

Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Re-inspection

London Borough of Haringey

August 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.

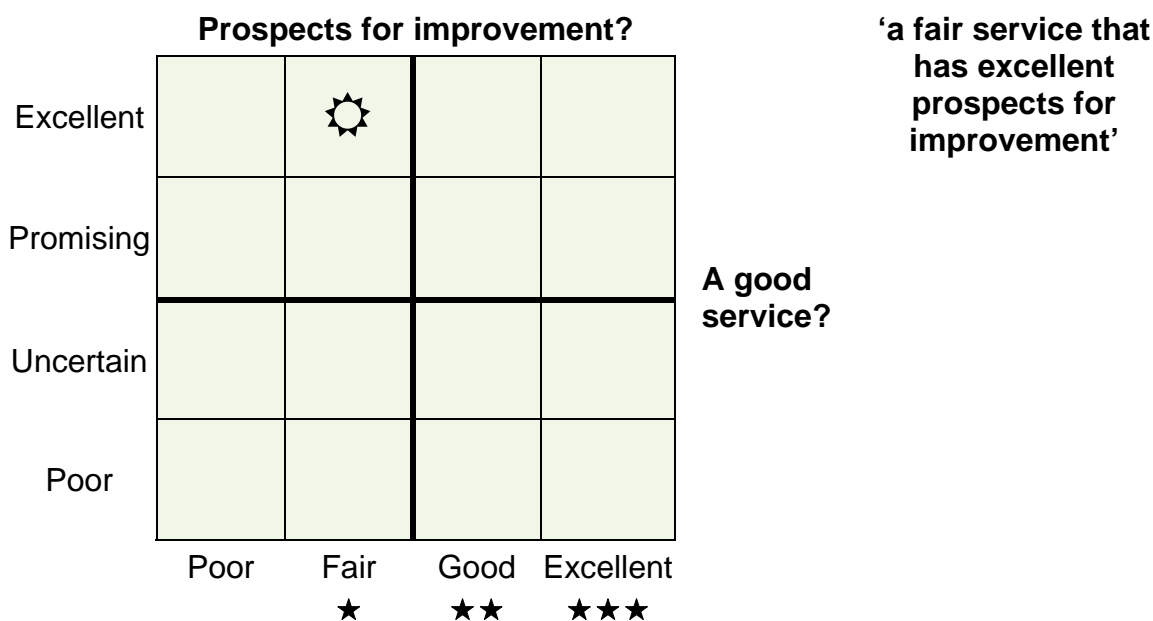
Summary

- 1 Haringey Council provides 'fair' allocations, lettings and homelessness services, which have excellent prospects for improvement. The services were inspected in 2007 and found to be 'poor', with promising prospects for improvement. This re-inspection found that services have improved in a number of areas.
- 2 There is now a comprehensive approach to preventing homelessness and offering housing options, which has contributed to a steady reduction in the use of temporary accommodation. Targets to limit the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met, and the standard of temporary accommodation is generally satisfactory. However, Haringey still has a very high number of households in temporary accommodation and the speed of homelessness decision-making is slow.
- 3 Services are generally easy to access and a good range of information is available, although the speed of telephone access is not meeting targets. Frontline staff provide a good level of customer care, and appointments are made efficiently and in appropriate timescales. There is also a sound approach to dealing with complaints. However, service standards are not comprehensive and the approach to obtaining customer feedback is patchy.
- 4 There is an effective approach to assessing and meeting the needs of vulnerable adults, and a strong multi-agency approach to providing advice and support to people experiencing domestic violence. There are arrangements to make services accessible to all customers, and a range of surgeries and activities take place to reach out to different groups. However, the approach to monitoring diversity to ensure fair and equal access across all services is not consistent or comprehensive and has produced limited outcomes.
- 5 The present lettings policy is not sufficiently transparent, registrations are not carried out promptly and the register has not been reviewed for several years, although the Council has plans to address these issues.
- 6 The Council has reduced the cost of providing temporary accommodation, while maintaining standards, but there is also a lack of comprehensive benchmarking and comparative data to enable the service to be sure it is delivering value for money.
- 7 The prospects for improvement are considered to be 'excellent' because appropriate plans and strategies are in place, with actions that will improve services for customers. There is a strong track record of improvement over recent years, including good progress against the recommendations of the 2007 inspection. Performance monitoring and reporting is generally robust and there has been strong leadership of the inspected services. There is the financial and staffing capacity to deliver further improvement and capacity is strengthened through external funding and partnership working.

Scoring the service

8 We have assessed London Borough of Haringey as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chartⁱ



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- an effective approach to preventing homelessness and using the private rented sector has significantly reduced the level of temporary accommodation used;
 - the housing and support needs of vulnerable adults are being addressed;
 - targets for limiting the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met;
 - good quality information and an informative website are available for service users;
 - there is effective working with housing associations and other partners in the allocation of homes and prevention of homelessness;
 - the multi-agency Hearthstone service is providing effective one-stop help to people facing domestic abuse;

ⁱ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- there is effective procurement of temporary accommodation, which has reduced unit costs while maintaining standards; and
 - there is a sound approach to dealing with complaints.
- 10 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the current allocations policy is not sufficiently transparent and needs updating;
 - housing registrations are not carried out promptly;
 - there are lengthy average relet times for empty council homes;
 - the speed of homelessness decision-making is not meeting targets;
 - diversity monitoring is not comprehensive and has not been systematically used to improve service delivery;
 - the service does not have a clear understanding of the value for money of the inspected services and how this compares with other organisations;
 - telephone calls are not answered within target times; and
 - service standards are not yet comprehensive, and there are weaknesses in monitoring and reporting of performance against the standards.
- 11 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:
- there is a strong track record of improvement over recent years, including progress against the recommendations of the 2007 inspection;
 - appropriate plans and strategies are in place, with actions that will improve services for customers;
 - performance monitoring and reporting is generally robust;
 - there has been strong leadership of the inspected services which has supported improvement; and
 - there is the financial and staffing capacity to deliver further improvement and capacity is strengthened through external funding and partnership working.
- 12 However, there are barriers to improvement. These include:
- progress has been slow in some areas, such as a failure to review the housing register; and
 - there has not been a sufficiently strong focus on learning from other organisations or from customer feedback.

Recommendations

13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costsⁱ 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 The Council should improve access and its customer focus by:

- ensuring that service standards are comprehensive and that performance against them is regularly monitored and reported;
- ensuring that telephone answering is accurately monitored and meets target timescales;
- ensuring that support is available to people bidding for properties at all Customer Service Centres;
- ensuring that the diversity of service users is monitored and that this information is used to shape service delivery and to ensure fair and equal access to services;
- completing equality impact assessments of all key service areas; and
- ensuring that customer feedback on the inspected services is regularly collected, reviewed and acted upon.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clarity for customers about the level of service they can expect and the level they are receiving;
- prompt access to services and to support when bidding for properties;
- increased customer satisfaction; and
- services that are delivered fairly and meet the needs of the diverse range of customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within four months of publication of this report.

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council should improve its approach to allocating vacant social rented homes by:

- reviewing the present allocation policy, in consultation with stakeholders, to ensure that it provides customers with a clear understanding of how homes are allocated;
- ensuring that new housing applications are registered promptly;
- regularly reviewing the housing register to ensure that it records current housing need; and
- ensuring that the allocation element of property relet times is minimised.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clarity for customers about how different housing needs are prioritised and homes are allocated;
- customers can begin bidding for homes more quickly;
- a more accurate understanding of housing need and demand in the borough; and
- the prompt letting of new homes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months of publication of this report.

