

Re-inspection of Housing Management Services

Crawley Borough Council

June 2010



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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

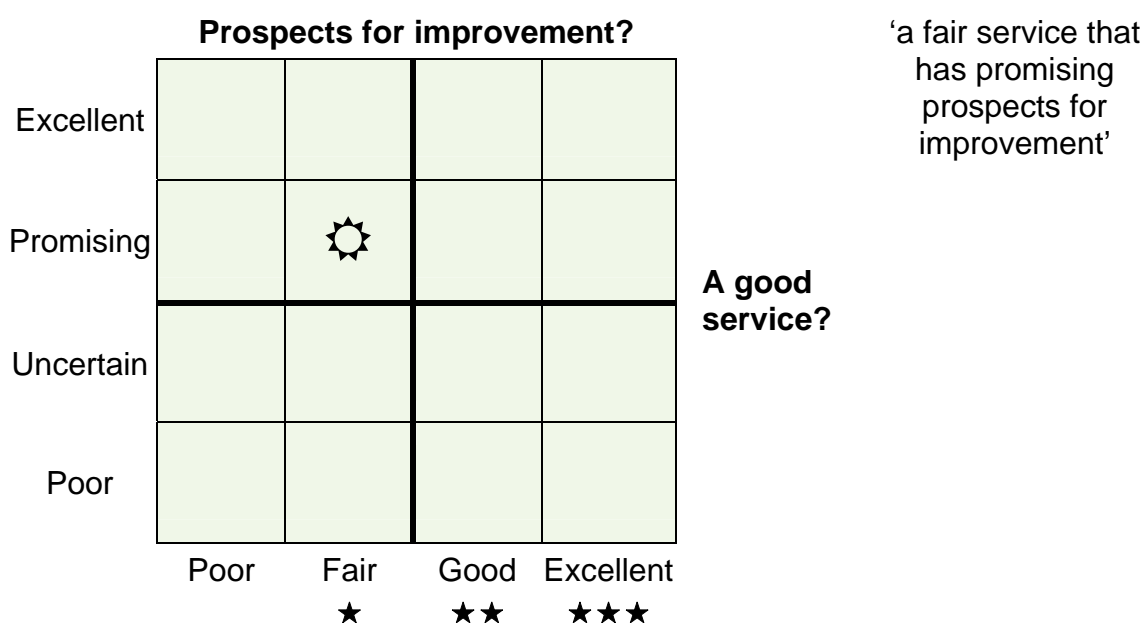
Summary

- 1 Crawley Borough Council is providing a fair, one-star service, with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The service is increasingly customer-focused. Tenants can easily access services in person, it is increasingly easy for tenants to participate, there is good information available and feedback is used to help drive improvement. There is a sound corporate approach to diversity and improved outcomes for some diverse groups. Improvements are being made to tenants' homes, gas servicing and repairs are carried out promptly, empty homes are relet reasonably quickly and estates are well maintained. Performance on collecting rent and recovering rent arrears is strong. The management of value for money is improving.
- 3 However, the way telephone calls are dealt with is an area for improvement and complaints handling is weak. The service's understanding of its tenants' needs is not comprehensive, monitoring service use is not robust and resident involvement structures are not fully representative of resident diversity. Some significant health and safety risks are not being adequately addressed and some disabled tenants wait too long for adaptations to their homes. The service does not deal with antisocial behaviour well and the management of former tenants' arrears is weak. Overall costs are mixed and costs are not always consistent with quality. The management of value for money is yet to be embedded in all areas with limited outcomes in some areas and tenant satisfaction with the value for money of rent has fallen.
- 4 The service is an important corporate priority that is increasingly well led. Leadership and staff capacity is strong and is increasing for example, through service reviews and partnership working. Performance management and risk management arrangements are generally effective. In the last few years the service has delivered some real improvements that customers would recognise for example, improvements to their homes.
- 5 However, the rate and scale of improvements has not been consistent across the service and weaknesses remain in some important areas. There are some important gaps in performance reporting and a learning culture is not fully embedded. ICT is not used to its full potential and the capacity of residents needs to be strengthened.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:

- the service is increasingly customer-focused;
- tenants can easily access services in person, there is good information available and customer feedback is used to help drive improvement;
- it is increasingly easy for tenants to participate with resources and good information available to support resident involvement;
- there is a sound corporate approach to diversity and improved outcomes for some diverse groups;
- there are robust investment plans in place delivering improvements that are important to tenants, such as improving energy efficiency;
- repairs are delivered in a customer-focused way; they are completed quickly using appointments and a multi-skilled workforce. Consequently satisfaction is high;

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.

- empty homes are relet reasonably quickly and to a good standard;
 - annual gas servicing is carried out promptly;
 - performance on collecting rent and recovering rent arrears is strong;
 - estates are well maintained, and the approach to estate improvements is positive; and
 - the management of value for money is improving. For example, improvements have been delivered through better procurement, service reviews and by drawing in external funding.
- 8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the way telephone calls are dealt with is an area for improvement;
 - the use of service standards is improving but is not yet fully robust and complaints handling is weak;
 - the Council does not have a complete understanding of the needs of tenants and needs data is not robust;
 - resident involvement structures are not fully representative of the diversity of residents and the strategic framework for resident involvement needs further strengthening;
 - home improvements and works to empty homes are not always delivered in a customer-focused way;
 - some significant health and safety risks are not being adequately addressed;
 - some disabled tenants wait too long for adaptations to their homes. Performance management is not comprehensive and the service lacks published standards and procedures;
 - tenants receive an inconsistent income collection service across the borough and the management of former tenants' arrears is weak;
 - the service does not deal with antisocial behaviour well leading to low levels of tenant satisfaction;
 - overall costs are mixed and costs are not always consistent with quality; and
 - value for money is not embedded across all parts of the service such as collecting former tenant arrears, aids and adaptations and elements of tenancy and estate management and falling tenant satisfaction with the value for money for rent charged.

Scoring the service

- 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- the service is an important corporate priority that is increasingly well led and has a high level of self-awareness;
 - leadership and staff capacity is strong and is increasing for example, through service reviews and partnership working;
 - the service has benefitted from corporate support and is investing in 'building blocks' to support further improvement;
 - performance management and risk management arrangements are generally effective;
 - the service has made reasonable progress in addressing the findings of the previous Audit Commission inspection although there are gaps; and
 - the service has delivered some real improvements that customers would recognise for example, improvements to their homes.
- 10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- the rate and scale of improvements has not been consistent across the service and weaknesses remain in some important areas;
 - there are some important gaps in performance reporting;
 - the responsive repairs service still faces a major challenge to ensure continued delivery of a quality service to tenants;
 - a learning culture is not fully embedded; and
 - ICT is not used to its full potential and the capacity of residents needs to be strengthened.

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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Strengthen the approach to diversity and customer focus by:

- engaging with a wider range of tenants in the management of the service and ensuring they are representative of the local population;
- improving the management of and response to complaints;
- improving the information held on tenants and ensuring it is effectively used to inform service delivery;
- ensuring service standards agreed with tenants are comprehensive and properly reflect the services delivered;
- ensuring arrangements for home improvement works are consistently customer-focused;
- ensuring that all potential health and safety risks are minimised;
- ensuring the approach to aids and adaptations is robust and that delivery is timely; and
- reviewing the arrangements for the telephone service to ensure an efficient service for customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better tenant satisfaction; and
- a more responsive service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve the approach to income collection by:

- ensuring the review is effectively rolled out to all areas under management;
- ensuring the approach to former tenants arrears is robust and that policies and procedures support the efficient collection of debt;
- review incentives and published information to encourage tenants to make payments by the most cost effective methods;
- ensuring service charges levied accurately reflect the services delivered; and
- ensuring that partnerships with external agencies for the delivery of advice and support to tenants experiencing debt are effectively evaluated and those outcomes are used to inform the management of the service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more income; and
- improved service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2011.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the management of antisocial behaviour (ASB) and estates by:

- ensuring the approach to the management of ASB is robust and is responsive to the needs of tenants experiencing ASB; and
- ensuring the outcomes of estate inspections are effectively publicised to all tenants.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved satisfaction; and
- better access for tenants to services and information.

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

Recommendation

- R4** Improve the approach to performance management by:
- ensuring performance information is comprehensive;
 - opportunities for learning and service improvement are maximised; and
 - arrangements for staff assessment are robust and reflective of service objectives.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved service outcomes;
- clearer objectives for staff; and
- better access for tenants to services and information.

