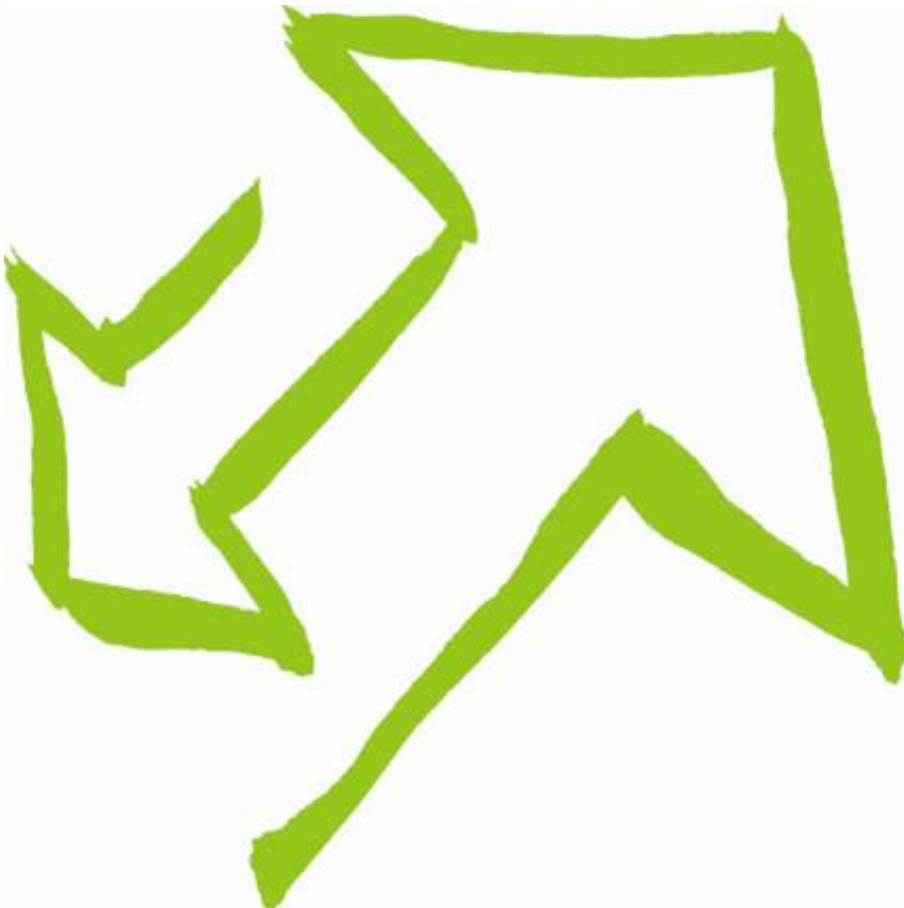


# Short Notice Inspection

Short notice inspection of income management,  
empty property management and gas services

Great Places Housing Group

June 2010



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# Housing Association Inspections

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

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

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

Short notice inspections (SNIs) have been developed to encourage improvements in the performance of housing associations (HAs) at delivering services to their customers. They focus on the outcomes for residents and work on the basis that associations will concentrate on improving services rather than preparing for an inspection, which could happen at any time.

The scope of each inspection of a housing association, undertaken by the Audit Commission has been agreed in consultation with the Tenant Services Authority. The Tenant Services Authority is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable as set out in its Regulatory Code.

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## The Group

- 1 On 1 November 2009 the three subsidiaries of Great Places Housing Group (HG) - Manchester Methodists Housing Association (HA), Ashiana HA and Space New Living HA - merged into one single landlord services organisation, Great Places HA. A new social business unit, the Ashiana Foundation, has been set up to ensure that the needs of diverse customers and communities are known and met.
- 2 The Group manages around 15,000 properties, including 10,515 general needs, 1,373 supported housing and 1,417 leasehold properties. Stock is distributed widely, mainly across the North West with properties in Lancashire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester. The group also has stock in Sheffield. Many neighbourhoods are affected by issues of changing demand in four housing market renewal areas: Manchester/Salford; Oldham/Rochdale; East Lancashire; and South Yorkshire. In total the Group operates in 30 different council areas.