Recommendation

R3 The Council should improve its approach to preventing and addressing homelessness by:

- developing an effective private sector deposit guarantee scheme for 'non-priority' homeless people;
- ensuring that landlords of Home Finder Scheme properties are either accredited, or meet accreditation standards before being accepted onto the scheme;
- ensuring that homelessness decisions are taken as promptly as is reasonably possible;
- considering the provision of a specialist mediation service, particularly for young people leaving home; and
- ensuring that all reports of disrepair in temporary accommodation are responded to in line with the agreed procedures and timescales.

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved access to housing for 'non priority' homeless people;
- homeless people are given prompt decisions on the extent of help available and the Council's accommodation costs are minimised;
- prevention of homelessness through mediation; and
- temporary accommodation is maintained to a reasonable standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within four months of publication of this report.

Recommendation

R4 The Council should take action to improve its approach to providing value for money by assessing the unit costs and outcomes of its services and initiatives and comparing these with other organisations, including high performers.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- services which offer better value for money to customers and to the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within four months of publication of this report.

- 14** We would like to thank the staff of the London Borough of Haringey who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 19-20 and 24-28 May 2010.

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Haringey is a north London borough, with a population of 226,200. There are six town centres – Wood Green, Tottenham High Road, Seven Sisters, Green Lanes, Crouch End and Muswell Hill; each has a thriving small business community. Familiar landmarks include Alexandra Palace, Bruce Castle and Tottenham Hotspur Football Club.
- 16 There is a notable contrast between the more affluent west of the borough, which includes Highgate, Crouch End and Muswell Hill, and the more deprived east of the borough, including Tottenham, Northumberland Park and Seven Sisters. Despite the relative affluent areas in the west, Haringey is the fifth most deprived borough in London (and the 18th most deprived in England).ⁱ The median gross weekly pay of full time employees is £492.50 (the fourth lowest in London) and unemployment is higher in the east of the borough, with 7.8 per cent of the working age population in the Tottenham Parliamentary Constituency claiming Jobseeker's Allowance in February 2010 – the highest figure in London.
- 17 Just over half the population (51 per cent) are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and around 160 languages are spoken within the borough.
- 18 There is a relatively high level of rented housing in the borough, particularly in the private rented sector. The 2001 census found that 46 per cent of households were owner occupiers (below the London average, and a reduction from 50 per cent in 1991); 24 per cent were renting privately (above the London average); 20 per cent were Council tenantsⁱⁱ and 10 per cent were tenants of housing associations. Owner occupation is greater in the west of the borough.
- 19 There is a high demand for housing across all tenures. This is reflected in high house prices and a growing housing register of more than 20,000 households. About 60 per cent of residents cannot afford to purchase a home and, despite substantial reductions in recent years, the number of homeless households living in temporary accommodation is consistently the highest or second highest in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ Haringey's annual shortfall of affordable housing is 4,865 units, based on the results of a 2007 housing needs assessment; this is equivalent to 52 homes per 1,000 of the population.

ⁱ Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007.

ⁱⁱ The Council's stock has been managed by an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) since 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ 3,547 households in March 2010.

The Council

- 20** London Borough of Haringey is Labour-controlled, with 34 Labour councillors and 23 Liberal Democrat councillors elected in May 2010. The Council's governance arrangements comprise a Leader and Cabinet (including a Cabinet Member for Housing), and 'task and finish' scrutiny panels, which are overseen by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Seven area assemblies have been set up with the intention of bringing the Council closer to its communities.
- 21** The organisational assessment of the Council in December 2009 (carried out as part of Comprehensive Area Assessment) found that Haringey was performing poorly, largely due to significant concerns over the safeguarding of children. In response, an inspection of progressⁱ was carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary at the request of the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families at the end of January 2010. The report was published on 23 February 2010 and states that: 'This inspection has found extensive and consistent evidence of good progress overall and good capacity for further improvement'.

The allocations, lettings and homelessness services

- 22** The Council's allocations, lettings and homelessness services are part of the Strategic and Community Housing Services (SCHS) business unit, within the Urban Environment directorate. SCHS is responsible for retained housing services, while 'Homes for Haringey' (an Arm's Length Management Organisation, or ALMO) manages the Council's housing stock.
- 23** SCHS was restructured in 2009 to bring together the homelessness and lettings functions, and establish specialist housing advice, housing options and private sector lettings teams to prevent homelessness, provide settled housing and reduce Haringey's use of temporary accommodation. SCHS had the equivalent of 150 full time posts in March 2010.
- 24** Haringey's allocations, lettings and homelessness service was inspected in October 2007 and a report of the inspection's findings was published in December 2008. The inspection found it to be a 'poor', no-star service with promising prospects for improvement.

ⁱ The 'Inspection of progress made in the provision of safeguarding in the London Borough of Haringey' was carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The report was published on 23 February 2010 and is available on the Ofsted website.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

25 The Housing Strategy 2009-2019 sets out the Council's ten-year vision to create:

'Neighbourhoods that people choose to live in with a balance of homes which offer quality, affordability and sustainability for current and future generations.'

26 This vision is underpinned by five aims:

- to meet housing need through mixed communities which provide opportunities for our residents;
- to ensure housing in the borough is well managed, of high quality and sustainable;
- to provide people with the support and advice they need;
- to make all homes in the borough a part of neighbourhoods of choice; and
- to contribute to creating the Greenest Borough.

27 Haringey's Homelessness Strategy 2008-2011 has as its nine key objectives:

- we will actively support and promote a partnership approach to preventing homelessness;
- we will invest in early intervention and effective homelessness prevention;
- we will increase the supply of affordable homes;
- we will provide choice and encourage independence;
- we will halve, by March 2010, the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation;
- we will improve the quality and suitability of temporary accommodation;
- we will work proactively to safeguard children and vulnerable adults;
- we will improve customer service, involvement and satisfaction; and
- we will ensure that our policies and procedures are fair, transparent and widely understood.

How good is the service?

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

Access and customer care

- 28** The 2007 inspection found that this was an area of weakness. Although the service could be easily accessed through the Customer Service Centres and the website, customer care and the quality of information were variable, and some applicants had to wait for more than three weeks for an appointment. Service standards were not clear or well publicised and it could be difficult to contact the service by phone. While there were some good examples of consultation with service users, the service did not have an informed understanding of the views of service users. The service was not systematically learning from complaints, although they were being responded to within target times.
- 29** This re-inspection found that this is now an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The services inspected are generally easy to access, although the speed of telephone access is not meeting targets. There is a range of good quality, helpful customer information available in print or through the website, but support is not always available for people bidding for properties. Frontline staff provide a good level of customer care and appointments are made efficiently and in appropriate timescales. There is also a sound approach to dealing with complaints. However, service standards are not comprehensive and performance against them is not systematically monitored, and the approach to obtaining customer feedback is patchy.
- 30** The services are generally easy for visitors to access. Housing needs and advice servicesⁱ are based at Apex House in South Tottenham, one of the Council's four Customer Service Centres, which are open from 8.45am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday. Customers can visit Apex House (which has a separate reception area for housing advice and optionsⁱⁱ) or any of the other Customer Service Centres. The housing needs and advice services also provide outreach advice and information at hostels, schools, community groups and on estates.
- 31** Frontline staff are helpful and committed, both in the Customer Service Centres and the housing needs and advice services. Our observations and mystery calls found staff to be keen to resolve issues at the first point of contact wherever possible. Partners noted that this is an area that has improved significantly and customer care is now generally good.