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

- 12** We would like to thank the staff of Crawley Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 22 - 26 March 2010.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Crawley is a compact new town (16.2 square miles) 30 miles to the south of London in the county of West Sussex. It has excellent transport links with Gatwick airport within its boundary. Crawley's population has grown from 9,000 when the town was designated in 1947 to over 100,000 now.
- 14 The town has been developed on neighbourhood principles with 13 neighbourhoods, each with its own local facilities including a community centre, shops, places of worship and GP surgery.
- 15 Crawley is a relatively prosperous town (ranked 215 out of 354 districts)ⁱ but there are significant pockets of deprivation (particularly in Broadfield, Bewbush and Langley Green) that are among the most deprived nationally. One local super output areaⁱⁱ in Broadfield South ward is in the most deprived 20 per cent nationally across a range of measures including income deprivation, health and disability and education skills and training. Several LSOAs feature in the most deprived 10 per cent nationally for barriers to housing and Broadfield South features in the 10 per cent most deprived LSOAs for crime.
- 16 There is a high demand for social housing. Twenty per cent of Crawley's residents rent their homes from the Council while another 5 per cent live in housing association accommodation.
- 17 The town has the highest proportion of people from BMEⁱⁱⁱ communities in West Sussex at 15 per cent. People of Asian origin form the largest BME group, although there is also evidence of population inflows from the new EU membership states.
- 18 The population is relatively young with approximately 65 per cent of residents under the age of 45 years old. However, the Council estimates that the proportion of residents over the age of 65 will increase by 15 per cent by 2017. There are below average numbers of people with a limiting long-term illness.

The Council

- 19 Crawley Borough Council has been Conservative-led since May 2007 after a short period of being a hung Council. It had previously been Labour-led for over 30 years. The Council has a leader and cabinet model of governance comprised of an executive of eight members, each having a portfolio of services which also includes housing. Non-cabinet members serve on various standing committees.

ⁱ On the Index of Deprivation where a ranking of 1 is the most deprived.

ⁱⁱ Super output area (SOA) - a geographical area used for the collection and publication of small area statistics. There are two layers of SOA - lower layer SOAs and middle layer SOAs. Each layer nests in the layer above (Improvement and Development Agency website)

ⁱⁱⁱ BME - Black and Minority Ethnic

- 20 Management of the Council is headed by a Chief Executive with corporate directors. The housing landlord service (known as Crawley Homes) is part of the Directorate of Environment and Housing.
- 21 The Council's mission is 'to be a Council that aims for excellence in all that it does'. The housing revenue account balance at 31 March 2009 was £3.083 million with a budget for 2009/10 of £38.5 million. The Council's cabinet has approved a £30 million stock investment programme to bring homes up to and beyond the Decent Homes Standard by March 2011.

The service

- 22 The Council manages 8,289 homes. The stock is made up of 4,926 houses, 2,511 flats, 599 units of sheltered accommodation, 112 hostel rooms, 141 shared ownership homes and 5,242 garages. There are 1,500 leasehold properties.
- 23 Most of the housing stock was built after 1950 with the majority built before 1974. Two neighbourhoods (Broadfield and Bewbush) were built in the 1970s and 1980s. Given that most of the housing was built in a concentrated period, many of the building components are coming to the end of their life cycles at the same time.
- 24 Eighty four per cent of tenants declare themselves to be White British, 23 per cent have a long-term illness or disability and 4.9 per cent use a wheelchair or have a long-term mobility problem. Twenty nine per cent of tenants are over the age of 65 and 52.5 per cent of tenants (excluding hostels) receive housing benefit.
- 25 The housing service is provided centrally and is based in the town hall and delivered by a team of generic housing officers. The repairs and maintenance services are provided by external contractors. Grounds maintenance services are delivered by an in-house department.
- 26 We inspected the landlord service in the summer of 2005 and found it to be a poor, no star service with promising prospects for improvement. We re-inspected the service in January 2008 and found it to be a poor, no star service with uncertain prospects for improvement. This inspection assessed the service against the following Key Lines of Enquiry: access and customer care, diversity, stock investment and asset management, housing income management, resident involvement, tenancy and estate management value for money and prospects for improvement.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 27 The Council's Corporate plan 'Aiming for Excellence' 2007-2012 includes a number of priorities. Those of particular relevance to housing are:
- reducing antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime;
 - supporting sustainable communities through housing and neighbourhood services;
 - delivering value for money services;
 - peak performing people; and
 - creating a culture of efficiency and the habit of success.
- 28 The Sustainable Community strategy 2008-12 includes the aim to provide a range of goods quality affordable housing that meets local need.
- 29 The Council's Housing strategy 2009-2012 has the following strategic housing objectives:
- increasing the supply of homes;
 - developing sustainable communities;
 - improving the quality of housing;
 - preventing and reducing homelessness; and
 - providing accessible information on housing choices.
- 30 Crawley Homes' mission statement is 'to provide homes that people are proud of'. Five strategic aims have been identified to help the service achieve this:
- customer focus;
 - high quality assets;
 - security of tenure;
 - safe, clean, attractive and friendly neighbourhoods; and
 - value for money.

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

Access and customer care

- 31 In the previous inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Access to the contact centre by telephone was difficult, service hours were limited to 'office hours' and there were weaknesses in the complaints system. However information and service standards were in development.

- 32** In this inspection we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. The service is increasingly customer-focused. Tenants can easily access services in person, there is good information available (including through the website) and customer feedback is used to help drive improvement. However, telephone calls are not always answered quickly, more calls could be dealt with at first point of contact and more services could be available through the website. The use of service standards is improving but is not yet fully robust and complaints handling is weak.
- 33** The service is increasingly customer-focused leading to high levels of tenant satisfaction. The Corporate Plan (2007- 2012) promotes 'exemplary' customer service based on quality and value for money outcomes as part of its aim to achieve excellent services. The Council's customer charter provides clear information on how and when services can be accessed and what service users can expect from the service. All housing staff take part in the corporate 'Aiming for Service Excellence' programme, as well as customer care training organised by each service. Contractors are required to complete customer care training and compliance is monitored regularly. The 2009 tenants' survey found that 70 per cent of tenants felt it was easy to get hold of the right person and 68 per cent were satisfied with the final outcome (an increase from 2008 survey findings which reported 68 per cent and 64 per cent respectively). Tenants we spoke to report the service has become more customer-focused and recognise improvements as shown by the 2009 STATUS survey when 82 per cent of tenants said they were satisfied with the service overall. A strong corporate focus is leading to improved outcomes for tenants.
- 34** Tenants can easily access face-to-face services. The town hall provides a pleasant environment and is well served by public transport. The reception is accessible and offers good facilities to deal with callers. Tenants can also access services through local surgeries held in local community centres. Home visits are also offered as a means of ensuring services are taken out to customers. These arrangements are helping customers to access services.
- 35** The website provides good, accessible information but more services could be available through the website. Housing staff can be e-mailed directly and key tenant information is available through the website in accessible formats. Services such as the reporting of antisocial behaviour (ASB), making rent payments and complaints can be accessed directly through online transactions. The website is used to capture tenant feedback with the facility to also make compliments or raise queries online. However repairs can only be reported but not ordered online and while service standards are described on the website they do not always match published information. Overall the service is using the internet effectively as a quick and cost-effective way of supporting access to its services and gathering tenant feedback.

How good is the service?

- 36** Performance in answering calls quickly is mixed. The majority of calls made by tenants relate to a repair request (2009 tenants' survey). Repairs calls are taken directly by a repairs team on a dedicated number. Performance with these calls is less clear as data capture is not robust and is to be revised to reflect the start of the new repairs contract. There are also individual service lines with year to date performance for housing exceeding targets with calls answered in 21 seconds against an unchallenging target of 29 seconds. However, current performance at the main contact centre is strong with all calls answered in nine seconds against a target of 15 seconds. Recent satisfaction monitoring with call handling of housing queries shows that 94 per cent of callers are satisfied.
- 37** Arrangements for ensuring calls are dealt with at first point of contact are an area for improvement. Once answered calls may be referred on to another advisor within the contact centre or for more complex queries the call could be passed directly to a member of staff within the housing service. This can be a frustrating experience for tenants and could confuse.
- 38** There are effective arrangements to deal with out-of-hours calls. Calls are dealt with through the community care helpline service provided by the Council, with referral arrangements to deal with any emergencies. Repair operatives attend to out-of-hours emergencies on the basis of completing the repair (if convenient to tenants) as opposed to "making safe" and returning the following day. The service has a material store that is accessible out-of-hours and performance is measured within the First Time Fix data. Tenants have access to an effective, customer-focused out-of-hours service.
- 39** There is a range of quality printed leaflets that are easy to understand and provide helpful advice. Newsletters have been used to promote key services such as gas servicing, complaints and resident involvement. Leaflets are available at public points of access across the borough and can be downloaded from the Council's website. Positively an annual tenant report also gives tenants clear information about how well the service is performing against key targets such as relet times, the energy efficiency of homes and tenant satisfaction with having their views taken into account. Information also highlights what the service aims to do to address any areas of underperformance. The quality and content of information is helping people to understand the range of services available and the outcomes.
- 40** Customer feedback is used to help drive improvement. Mystery shopping has been used with tenants supported by an external training consultant. This has led to improvements in the way staff identify themselves when answering the telephone and procedures to ensure that tenants are directly referred to a named officer for ASB cases. In addition the newsletter includes a 'you said, we did' section that tells tenants what the Council did in response to issues that they have raised. Feedback is being used to deliver improvements that are important to tenants.