- 3 Great Places HG has a tradition of working in challenging areas and neighbourhoods. Ashiana HA specialised in the housing needs of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and Great Places HG has a significant proportion of specialist accommodation for people with housing related support needs.
- 4 Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) populations vary significantly in the areas in which the Group operates from 2.7 per cent in Wyre to 25.6 per cent in Blackburn. BME communities form significant customer bases in areas such as Longsight in Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale and other areas in East Lancashire.
- 5 Great Places HG is governed by a board made up of fourteen members including two tenants. The board delegates detailed monitoring of service delivery to a customer led forum, Great Places Tenant Services Committee. The Group's vision is to be strong, bright and real:
  - strong - bold, energetic, forceful, have sound finances and solid roots;
  - bright - innovative, fresh, new, colourful and stylish; and
  - real - feet on the ground, customer focused, know where it is from, realistic, there's substance in what it does.

The Group has an annual turnover of £62 million. It employs around 560 staff.

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### The scope of the inspection

- 6 The scope of this inspection focused on the following areas, identified in consultation with the regulator, the Tenant Services Authority:
  - repair and re-let of empty property;
  - income management; and
  - gas servicing.
- 7 The inspection also included an assessment of how Great Places Housing Group is addressing three cross-cutting themes: access and customer care, diversity and value for money within the services included in the inspection's scope.
- 8 We would like to thank the staff of Great Places Housing Group who made us welcome and met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 1 to 3 December 2009h

# Summary of our findings

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

**Table 1 Assessment**

How good is the service?	Assessment
• Access and customer care <sup>I</sup>	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
• Diversity	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
• Income management	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
• Void repairs and re-letting	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
• Gas servicing	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
• Value for money	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance

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

**Table 2 Assessment of prospects for improvement**

Prospects for Improvement <sup>II</sup>	Assessment
Track record of improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
How well is performance managed	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
Is there capacity to improve	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses

<sup>I</sup> Access and customer care, diversity and value for money are assessed in relation to the service areas inspected only.

<sup>II</sup> In the relation to the service areas inspected

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# How good is the service?

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## Access and customer care in the service areas inspected

12 We found strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area.

13 There are a number of strengths.

- A centrally based customer access team taking telephone enquiries is making services more accessible. Staff are polite, helpful and friendly. Surveys show that customers are satisfied with arrangements to access services.
- ICT is used to improve access to services. The latest mobile technology allows neighbourhood based staff access to information and to deliver services in customers' homes.
- Newsletters use plain English in a reader friendly, attractive, style and contain interesting information. Good examples were seen in publications about gas safety and feedback on performance against service standards.
- The website is accessible and informative and contains useful resources for customers. For example, as well as an easy portal for paying rent there are financial inclusion pages that provide useful links and information, including a benefits calculator and a utilities comparison site. Information helps customers to access services to increase their income, get advice and pay their rent.
- Customers are able to influence and monitor service delivery. The Group involved more than 600 customers in developing the service standards reported to Tenants Panels. Performance against service standards has been improving since this was introduced.

14 There are weaknesses.

- With over 11 per cent of calls direct to contractors lost and telephone answering targets not always met, customers may have difficulty getting through on the telephone. As a result, customers may not be able to report a needed repair or have to wait longer for an answer to their enquiry.
- It takes too long to deal with complaints and the way they are handled is not encouraging customers to complain. Customers are dissatisfied with the outcome of complaints and performance is considerably below the target set in the service standards.
- Learning from complaints is not well structured. For example, there is limited analysis of who is making complaints or the main causes of dissatisfaction and limited reporting of the outcome of complaints and how those outcomes have fed into service improvement.