ⁱ In this report the phrase 'Housing needs and advice' is used to cover all needs, advice and support services, including the housing register, allocations, homelessness services, temporary accommodation, housing support, housing advice and housing options.

ⁱⁱ The Housing advice and options reception is open 9.00 – 5.00 weekdays, except Wednesday mornings when it is closed for staff training. When the Housing Reception is closed, SCHS staff are still available to carry out emergency interviews in the Customer Service Centre.

- 32** The frontline Customer Services Officers (CSOs) provide an effective service. They have been trained in providing housing information and signposting customers appropriately. Customers are seen reasonably promptly – in the last year, 77 per cent of visitors were seen within 15 minutes (exceeding the 70 per cent target). If necessary, the CSOs contact housing services to make appointments for customers using dedicated phone lines to housing managers. Appointments are made in appropriate timescales, with emergency cases seen on the day and others seen within one or two weeks, according to the urgency of the situation. This ensures that all appointments are appropriate and that urgent cases get dealt with promptly.
- 33** However, we also found some weaknesses in access arrangements for visitors. For example, although Home Connectionsⁱ and other relevant information is on display at Apex House, there was no public computer access or support provided for bidding at the office when we visited, and we were directed instead to the North Tottenham office (just over a mile away). Also, on two visits to the Wood Green Customer Service Centre, it was found that use of the four terminals available for bidding is dependent upon customers requesting a pass number to operate them. As this was not very clear, some people may have been put off bidding for properties.
- 34** Although the reception areas at Apex house are generally modern and welcoming, the cubicles for housing advice and options interviews are not customer-friendly. All but one of the eight cubicles have fixed screens from ceiling to desk, which does not engender a trusting and relaxed atmosphere.
- 35** Telephone calls are not being dealt with promptly. The Council has a 'One number' Contact Centreⁱⁱ from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm. In 2009/10 (to February 2010) 83 per cent of calls were answered (falling short of the 90 per cent target) and 54 per cent were answered within 30 seconds (against a target of 70 per cent). Over the same period and against the same targets, 77 per cent of calls made specifically to SCHS were answered, and 53 per cent were answered within 30 seconds. The housing service has recently reviewed how telephone systems are used and implemented changes, but it is too early to see the measurable outcomes from this.
- 36** The quality of telephone advice is good. Our mystery shopping calls to the Contact Centre and to the Housing Advice and Options team were answered promptly and professionally and the advice received was appropriate and realistic. The CSOs are able to make appointments for housing advice if necessary, by speaking first to housing managers, rather than simply transferring the call. This ensures that customers are dealt with appropriately.
- 37** There are satisfactory arrangements for out-of-hours calls. The out-of-hours line is staffed by housing managers from 5.00 pm to 9.00 pm (when most out-of-hours calls are received) which ensures a knowledgeable level of response. After 9.00 pm calls are dealt with by a duty social worker. Callers can be booked into emergency accommodation if necessary and are then interviewed the following day. The service is exceeding its target to answer 85 per cent of calls within ten seconds, and our mystery shopping out-of-hours calls were answered promptly and appropriately.

ⁱ 'Home Connections' is the Choice Based Lettings scheme which Haringey is a member of.

ⁱⁱ The 'One number' Contact Centre was introduced in April 2009, replacing 20 separate numbers. The Council dealt with 570,778 calls in 2008/09 and 599,427 in 2009/10.

How good is the service?

Information

- 38 A range of good quality and helpful customer information is available, including information on the website. There are a number of clearly-written and up-to-date leaflets, such as 'Finding private rented accommodation', 'Home Connections' (choice-based lettings) and 'Harassment and illegal eviction'. There are helpful information packs for people moving into temporary or permanent homes. There is an informative bi-annual 'Moving on' magazine for people living in temporary accommodation, which benefits from readers' feedback being sought and used to improve its design and content. Also, a 'Home Connections' DVD, produced with service users, has been sent to all temporary accommodation residents. Information for non-priority homeless people is available, but more information could be available about the process of applying as homeless. Overall, however, the range and quality of information is meeting customers' needs.
- 39 The housing pages of the Council's website are generally accessible and clear, with a wide range of information and links. The housing application form can be downloaded from the site, as can the various leaflets and newsletters, the lettings policy and information for private landlords.
- 40 Customers have been involved in developing the various information materials and a group of communications champions from across the services helps the communications officer to ensure that leaflets and the website are up to date.

Service standards

- 41 Service standards are not sufficiently comprehensive and performance against them is not systematically monitored and reported. The council-wide Customer Charter is clear and has specific targets, but the standards for the inspected services do not cover all service areas and are not sufficiently specific. Stakeholders and service users were not sufficiently engaged in developing them and there is no systematic reporting of performance against all the standards. The Council has recognised these weaknesses and is reviewing the standards with stakeholders and service users, but this work is not yet complete and revised standards are not due to be in place until September 2010. This means that customers are not clear about the standards they can expect, or whether these are being met.

Consultation and feedback

- 42 The approach to measuring customer satisfaction with services is not systematic or comprehensive. Some surveys have taken place, but response rates have often been too low to provide useful feedback (15 responses in a year from satisfaction forms given to all housing advice and options visitors, and 11 from closed cases). The housing needs and advice services have introduced a number of more robust telephone satisfaction surveys in recent months,ⁱ but these are too recent to have delivered feedback that can be used to improve services.

ⁱ For example, the private sector lettings team recently introduced a telephone survey of new 'Home Finder Scheme' tenants, six weeks after they move in, and a landlords' survey.

- 43 However, it is positive that the temporary accommodation users' forum is enabling residents to shape and influence services. The forum was formed in December 2008 and is well attended; outcomes include clearer information on how to report repairs, improved repairs monitoring, information packs and a 'frequently asked questions' leaflet. Based on what members said was important to them, a training and jobs fair was held in May 2009 and a workshop in March 2010.

Complaints

- 44 There is a sound approach to handling complaints and learning from them. The corporate complaints procedure is clear, easily accessed and well publicised. The responses to complaints seen were detailed and sensitively written (for example, making an apology to the customer), although some spelling and grammatical errors detracted from the generally high quality of responses. The management team regularly scrutinises the complaints processes and receives 'Learning from Complaints' reports. Learning is shared at meetings with staff and with the lead councillor and is used to improve services. For example, people in temporary accommodation are now given a clear date and time for repairs to be carried out.
- 45 Complaints are generally responded to promptly. In 2009/10, 85 per cent of the 200 stage one complaints were answered on time, and 97 per cent (all but one) of the stage two complaints. There is evidence of complaints made against landlords or agents being dealt with effectively, including this contributing to termination of contracts. Overall, the approach to dealing with complaints is ensuring that customer's concerns are responded to and used to improve services.