- 41 The use of service standards is improving but is not yet fully robust. Service standards are in place in many areas, but not all; they vary in quality with some not challenging and they are not always monitored. Some standards are challenging, such as aiming to achieve 90 per cent customer satisfaction with complaints handling while the aim to deal with 95 per cent of fly-tipping within two working days is less so (in reality this is exceeded). However, standards, while developed with tenants are not comprehensive with significant gaps in areas such as aids and adaptations. At a corporate level there are generally challenging standards in place that set out the level of service in terms of replying to enquiries and correspondence, performance is reported against these. Tenants cannot make informed assessments about the level of service in individual areas.
- 42 Complaints handling is weak. While the corporate system is well promoted and arrangements are in place to offer compensation for service failure, a sample of complaints checked during the inspection found that:
- reasons for delays in case management are not always clearly stated on the monitoring system;
 - equality monitoring forms are often not completed and the service is failing to identify or monitor trends;
 - learning is limited with no system in place to capture feedback from low-level complaints; and
 - there are no checks in place to ensure consistency in the quality of responses, how to move on to the next stage or ensure that cases are being closed effectively.

Response target times are not met and only 26 per cent of service users are satisfied with the complaints process. Only 36 per cent are satisfied with the outcome.

Diversity

- 43 The previous inspection found that weaknesses significantly outweighed strengths. There was no effective leadership and the focus on equalities was mixed. The Council was at a low-level in respect of the Local Government Equality Standard and this was reflected in service delivery. The Council had not carried out a full range of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) and customer profiling was not used being used to increase outcomes for residents.
- 44 In this inspection we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. The Council has a sound corporate approach to diversity led by the Chief Executive and lead Councillor. Equality and diversity is being embedded through training and through the use of Equality Impact Assessments leading to improved outcomes for some diverse groups. There are positive examples of working in partnership and engaging with diverse communities. However, the service's understanding of its tenant profile is weak and it is not robustly monitoring who is using its services. There are also some barriers to people who require translation service easily accessing services.

How good is the service?

- 45 There is a sound corporate diversity framework in place with the Chief Executive as the corporate lead. A Corporate Equalities Scheme is in place with delivery supported by the lead Member for diversity and a staff network of equality and diversity champions to help take the agenda forward. Progress against the scheme and the equalities scheme plan is monitored corporately and reported annually (including to tenants through the website). This approach means the Council is best placed to take forward improvements for service users with different needs.
- 46 There are positive examples of working in partnership and engaging with diverse communities. The Council has been proactive in its work with others including local schools, the police and local community groups on community cohesion initiatives. A faith, belief and culture guide has been produced in partnership with others to help raise awareness of the different communities in Crawley. These are helping to tackle issues important to residents.
- 47 Equality impact assessments (EIAs) are leading to more accessible services for people with different needs. A three-year rolling programme of EIAs has delivered improvements such as the updating of translation panels on published tenant literature to reflect key changes in local community languages, the proposed introduction of early evening estate inspections and flexible appointment times for tenancy sign-ups. This reduces potential service barriers for customers.
- 48 The Council is making progress meeting good practice guidelines. For example, completed objectives (2008/09) against the equalities plan have enabled disabled service users to better access and participate in Council services. Cash office payment facilities have been made more accessible for customers. In its engagement with tenants, telephone surveys have been offered to those with a visual impairment. Crawley reports that a recent external assessment of compliance against the Equality Framework for Local Government¹ found the Council to have reached the 'Achievement Level'. This approach is helping to embed diversity in to service delivery although outcomes are not yet consistent.
- 49 The Council has delivered some positive outcomes to help address the needs of people experiencing domestic violence and hate crime. The ASB policy covers harassment and domestic violence and the Respect Standard. There is good information for tenants. Tenants experiencing domestic violence (or hate crime) are offered practical support such as strengthened security, additional external lighting, referral to a full sanctuary scheme (funded by the Council) or a supported tenancy transfer. This is helping people experiencing domestic abuse or hate crime receive appropriate help and advice.
- 50 Staff and contractors receive up-to-date diversity training. Diversity training is compulsory for staff and 94 per cent have attended. Training is not mandatory for Councillors or involved tenants. However in practice the majority of involved tenants have completed the same training as staff. The Council also works with its contractors and training plans include a pilot scheme (due July 2010) to train operatives to be able to identify and report potential cases of hate crime and domestic violence. This is helping to raise awareness and improve knowledge in this area.

¹ The EFLG is a performance and benchmarking tool which helps councils in their approach to equality and diversity

- 51** The Council has an incomplete understanding of the needs of tenants and needs data is not robust. Information held covers all six diversity strands but there are gaps in information particularly about disability. Despite the Council's efforts to capture information there are concerns that some tenants' needs may be under-reported. The profile of the Tenants Forum is known but it does not reflect the demographics of the wider tenant population. However profiling information has been used to change the membership of sub groups of the Forum to achieve better representation. The newly developed database for responsive repairs does not link to the housing management system (which holds tenant profiling information) which increases the risk that this key service may not be delivering a tailored service to a known need.
- 52** There are some barriers to people who require translation service easily accessing services. Despite the Councils' policy to provide information in alternative formats mystery shopping (undertaken as part of the inspection) found that translated information was not easily available and that tenants requesting information in audio format had to wait up to five weeks. The Council responded well to this feedback and reissued guidance to staff but our findings suggests that some tenants could experience difficulty accessing information in a timely way.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 53** In the previous inspection we found weaknesses outweighed strengths. An asset management strategy had not been adopted, progress to deliver decent homes by 2010 was slow, tenant involvement at a strategic level was limited, asbestos management arrangements were weak and the approach to value for money was inconsistent. Stock condition information was not comprehensive.
- 54** In this inspection we found strengths and weaknesses are in balance. The service has robust plans in place to manage investment in its homes. Investment is focusing on improvements that are important to tenants such as improving the energy efficiency of their homes. Contract management is effective and there are some good examples of works being tailored to meet individual's needs. However, the service is not always customer-focused and the overall approach to cyclical maintenance is weak with some significant health and safety risks not adequately addressed.
- 55** The service has robust plans in place to manage investment in its homes. Future investment is supported by an up-to-date and robust asset management strategy and plan. The Council's asset management strategy (2008-11) and associated action plan provides a basis for the future investment and sets out the approach to deliver maintenance and improvements. The strategy is based on a 75 per cent internal and external sample survey of homes including assessment against compliance with the HHSRS¹. This is continually updated with information from significant responsive repairs, Decent Homes work and voids work. There are effective arrangements to deal with 335 non-traditional build properties with works completed under the decent homes programme. This approach is providing a good foundation to plan future investment.

¹ HHSRS - the Housing Health and Safety Rating System is the risk assessment procedure for residential properties.

How good is the service?

- 56** The capital programme is focusing on improvements that are important to tenants. Improvements include work to increase levels of energy efficiency, hard-wired smoke alarms as well as new kitchens and bathrooms. There is a costed programme in place to achieve full compliance with the Decent Homes standard by January 2011 and the service is on target to achieve this. Most homes have full gas central heating while windows are being upgraded where necessary. The standard of work includes redecoration and replacement flooring although tenants are not offered the choice of a shower. The programme has also delivered 125 adaptations to homes as recommended by an in-house occupational therapist. Levels of non-decency have reduced from 32 per cent (2008/09) to 27 per cent and tenant satisfaction is averaging over 90 per cent.
- 57** There are examples of works being tailored to meet individual's needs. For example, appropriate arrangements are in place to help tenants who need extra support during improvement work. Needs are assessed by a tenant liaison officer who identifies early any help or special needs, such as the timing of work, moving furniture or arranging daycare services. This ensures disruption is kept to a minimum.
- 58** There are effective contract management arrangements. Procedures ensure contracts are consistently managed and project managers are allocated for each project, supported by external quantity surveying consultants. Regular site visits take place and on-site contract meetings (that include tenants) are held to discuss progress and performance and deal with any issues. This is resulting in well managed contracts.
- 59** The ratio of planned to responsive works is 79:21 and is reflective of good practice levels recommended by the Audit Commission. Investment in planned works is reducing the need for more expensive and less convenient responsive repairs.
- 60** Tenant consultation and liaison is of variable quality. There is effective individual consultation with tenants before decent homes work being carried out. The design of new kitchens is discussed with individual tenants using 3-D drawings. There is also a good range of choice over surface finishes and materials. However the published decent homes programme (published 2009 and covering works until 2011) does not indicate when work will begin in individual roads and tenants report that ongoing communication during work is not always effective. Reported concerns include non-English speaking operatives leading to communication difficulties with tenants on-site and lack of information about when follow on trades require access. The approach prior to the start of decent homes work helps tenants to plan effectively but the inconsistent approach during works means that some tenants do not receive a customer-focused service.
- 61** The approach to managing asbestos is not sufficiently robust. An asbestos policy is in place and all communal areas and 50 per cent of homes have been surveyed (this figure is increasing weekly through the decent homes programme). Information about asbestos is shared with contractors, repairs operatives and flagged on the main stock condition database. Staff and contractors have received training on asbestos. Safety information is published but only new tenants receive the results of asbestos surveys. The asbestos register is not aligned to the housing management system and has to be accessed manually. The current approach ensures the Council now has information about asbestos in its housing stock but robust systems are not in place to ensure the health and safety of tenants and contractors.