## How good is the service?

- Although changes are planned, performance against services standards is not currently monitored comprehensively. The Group is missing the opportunity to improve performance in-line with service standards that have been agreed with customers.
- The Group does not have recent information showing how satisfied customers are with overall services provided by their landlord or that their views are taken into account. Significant changes have been introduced since the last survey in 2007/08 when results varied across the subsidiaries from above average to comparable to the worst performing organisations. As a result the Group does not know what impact the changes have had on customers.

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## Diversity in the service areas inspected

15 We found strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area.

16 There are a number of strengths.

- The Group is making progress in collecting and using customer profile data with information covering gender, ethnicity, disability and age held on over 85 per cent of customers and 48 per cent on sexuality. Data is used for example, to target older and vulnerable customers with advice and information on how to stay safe and warm over winter.
- Staff and board member composition is exceeding targets set to ensure they are representative of the local community. The diverse governance and staffing arrangements gives customers confidence the Group respects differences.
- With a single equality scheme covering six equality strands and a group wide strategy, the Group has a strong strategic approach to diversity. This is providing direction and a sound basis for the promotion of equality and diversity.
- Staff and contractor training and sharing of customer profile information has encouraged some tailoring of services. For example, operatives know when a customer does not speak English as their first language and can go prepared to use interpreter services.
- Lettings to customers from BME communities and people with a disability are high.
- Action is taken to address differing levels of customer satisfaction, for example with repairs services including gas. Improvements, including more appropriate components such as lever taps, are now used as part of the repairs service.
- Great Places works with a number of external agencies to promote diversity through an annual diversity week. This has raised awareness, clearly demonstrated the Group's commitment and provided staff and customers with access to a range of information in an imaginative and informal way.

### 17 There are some key weaknesses.

- Equality impact assessments have not been carried out on the policies and procedures covering income management or gas servicing to identify any potential barriers or discriminatory practices. Some profiling work, particularly in relation to income management has been carried out. However, by not comprehensively assessing the outcomes of policies and practices the Group makes it possible for some people in the community to be disadvantaged unintentionally.
- Targets to measure contractor equality and diversity performance are not being closely monitored. As a result, the Group does not know what progress is being made, for example towards a diverse workforce that reflects the communities served.
- Although some services are monitored by diversity strands, this does not yet cover some key elements of service delivery. For example, complaints and routine customer satisfaction information are not broken down to see whether there is a higher incidence of complaints from a particular minority community or lower levels of satisfaction.
- Although some staff have access to training, some front line staff and operatives going into customers homes on a regular basis have not had training to recognise signs of abuse or understand what action they need to take.

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## Income management

### 18 We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

### 19 There are a number of strengths.

- A wide range of payment methods, including giving rent staff the ability to set up direct debits on visits, make paying rent and other payments easy for customers. Incentives are offered to encourage customers to keep clear rent accounts, pay by direct debit or keep to agreements to clear arrears. These are helping to encourage payment and reduce arrears levels.
- Rent arrears are reducing from a relative high position. Rent arrears at the end of 2006/07 in the former subsidiaries Ashiana HA and Space New Living HA were 13.8 per cent of the rent roll and 6.1 per cent respectively. In the twelve months to November 2009, arrears have steadily reduced both for the former subsidiaries and for the combined Group, reducing overall from 6 per cent to 5.5 per cent<sup>1</sup>. During this period the Group collected 100.2 per cent of rent due. There has been success in tackling arrears in some areas that previously had high arrears.
- Performance in recovering former tenant arrears is better than the comparison benchmarking group average. Former tenants' arrears are 2.6 per cent of the rent roll, below the benchmarking group average of 3.9 per cent.

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<sup>1</sup> similar associations in Great Places' North West 'peer group' had average rent arrears of 6.1per cent.

## How good is the service?

- Benefits and other debt advice is an integral part of procedures followed by front line staff. Rent arrears staff have a good working knowledge of relevant benefits and know where to signpost customers with more complex problems. They can give advice at the first point of contact. The success of this work is shown by the reducing levels of evictions.
- There is a clear commitment to promoting financial inclusion with a dedicated team and developing relationships with partners. For example, more than £11,702 has been recovered for customers in Sheffield who were entitled to help with their water rates. This gives customers the chance to reduce their payments and avoid getting into debt.
- Income management staff have forged strong relationships with local housing benefit departments and are able to give basic benefits advice and know when to signpost people with more complex problems to other agencies. This knowledge is used to make sure that claims are set up quickly and correctly and has helped recover more than £11,796 in unclaimed housing benefit since April 2009.
- Letters and other rent information are clear and easy to understand. This helps customers to avoid rent arrears building up.