Diversity

- 46 The 2007 inspection found that this was an area where strengths and weaknesses were in balance. The service was delivering positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups, often in partnership. There was a good approach to completing equality impact assessments (EIAs) but weaknesses in their application. The service did not consistently measure its effectiveness among diverse groups or tailor services to clients' needs. Vulnerability flags on the IT system were not used systematically by staff and capacity issues meant that limited support was provided for vulnerable applicants. Also, the service did not consistently ensure that contractors complied with the Council's diversity requirements.
- 47 This re-inspection found that this remains an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The process for carrying out EIAs is sound, and those that have been completed have been comprehensive and have delivered outcomes, although several service areas have not yet been covered by the EIA programme, which is a weakness in such a diverse borough. There is appropriate training for staff on diversity-related issues, and all relevant staff have been trained in safeguarding. There is an effective approach to assessing and meeting the needs of vulnerable adults, although outcome measures for this work are not yet in place. In particular, there is a strong multi-agency approach to providing advice and support to people experiencing domestic violence. There are arrangements to make services accessible to all customers and a range of surgeries and activities take place to reach out to different groups. However, the approach to monitoring diversity to ensure fair and equal access across all services is not consistent or comprehensive and has produced limited outcomes.

How good is the service?

- 48** The Council's corporate approach to equality and diversity has a number of strengths that support the work of the inspected services. The Council has developed a single equality scheme covering all six diversity strands (approved in May 2010). Work is now taking place to develop a specific strategy to support the implementation of the scheme in housing-related services. A corporate equalities unit provides support, guidance and challenge on equality and diversity issues with equality officers allocated to each directorate to support the implementation of corporate objectives, including acting as critical friends for the EIA process. Each service area has an equalities forum which meets bi-monthly to share learning, communicate key issues and review and challenge completed EIAs.
- 49** The approach to completing EIAs of policies and strategies is robust in the instances where they have been carried out. Full EIAs are completed by strategy authors in conjunction with others, with challenge provided by the relevant equalities officer and the integrated housing board. There is a standard template and guidance, supported by a detailed demographic profileⁱ of likely service users. Examples of the effective use of EIAs include the EIA for the housing strategy, which consulted with the BME community and disability groups. The EIA of the draft move-on strategy included consultation with immigration groups and two Asian women's refuges; this EIA highlighted issues for single people with no statutory right to housing who found it difficult to move on from short-term accommodation. The EIA of autobidding highlighted the need to provide clear guidance for customers in the form of a frequently asked questions leaflet and the need to brief support and community groups on the scheme. Work has begun to carry out an EIA of private sector lettings but this is at an early stage and there are no outcomes to date. A summary of completed EIAs is added to the website each year, which aids accountability.
- 50** However, although the EIAs that have been completed are robust, few have been undertaken or timetabled across the inspected areas. For example, no EIAs have been carried out or are planned in the areas of housing advice or homelessness assessment work. This means that the housing needs and advice service cannot be sure of the impact of all of its policies and services on different groups.
- 51** There has been some effective work to contact, involve and inform different communities and hard to reach groups. This has included attending community events to engage with the Somali and other communities and surgeries in local schools to offer housing advice to parents. Community and housing information days have been held which include advice on allocations and housing options, with translated materials and interpreters available. Also, the homelessness strategy identified the need to increase access to work and training for BME groups, leading to an open day for people in temporary accommodation. Research has just been completed to identify service users' attitudes to temporary accommodation as part of work to reduce the numbers there, focusing on Somalians, other black African people and Turkish-speaking people.

ⁱ The guidance on how to complete EIAs is on the Council's website, with links to the 2008 borough profile and other sources of demographic data.

- 52 This engagement work is supported by a corporate consultation framework and toolkit for engaging with hard to reach groups. This requires officers to identify who they need to consult and include this in a consultation plan. The corporate consultation team then monitors this and provides a challenge if it is felt that something has been missed. This is helping to ensure that the approach to community consultation is robust.
- 53 The Council's 'Hearthstone' service is providing an effective multi-agency response to domestic abuse within the borough. This is a partnership service hosted by the Council, which benefits from having a separate identity and its own premises, including a drop-in service. The service is widely promoted and offers a range of options and support services all in one place, including a police presence; legal advice; a number of floating support services; an out of borough resettlement service; a substance misuse worker; a Turkish women's support agency; independent advisers for high-risk cases; a family support worker; and shortly a children's social worker. It also operates the borough's sanctuary scheme which supports around 80 women each year to remain at home with home security measures alongside legal remedies. The service has played an important part in homelessness prevention, with only six cases needing to make an emergency homelessness application in 2009/10 and with 98 per cent service user satisfaction.
- 54 The Council is equipping its staff to understand and meet customers' different needs. Training on equality and diversity is a core requirement for all staff at basic, intermediate and advanced levels. It is also included in the induction programme for new employees and in a revised housing induction pack. The need for more specific training to understand diverse needs is also identified through annual appraisals and one to one meetings.
- 55 There has been an appropriate focus on ensuring that staff are trained in the safeguarding of children and adults, and that systems are in place to alert staff to cases where there are known safeguarding issues. Safeguarding is a responsibility which is now included in all job descriptions, and staff have all received training which has strengthened their confidence in this area. A senior manager is the directorate's safeguarding champion and sits on the safeguarding board and serious case panel. Training has taken place for staff, with specific training for managers and Hearthstone staff. Procedures are in place for Children's services to share details of relevant cases each week and for these to be flagged on the housing IT system, although full details are only accessible by managers. Where families in temporary accommodation are 'flagged', the agreed procedure is for housing staff to keep social workers informed of the outcomes of their visits and of any planned moves. The managers and staff we spoke to were aware of these procedures and said that they were being followed.

How good is the service?

- 56** Positive arrangements are in place to identify and meet the housing related support needs of more vulnerable adults. The multi-disciplinary Vulnerable Adults Team assesses support needs and makes appropriate referrals. The service is enhanced by co-located workers from other agencies and one team member spends a day each week with probation and another a day each week with the local psychiatric hospital. The team links with the housing options and homelessness teams to highlight the kind of support that individual applicants would benefit from. It is also the main referral point for all housing-related support in the borough. This is providing a seamless service for people who need housing-related support and helping to ensure that best use is made of supported housing provision.
- 57** While the Vulnerable Adults Team is providing a positive service, there are no outcome measures to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of the work its does, although work to address this is planned. For example, the number of tenancy or housing placements sustained as a result of support and the contribution in terms of reduced demands on other services are not evaluated. Opportunities to evidence the overall value of the service are being missed.
- 58** The recently developed Vulnerable Tenants Panel is helping to ensure that people living in homes managed by Homes for Haringey and in temporary accommodation have the support they need. The panel takes a case conference approach, with the membership varying depending on the nature of each case. There is a clear referral route to the panel which has now met twice and, although outcomes are limited at this early stage, outright possession has been avoided in three cases which may have resulted in homeless applications.
- 59** The approach to monitoring fair and equal access is underdeveloped. Customer profile information is now collected for the key diversity strandsⁱ following an amendment to the homelessness application form, but the housing application form does not ask for information on religion/faith or sexual orientation. A recent income recovery satisfaction survey did not gather information on sexual orientation or transgender status. Monitoring of lettings to BME households shows that they are broadly in line with their representation on the housing register, but other diversity strands are not monitored and neither are bidding patterns. There are examples of initiatives developed in response to diversity information, such as outreach surgeries, but these are generally recent or yet to take place. Overall, data is not systematically or comprehensively gathered, analysed or reported across the services inspected. Potential barriers to access are therefore not being identified and removed.
- 60** In contrast to these shortcomings, Hearthstone does take a comprehensive approach to monitoring diversity and has used its monitoring data to identify and reach out to under-represented groups, such as Turkish women and lesbian/gay and transgender people.
- 61** The Council is not consistently ensuring that its contractors are delivering services fairly and equally. Contracts for the management of temporary accommodation have equalities clauses, including safeguarding, and there are plans to draw up an equalities charter for all contractors in 2010/11. However, although compliance with these clauses is picked up to some extent by staff when they visit residents, it is not formally monitored, which is a weakness.