62 The Council's approach to cyclical maintenance is weak with some significant health and safety risks not adequately addressed. Contracts are in place for the regular maintenance of fire safety equipment and lifts. Risks arising from legionella are not managed well with plans showing only about 15 per cent of surveys complete. In addition, the service does not have a routine electrical inspection programme and it is estimated that by January 2011 approximately 50 per cent of homes will not have had an electrical check for 10 years. However, the cyclical painting programme has been suspended until the decent homes programme has been completed. Some communal areas are beginning to look tired.

Responsive repairs

63 The previous inspection found that weaknesses significantly outweighed strengths. Management arrangements were underdeveloped, performance was poor, the service lacked a strategic approach and customer focus was weak. However, some recent improvements were beginning to lead to positive outcomes.

64 In this inspection we found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Repairs are delivered in a customer-focused way; it is easy to report a repair, they are completed quickly using appointments and a multi-skilled workforce. Consequently satisfaction is high.

65 The service is customer-focused. Satisfaction with repairs is high and improving. At the time of the inspection tenant satisfaction with repairs was 99.4 per cent and represented a significant improvement on satisfaction ratings which previously averaged in the high seventies. All non urgent work is carried out by appointment and the multi-skilling of operatives enables a high proportion of jobs to be carried out during the first visit. Work is of good quality with 83 per cent of work remaining fixed first time. The co-location of the repairs partnering contractors has resulted in the service not pre-inspecting work (in keeping with the revised approach to the service). End to end times for repair completions have significantly reduced from an average of 79 days to just over 13 days .This is reducing the inconvenience to tenants and improving efficiency.

66 Performance against set measures is strong. Following a review of responsive repairs, and the introduction of a customer-orientated approach, the service does not report some traditional performance measures. However reported performance is positive as some measures show.

Crawley KPIs	Average YTD (at February 2010)
Completions in target %	
Emergency	99.54%
Urgent same	99.24%
Urgent next	99.96%
Non urgent	99.08%

How good is the service?

Crawley KPIs	Average YTD (at February 2010)
Repair Appointments	
% made	100.00%
% kept	97.84%
Breakdown first fix%	
% completed on 1st visit	88.02%
% completed on 2nd visit	11.12%
% completed on 3rd visit	0.68%
% 4th visit	0.18%

Crawley report April 2009 to February 2010

- 67** It is easy for tenants to report a repair. Most tenants choose to use the telephone and their calls are answered by a small team working alongside the contractors and Council's technical officers. Tenants have a helpful diagnostic repairs handbook and this together with the new partnering approach means that the level of variation orders is very low and a high volume of work is carried out in one visit.
- 68** The responsive repairs service is managed well. Duplication between client and contract staff has been reduced. Regular monitoring between the client and contractor takes place and reports are provided to senior managers, Councillors and tenants and strong performance has been maintained pending the introduction of the new repairs contracts (April 2010). Regular contract management meetings involve tenants. The approach has helped to ensure that the service delivers strong outcomes and is tenant focused.
- 69** Appropriate quality assurance processes are in place. Approximately 10 per cent of works are post inspected with the focus on works which are of higher risk or higher cost. At the time of the inspection the proportion of works post inspected had been increased as part of the transitional arrangements to ensure repairs performance remained high. This means that the Council can show that repairs are being completed to required standards.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 70** The previous inspection found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Performance in letting empty homes was strong and the process was managed effectively. However, the approach to value for money was weak and the customer focus was mixed.
- 71** In this inspection we found strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Empty homes are relet reasonably quickly and to a good standard in line with the published letting standard. End of tenancy visits are used to assess the repairs needed before the tenant moves out and these are then completed quickly. However, the service is not always customer-focused and is not learning from tenant feedback.

- 72** Empty homes are relet reasonably quickly. In 2008/09 the average relet time was over 40 days but current performance shows average times have been reduced to 23 days. Written procedures and modern partnering arrangements with the contractor are helping to provide a clear and better managed process that has reduced the time taken to repair empty homes. This contributes to less lost income and shorter waiting times for those in need of rehousing.
- 73** Repairs to empty homes are completed quickly within the ten day target (this also includes any Decent Homes work). Repairs are rarely carried out post-letting, if new tenants report a repair within the first four weeks of their tenancy this work is undertaken by the voids repair team. This approach is supporting faster relet time reduces inconvenience to new tenants.
- 74** End of tenancy visits are used to good effect. All homes are visited to assess their condition before the tenant moves out. The information collected is used to identify voids that can be turned around quickly and where the tenant is required to carry out work before handing back the property. Tenants are given five days to carry out required work before a second visit is made to check on progress. This approach helps the service to plan void repair work and ensure that tenants leave the property in a sound condition.
- 75** A clear letting standard is in place and is being consistently applied. Properties appear to meet the published void standard and are left in good decorative repair. A good specification is used for new kitchens. This is in keeping with the approach taken to ensure void properties meet the decent homes standard where work is shortly due to be undertaken. Homes offered are of a high standard, costs are reasonable and working practice minimises inconvenience to tenants.
- 76** Arrangements in place help ensure homes are let to a high decorative standard. All void sheltered and bungalow homes are decorated as part of the void repair process. In other instances decoration vouchers are allocated based on a cost for each room. This means vulnerable tenants receive help and tenants receive choice in maintaining their homes to a reasonable standard.
- 77** The service is not always customer-focused and is not learning from tenant feedback. Tenant satisfaction is not informing the service. Information on new tenant satisfaction is not captured although satisfaction is a key performance indicator used across the service to measure success. Older or vulnerable tenants moving in to general needs voids are not supported to ensure their homes are in good decorative order. Those tenants not living in sheltered accommodation or in a bungalow but unable to decorate their new home using the decoration voucher scheme are not offered a decoration service. Outcomes for tenants are inconsistent.

Gas servicing

- 78** The previous inspection found strengths outweighed weaknesses. The service was effectively managed and with strong procedures in place.
- 79** In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Annual gas safety checks are carried out promptly and the service is externally quality checked. The approach is customer-focused. However the service does not consistently meet its own targets in cases of no access.

How good is the service?

- 80** Annual gas safety checks are carried out promptly. During the final quarter of 2009/10, 100 per cent of homes are reported as having an up-to-date gas safety check completed. At the time of the inspection, there were no outstanding gas checks. Service quality is checked through external validation by a specialist consultant on 5 per cent of all work, including all Decent Homes boiler replacements. This performance has been achieved through a clear focused procedure based on a ten month rolling programme. The Council is minimising risk to tenants.
- 81** The approach to gas safety is customer-focused. No access procedures are clear and escalate appropriately. The Council has not had to use legal remedies to gain access. The importance of gas servicing is widely promoted through newsletters, information leaflets and on the website. Gas servicing appointments include evenings and Saturday mornings (although these are not publicised). The service was extended to leaseholders in autumn 2009 but take up rates are not yet known. This approach ensures that tenants understand how important gas servicing is and provide access.
- 82** Gas servicing records are maintained effectively. The process is now paperless and records are electronically managed. Gas safety certificate records are up-to-date and well managed. Regular safety checks have taken place where new gas supplies have been installed as part of planned works over the last three years. The service can evidence that homes recorded as not having a gas supply (and therefore no gas safety certificate) are accurate. Accurate records support an effective gas servicing programme.
- 83** Arrangements for other servicing are appropriate. There are only three properties which use liquid petroleum and these are regularly serviced through a specialist service.
- 84** Some aspects of the service do not reflect national good practice. There are no servicing arrangements in place to maintain the hard-wired smoke detectors that are installed as part of the electrical refurbishment programme. The Housing management system does not have the facility to flag up outstanding no access cases and standard letters sent out in the final stages do not have community language straplines. These gaps do increase risk.
- 85** Targets as set out in the gas servicing procedure are not consistently met. Housing management staff are required to deliver letters to tenants where access has not been granted during the final stages of the no-access procedure. Checks showed that some letters are delayed for several weeks. Although numbers are small this increases the risk that safety procedures will not be followed.