### 20 There are weaknesses.

- Despite reducing year on year, rent arrears owed by current tenants remains higher than the Group's year end target and above the national average. Uncollected income is not available to develop services elsewhere.
- Although all areas are showing improved performance, significant differences remain between areas, for example with tenants of ex-Ashiana properties owing 6.6 per cent of the rent roll at the end of December 2009 compared to 5 per cent elsewhere.
- Financial inclusion is still in its early stages. Take up of some of the recent initiatives by the Financial Inclusion Team has been modest.

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## Void repairs and re-letting

### 21 We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

### 22 There are a number of strengths.

- Improved working practices and communication between the Group and its contractors is leading to a reduction in turnaround times from an average of 43 days during 2008/09 to 31 days between April and October 2009. Consistent repair practices are being followed across the Group.
- New practices, such as back to back lets, and initiatives, such as financial incentives to leave properties clear and clean, have been introduced to minimise re-let times. These are helping to reduce costs and waiting times and are improving the sustainability of neighbourhoods.

- The Group has reversed deteriorating trends, particularly properties previously managed by two of the subsidiaries, in the length of time it takes to re-let properties. During 2008/09 the average re-let time in Ashiana HA was 43 days and 59 days for Space New Living HA. Between April and October 2009 the average re-let time for Ashiana HA was 28 days and 33 days for Space New Living HA. Overall the Group's average re-let time for general needs properties was 31 days<sup>1</sup> and re-let times for supported housing units was also better than average. This reduces the amount of rent lost while a property is empty.
- Appropriate levels of post void repair inspection arrangements are in place to confirm the quality of repair work and that properties are ready to let. Properties are checked to ensure they meet the standard needed.
- Newly re-let properties meet or exceed the standard agreed by customers. As a result most customers are satisfied with the condition of their new homes with feedback from April 2009 showing 92 per cent satisfied with the condition of their new home, and 88 per cent considered their home met the lettable standard.
- The Group keeps a close eye on schemes and neighbourhood sustainability. Examples include Spinners Hall where the scheme no longer has any empty properties and St Francis house where property turnover has fallen sharply. Despite challenging economic circumstances, the Group is keeping tenancy turnover rates below the average of housing associations reporting turnover to a regional benchmarking club.
- Great Places has fewer empty general needs and supported housing properties than average. Currently the Group has 1.3 per cent of its general needs properties empty. This compares with the 2008/09 national top quartile level of less than 1.3 per cent. This means that rental losses as a result of properties being unoccupied are reduced.

### 23 There are weaknesses.

- The lettable standard is basic and open to misinterpretation. Customers will not be clear about what standard of property to expect.
- More properties are refused by prospective tenants than the average of properties offered by other landlords in north west. As a result more effort is needed to re-let the property and costs rise.
- Limited information is provided to customers, for example on what support or assistance they can claim to redecorate their new home. Prospective tenants may not claim their entitlement or may refuse a property because they do not know what assistance is available and other initiatives are less effective.
- Although consistent procedures have been introduced across the Group, we found inconsistencies in practices followed in ex-Ashiana properties, for example relating to decoration vouchers and help for vulnerable people. Customers may be offered different levels of service depending on the location of their property.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008/09 the national re-let time average was 39.5 days and median 35.6 days: source Tenant Services Authority

## How good is the service?

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### Gas servicing

24 We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

25 There are a number of strengths.

- A high proportion of properties have a valid gas safety certificate with only seven properties where the certificate is overdue<sup>i</sup>. The Group is complying with legislation and protecting the safety of its customers.
- A range of measures, including prize draw incentives, flexible appointments and clear warning messages on letters, are used to gain access for gas servicing. As a result, most customers allow early access and legal action is only needed in a small number of cases.
- At 99.7 per cent, customer satisfaction with gas servicing is high. Customers are more likely to allow access when they know the service is important for their safety and the work is carried out to a high standard.
- By raising the profile, close attention from the Board, strengthening contract monitoring and amending working practices, the Group has addressed previously poor performance. The Board is discharging its legal responsibilities and protecting its customers.