ⁱ Age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion.

- 62** The Council is ensuring that physical barriers to access are identified and addressed. The Council's public offices are accessible to people who have disabilities and there is a rolling and ongoing programme of audits. One of the Council's temporary accommodation hostels comprises 31 units of accommodation that are suitable for people with disabilities. All of the homes have low level baths and four have wet rooms that are accessible for wheelchair users.
- 63** There are also effective arrangements for accessing interpreting and translation services, and the Council's Contact Centre has an 'interactive voice response' channel in ten languages, which ensures that an estimated 99 per cent of the population have access to the service. Three of the Customer Service Centres hold regular sessions for Turkish speakers and two hold regular sessions for Kurdish speakers based on the demography of the borough. Sign Language interpreters can be provided and all public offices are fitted with induction loops. These initiatives help to ensure that services are available for all groups.

Allocations and lettings

- 64** The 2007 inspection found that Haringey's management of the housing register and the operation of the choice-based lettings scheme was an area of weakness. Performance in dealing with applications was weak and the Home Connections scheme was not efficient or customer-focused. However, the Council had improved the management of the housing register through a re-registration process and revised its lettings policy. Longer void periods had led to delays in securing permanent housing for those in need. The Council had nomination agreements in place with housing association partners but some important aspects of its monitoring arrangements were not robust.
- 65** This re-inspection found that this is now an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. A high percentage of lettings are made through a well-established choice-based scheme and there are clear assessment procedures for applicants. However, the present lettings policy is not sufficiently transparent, registrations are not carried out promptly and the register has not been reviewed for several years. The Council is working well in partnership with housing associations, but has not been achieving the full level of nominations to which it is entitled from its housing association partners. There is an effective approach to assessing the needs of applicants and matching them to suitable properties, although the Council has been slow to address the unpopularity of some sheltered stock.
- 66** The assessments and lettings teams are responsible for the assessment of applications to join the Council's housing register and manage the letting of all permanent Council stock, including sheltered housing. In 2008/09, 1,049 properties were let, and 1,053 in 2009/10. Although overall responsibility for allocations and lettings has remained with the Council, it works closely with Homes for Haringey, which signs up new tenants and now carries out viewings.

How good is the service?

67 The current housing allocations policy (known as a 'Lettings policy')ⁱ is not fully effective, which the Council recognises. It is a points-based policy which lacks transparency about the differing levels of priority. To address this the Council is reviewing the policy and proposing a 'banding' system which should be more transparent and easier to administer with people placed in date order of application within each band. There has been some initial consultation with chief officers, councillors and service users (through the temporary accommodation forum) which was supportive of the changes, but Cabinet consideration and full external consultation was delayed until after the May 2010 elections. Partners have been involved in the development of the draft policy and consider that it will provide greater clarity for the public. However, while the proposed changes appear sound, the lettings policy in place at the time of this inspection was not fully fit for purpose.

Housing register

- 68 Housing register applications are generally assessed effectively. The assessment process has been streamlined to improve efficiency. The verification process at the time of the last inspection was time-consuming and complicated and, given that so few applicants would be bidding successfully, has been reduced to essential checks, supported by credit checking software. Applicants who are close to bidding successfully then receive more detailed pre-verification checks to minimise delays when they are short-listed. Our observation of two pre-verification interviews showed that staff were professional in the way that they carried out the necessary checks and also took time to answer customers' queries. This is helping to ensure that allocations are made to appropriate applicants.
- 69 However, some housing applicants are not receiving a prompt service, although this is improving. A large back-log of registrations has now been cleared,ⁱⁱ but it is still taking an average of 35 days to register a new application against a target of 28 days. This is a marked improvement from the last inspection, when average performance was 86 days, against a 14-day target, but customers are still not receiving sufficiently prompt registrations.
- 70 The housing register is not up-to-date. The register has not been reviewed since 2006/07, at which point it was reduced from over 20,000 to 10,252. Since then, the planned annual reviews have not been carried out and the number of registrations had risen to 20,251 by March 2010. A review is planned for September 2010, following introduction of the new lettings policy. The present register is likely to contain outdated applications and this gives rise to an unnecessary administrative burden.
- 71 Haringey does not have a common housing register, although the draft allocation policy offers the potential for one to be set up. At present, this means that applicants may have to apply to several social landlords rather than to one register which lacks customer focus and makes poor use of social housing providers' resources.

ⁱ 'Lettings Policy – A guide to housing lettings in Haringey', adopted in 2006 and revised in 2008.

ⁱⁱ Between November 2009 and April 2010 the Council cleared a backlog of 1,500 applications whilst also assessing, on average, 200 new applications a week.

Choice-based lettings

- 72** The Council belongs to a well-established choice-based lettings scheme, 'Home Connections' through which applicants can bid for properties.ⁱ Haringey is represented on the board of directors and is fully involved in the development of the scheme. In 2009/10, 88 per cent of lettings were made through Home Connections against a target of 80 per cent. Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure that urgent cases, such as secure tenants experiencing domestic violence and other acute needs, can be made direct offers on a management transfer basis, without having to move into temporary accommodation (see also 'Diversity' above). The scheme has a range of bidding optionsⁱⁱ and support is available for more vulnerable customers. Within a context of very limited supply, the Council is working to extend choice to customers where possible.
- 73** Information is available to enable housing applicants to make informed choices. This information is used in housing options, assessment and homelessness interviews. It shows the number and type of homes in each part of the borough along with turnover information and the level of points required. An interactive map on the website also shows customers where properties are located in the borough and recent turnover.
- 74** There are arrangements to support people in making bids, but access to this support is inconsistent. Access to the service has been increased through the training of library staff to help people use the Home Connections website and to explain how the scheme operates. However, assistance with bidding was not offered at the Wood Green library or the Customer Service Centre at Apex House when we visited. This does not ensure that people get support at the time they need it.
- 75** Vulnerable people are supported to use the Home Connections service. Home Connections support staff explain how the system works and are able to place bids for customers if they wish, as can social workers. Community and support groups have also been briefed on how the system works so that they can assist clients.
- 76** The Council is making efforts to minimise the time that people stay in temporary accommodation. Applicants in temporary accommodation are entitled to bid for properties through choice-based lettings and a system of 'auto-bidding' has been introduced to reduce the use of temporary accommodation and ensure that applicants find settled accommodation within a reasonable period. Two months after an applicant reaches a set number of points, bids are automatically made on their behalf for relevant properties suitable to their needs (taking account of factors such as property size and medical conditions). Applicants have the right to request a review of the suitability of an offer, and are entitled to a further offer if it is decided that the original offer was not suitable. Applicants are given advice before auto-bidding commences and advised of their other housing options (such as private rented housing through the Home Finder Scheme). The system has given rise to an increase in refusals and will therefore need to be kept under review, but overall it is providing more transparency in allocations than would be achieved by making direct offers outside the choice-based system.

ⁱ The Home Connections choice-based scheme has operated in Haringey since December 2006 – it is a partnership between a number of London boroughs and housing associations.

ⁱⁱ Applicants can bid online, by text, and by telephone in nine community languages.

How good is the service?

77 Appropriate quality assurance checks take place for the housing register and allocations. The team leader checks 10 per cent of all applications assessed and 100 per cent of pre-verifications. The service manager carries out further sample checks each month. This has identified training needs and has led to improvements such as an assessment pro-forma to guide staff. Every offer is counter-signed by a team leader and direct offers are counter-signed by the team leader and the service manager, having already been through a rigorous panel assessment. This is ensuring that applications are assessed appropriately and that homes are allocated fairly.

