and accounting is the fourth least expensive in London, and void management costs are about average compared to ALMOs in London and nationally. Average major and cyclical repair costs, and accommodation costs also compare favourably.

How good is the service?

189 The organisation has a reasonably good understanding of how costs and quality of service compare. Benchmarking is conducted via a range of activities including via an established social housing benchmarking service and other benchmarking groups for example for leasehold management and former tenancy arrears, through networks such as ALMO Finance Directors' group, from job evaluation processes, and through direct comparisons with partner contractors and other London ALMOs.

How is value for money managed?

- 190** The ALMO has taken steps to develop a framework for managing value for money which it is in the process of rolling out and developing further. This includes a VFM strategy and action plan up to December 2008, an annual review of targets, costs and customer feedback as part of the budget-setting process, a procurement strategy and agreed methodology for major investments and procurement decisions including a VFM business case template, and costs are being benchmarked against London and national ALMOs. Briefings have been held for staff on VFM and procurement to identify efficiency savings, and there is an awareness among staff of the need to reduce costs and deliver services more efficiently. VFM is incorporated into core competencies for senior managers' appraisals, although efficiency targets have yet to be set. A well-developed framework can make a greater impact in delivering VFM than ad hoc activities.
- 191** The ALMO has identified more efficient ways of working and achieved cost savings in many areas. For example, in environmental services savings have been negotiated on cleaning products and moving to mobile teams means that more estates can be covered by the same number of staff. A re-tendered window cleaning contract secured VFM gains and community service offenders are utilised to redecorate void properties. £84,702 has been saved on re-tendered contracts such as lift maintenance and controlled entry systems. By making possession claims online £5,550 has been saved in legal costs and earlier court dates are being secured which prevents arrears escalating, and the introduction of a new repairs appointment system and hand held devices in the repairs service has delivered cashable savings of £22,000 to date.
- 192** The focus on value for money in the new repairs contract is robust. The new repairs contract is a ten year partnering arrangement for responsive repairs including the dedicated repairs call centre. While it does not have a specified long term target for savings, the incentive to share efficiencies is delivering significantly. In the first year of operation £1.3 million of savings were delivered and £200,000 in the second year. The defects liability period for capital works has been extended to four years at no extra cost which also represents savings for the ALMO. While few cashable savings are anticipated in the current year, process mapping and a programme to examine all of the costs in detail and requiring the contractor to adopt an open book approach from this year are likely to identify further efficiencies if the process is handled well.
- 193** Repairs and maintenance practice is delivering VFM in a number of ways. Pre-inspections are low, and the contractor includes multi-skilled operatives among its repairs team which reduces the number of calls required and time to complete void repairs and responsive repairs such as a bath replacement. The planned to responsive ratio of 79:21 represents VFM as planned work will generally cost less than repairs carried out on a reactive basis.