Aids and adaptations

- 86** The previous inspection found that weaknesses outweighed strengths Residents had to wait for long periods for works to be done and there was a lack of strategic planning, customer focus and value for money.
- 87** In this inspection we found weaknesses outweigh strengths. Some disabled tenants wait too long for adaptations to their homes. Performance management is not comprehensive and the service lacks published standards and procedures. However increased investment in the service does mean the service is helping more tenants and partnership working with the Social Services has been strengthened.

- 88** Some disabled tenants wait too long for adaptations to their homes. The backlog of disabled adaptations is relatively low but completions can take some time. The longest outstanding case is recorded as over three years old. The average time for minor adaptations is over two months and is more than five months for major adaptations (over £500). However, given weaknesses in performance management (detailed elsewhere in this section) waiting periods could be longer. This could lead to difficulties for vulnerable tenants wanting to live independently.
- 89** The service lacks clear information for tenants about how cases are prioritised and there are no published service standards. Individual cases are usually processed by date order but officers also use their discretion for more urgent cases. Current arrangements do not provide transparency about what tenants can expect from the service.
- 90** Performance management arrangements are not comprehensive. Monitoring and reporting is limited with reporting only capturing the time taken from when the case is referred by the Occupational Therapy (OT) service or when orders for minor adaptations are placed with the contractor. This approach does not take in to account the significant time (over five months) taken to undertake OT assessments where they are referred by the Council. Under current arrangements the failure to monitor or report completion times from the time of request means the service does not know the real time that vulnerable tenants have to wait for an adaptation.
- 91** The Council has invested in the service to help meet the identified need. The aids and adaptations budget for 2009/10 is £631,250, which includes a £200,000 increase from the previous year. However the budget set for 2010/11 has reduced to £516,810. The service has provided about 600 to 700 adaptations each year through a specialist contractor. Four extensions have also been funded from the Council capital programme. Investment in the service is improving the quality of life for some vulnerable residents.
- 92** Improved partnership working is strengthening the approach to managing the service. The housing service now takes part in regular meetings with the County Council and the time taken to access OT assessments is falling. This reporting has changed since April and is shared with the service each month. There are regular review meetings and work is underway to see further improvements can be delivered. This should enable effective measurement of end to end waiting times for those tenants needing an adaptation.

Housing income management

- 93** In the previous inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. Income collection performance for current tenants was just above average while arrears management and prevention work were reasonable. However, customer focus practices were mixed, the approach to value for money was not robust and the collection of former tenants' arrears was poor.

How good is the service?

- 94 In this inspection we found that strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Performance on collecting rent and recovering rent arrears is strong. There is an appropriate balance between enforcement and support with an improving approach to debt prevention in some neighbourhoods. However, tenants receive an inconsistent service across the borough, there is no clear corporate approach to debt management, the most cost-effective rent payment method is not effectively promoted and the management of former tenants' arrears is weak.
- 95 Performance in collecting rent and recovering rent arrears is strong. Rent collection performance in 2008/09 was strong at 98.8 per cent against a target of 98.6 per cent (benchmarked top quartile position was 99 per cent). At quarter three of this year (2009/10) reported rent collection performance was 98.45 per cent. Arrears performance in 2008/09 was 1.5 per cent against a target of 1.9 per cent. At quarter three of the current year performance was 1.2 per cent. This helps to maximise income for the delivery of services to tenants.
- 96 The corporate approach to debt management is not robust. The Council's approach to social inclusion sits within the sustainable community strategy (2008 - 2012). The social inclusion strategy includes an objective to ensure those on low incomes do not suffer financial hardship but there is no clear link as to how the housing service is to contribute to this. A debt management policy provides staff guidance on the Council's approach to monies owed by debtors including current and former tenants and includes delegated authority in the management of write-offs. However, there is no reference to the priority which may be given to different debts owed by one customer. In addition, ICT systems do not readily identify multiple debts which may be owed by one person and so different departments may potentially chase the same customer for debt. Although referrals may be made to external support and advice agencies, including those in receipt of Council funding, there is no clear analysis of how they are helping to minimise arrears or the level of rent collected overall. Service charge costs are not all transparent as elements for lighting and grounds maintenance are yet to be de-pooled from rents.
- 97 There is an appropriate balance between enforcement and support. The use of evictions has been low, with only three tenants evicted in 2009/10. The service is supporting tenants to pay their rent on time by providing good information. A debt charter clearly sets out the responsibilities of both service users and the Council in the management of arrears and includes advice and support available to tenants experiencing arrears. A rent payment calendar is available on the website and well set out rent statements (agreed with tenants) are sent out on a quarterly basis and clear explanatory notes can be viewed online. The sign-up process and new tenants visits are also used as opportunities to remind tenants of the importance of making regular rent payments and where to access advice if required. This helps tenants to better understand their responsibility to make regular payments and to manage their rent accounts.

- 98** Partnership working with the housing benefit service is reasonable. Working links with the benefit service are satisfactory and IT links enable housing staff to view housing benefit updates. Performance within the benefit service is in the best 25 per cent of performers. While there are annual rent payment campaigns, the housing service is not proactively involved in benefit take up campaigns with the benefits service and staff do not carry out verification checks. Co-operative working helps in maximising rent collection.
- 99** Signposting and referrals for support and advice is not consistent for all tenants. Staff have received training in welfare advice and have access to a housing benefit calculator to help assess the likely benefit tenants experiencing debt may be entitled to. The service also promotes the services provided by local and national advice agencies but signposting is not clearly consistent. The Council acknowledges weaknesses in this area and proposes to address this through staff training and supervision meetings. However at present, potentially not all tenants in need of effective support will receive it.
- 100** The service is potentially delivering two levels of service. The service has been reviewed in some neighbourhoods and where outcomes are being implemented this is leading to more efficient working practices with new rent accounts being set up more quickly and arrangements with housing benefits in place more promptly. In these areas the service has also identified reasons for the accrual of debt and there are plans to use this information to inform service delivery. Performance has also shown significant improvement compared to those areas not yet subject to the review. However, tenants living in those neighbourhoods where this approach is yet to be rolled out may be in receipt of a lower quality service. While the revised approach is due to be rolled out to all areas shortly, at present tenants may experience an uneven service.
- 101** The approach to managing former tenants' arrears is weak. The process does not start promptly with first steps taken after the tenancy has been terminated. Beyond two initial letters, the service only seeks to collect money owed through the courts but there has been no legal action over the past year. The total level of former tenants' arrears is increasing (£500,532) and the use of tracing and debt-collection agents is not proving to be cost-effective. Only £3,200 has been collected in 2009/10 with 35 per cent commission paid on each case where money has been collected. The Council recognises that performance is weak and has a review planned for the new financial year.
- 102** The most cost-effective rent payment method is not effectively promoted. The debt management policy seeks to encourage the most cost effective methods but only 35 per cent (the same as during the 2008 inspection) of payments are made by direct debit which costs 25 pence per transaction. Payments by direct debit are not incentivised. The majority of payments are made using more expensive methods such as the cash office at £1.70 per transaction and Paypoint at 41 pence per transaction. The service has dropped a marketing plan aimed at encouraging tenants to use direct debits (although some elements such as introducing multiple payment dates remain). While the Council aims to maintain convenience for customers, a lack of tenant information on costs means tenants will not be aware of the full implications.

How good is the service?

Resident involvement

- 103** The previous inspection found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Tenants were not at the focus of service delivery and their views were not informing service development. The strategic approach was underdeveloped and while there were a broad range of involvement opportunities they were not effectively managed. Staff were not fully engaged in resident involvement and capacity building and resources were not leading to positive outcomes.
- 104** In this inspection we found strengths and weaknesses are in balance. It is increasingly easy for tenants to participate with resources and good information available to support resident involvement. However, while improving, tenant satisfaction with opportunities to participate remains an area for improvement and structures are not fully representative of the diversity of residents and the strategic framework for resident involvement needs further strengthening.
- 105** Resources are available to support resident involvement. A training budget of £15,000 supports tenant development and tenants have completed a wide range of training courses. Recent courses include training to prepare tenants to undertake complex work such as involvement in service reviews and procurement. The Tenants' Forum has also worked with external consultants to develop a future vision for the service. This helps tenants to become effectively involved in the opportunities available.
- 106** It is easy for tenants to get involved. The Tenants Forum is the key consultation vehicle for service and policy development. Other formal involvement opportunities include a service and performance group, editorial panel, repairs panel and a sheltered forum. On a more practical level tenants can become involved in a programme of estate inspections, mystery shopping and attend liaison meetings between Members and tenants. CHIP¹, (a database of tenants and residents who have expressed an interest in being involved), currently holds over 300 names. There are a range of opportunities for tenants to become involved.
- 107** Tenants and residents get clear and regular information on the service and involvement opportunities available. Quarterly newsletters, service information leaflets, the website, new tenants visits and neighbourhood action days have been used to promote the service. Tenants and residents are more aware of the ways they can get involved in-service delivery.
- 108** Tenants' satisfaction with opportunities to participate is improving but remains an area for improvement. The latest STATUS survey (2009) showed tenant satisfaction at 58 per cent (around average) for whether their views were considered. At the time of our previous inspection (2008) this was only 50 per cent. However, over 40 per cent of tenants are not satisfied with the opportunities to become involved and councillors are not yet benefitting from the possible engagement with its tenants.