Void turnaround

- 78 Average relet times are high.ⁱ At the end of April 2010 the average relet time was 44 days against a 28-day target; a 'voids transformation project' is underway to address this (see 'How well does the service manage performance?' later in this report). The void period comprises some issues beyond the scope of this inspection, such as void repairs and sign-up arrangements, but it also includes the allocation and viewing process. Since April 2009, the average time from a property being passed as 'ready for let' and the tenancy starting was 38 days for both general needs and sheltered properties; this was reduced to 25 days by April 2010, but is still above target.
- 79 Our shadowing of accompanied viewings raised some issues. Only one out of five bidders attended one viewing, and refused it because it was on the wrong side of the borough; also, the property had yet to be cleaned. Our telephone interviews with new tenants showed that three out of ten were unhappy with their property, citing as their reasons the area and the condition of the properties. Reasons for refusal are monitored, but our visits indicated a need for more work to take place ahead of viewings to ensure that properties are well presented and the shortlisted applicants are fully aware of the property details.

Supported and sheltered housing

- 80 Sound arrangements are in place to assess the needs of older and disabled people. A Special Needs Team was formed in 2009, bringing together relevant staff in one place. Two staff provide an outreach service to assess needs, advise on the range of available housing options and liaise with internal and external partners. A dedicated officer carries out medical assessments for housing register and homeless applicants and a supported housing lettings officer works to match those most in need with available vacancies. Although the team is still bedding in, communication has improved, the service is more tailored and available homes are allocated more effectively.
- 81 The Council generally makes effective lettings of council homes which have been adapted for disabled people. If a vacant home is adapted, the surveyor will liaise with an occupational therapist to check, for example, that the adaptations are in good repair and not out of date. The Home Connections advert highlights that preference will be given to bidders who need an adaptation. The special needs team will also look for applicants who have maximum medical priority and can visit properties with an occupational therapist to check their suitability before raising an applicant's hopes. In 2009/10, 276 adapted homes were successfully let to people in need of adaptations.

ⁱ HouseMark Core Landlord Services benchmarking figures for 2008/09 show median performance was 34 days in London and 32 days for England and Wales.

- 82** The Council has identified 1,749 council homes that have been adapted, but does not yet know how many of these are occupied by people who do not need them and might be willing to transfer. It is considering the possibility of offering tenants the same package of support and incentives as is currently offered to tenants who are under-occupying family homes. But at present, the Council may not be making best use of its adapted homes.
- 83** The Council has been slow to address the future of its outdated sheltered housing stock and this has had an impact on lettings and void turnaround. The Council is now moving forward and consulting residents on the future of these properties, with the prospect of some becoming extra-care schemes.
- 84** Arrangements for managing and letting vacant sheltered homes have been strengthened. The qualifying age has been reduced from 60 to 55 and will be reduced further to 50 under the new allocations policy, which is to be consulted upon. This will help the Council to let sheltered housing in certain areas and increase the options open to people in that age group. A temporary post was created to focus on 62 long-term ready to let sheltered vacancies, and, through targeted matching and close liaison with other staff, this was reduced to 18 properties. At the same time, around 300 cases waiting for sheltered housing have been reviewed, with further six-monthly reviews to check if needs have changed. This is helping to match applicants to available properties and reduce the vacancy rate.

Housing association nominations and partnership working

- 85** Housing association lettings to which the Council has nominations rights are advertised through Home Connections, with the exception of properties that are used as direct lets.ⁱ The arrangements aim to match properties for nomination to the profile of need on the housing register. The Council should receive 100 per cent of nominations to all new build schemes, 50 per cent of one-bedroom re-lets (for which there is less demand) and 75 per cent of other re-lets.
- 86** However, performance in obtaining nominations is patchy. Information provided by the Councilⁱⁱ shows that in 2009/10, 99 per cent of nominations for new units were received (against a 100 per cent 'true voids'ⁱⁱⁱ target); 64 per cent of bedsit or one-bed properties (against a 50 per cent true voids target); but only 50 per cent of other properties (against a 75 per cent true voids target). This means that the Council is not maximising its lettings through housing associations.

ⁱ Direct lets constitute 12 per cent of all lets.

ⁱⁱ 'Audit Commission Inspection of Haringey's Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Services – Housing Association nominations 2009/10'.

ⁱⁱⁱ The definition of 'true voids' excludes voids created by temporarily decanted tenants, or by mutual exchanges, or as a result of tenant transfers within a housing association's own stock and within the borough of Haringey.

How good is the service?

- 87 A new partnership agreement with housing associations should minimise any future shortfalls in nominations. The agreement is an effective framework for joint working and covers new development, lettings and nominations; it also includes safeguarding requirements. It replaces a number of separate agreements with housing associations and provides greater transparency and consistency. Housing associations were involved in drawing up the agreement and all have either signed or are in the process of signing it. Partnership working is also supported through regular liaison meetings, which discuss new development, nominations and lettings arrangements. These arrangements are ensuring an effective approach to working in partnership to meet housing need and make best use of affordable housing in the borough.
- 88 Improved partnership working and information sharing means that partners rarely refuse the Council's nominations to vacancies. The Council provides a comprehensive vulnerability assessment and checklist so that housing associations are aware of customers' needs from the outset and can manage any risk.

Mobility schemes and mutual exchanges

- 89 The Council is working to promote options to people who wish to exchange homes or move to other areas. Assessment staff and housing options officers are promoting these possibilities to existing tenants. In 2009/10, 11 households were enabled to move through mobility schemes. Mutual exchanges are also providing an option for existing secure tenants who wish to move. The council subscribes to the 'Home Swapper' scheme and 35 households were able to move in 2009/10.

Overcrowding and under-occupation

- 90 The Council is actively working to free up under-occupied homes. The current lettings policy awards a high level of priority to applicants who are under-occupying their home, supported by financial incentives and help to move funded by CLG 'Overcrowding Pathfinder' funding. An event has been held to promote options to under-occupiers, and the incentives are promoted through a 'money to move' leaflet. In 2009/10, 70 under occupiers moved of whom 55 received a financial incentive, with spend of £64,500. In 2010/11, CLG funding of £55,000 is being used for further work in this area. Given the high demand for family-sized homes in the borough, this provides value for money and ensures effective use of scarce council homes.
- 91 The Council and ALMO identify under-occupiers through, for example, the housing register; 'Patch Plans' created and updated by Homes for Haringey which profile each social housing patch; and mutual exchange registrations. However, data on under-occupation is not yet comprehensive.
- 92 It is positive that Homes for Haringey has visited 150 of the most severely overcrowded households to see if there is any possibility of extending their properties. Eight of the properties have been identified as being suitable for conversion and a space saving solution has been provided for another property.

Homelessness

- 93** The 2007 inspection found that this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. The Council had increased its emphasis on prevention but this had yet to deliver consistently positive outcomes. The number of people in temporary accommodation had increased and was very high,ⁱ while services to households in temporary accommodation were poor, with residents not routinely offered help or kept informed about their housing options. Performance across a range of homelessness indicators, including length of stay in all forms of temporary accommodation, was poor.
- 94** This re-inspection found that this is now an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. An effective homelessness strategy is in place and being delivered with partners. There is now a comprehensive approach to preventing homelessness and offering housing options and appropriate standards of casework advice. There has been a significant reduction in the use of temporary accommodation, increased support to the households that remain, and bed and breakfast targets have been met. However, Haringey still has a very high number of households in temporary accommodation and many have been there for a number of years. The speed of homelessness decision-making is slow and there is no specialist mediation service. Repairs to temporary accommodation are not always carried out promptly.