- 194** A programme of service level agreement (SLA) reviews is delivering improved VFM. 7 out of 12 SLAs have been reviewed to date and have resulted in enhanced service levels or additional services for the same fee, or in one case, a saving of £75,900 by bringing the contract compliance unit in-house, and £34,000 savings on legal and constitutional services.
- 195** Some cashable savings have been secured through joint procurement with the Council. For example, £68,600 savings on a new recruitment agency contract as well as savings on smaller contracts for office and stationary supplies.
- 196** External funding has been secured to undertake some major adaptations for disabled residents, but has otherwise been limited. £80,000 of regional funding has been secured for larger adaptations to a long term empty property to meet the needs of a family with a disabled member. A further £150,000 of regional funding is being used to create three additional accessible properties for disabled residents at the bottom of a tower block in Liston Way. This will also provide additional rental income for the ALMO. External funding can increase the organisations capacity to deliver improvements and improve value for money.
- 197** However, the approach to managing VFM is not yet fully developed or effectively embedded across the organisation. The new VFM strategy is not an effective tool for driving and embedding VFM. It is not SMART¹⁵, and has no outcomes or up-to-date implementation plan. VFM is not reflected in the core values or service objectives and many staff could not demonstrate a clear understanding of VFM beyond achieving savings, and not all managers have specific targets as part of a corporate drive to improve VFM, despite costs being high. Without a clear and targeted approach, the organisation cannot know whether services are delivering value for money.
- 198** There is no systematic approach for undertaking VFM assessments and service reviews, and a programme of service reviews is yet to be developed. Some work has been undertaken to identify potential efficiency savings in areas of high costs through external benchmarking. For example with caretaking services, where more services have been provided as a result, but this has not happened across the organisation. VFM is supposed to be managed through service plans and budgets, but most of these have not included VFM assessments or targets and are mostly lists of operational tasks. Without a systemic approach it is unclear how the organisation assesses the impact of service developments such as creating specialist teams in customer care, ASB, and voids.
- 199** Benchmarking information is not being effectively used and is not carried out in all services. Redbridge Homes uses benchmarking data to identify how costs compare, but it has not yet used it to manage costs by identifying higher performers and considering alternative approaches to service delivery. Where it has made efforts to do this for example in comparing the scope and staffing levels of the income recovery role, this was against a lower performing council. The adaptations service is not benchmarked and some benchmarking data is not effectively analysed for example for former tenancy arrears. The organisation does not know how its costs compare in all areas and is not always using benchmarking to learn from higher performers.

¹⁵ SMART is specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed

How good is the service?

200 There are several practices that are not delivering value for money. For example:

- The repairs contractor has high staffing costs and redundant office space at its depot in Bourne Court that adds to its overheads. Double charging for costs have been identified for example, staff costs that are works costs already included in the schedule of rates and costs for staff that spend at least a part of their time on other contracts.
- The level of post-inspections is high but the quality of works is often of an unsatisfactory standard. The contractor post-inspects between 30 and 40 per cent of all jobs, and a further 10 per cent of these are double checked by Redbridge Homes audit managers. This represents an unnecessary expense that goes against the principles of partnering.
- Redbridge Homes has rarely recharged or collected rechargeable costs for repairs from its tenants.
- There is a reactive rather than planned approach to boiler replacement.
- Leasehold management charges are not covering management costs. The lease clause only allows for a maximum ten per cent management fee which falls well below the cost of providing the service, and some leaseholders are paying different amounts for the same service due to variations between leases.
- Until February 2009 the ALMO was paying £50,000 for HR services from the Council that it was not receiving. Due to the unresponsiveness of the Council's service the ALMO resorted to appointing an in-house interim HR manager to provide the support that should have been delivered under the SLA.
- VFM is not effectively considered in the provision of training and development. In-house expertise is used to deliver training to reduce costs, but it is not evaluated for cost effectiveness. Market testing of training providers has been limited, and joint training with other landlord organisations has not been explored.

201 The corporate approach to procurement is newly developed and is yet to be fully implemented. A corporate procurement strategy sets out a clear approach with four themes: efficiency and effectiveness, social responsibility, community focus and partnering and collaboration. This has had some impact, particularly in respect to planned works, but key commitments in the strategy such as using the four 'C's'¹⁶ to deliver best value in service delivery, SLA reviews and other procurement activities are yet to be implemented. The corporate approach to procurement is yet to deliver substantial efficiency gains in all service areas.

202 Not all service level agreements have been reviewed. The ALMO has been in existence for almost two years and 5 out of 12 SLAs are still to be reviewed, although two of these reviews have recently started. These remaining reviews are to be undertaken in 2009/10 with potential for further savings or improved service levels.

¹⁶ The four C's - Challenge, Compare, Compete, and Consult - is an approach to ensuring best value in services.