26 There are weaknesses.

- Two gas safety checks are well overdue<sup>ii</sup>, one over 200 days and the highest being 319 days overdue. Although appropriate action is currently being taken, the appliances present an increasing risk to the safety of the property occupants and neighbours.
- Customers are not provided with details of the standard of service they can expect or made aware of the range of appointments or incentives available. This limits the effectiveness of initiatives and the ability of the Group to demonstrate the standard of performance being provided.

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### Value for money in the service areas inspected<sup>iii</sup>

27 We found that strengths are balanced with weaknesses in this area.

28 There are a number of strengths.

- Gas and voids repairs service costs are competitive as services have recently been subjected to competitive tender as part of the wider renewal of repairs and maintenance contracts. Average costs compare well.

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<sup>i</sup> Reducing to none by January 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Reducing to one shortly after the on site inspection work.

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

- Action has been taken to identify areas where improved efficiency can be achieved. This illustrated a number of areas for improvement, for example rationalising the number of suppliers used, using agency staff in a more structured way, getting economies of scale from landscaping contracts where further work has delivered efficiencies.
- Great Places HG has outperformed the efficiency gains it projected for 2008/09, delivering a total of £1,388,000 (2.24 per cent of turnover). A number of procedural efficiencies, such as pre-termination visits, more back to back lets and changing former tenant arrears collection arrangements have been introduced. Efficiencies include £10,000 as a result of introducing online court applications, £12,000 following a review of the Allpay transaction contract, and £3,000 changing the way it procures decorating vouchers. More funds are available for service development.
- Significant economies of scale have been realised by moving to the Group structure. Efficiencies of £429,000 were achieved in the first year of Space New Living HA joining the Group with a forecast £2.7 million over five years. Up to £220,000 further efficiency savings are forecast from the merger of three subsidiaries into one new association. This has released funding for re-investment into new services such as developing the Financial Inclusion Team.
- The Group has an ongoing programme of service improvement reviews, including voids management, and service charges. These have contributed to the service improvements currently being delivered.

### 29 There are weaknesses.

- The Group does not know how its overall income collection costs compare to others. Customers do not know whether they are getting value for money.
- Benchmarking is underdeveloped; not all service areas are actively involved in sharing information on costs, quality and processes to understand how they compare and learn from good practice. As a result, the Group does not know how its overall costs, quality and performance on voids or income collection compare with others outside the Group.
- Routine overall value for money assessments (balancing cost, quality, performance and customer satisfaction) and comparing these with others are not undertaken at a service level. So for example, a detailed efficiency review is undertaken of Allpay arrangements, but no assessment is made of how overall costs, performance, and customer satisfaction rates of income collection services compare with others.
- Customers are not yet closely involved in the assessment of value for money. Although customers are involved in monitoring service delivery and receive performance and other satisfaction information that is collected, these are not set alongside the costs of services and how these compare to others. Customers do not get the information they need to make a meaningful judgement.
- The Group does not yet have any value for money measures in place for the areas being inspected or for the Group overall. It is therefore difficult for the Group and its customers to see what is being achieved.

# Recommendations

- 30 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>1</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with customers and board members; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### Recommendation

#### R1 Improve access and customer care by:

- developing and monitoring service standards, with customers, in all service areas;
- setting targets for contractor calls handling and monitoring their achievement;
- concluding investigations into complaints more quickly; and
- learning from individual and patterns of complaints how services can be improved.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will know how the Group is performing;
- customers will be more confident that complaints will be acted upon; and
- procedures will be improved to prevent similar complaints being made.