¹ Crawley Homes Involving People

- 109** The strategic framework for improving resident involvement needs further strengthening. A Tenant Compact (revised 2009) details Crawley's aims and promises to tenants. It sets out the methods of involvement and how the Compact is to be monitored. However, clear measurable standards are limited. The strategic approach to tenant involvement is guided by the Council's approach to community engagement (with the local strategic partnership) which looks beyond housing and includes key stakeholder partners including the voluntary sector, neighbourhood action teams, the business community and local police. However resident involvement staff have limited engagement in this process and how tenants will contribute to high-level engagement is not clear.
- 110** Resident involvement structures are not fully representative of the diversity of residents. Tenant engagement is focused on a small number of tenants who do not reflect the wider tenant profile. Governance arrangements allow up to 30 tenants to become members of the Tenant's Forum but only half of these places are filled. There is no plan that details how the service will build on this to broaden representation and capture a wider group of tenants that can be actively involved. This limits capacity and potential service outcomes.

Tenancy and estate management

- 111** In the previous inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. Practices in place to advise tenants of their rights and responsibilities were strong and the Council was managing antisocial behaviour (ASB). The Council was dealing with estate problems quickly and tenants were satisfied with their environment. However, the strategic approach to sheltered housing and estate management was not robust.

Tenancy management

- 112** In this inspection we found weaknesses outweigh strengths. The service does not deal with antisocial behaviour well leading to low levels of tenant satisfaction. For example, ASB case management is not robust and staff are not yet fully equipped to respond to incidents of ASB. However, partnership working, better prevention work and enforcement are leading to better outcomes.
- 113** Tenant satisfaction with the ASB service is low. Thirty eight per cent of tenants were dissatisfied with the final outcome (2009 tenants' survey). Outcomes of reporting ASB are not meeting tenants' expectations.
- 114** ASB case management is not robust. The Council acknowledges that the approach to case management is not consistently timely or proactive. Managers report that competing staff priorities and the complexity of some cases can prove a barrier to effective case management. In 2008/09 only 54 per cent of cases were resolved. It is not clear how far the service contributes to the Council's overall objectives.
- 115** Staff are not yet fully equipped to respond to incidents of ASB. While training is planned to tackle this and a staff guide has been updated at present staff awareness in some aspects of ASB management may be limited. Tenant dissatisfaction highlighted issues relating to the inability of staff to deal effectively with queries relating to ASB.

How good is the service?

116 Information about tenancy management and ASB is satisfactory. The tenants' handbook includes useful information about ASB and articles appear in newsletters keeping the profile of ASB high. Information can also be accessed through the website. This ensures that the wider community knows the sanctions that are used where necessary.

117 Better prevention work and enforcement is leading to better outcomes. Although overall levels of ASB are low a range of measures are used to address the 42 live cases. Measures used include:

- an updated tenancy agreement and introductory tenancies with evidence of their enforcement where necessary;
- the aim to conduct 10 per cent tenancy audit checks each year (not on track this year);
- the issuing of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABC's) in partnership with others;
- the use of a mediation service funded by the Council, although take up is low;
- support for vulnerable people through referral to specialist support providers; and
- cases involving young people are referred on to the youth service where diversionary activity will be used as appropriate.

In addition legal enforcement against perpetrators of ASB is a last resort with two evictions in 2008/09 and just one (an introductory tenancy) in 2009/10. However, of 109 new cases recorded in 2009/10 only 24 show identified actions. Measures taken suggest a balanced approach although the response may not be timely.

118 Tenant involvement in the service is developing. A tenants' ASB panel meets with staff to consider housing's approach to ASB. Outcomes have included the revision of the feedback form sent to complainants at case closure and the programming of ASB training for staff to ensure they are better able to manage cases effectively. While the role of the group is still being defined the impact made to date has been positive.

119 The strategic approach to managing ASB is reasonable. The strategic approach to tackling ASB is set within the Council's corporate plan and the CDRP's¹ partnership plan. The partnership plan covers eight themes, one of which is tackling ASB and includes aims such as reducing the fear of crime. The housing service is involved in the delivery of the ASB action plan which has been developed from this. In addition the service has signed up to the Respect Agenda and re-launched its policies and procedures as a result. This approach will help shape the service delivered.

120 Partnership working in the management of ASB is reasonable but the approach to measuring their impact is weak. Referrals are made to external services and other Council departments as appropriate and there are examples of working with local community wardens and the Police. Partnership working is evaluated at a corporate level through the community safety partnership. However, there is limited awareness within the housing service of the outcomes of assessments and the impact partnerships are making in case resolution. Better awareness could result in a more robust and targeted approach in service delivery.

¹ CDRP - Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership

Estate management

- 121** In this inspection we found strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Estates are well maintained, and the approach to estate improvements is positive. The use of tenant feedback and estate inspections are both areas for improvement
- 122** Estates, communal areas and bin stores are clean and well maintained. The tenants' survey (2009) found 81 per cent of tenants are satisfied with their area as a place to live. Most tenants live in a well maintained area.
- 123** Standards of grounds maintenance and communal cleaning are high. Challenging targets for graffiti removal are being exceeded and the grounds maintenance service is contributing to the satisfactory appearance of estates. A recently developed service level agreement for estate services provides service standards about the quality of service expected and clearer accountability. Arrangements in place are ensuring that estates are pleasant environments in which to live.
- 124** The approach to estate improvements is positive. An estate improvement budget of £30,000 (2009/10) has been increased to £60,000 (2010/11). The budget is administered through an estate improvement panel comprised of tenants. The panel decides on bids made to the fund (by staff or tenants) for local improvement projects. Expenditure has included enhanced security doors, new fencing and anti-parking measures. However the assessment process is underdeveloped and requires greater transparency. Tenants play a significant role deciding how and where estate improvements are delivered.
- 125** The use of estate inspections is an area for improvement. There is a rolling programme of advertised estate inspections involving local residents, staff, contractors and relevant agencies to check estates and make sure that they meet agreed standards. At present however, outcomes are not fed back to tenants beyond those who attended and this could be a missed opportunity to encourage involvement in future inspections. While numbers of tenants accompanying estate inspections is low, the programme is publicised in advance through the website and newsletters and locally tenants receive a reminder letter two weeks before detailing the time and meeting point. The service will be introducing early evening inspections to try to increase numbers. Estate inspections are maintaining standards but not maximising opportunities to keep tenants informed about what action is being taken.
- 126** There is scope to use customer feedback more effectively. While complaints about estate services are monitored against each category such as graffiti and grass cutting there is no ongoing monitoring of satisfaction with these services. Proactive use of customer feedback will give a better indication as to the quality of outcomes.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 127** In the previous inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. There was no strategic approach to value for money (VFM) and the Council did not understand how its costs compared. There were mixed practices in procurement and no customer involvement. The Council was beginning to deal with critical areas of the service which had not been providing VFM.

How good is the service?

128 In this inspection strengths and weaknesses are in balance. The service has an improving understanding of its costs and how these compare. Overall service costs are mixed compared to other similar organisations and costs are not always consistent with quality. The management of value for money is improving. It is a key corporate priority and improvements have been delivered through better procurement, service reviews and by drawing in external funding. There are also some examples of tenant feedback influencing value for money decisions. However, not all service areas have been reviewed and outcomes remain more limited. Overall tenant satisfaction with the value for money of rent has fallen.

How do costs compare?

129 Service costs are mixed compared to other similar organisations. Benchmark information (2008/09) with 38 local authorities across England shows direct costs per property for resident involvement and for major and cyclical works are in the best 25 per cent of organisations. Comparative performance for direct costs per property in housing management (including rents) and for ASB are in the best 50 per cent. Responsive repairs and voids are in the worst 25 per cent and estates services are in the worst 50 per cent. However some central overhead costs are high with office costs, finance and central costs in the most expensive 25 per cent. IT costs are around average.