203 Redbridge Homes is required to return any surpluses on its management fee to the Council under the terms of its management agreement, and the Council has to consider the ALMO's views before making decisions on use of any surpluses. The ALMO minimises the amount it has to return by re-allocating any areas of under spend between budget headings throughout the year which is discussed with the Council at monthly monitoring meetings. The requirement to return surpluses to the Council could be a disincentive to achieve efficiency savings or may not always be re-invested in tenant priorities.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 204** In 2006, we found that this was an area of strength, as the Council had made measurable improvements across some repairs and maintenance services, including customer focus, gas servicing, re-let times the delivery of the capital programme. It had started to deliver services through modern methods, and was expanding this through its repairs procurement. However, there were weaknesses in delivering value for money across its services particularly in responsive repairs. There had been progress in implementing the key recommendations made in an earlier report.
- 205** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. A wide number of improvements have been delivered resulting in a more responsive repairs service, more resident involvement and influence, improved estates and higher levels of satisfaction. However, in some areas performance has declined such as re-let times and rent collection, the ALMO has been slow to improve some key areas such as the telephone system and the aids and adaptations service and some initiatives are too recent to have delivered any real improvements for residents.
- 206** Customers have improved access to services through re-furnished offices, better communication including well presented information leaflets and booklets, an informative newsletter and website.
- 207** Satisfaction has increased in a number of key areas since the ALMO was set up.
- Satisfaction with overall service has increased by 9 per cent to 77 per cent.
 - Satisfaction with the repairs service increased by 10 per cent to 75 per cent.
 - Satisfaction with estates increased by 7 per cent to 73 per cent.
 - Satisfaction with VFM of rent increased by 12 per cent to 68 per cent.
- 208** Tenants' opportunities to influence service development have increased with a wider range of opportunities to participate and more extensive and regular satisfaction monitoring and customer feedback opportunities.
- 209** The level of diversity profile data has increased from a very low starting point to the current 66 per cent of tenants and has been used operationally to improve services for some tenants.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

210 Redbridge Homes has delivered a range of improvements that have been to the benefits of its tenants.

- The speed of responsive repairs has improved for each of the last three years across each category, and new IT software has led to more appointments being made, kept and jobs being done right first time.
- The proportion of decent homes improved from 69 per cent in 2006 to 73 per cent in 2008.
- The level of gas servicing has improved reaching 99.4 per cent by February 2009.
- Average re-let times have been reducing over the previous three years. In 2005/06 it took an average of 33 days to re-let properties, this reduced to 27 days in 2006/07, and last year it achieved a further reduction of 24.9 days.
- Performance against leaseholder service standards has increased significantly in the past six months with 100 per cent of correspondence now being responded to within the target times.
- The percentage of tenants owing more than seven weeks rent has declined over the past three years.
- In-house monitoring of grounds maintenance and window cleaning has improved performance from the contractors.
- Better quality and range of information and communications with residents.
- The creation of specialist teams such as the customer service division, home ownership team and dedicated ASB team has improved the quality of response and achieved greater outcomes for residents.

211 However, performance in some areas has declined.

- Rent collection declined from 97.88 per cent for 2007/08 to 96.25 per cent at October 2008 against target of 98.25 per cent.
- The percentage of homes with gas safety certificates fell from 99.7 to 98 in the last full year.
- Satisfaction with opportunities to participate declined from 49 per cent in 2006/07 to 45 per cent in 2008.
- Average re-let times increased from 24.9 days in 2007/08 to 28.2 days in 2008/09.

212 Future plans for improving access arrangements have been slow to develop. Some key tasks in the customer service strategy such as improving the telephone system and making the website more accessible have yet to be delivered. The telephony remains a key weakness, and is unlikely to be resolved before mid-2009, and the ALMO has yet to consult customers on future office locations.