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

### Recommendation

#### R2 Improve service delivery to a diverse community by:

- completing equality impact assessments on the policies and procedures of inspected services and addressing any barriers or potentially discriminatory practices;
- monitoring ongoing contractor performance against agreed equality and diversity targets; and
- providing training on domestic abuse to front line staff who are in regular contact with customers.

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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Group will comply with legislation;
- barriers to accessing services will be identified and removed; and
- service delivery will be consistent.

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

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve income management by:

- increasing the proportion of rent collected;
- continuing to target areas with higher levels of arrears to achieve below average levels overall and more consistency across the Group; and
- understanding why rent is not being paid, learning from what works well elsewhere and providing access to advice and support in appropriate circumstances.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more income will be collected; and
- customers will be offered advice and support when it is needed.

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

### Recommendation

**R4** Improve the management of empty properties by:

- agreeing with existing and potential customers a clear and affordable re-let standard that meets their needs;
- closely monitoring the standard of ready to let properties, including the use of mystery shopping;
- reducing the level of offers refused by understanding and addressing the reasons why customers are refusing properties; and
- providing customers with clear and consistent information on support available for redecoration, including decoration vouchers and additional support available for vulnerable customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will know what standard to expect and the support available for redecoration; and
- fewer properties offered to customers will be refused.

## Recommendations

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

### Recommendation

**R5** Improve value for money by:

- developing benchmarking activity so that all service areas routinely compare costs, quality and performance information with other service providers and learn from good practice;
- routinely assessing and ranking service areas for value for money (cost: quality: performance: customer satisfaction: effectiveness) to target areas where improvements are necessary;
- introducing targets and measures for value for money; and
- providing information and involving customers in decision making.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers and managers will be able to see how services compare with others;
- weaker areas can be targeted for improvement; and
- customers and managers will see where improvements are being delivered.

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

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# Prospects for improvement

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

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

**31** We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**32** There are a number of strengths.

- Performance across all three service areas inspected shows strong improvement. More rent is being collected, relet times have significantly reduced, fewer properties are empty and the number of safety checks completed within the annual interval on properties with gas supplies has increased substantially.
- Access to services and customer care is improving. Customer telephone enquiries are answered quickly and customer care meets the Government's Customer Service Excellence standard.
- The Group is achieving more of the service standards it has agreed with customers. Results are reported back to customers and monitored by the Tenant Panels.
- Where customer satisfaction is measured the levels achieved are high. Customers are happy with gas servicing and the condition of their new home.
- Great Places Group has a positive record of delivering year on year efficiency improvements. Significant efficiencies have been delivered in the last two years with savings invested in new services, such as developing Financial Inclusion by promoting credit unions, reducing customers' utility bills and helping people claim welfare benefits.
- Important work has been done in taking subsidiaries with previously mixed performance into the Great Places Group. This is resulting in improvements in customer experience and service performance in the areas in the scope of this inspection.

There are weaknesses.

- Although the majority have been implemented, some elements of recommendations made following a previous inspection in one subsidiary have not been fully implemented. As a result there are continuing weaknesses such as not reviewing all performance information by diversity strands or setting targets for value for money.
- Slow progress has been made to ensure policies and procedures covering income management and gas servicing provide fair and equal access and that any barriers to individuals or groups are identified and removed.

## Prospects for improvement

- While the gap is narrowing, customers can still experience differences in service delivery across the Group. Although performance can be affected by contextual issues such as the type of property, the tenant need or the neighbourhood; empty property relet times and rent arrears collection rates show some important variations by neighbourhood and some inconsistent practices persist.