Housing advice, homelessness prevention and options services

- 95** Haringey is working effectively to prevent homelessness and offer housing options to people in housing need. There is now a clear focus on preventing homelessness, providing timely and detailed housing advice, and offering housing options (primarily private renting). Staff are clear about their roles and generally work well across teams. This is helping to ensure that people are prevented from becoming homeless and do not need to move into temporary accommodation.
- 96** The Council has moved from a primarily reactive service at the time of the last inspection, to one based on prevention and advice on housing options. The service has a specialist housing advice team and a separate specialist housing options team. People with security of tenure are offered comprehensive housing advice to enable them to retain their housing, while people with little or no security of tenureⁱⁱ receive advice about their housing options, which may include making a homelessness application, and/or moving to the private rented sector. Homelessness was prevented in more than 1,000 cases in 2009. Evidence from observation and case file reviews is that the advice provided by both teams is generally comprehensive and appropriate. This is ensuring that homelessness is prevented or addressed where possible.

ⁱ 5,415 households were in temporary accommodation at the time of the last inspection – October 2007.

ⁱⁱ People with little or no security of tenure mainly consists of those who have already lost their home, or who have been asked to leave by family or friends.

How good is the service?

- 97 Appointments are available quickly and the full range of options are considered. Duty rotas for personal and telephone callers have sufficient capacity to deal with demand. A check is made of the person's housing register points-level and bidding prospects, and other options are discussed. Available options are posted on an 'options board' in the office to keep staff fully updated on what is available. Staff from floating support providers are co-located with the options team, so that support can be arranged if necessary.
- 98 The Council is making effective use of the borough's sizeable private rented sectorⁱ to prevent and relieve homelessness. There is an effective private sector lettings scheme ('Home Finder') through which 1,022 households were housed in 2009/10.ⁱⁱ There is also a housing association 'lettings-direct' scheme.ⁱⁱⁱ Checks are made of property conditions and affordability and tenancies are for a minimum of one or three years. The Council uses its work with landlords to influence the private rental market and drive up standards. The Council's private sector lettings team works well in partnership with landlords and convenes a well-attended landlords' forum and landlords can use a dedicated telephone line to contact team leaders on tenancy sustainment issues. Overall, this is ensuring that reasonable alternatives are available for those not wishing to stay in temporary accommodation or unable to access the limited social housing stock.
- 99 There is effective work to address youth homelessness. Arrangements are in place to work with Children's Services to assess and assist homeless 16-17 year-olds and, in 2009/10, 166 young people were helped to return to their families. A social worker co-located with the options team interviews and visits young people, and assessments are made under the Children Act^{iv} by the Leaving Care team, with the housing service providing interim accommodation if necessary. Some supported lodging bed spaces are available, although there is no 'Crashpad' service^v to provide immediate temporary accommodation. Overall, the service is working well to meet the needs of young homeless people.
- 100 Case file checks showed a satisfactory standard of advice, with advice confirmed to clients in writing and the use of clear standard forms and letters. The standard of record keeping and file management was variable on the 'closed' files seen, but case file management procedures have recently been introduced to address this for new cases.^{vi} Overall, the files seen evidenced an appropriate quality of casework.

ⁱ Around 25 per cent of the borough's homes are privately rented.

ⁱⁱ Of which 543 were prevention cases and 479 were 'Qualifying Offers' made to people in temporary accommodation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'lettings-direct' scheme consists of a housing association managing properties for private landlords (generally on three-year assured shorthold tenancies), with the Council having nomination rights.

^{iv} Children Act 1989, section 20 'Provision of accommodation for children'.

^v 'Crashpad' services offer temporary accommodation to young homeless people, usually through a room with an approved host who offers bed, breakfast and an evening meal within their own home for a short period.

^{vi} The Housing Advice and Options teams introduced a new case file management system in March 2010 to address these issues.

101 Other positive aspects of the homelessness prevention, advice and options work include:

- the advice team includes a Housing Benefit liaison officer who works effectively to maximise benefits and verify arrears levels. This helped customers to secure an extra £148,331 in Housing Benefit in 2009/10;
- Discretionary Housing Payments of £33,568 were used by the advice and options teams in 2009/10 to prevent homelessness;
- debt counselling is available promptly via three Citizens Advice Bureaux and a Mortgage Rescue Scheme is in place (with one case completed so far);
- referrals to the cross-tenure Sanctuary Scheme for people threatened with domestic violence who wish to stay in their own homes (co-ordinated by Hearthstone – see 'Diversity' above for further details);
- the multi-agency 'vulnerable tenants panel' (see 'Diversity' above) considers how homelessness might be prevented in cases where there is a threat of eviction;
- a homelessness prevention fund is available and is used appropriately. For example, to provide loans to pay off arrears in order to suspended repossession; and
- the housing advice service was recently promoted to local shoppers through a short film aimed at residents and landlords.

102 However, there are also areas for improvement. There is a need for more joint working between some internal teams. For example, there is some shuttling of files between teams due to a lack of clarity from staff over who should be carrying out certain enquiries. There is written guidance available to staff, but we found that in practice there are still areas of dispute. This does not provide the most efficient service for clients.

103 Advice on housing options for people in temporary accommodation is available, but limited. Although housing advice and options continue to be promoted to households when they are in temporary accommodation, the high number of households means that this is unlikely to take place more than once a year (on the annual occupancy visit), and households are not routinely invited in for periodic interviews to discuss their rehousing options and prospects. There are two projects planned to increase the level of options advice available to these households but, at present, opportunities for some people to move on earlier from temporary accommodation may be missed.

104 There is no deposit guarantee scheme for non-priority homeless households. A scheme is being developed with the voluntary sector, but was not yet in place at the time of this inspection, which limits the re-housing options of single homeless people and other 'non-priority' or intentionally homeless households.

How good is the service?

- 105** Landlord accreditation procedures are not fully comprehensive. There is a landlord accreditation scheme, but landlords of Home Finder Scheme properties do not have to be accredited. Landlords or agents receive a £200 incentive at the start of a tenancy whether or not they are accredited but cannot make a claim against the deposit guarantee at the end of the tenancy unless they are accredited. The Council's view is that this incentivises landlord accreditation. However, this means that some tenants do not have the level of assurance about the standing of their landlord that accreditation provides.
- 106** The benefits of specialist mediation are not being obtained. Specialist mediation is not available for people asked to leave by friends or family. Options officers carry out this role to some extent, but have not been specifically trained to do so. The Council is looking to agree a mediation contract with a local service but this has yet to be finalised. This means that the potential of mediation to prevent homelessness is not necessarily being maximised.
- 107** Hospital discharge agreements are in place and referrals are generally dealt with effectively. However, insufficient notice of discharge is still received in a number of cases and more work needs to be done with some hospitals to ensure that they provide maximum notice of discharge and details of patients.
- 108** The arrangements for using Discretionary Housing Payments to prevent homelessness are not fully effective. It is positive that the Council has made use all of the government contribution in the past three years, and provided some extra funding of its own. However, the housing advice and options services only make use of around 10 per cent of this fundⁱ and do not have a devolved budget from the Housing Benefit department, which can lead to delays in administering payments. To address this, the advice and options service is looking to produce a business case requesting that it directly administers £50,000 of the fund for the prevention of homelessness. At present, however, the arrangements can lead to delays for customers.