213 Action to address weaknesses in the adaptations service has been very slow. Weaknesses were identified in 2007 by an external consultants review, but the ALMO did not begin to address it seriously until four months ago, following a change in personnel. Significant weaknesses remain in terms of information and access to the service, recycling adaptations, the service not being needs led and tenants receiving a poorer service than other residents in the borough.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 214** Redbridge Homes has not fully addressed all the recommendations outlined in the previous Audit Commission report. Approximately 70 per cent of the recommendations have been achieved and details of progress against previous inspection recommendations are set out in Appendix 2.
- 215** Some positive initiatives are still very recent or are yet to be implemented and so have not yet delivered improved outcomes for residents. For example, the new CAB advice surgeries have only assisted a small number of residents so have had limited impact, a draft major works compact is currently being considered by the major works forum and a new procedure which requires tenants to be involved in the drafting of contract documents is yet to be implemented.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 216** In 2006, we found that there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council had effective strategic improvement planning to improve the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service, and had prioritised this to focus on some of the key weaknesses. There was a robust corporate performance management framework, and clear leadership supported the delivery of planning and improvements. The weaknesses were in the monitoring of the day-to-day delivery of services, as there were few local PIs that made an impact on services, residents had not been involved in reviewing service delivery, the repairs improvement plan was not SMART and the future management and monitoring arrangements of the new repairs partner were unclear.
- 217** In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are still in balance. A performance management framework is in place and leadership is strong. Staff performance is being actively managed and budget management has improved. There is a good relationship with the Council and the organisation is learning from other providers. However, business and service improvement planning is uncoordinated and there is no up-to-date improvement plan in place. Service plans are of low quality and risk management is not adequately robust. Some performance targets are unchallenging, data is not always reliable and internal communications is an issue.
- 218** An appropriate performance management framework and governance and scrutiny arrangements have been developed. These include the business plan and improvement plan, performance indicators, financial performance reports, service plans with budgets devolved to service managers, senior management team meetings, a managers' forum, team meetings and staff appraisals. Governance and scrutiny arrangements include the Board, four sub committees (Audit and Governance, Resources and Performance, Customer Services and Property Services), the Council's performance meeting and Housing Scrutiny Committee, and the borough housing panel of residents and a repairs panel.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 219** Leadership of the ALMO is strong. There is an experienced senior management team and an experienced and effective Chair. The new Chief Executive has brought strong leadership and a clear vision to the organisation, particularly in respect to developing a strong customer focus. She has introduced a competency framework for managers and built a positive but robust relationship with the Council that has resulted in improvements, for example through reviews of SLAs with the Council. Contractors describe the ALMO as 'tough but fair' giving strong messages about working together to improve perceptions and customer focus.
- 220** There is a strong commitment at Board level to organisational cultural change and promoting diversity. The Board has a clear focus on needing to understand weaknesses and identify areas for improvement, including diversity issues. A strong commitment to diversity issues is led by the Chair, two Board champions and the Chief Executive. The ALMO also benefits from the strong support and commitment of the Council cabinet member for housing on diversity issues. Strong leadership is essential for driving forward improvements
- 221** The Board has a wide range of experience and effectively scrutinises and challenges reports as appropriate. The sub-committees receive detailed reports on performance and key service areas where they are closely scrutinised, and the Board receives minutes of the meetings and key performance information. Reports are clearly written although benchmarking information is limited as it does not indicate how the ALMO's performance compares to all others. Where under performance continues, further analysis and reports are requested. The Board does reject officer proposals such as options for new offices, and also challenges officers on under performance, such as gas servicing which has resulted in service improvements.
- 222** Staff are involved in developing the organisation's objectives and priorities. In 2007 the improvement plan was developed with staff at away days, and lunch time briefings, senior management team 'tea parties' and staff conferences have all provided involvement opportunities. Staff are involved in developing service plans and have other opportunities such as team meetings. Involved staff will have a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the organisation's objective.