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

**33** We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**34** There are a number of strengths.

- In response to the inspection recommendations, Great Places Housing Group, following widespread consultation with tenants, staff and managers, has produced a comprehensive action plan that addresses all the recommendations made. Robust monitoring arrangements have been put in place with tenants closely involved. When implemented, actions will address the weaknesses identified.
- The board is showing leadership and is prepared to take difficult decisions. Examples include the decision to collapse the subsidiaries involving substantial change at all levels, investing in financial inclusion at a time when its benefits are most needed and driving up performance on gas safety checks.
- A clear digest of performance is reported quarterly to the board using a balanced scorecard. Information is available to enable the Board to identify high and low performing areas and take informed decisions.
- Customers are generally kept informed of how the Association is performing in key service areas. Information is provided for the Tenants Panel to scrutinise performance against standards and key performance information is included in the quarterly newsletters to keep all customers informed.
- Plans address the right areas for improvement and make clear links to corporate objectives. Areas for improvement include further developing customer access by telephone and through the website, complaints and extending financial inclusion for vulnerable customers who are most affected by the economic downturn.
- Great Places HG has a comprehensive system for assessing risk and is taking a proactive approach to reducing it. This lessens the likelihood and potential impact of unplanned events.
- In some areas the Group seeks to learn from others and internally within the group. Examples include celebrating diversity and extending sound recycling practices to all contractors.

**35** There are weaknesses.

- Some key areas of business, such as efficiency and value for money, do not have overall measures or targets, but a tool has now been developed to put in place these targets.

- There are gaps in the performance management framework. For example, service standards are not yet comprehensively monitored and not all performance information is broken down by diversity strand. The picture of performance is not complete.
- Some opportunities for learning are not fully developed. Not all service areas are involved in benchmarking groups and more needs to be done to learn from complaints.

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

**36** We found strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**37** There are a number of strengths.

- Governance arrangements have been streamlined to fit with the new organisational structure. With one set of standards and the same delivery arrangements across the organisation, the Group is in a stronger position to deliver consistent levels of service.
- Board members are experienced and have a range of relevant skills with appropriate appraisal, training and development opportunities. Members keep abreast of the knowledge needed to discharge their responsibilities.
- Finances are healthy despite the difficult current economic climate. Funding is available to support planned improvements.
- The board, management and staff are a reasonable reflection of the diversity of local communities particularly in terms of ethnicity and gender. This reflects an inclusive organisation.
- There are low levels of staff sickness. More staffing resources are available to deliver services.
- More dedicated staffing resources are available in some key areas, such as value for money and resident involvement. This strengthens the focus and adds to the capacity of the Group to deliver improvements in these areas.
- Appropriate appraisal, training and development opportunities are in place for managers and staff. These ensure staff have the skills necessary to deliver improving services.
- Effective and reliable ICT support enables the Group to deliver services in more efficient ways. For example, staff can access customer information remotely so that action to deal with customer requests can be started or answered straight away.
- Despite major organisational change, staff are firmly committed to improving services and remain well motivated. A high 85 per cent of staff say they are proud to work for Great Places HG. Staff feel well informed and that their contribution is valued.

## Prospects for improvement

- Great Places HG is working well in partnership with local councils to help them discharge their statutory functions, find homes for people, and develop new ways to give people greater choice. The Association is at the forefront of developing improved ways of providing services, for example developing new ways of advertising and allocating properties through local and sub-regional choice based lettings schemes.

### 38 There are weaknesses.

- At the time of the inspection all board members had not received recent equality and diversity training. This has now been put in place.
- There are weaknesses with staff appraisal procedures and their links to training. Without checks to ensure staff appraisals are carried out to an acceptable standard, shortcomings will go undetected. Until this year, identified training needs have not been collated into a training programme. Some training needs may not have been met.

# Appendix 1 – Positive practice

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

## **Promoting diversity**

- 1** Great Places holds a diversity week designed to raise awareness and ownership among staff across a range of areas relating to diversity. Staff suggest and develop sessions on particular areas, such as women into construction, race and hate incidents, and traveller crafts, culture and history. Many external agencies are involved in delivering the activities alongside health staff over the course of the week. This ensures customers and staff have access to a range of information delivered in an imaginative and informal way. It also demonstrates all the agencies commitment to engage with all customers regardless of their age, origin, disability, sexuality or background.

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# The Audit Commission

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

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

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

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