130 Cost is not always consistent with service quality. For example, while major and cyclical works are low cost outcomes such as tenant satisfaction and the proportion of homes failing the decent homes standard (while improving) are below average and among the worst 25 per cent performance respectively. Equally the resident involvement service is low cost but qualitative indicators such as satisfaction with views are being taken into account and satisfaction with complaints handling show below average performance when compared to others. While housing management costs are above average outcomes such as relet times and arrears performance show best 25 per cent performance. Some low cost services are producing low quality outcomes for tenants.

131 Understanding of costs across the service is developing. The Council can show how high level costs compare and it is developing its intelligence about transaction costs and some low-level costs. Comparative information on costs and performance are used by the Council to challenge if services are delivering value for money.

132 The Council has a good understanding of the cost of its Decent Homes programme and this is supported through effective benchmarking. This information is being used to inform the open book approach. Both Decent Homes contractors have provided information on similar external projects. Consultants have also selected two external projects to provide further comparison. This work shows that Crawley is providing their decent homes programme the cost at the lower end of the spectrum.

133 There are areas where value for money is not fully embedded and the Council does not know how its services compare to others. For example there is no understanding or assessment of costs for the aids and adaptations service or in income management (including former tenants' arrears). In estate management the lack of de-pooled service charges limits transparency, the Council's ability to demonstrate to tenants that service charges deliver value for money and some tenants maybe subsidising others. Gaps in benchmarking information and costs limit the impact and overall approach to value for money across all service areas.

How is value for money managed?

134 A corporate strategic value for money framework supports the overall approach across the service. Delivering value for money is one of the 12 priorities identified within the Corporate Plan.

135 The approach to procurement is improving value for money. The Council has a joint procurement strategy with two other Councils and related action plan. A single procurement team made up of staff from all three authorities formally comes into existence in April 2010, although informal arrangements have been in place for some months. The Council's joint procurement team supported the housing service through the recent large procurement of Decent Homes and responsive repairs void and gas servicing contracts. Corporate joint procurement has also helped deliver some added capacity and efficiencies, such as the such as county wide agency staffing contract and a joint insurance contract which has resulted in cashable savings for the Housing Revenue Account of £71,000 yearly, the total saving over four years is £284,000.

136 Overall scrutiny of value for money takes place at a corporate and service level. The Cabinet sets the strategic direction while the improvement planning group has specific responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of the value for money review programme as part of its remit. Financial and satisfaction data is considered alongside related performance information linked to strategic objectives. A suite of value for money indicators are benchmarked with other landlords with the target to achieve best 25 per cent performance. Current performance shows seven targets are at green, one is at amber and two are at red (failing to achieve the target). Senior and middle managers are responsible for ensuring value for money is embedded in the culture of the organisation and in service outcomes through the programme of service reviews.

137 Service reviews are delivering efficiency savings. Service reviews in the housing service have been identified and prioritised based on a basket of indicators. A monthly Improvement Planning Group monitors key performance indicators and progress of the Value for Money programme reviews. A review of the repairs process has delivered efficiency savings of £260,000 and the service has achieved savings of £54,000 on voids overheads as a result of agreed changes to the contractor's staff structure. A review exercise in the decent homes programme resulted in positive value for money outcomes with an 18 per cent reduction in costs for boilers and kitchens and 19 per cent reductions in costs for bathrooms. However, the impact of service reviews on income management has not yet been assessed as the review has not yet been rolled across all parts of the service. Efficiencies are yet to be identified or delivered in all areas.

How good is the service?

- 138** There are some examples of tenant feedback influencing value for money decisions. The 2008 tenants' survey included an additional questionnaire to identify tenants' priorities. The response rated modernising homes significantly higher than any other priority. This has become a key area for investment. Members of the Tenants Forum have also had some input in determining priorities for savings and investment as part of the Council budget setting process and have been involved in the recent procurement of the decent homes, gas servicing and responsive repairs contractors. A recent bid for the establishment of a specialist post to deliver a more effective ASB service has been influenced by tenant feedback on the quality of the service. Investment priorities and decisions are taking into account the views of tenants.
- 139** The Council has had some success attracting external funding. Social Housing Energy Savings project has delivered £450,000, the Retrofit for the Future £600,000 and a Family Intervention Project has two years funding for a project worker. At a corporate level funding includes Health and Well-being work in the Local Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (which have high concentrations of social housing) around health inequalities is providing £800,000 investment. External funding is resulting in additional initiatives or services.
- 140** The approach to value for money is not fully embedded in all areas. The approach is developing in some areas such as in rents where cases are presented in court by staff instead of solicitors and the introduction of online possessions is speeding up the process and leading to savings. However, costs have not been fully challenged in some areas such as collecting former tenants' arrears, aids and adaptations and elements of tenancy of tenancy and estate management. The lack of de-pooled service charges limits transparency and the Council's ability to be able to demonstrate to tenants that service charges deliver value for money. Tenant satisfaction with the value for money for rent has reduced from 72 per cent (2008) to 69 per cent (2009).

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

141 In the previous inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. The Council was found to have been slow to carry out action plans and recommendations in key areas. Performance and direction of travel had not been strong. There was no evidence of consistently improving VFM over time. There were improvements in the responsive repairs service but tenant satisfaction with services was mixed.

142 In this inspection we found strengths and weaknesses are in balance. The service has delivered some real improvements that customers would recognise for example, improvements to their homes. However, the rate and scale of improvements has not been consistent across the service and weaknesses remain in some important areas. The service has made reasonable progress in addressing the findings of the previous Audit Commission inspection although there are gaps.

143 The service has delivered some real improvements that customers would recognise including:

- improvements to tenants' homes through the delivery of a decent homes programme;
- good quality information available and clearer service standards;
- estate services are effective and contributing to positive neighbourhood environments;
- appointments offered for all repairs which are being completed quickly; and
- it is increasingly easy for tenants to participate and to influence the services they receive.

144 However, the rate and scale of improvements has not been consistent across the service and weaknesses remain in some important areas:

- the way telephone calls are dealt with is an area for improvement and complaints handling is weak;
- the delivery of aids and adaptations is still weak and disabled tenants are waiting too long for adaptations;
- some significant health and safety risks have not been adequately addressed;
- the approach to arrears prevention has not yet been developed across all patches;
- the service does not deal with antisocial behaviour well; and
- tenant feedback is still not routinely informing service delivery such as in the management of empty homes and in estate services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

145 The service has made reasonable progress in addressing the findings of the previous Audit Commission inspection although there are gaps. For example:

- service outcomes for customers are improving with the availability of more self service options through the website and the service is readily accessible;
- equality impact assessments have been completed, there are examples of outcomes benefiting tenants as a result and the Council has improved its rating against the equalities framework; and
- there have been improvements to the repairs service through the revised approach to the responsive repairs process and the quality of contract management has improved.

Most recommendations have been addressed but there are some gaps where actions are still to be completed (although they are in plans to be addressed). A key gap is the efficient and effective collection of debts which is currently subject to a service review. Where some recommendations have been addressed outcomes are still not consistent such as weaknesses identified in the approach to diversity.

146 Improvement in performance across the service is showing a positive trend in some areas. Gas servicing has been maintained at a high-level and the time taken to relet empty homes has been reduced. In addition the quality of estates has remained high. Where high standards have previously been identified these have been maintained in some key areas.

147 The approach to value for money is improving. The service has an improving understanding of its costs and how these compare. Value for money improvements have been delivered through better procurement and by drawing in external funding. Structures in key service areas have or are being reorganised to deliver substantial savings which have been reinvested in the service in areas such as decent homes. However where reviews are not yet completed the approach to value for money is less well embedded in service delivery.

148 The approach to diversity has been slow. Outcomes for tenants are improving but information held is not yet comprehensive and it is not consistently used to shape services.

149 Tenant satisfaction with services mixed. Satisfaction with the service overall is high and many areas show average levels of satisfaction when compared to others. However, some areas such as value for money with rent and satisfaction with being kept informed (ASB) have shown a decrease since 2008. This suggests service quality has not been consistent.

How well does the service manage performance?