- 223** A performance management process is in place. Staff performance is managed through one-to-ones, annual appraisals and six monthly reviews. Staff are given targets and objectives and are now assessed against core competencies although these are still to be linked to job descriptions. All managers have had training in conducting appraisals and use of core competencies. Performance information is regularly shared with staff on both organisational, team and individual performance, and discussed at team meetings. A staff incentive scheme encourages and highlights exceptional performance and nominations are made by staff.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 224** The ALMO has a positive working relationship with the Council. The Council has confidence in the senior managers, and monthly performance monitoring meetings are held between officers to monitor the annual delivery plan which is agreed with the Council. Board members, senior officers and the Cabinet member meet quarterly. An ongoing programme of service level agreement (SLA) reviews with the Council is in place, and where it offers good value for money it has been retained, while others that cannot demonstrate value for money have been amended or terminated. The relationship has matured since the ALMO was set up and the Council is committed to ensuring that within the terms of the management agreement, the ALMO can determine the most appropriate and cost effective approaches for its residents.
- 225** A clear process for developing and managing budgets has been developed. A 'budget book' pulls together all budgets and service plans and provides clear guidance for budget holders on monitoring and managing their budgets and briefings have been provided. Budgets were developed in consultation with service teams, the board, the Council and tenants. For 2009/10 tenants were sent a survey questionnaire to indicate their priorities for service improvement and other customer feedback was used. A base budget and a growth budget have been produced to reflect activities depending on whether decent homes funding is secured.
- 226** Redbridge Homes has improved its approach to managing capital works to avoid under spends in the capital budget. Late agreement of what the capital programme was to be made up of and the time taken to consult with leaseholders has previously led to significant underspends, but work on the programme now starts at an earlier stage with greater emphasis on liaising with leaseholders on the value of the work. This has led to much higher expenditure of the budget in 2008/09. Better planning will improve the capacity of the service to meet the decent homes standard.
- 227** The organisation learns from other landlords to develop and improve services. There are various examples of where other landlords' practice has informed service improvements, including support for vulnerable people and successful cash incentives schemes. It also learns from Audit Commission positive practice examples and other web-based good practice.
- 228** However, business and service improvement planning is uncoordinated and the business plan does not adequately address the short to medium term challenges facing the organisation. The plan lacks strategic objectives for the organisation's core business of landlord services, but there are two stated objectives which relate to future expansion through increasing its stock and selling its services. There is no service improvement plan for the 2009/14 lifespan of the plan, as the current plan that expires in March 2009 has eight top level objectives that were based on an assessment of each service area when the ALMO was established. Without clear and up-to-date improvement plans it is unclear how prepared the organisation is to manage its performance and the challenges ahead.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 229** Service plans are of an inconsistent quality and are not effective tools for driving improvement. Service planning was undertaken for the first time in 2008/09, and each service team developed a basic annual service plan as part of the budget setting process. While it may have been useful starting point for focusing teams on performance issues, many of the objectives do not go beyond the core activities of the service and would not deliver improved services for tenants. Some action plans are not SMART, such as the voids and ASB action plans.
- 230** Service reviews including VFM assessments have not been undertaken in most areas and there is no agreed programme of reviews. Some aspects of some services have been reviewed that have been informed by customer feedback, such as caretaking and ASB services, but these have not included a full VFM assessment. There is a commitment in the 2009/14 business plan to 'comprehensive service planning and challenging VFM reviews' and the VFM action plan sets out a clear review process, but a programme of service reviews is yet to be put in place.
- 231** Risk management is not adequately robust. A risk register was only set up in November 2008 and a risk management process agreed which identifies where risks are, who the identified person is to manage the risk, the potential outcomes and projects required to minimise the risk. Quarterly risk reports are made to the audit committee and some key risks are outlined in the new business plan, but the focus has been almost exclusively on securing decent homes funding, and there has been no re-evaluation of other key risks such as the potential impact of the economic recession on all aspects of the business.
- 232** Performance targets not sufficiently challenging, and in some areas the current target is worse than the actual outturn for 2007/08: average re-let times, void time with the contractor, average void and responsive repair costs, percentage of tenants more than seven weeks in arrears and the percentage of customers satisfied with the service. Targets for the caretaking service have remained the same since the ALMO was established and the target on estate quality is not challenging. Without challenging targets developed with tenants there is no driver towards continuous improvement.
- 233** Performance monitoring lacks clarity and is not always reliable. A range of information is recorded for local performance indicators but much of the data is not useful for management purposes and some is not accurate as it is not consistently recorded, for example in the arrears recovery process and the number of arrangements made. Also, performance data is not always consistent between different documents, and so time and effort is being wasted on collecting unused or unreliable data.
- 234** There are gaps in communication from senior managers to staff about actions and plans to develop services. For example, staff were not aware of how joint working with the Council was assisting the development of services, such as a separate grounds maintenance contract and the procurement of an improved telephone system, and staff could not always demonstrate a clear understanding of the organisations objectives. A lack of effective communication can result in uncoordinated services and a lack of commitment to objectives.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 235** Communication and co-ordination between some teams is not robust. Staff surveys reveal communication across the organisation is an issue. An example is that staff dealing with former tenancy arrears are not always informed of a tenants giving notice, and so outgoing tenants are not always adequately advised about the need to hand in the keys promptly to avoid a further rent charge, and the FTA staff miss the opportunity to collect new contact details and to make a repayment arrangement. Lack of communication between teams can result in poorer services for tenants.
- 236** No systems are in place to ensure that one-to-ones and appraisals are conducted. Only 89 per cent of staff have had appraisals this year and a similar number were carried out in 2007/08, and there are no quality checks to ensure that appraisals are being carried out effectively.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 237** In 2006, we found more strengths in this area than weaknesses. The Council had clear aims for improving the service that filtered down to managers and staff, and those we met were aware of the priorities of the service. The capacity of the service had been developed through leadership, staffing and external resources to deliver major projects. And there had been improvements in building the capacity of the service, however, some of these were temporary and the Council did not have the capacity to demonstrate it would sustain service delivery and improvements. The main focus for improving the service was through the repairs procurement partnership that would cover the majority of the service areas that this inspection covered, and had undergone a robust tendering and selection process.
- 238** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses in this area. There is a skilled and experience senior management team and board, and the organisation has restructured services and is investing in staff training and development and IT systems. Staff are motivated and supported, underperformance and staff absences are addressed, and there is a strong partnership with its main contractor. However, while the ALMO is addressing weaknesses in areas such as Board capacity, human resources and IT this has not been within a robust strategic framework leaving some IT system inadequate and financial capacity uncertain.
- 239** There is an experienced and skilled senior management team, as well as significant housing and asset management experience on the Board. There is a high degree of self-awareness of the organisation's weaknesses and challenges, which combined with the track record to date and their experience puts the organisation in a strong position for improvement.
- 240** Restructured specialist services are increasing the expertise and delivering more focused services. Specialist teams now exist in income, ASB, leasehold management as well as a comprehensive asset management division. The combination of experience, new technology, and better organisation of work is delivering improvements. In the repairs service greater interaction between asset and leasehold management is improving the recharging process, and the co-location of the call centre and the contractor team has improved the repairs response. Surveyors now work according to their area of greatest expertise rather than on an area basis. A skilled and motivated workforce will deliver a more consistent and high quality service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 241** There is a corporate training plan based on training needs identified from staff appraisals and linked to the service plans, the organisational values and core competencies. Staff have opportunities to attend conferences to learn about new legislative and regulatory requirements and good practice. Investment is being made into professional development such as NVQ level 2 in caretaking and a BTEC qualification in neighbour nuisance. This helps to ensure that resources are effectively targeted and opportunities are taken up.
- 242** Staff are increasingly positive about working for the ALMO and turnover is very low. Staff state that access to senior management has improved and they are approachable and supportive. A significant amount of dissatisfaction was expressed in the March 2008 staff survey which was actively addressed through small group 'tea sessions' with the new Chief Executive and senior managers, more team meetings and social events. A monthly staff newsletter, intranet and annual staff conferences support staff and keep them informed of organisational developments, all of which are contributing to higher levels of morale. Morale among operatives is high and they are positive about the tenant focus, clear guidelines and the management of the service. A positive and stable workforce increases the capacity to delivering quality services.