150 The previous inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The service improvement plan was addressing key weaknesses and new leadership was providing direction. Performance management arrangements were developing but there were still gaps in plans which were not robust and learning was not systematic.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 151** In this inspection we found strengths outweigh weaknesses. The housing management service is an important corporate priority and leadership of the service is strong. The service is increasingly well led and demonstrates a high level of self-awareness. Performance management and risk management arrangements are generally effective. However, there are some important gaps in performance reporting and a learning culture is not fully embedded. Performance management of plans is not consistently strong and the assessment of staff performance and target setting is not fully robust.
- 152** The housing service is an important corporate priority and is benefitting from strong leadership. Service improvement plans are regularly reviewed by senior managers and Councillors as well as the Tenants Forum. The service now has a high-profile across the Council. This approach ensures that improvement is delivered and when necessary difficult decisions have been taken to move the service forward and meet the needs of tenants.
- 153** Leadership of the service is strong. The Council has demonstrated its willingness to make difficult decisions to ensure performance management arrangements are satisfactory. The service is self-aware and open to external challenge. This best supports service improvement.
- 154** Service planning is robust. Actions to deliver corporate priorities, such as 'delivering excellent services', are captured in plans, with improvements specifically for tenancy services that have been identified through customer feedback. This has been further informed by self-assessment against the Key Lines of Enquiry and external challenge. Tenants have played a key role developing service improvement plans. As part of developing the HRA business plan 2009/11 a number of mechanisms were used to find out what mattered to tenants. Where services have undergone a full review (such as repairs and part of income management) plans and outcomes are strong. Plans are less effective in areas which have not yet been reviewed.
- 155** Performance management arrangements are generally effective. Performance is monitored monthly at senior management and corporate management teams, the corporate Improvement and Planning Group (chaired by the Leader) and on a quarterly basis at the Performance Monitoring Scrutiny Panel. The housing service monitors a range of data and the service is moving towards reporting end to end reporting times to better reflect the tenant experience. All reports are available in real-time on the electronic performance management system. The organisation is well-placed to identify and address areas of weaker performance.
- 156** Effective financial monitoring systems are in place. Monitoring reports identify material variations and focus on areas of risk or volatility. Invoice processing has been strengthened and works well across the service. Managers receive monthly reports and support from the Council's financial team. This means any weaknesses will be easily highlighted and action taken.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 157** The approach to risk management is effective. The risk management strategy and risk register identify and rank the risks that face the service. A risk management process ensures the most significant ones are actively monitored and reviewed. Health and safety risks such as asbestos and electrical safety have been identified and ranked as very low while legionella has been given a warning status. This approach demonstrated the service is self-aware and is less likely to fail to deliver business plan objectives.
- 158** The service is self aware and open to external challenge. The Council has responded well to inspection. Some weaknesses highlighted earlier in the report are identified in improvement plans such as improvements in the approach to managing ASB, the extending of the review of income management to all patches and reviewing the delivery of the aids and adaptations service. During the inspection the Council responded positively to feedback and where appropriate action was taken. Actions should deliver improvement.
- 159** There are some important gaps in performance reporting. Collection and analysis of tenant satisfaction is weak. This is significant as this is a performance measure for the service. Information about aids and adaptations and equality and diversity performance is not robust and not all service standards are monitored. This makes it difficult to demonstrate how well the service performs in all areas and limits understanding.
- 160** A learning culture is not fully embedded across the service. The use of external consultants to support the change management programme has brought new learning into the organisation. Where reviews have been undertaken there are examples of visits to other landlords and identifying new ways of working such as in resident involvement. There are examples of learning from customer feedback to drive through improvement such as in the use of mystery shopping. However, while complaints are analysed for learning opportunities this tends to focus on areas which have been reviewed such as repairs. Benchmarking is being used in repairs and the decent homes programme but is not fully embedded across the service in terms of being actively used to drive improvement. There are some weaknesses which show a lack of awareness of good practice. Examples include aids and adaptations and the management of ASB. At present there are some parts of the service that are not benefiting from a systematic approach to learning.
- 161** The performance management of plans is not consistently strong. There are weaknesses in signing off plans where some actions have been noted as complete but where the inspection highlighted weaknesses, such as aids and adaptations. There has also been slippage against some actions within key plans. For example the review of rents is only 33 per cent complete, the update of the housing officers' procedure manual is only 20 per cent complete, and the identification and management of legionella risks is shown in plans as 15 per cent complete. All have end dates of March 2010 but there is no indication why delays have occurred or what actions are being taken. This weakens plans and the effectiveness of performance management.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

162 Assessment of staff performance and target setting is not fully robust. A small selection of staff appraisals showed compliance with the corporate process but training requirements are not consistently identified. Appraisals lacked strong outcome targets and often described a process or action rather than what a successful outcome should produce. Appraisals are also not used consistently to embed corporate 'values' such as equality and diversity and being customer-focused and lacked clear targets against which success can be assessed.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

163 The previous inspection found positive signs of improvement based on new leadership, a focus on cultural change, new partnered maintenance contracts and staff development. However, the short-term and long-term funding of housing maintenance was unclear and there was no effective partnership working with tenants.

164 In this inspection we found strengths outweigh weaknesses. Leadership and staff capacity is strong. The service has benefitted from corporate support and is investing in 'building blocks' to support further improvement. The service has increased through its capacity through service reviews and partnership working. However, ICT is not used to its full potential. The responsive repairs service still faces a major challenge to ensure continued delivery of a quality service to tenants and the capacity of residents is not being maximised.

165 Leadership capacity is strong. The executive management team is providing positive leadership and is supported by an effective portfolio holder. Senior managers have been seconded into the service and are helping to bring about service improvement. A change management programme is facilitating ongoing training and evaluation of middle managers. In addition there is an increased focus from the corporate management team and Members. This gives assurance for further improvements.

166 Staff capacity is strong. Morale is high and staff demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment. Staff turnover and sickness levels are low within the service. Communication and team working has been strengthened both at a service and corporate level and there are mechanisms in place for staff to provide feedback and be involved in service improvement. Regular staff briefings, team meetings and individual meetings with managers help staff to understand how their role contributes to delivery of service objectives.

167 Corporate support for the service is increasing capacity. There is effective support from human resources, during service reviews and changes to staff structures. This is supported by a three year workforce plan (2010-2013). There are robust policies in place to support service transformation and to support staff. Training and development opportunities are positive, strengthen staff capacity and staff turnover is low. The service benefits from a stable and experienced workforce and sickness levels are low.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 168** The service is investing in 'building blocks' to support further improvements. A culture change project is in progress and providing a stronger focus on how services should be delivered to achieve high customer satisfaction. The service has a sound understanding of its financial position and is taking action to address some of the financial challenges facing the housing revenue account (HRA). Sufficient resources have been identified to deliver agreed improvements.
- 169** The Council has increased capacity through risk based service reviews. The Council has used consultants to facilitate this approach but has also positively used this to help build internal capacity to undertake future service reviews with reducing support from consultants. Key staff have received training and are leading two reviews; one in licensing and one in the homelessness and allocations service. It is anticipated that another two or three service areas will undertake reviews in 2010/2011 as well as the continued roll out of the review of income management and the approach to former tenants' arrears. They are likely to require limited consultancy support.
- 170** The Council makes positive use of partnerships to deliver services. This includes working with the police and corporate community safety teams to address problems of antisocial behaviour. Corporate community development work (particularly in areas of high levels of social housing) and with the new maintenance contractors. This is important as it is making services more efficient, increases skills levels and increases the resources available.
- 171** ICT is not used to its full potential. There is a lack of electronic interface between the housing management systems and the stock condition database which means there is a manual transfer of data. IT is not all effectively used to flag tenants' needs since the housing management system has this facility but the repairs system does not and does not flag where gas servicing is outstanding. However, IT is used to centrally capture performance information which can be drilled down to a detailed level. The service review of responsive repairs and the housing income pilot have placed additional IT resource requirements across these parts of the service. At present service delivery will not be consistently efficient.
- 172** The responsive repairs service still faces a major challenge to ensure delivery of a quality service to tenants. Two new contractor partners start in April 2010 and there are risks to be managed around any deterioration in service outcomes. The service requires a 'one contractor' approach which is driven by tenants' requests. It is important that work is quickly completed to drive out some of the efficiencies of having two contract areas. To date this has been managed effectively but the service must ensure that the momentum is maintained.
- 173** The capacity of residents needs to be strengthened. Resident involvement activity is limited to a small pool of people. The number of actively involved tenants is small and there is a risk of over consultation. The service is increasingly using tenants to develop its strategic approach as well as monitor on-going service delivery and without further capacity-building there is a risk that decisions about the future direction of the service may not reflect the needs of all tenants.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Crawley Borough Council performance 2007/08 to 2009/10

Performance indicator (BVPI reference)	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 (Q3) (unaudited)
63 Average SAP rating	72	72	year end
66a Percentage rent collected	98.08%	98.83%	98.45%
66b Percentage tenants with > seven weeks arrears (gross)	-	-	year end
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	-	-	year end
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	-	-	year end
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	83%	-	82%
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	65%		
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	41%	32.4%	29.9%
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	–	31%	year end
BPSAe (formerly BV 68) Average relet time in days	31	24	23

Performance profile information

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:

- focus groups with tenants and other stakeholders;
- interviews with staff and Councillors;
- telephone calls to test services;
- estate visits;
- visits to ready to let voids (empty homes);
- observation of the contact centre and the repairs call centre; and
- complaints file checks.

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