- 243** Sickness absence is being actively managed. Both short-term and long-term sickness levels are above the target of four days absence per full time employee. Short-term sickness is currently at 5.1 days and long term at 6.12 days which in themselves are very low levels of sickness. However, an absence management policy is in place and there has been some training for line managers. Referrals are made to an occupational therapist and preventative initiatives have been introduced to minimise health-related absences such as massage sessions, flu jabs and social activities.
- 244** Limitations in management capacity at the middle management level are being effectively addressed. Weaknesses in middle management have been identified by the senior officers and Board and are reflected in some of the staff survey results. To address this, a management competency framework and coaching for managers has been introduced with a clearer focus on competency assessment and staff development. In some instances capability procedures have been used to improve performance or to ultimately remove poor performers. Actively managing under performance increases both individual and organisational capacity to deliver improved services.
- 245** The telephony system is due to be replaced in 2009 which will include voicemail and monitoring facilities. This will improve access for customers and allow for performance against service standards to be measured and improvements to be more effectively targeted.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 246** Redbridge Homes is investing to increase its IT capacity although it is still to finalise an IT strategy. Mobile technology such as mobile phones, laptops and online benefits calculators are used to advise tenants and send them reminders by text message. Housing Officers can connect laptops to the housing IT system while undertaking surgeries, and mobile handheld technology is being trialled. Further investment has been made in a number of areas including new performance management software that will be in use from April 2009. It will enable performance indicators, service plans and risks to be linked and will run snapshot reports for any service area or theme such as VFM to track progress. If used effectively the new system will greatly enhance the capacity for effective performance management.
- 247** There is a strong spirit of partnership that is well managed between Redbridge Homes and its main contractor. Monthly operational meetings are helping to promote the spirit of partnership between the partners and tenants, with an increasing willingness to acknowledge and address mistakes. Staff recognise that the relationship between partners has improved and continues to do so, with previous 'them and us' attitudes no longer present and a greater degree of trust on both sides. Strong partnerships enhance the capacity to deliver quality services.
- 248** Board training needs are assessed and relevant training is delivered, although a regular appraisal and training programme is not yet in place. A self-assessment training needs survey was conducted last year and training has been provided such as risk management, diversity and budgeting and new members receive an induction pack and training. This means the ALMO is developing the Board's core skills but may be missing the opportunity to develop a wider knowledge and skill base for the Board.
- 249** However, there is no HR or people strategy within which human resources are managed, despite a number of on-going issues that the organisation needs to address. For example, the use of temporary staff is high (24 per cent at January 2009) and it has had difficulties in recruiting to posts, including a key post of Director of Resources. Initiatives such as work experience placements and apprenticeships have been set up but these have not been as part of any planned approach. Without a clear strategy of how it plans to address the medium to longer term needs of the organisation, long-term vacancies and a high level of temporary staff may ultimately limit the organisation's capacity to improve.
- 250** Investment is being made into improving computer systems but there are some limitations that are still to be addressed. The contact management system is inadequate, the system for managing former tenancy arrears lacks an escalation facility so all cases have to be manually recorded in online calendars to prompt a reminder, ASB and vulnerability information is stored on stand-alone databases and is not integrated into housing IT systems. It does not allow automatic monitoring of ASB actions or referrals, and data has to be manually assessed for performance reporting. This means that this information may not be available to staff, and management of cases is inefficient.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 251** Financial capacity is uncertain as it is heavily dependent on the ALMO's ability to access decent homes funding. While the ALMO has identified a £39 million shortfall to bring its homes up to the decent homes standard, insufficient capital fund has already led to an increase in non-decency and a further 500 homes (about eight per cent of the stock) is anticipated to fall below the decent homes standard next year without additional funding. Funding shortfalls have resulted in the decision to replace boilers on a reactive rather than planned basis which is likely to cost more in the long term. On the revenue side the management fee is being reduced by three per cent year on year, and the HRA is predicted to be in deficit in two years time which would put increased financial pressure on the ALMO.
- 252** The leaseholders' management fee is not covering its management costs. It is planning to seek a deed of variation in order to amend the level of management fee charged to leaseholders to reflect the true management costs, but as leasehold management costs are already comparatively high, this could impact on the level of service charge debt owed.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Redbridge performance 2005/06 to 2007/08

Performance indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 - to 31/12/08	LB top 25% 2007/08
63 Average SAP rating	70	71	72	70	72
66a Percentage rent collected	97.64	96.57	97.88	97.76	98.1
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	6.62	6.31	5.39	4.6	6.1
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	32.99	21.27	28.39	26.57	16.6
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.27	0.15	0.36	0.4	0.2
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	71	68	68	77	74
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	49	49	46	64
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	39	31	29	25	23.8
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	3.4	7.7	6.8	-	27.9
212 Average re-let time (days)	35	27	25	30.9	23.8

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Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Table 1 Repairs and maintenance

March 2006

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Improve the opportunities for resident involvement by ensuring that (by June 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information on the service is consistently publicised in accessible places; 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the complaints process is adequately publicised, responded to and used to improve service delivery; and 	Partially achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tenant profile information is comprehensive and used to inform service delivery. 	Partially achieved
R2 Improve performance management by ensuring that (by April 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the capital programme is effectively managed and delivers work to budget; 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • targets for responsive repairs are met; 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenging targets are set and monitored to reduce the level of emergency and urgent repairs; ultimately in line with Audit Commission guidance; 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decoration allowances are monitored to ensure they are consistently issued and appropriately validated; and 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the value for money of voids costs are reviewed and targets set to align with comparative organisations. 	Partly achieved

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R3 Strengthen the approach to service and improvement planning by ensuring that (by June 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all elements of the service reflect best value principles; 	Not yet achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all elements of the service and improvement plans are SMART; and 	Not yet achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> benchmarking data is effectively used to drive up performance in poorly performing areas. 	Partly achieved
R4 Ensure housing offices comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act legislation by April 2006.	Achieved for two out of three offices

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Table 2 Housing management

February 2006

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Improve the opportunities for resident involvement by ensuring that (by April 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> better Information on the service is consistently publicised in accessible places; 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the complaints system is publicised, used effectively and that complainants are advised of the outcome of their complaint; and 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take steps to publicise the compensation policy so that residents are clear about the council's position. 	Not yet achieved
R2 Improve the approach to diversity by ensuring that (by April 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all the actions to improve diversity are brought together in a more joined up approach; 	Not yet achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> better measures are put in place to assess the level of racist incidents; and 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> consistent levels of support are provided to the BME focus group. 	Not applicable.

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R3 Improve rent collection rates and the cost effectiveness of the service by (by April 2006):	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● setting targets for increasing the take up of direct debits; 	Partly achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● setting clear collection targets for FTAs; and 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● carry out a review of the effectiveness of other mechanisms for improving collection rates, such as text messaging, rent campaigns. 	Achieved
R4 Improve co-ordination and communication of estate inspections - report on value for money across the service within six months.	Achieved
R5 Ensure that follow-up visits to new tenants conform to procedure of four weeks target, and provide information on the letting standard at viewing stage.	Achieved
R6 Take steps to improve service charge collection rates, and place summary of rights and responsibilities on bills (immediately).	Partly achieved
R7 Improve overall budget monitoring and devolvement of information:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● introduce an effective administrative system to ensure that new tenants complete all decorations before the release of part two of the decorations allowance; and 	Achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● report on value for money for the Housing Service as a whole and for existing service contracts within six months. 	Not yet achieved

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Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included the following.
 - Observation of reception areas.
 - Exit interviews with customers at local offices.
 - Telephone calls to tenants who had recently used the service, including those who were new tenants, or who had reported a repair or made a complaint.
 - Observation of telephone calls to income recovery officers.
 - Observation of a Board meeting.
 - Shadowing the repairs call centre.
 - Shadowing a new tenancy sign up.
 - Shadowing the post inspection of repairs.
 - Estates tour and visits including completed planned and cyclical maintenance schemes.
 - Visits to ready to let empty properties.
 - File checks for rent arrears, complaints, ASB and domestic violence.
 - Review of appraisal and one to one supervision meeting records.
 - Focus group with residents involved in participation structures.
 - Focus group of tenants not involved in participation structures.
 - Focus group of leaseholders.
 - Focus group with partner organisations and contractors, including contractors operatives.
 - Focus groups of caretakers.
 - Review of the website and intranet.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Creating additional adapted homes for households with a disabled person

- 1** Redbridge Homes secured regional funding to convert the empty space under the stilts of a local tower block in to three adapted and accessible properties for disabled households. This is an imaginative approach to using available space, increases the supply of accessible housing and also results in a new source of income for the ALMO.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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