Homelessness strategy, applications and assessments

- 109** The 2008-2011 Homelessness Strategy is an effective tool for improving services. It is a genuinely multi-agency strategy, developed and implemented with partners. The strategy covers all key aspects of homelessness, including rough sleeping, and is being delivered by nine delivery groups, attended and in some cases chaired by partners. The partners spoken to praised the content of the strategy and the partnership approach taken by the Council. This is helping to ensure that progress is made in addressing key areas of homelessness.

ⁱ Housing advice and options secured £33,568 for customers in 2009/10 from a DHP fund of £332,423.

- 110** The Council is ensuring that the Homelessness Strategy remains up to date and that progress is monitored. There is an annual multi-agency review of progress and an event to discuss progress was held in September 2009. Although some of its timescales were over-ambitious,ⁱ the Homelessness Strategy has delivered significant change in a number of areas. For example, alongside the reduction in the use of temporary accommodation there has been a marked improvement in communication with those still living there, through visits, the temporary accommodation service users' forum and the newsletter.
- 111** There is an appropriate emphasis on working with private sector landlords in the strategic approach to providing housing opportunities and tackling homelessness. Apart from the successful Home Finder Scheme, there is a regular and well-attended Landlords' Forum. Landlords are offered advice and support and have direct access to the Council's housing managers. This is ensuring that the Council is well placed to make good use of the private rented sector for people in housing need.
- 112** A robust move-on strategy is not yet in place, although some work to address the need for move-on accommodation has taken place and a comprehensive draft strategy (2010-2015) is at an advanced stage. The draft strategy was informed by a survey of stakeholders and a consultation event and is due for Cabinet approval in July 2010. It is comprehensive, identifies the barriers that stop service users from moving on and promotes partnership working. However, partners consider that the present approach is not sufficiently sophisticated, with a blanket approach of an extra 50 points for people needing to move on from supported housing which is not sensitive to the circumstances of different individuals and schemes.
- 113** The draft rough sleepers' strategy is comprehensive and will help to address the low but increasing level of rough sleeping in the borough. However, the lack of a rent deposit scheme for single homeless people is a barrier to addressing some cases of rough sleeping.
- 114** The Council is slow to reach decisions on homelessness cases. Homelessness assessments are carried out by a specialist team and the quality of advice, as evidenced by case files, is satisfactory. However, only 46 per cent of homelessness decisions were made within 33 working days in 2009/10 against an 80 per cent target (although up from 31 per cent in 2007 and 40 per cent in 2008). Some 43 per cent of assessments took more than 50 working days to be completed. Despite the marked improvement over the past year, performance is still below target. This means that households face periods of uncertainty and the Council may be incurring unnecessary temporary accommodation costs.
- 115** There is not a comprehensive staff procedures manual for staff dealing with people in housing need. Procedures are generally held by the service teams and some have gaps in their content. Some procedures are held centrally, but these do not cover the whole service. A comprehensive procedures manual for the homelessness officers is due to be produced by September 2010. In the meantime, staff do not have access to a single and comprehensive set of procedures to guide them in dealing with customers fairly and consistently.

ⁱ Progress against the strategy is discussed under 'What is the service track record in delivering improvement?' later in this report.

How good is the service?

- 116** Homelessness assessment staff have access to appropriate tools when making enquiries, such as Council Tax records, land registry records and credit checking software. There are also appropriate arrangements for carrying out medical assessments. There are in-house medical advisers and assistance is available from the Vulnerable Adults Team on mental health assessments.
- 117** There are quality assurance procedures in place for homelessness casework that are generally comprehensive. However, there are no arrangements for periodic external audits. All decisions are checked and approved by managers and cases are discussed in supervision meetings which take place at least once a month.
- 118** There are appropriate arrangements for carrying out statutory reviews of homelessness and allocations decisions when these are requested by applicants, and reviews are carried out within a reasonable timescale. The number of reviews requested fell from 317 in 2008/09 (with 86 per cent of original decisions upheld) to 273 in 2009/10 (with 87 per cent of decisions upheld). Only one case was found in the applicant's favour on appeal to the county court in 2008/09 and none in 2009/10. However, the Council did lose one Judicial Review case in 2009/10.ⁱ Reviews are carried out promptly, with 98.9 per cent of reviews completed within the target of 56 days in 2009/10. The review officers feed learning back to caseworkers and team leaders, and circulate details of significant caselaw. Overall, customers are receiving prompt responses to their review requests and the Council is learning from its experience of reviews and appeals.

Temporary accommodation and support services

- 119** Haringey has made significant progress in reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation, although the numbers are still the equal highest in the country. The CLG set a target for councils to reduce their use of temporary accommodation by 50 per cent between December 2004 and 2010. In December 2004 Haringey had 5,207 households in temporary accommodation, the second highest level nationally. This increased to a high of 5,909 households in December 2006 and then fell to 5,621 just before the last inspection.ⁱⁱ Although the CLG target of 2,603 is unlikely to be met in 2010, significant progress has been made, with 3,547 households in temporary accommodation at the end of March 2010, a reduction of 40 per cent since the 2006 high point. The reduction has been achieved through a comprehensive strategic approach which includes the increased use of preventative advice and the promotion of housing options, as outlined earlier in this report. The main option used is the private rented sector, which can have drawbacks in terms of physical standards, security of tenure and creating a benefit trap, but the Council has put measures in place to limit these factors where possible.ⁱⁱⁱ Overall, a high number of households have been rehoused into suitable accommodation, or prevented from having to move into temporary accommodation since the last inspection.

ⁱ For refusal to take a new application.

ⁱⁱ 5,621 households were in temporary accommodation at 30 September 2007, prior to the October 2007 inspection.

ⁱⁱⁱ By, for example, inspecting properties; requiring rents to be within Local Housing Allowance levels; and requiring fixed term tenancies of one or three years.

- 120** This overall reduction in temporary accommodation includes a planned and significant reduction in the use of nightly-paid 'emergency' accommodation which is traditionally more expensive to procure. This is discussed under 'How is the service delivering value for money?' below. There has also been a significant fall in households accommodated temporarily within the Council's own stock, from 386 in March 2007, to 65 in April 2010, mainly by converting residents to 'secure' tenants of the properties, where appropriate.
- 121** However, while there has been significant progress, Haringey still has the equal highest level of households in temporary accommodation in the country.ⁱ The high number of households, coupled with the low supply of social housing lettings, means that households spend long periods in temporary accommodation. At 31 March 2010, the average length of stay was four and a half years, with 102 households having stays of over ten years and three households having been in temporary accommodation for 17 or 18 years.ⁱⁱ This means that households do not have certainty about their long-term housing situation which impacts on families and communities and results in high management and support costs for the Council.
- 122** Government targets for the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met. The requirement that bed and breakfast hotels should not be used for families with children or for 16-17 year-olds (except in an emergency) are being met. No families with children were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in 2009/10 and no 16-17 year-olds were in hotels by the target date of 2010. This is ensuring that inappropriate accommodation is not used for particular groups.
- 123** There is an effective approach to procuring temporary accommodation. The procurement and compliance team uses a range of methods to source properties and works to ensure there is a balanced portfolio of property types available. All potential properties are inspected. Private sector leases are generally for three years, but the Council can terminate at four weeks' notice, which minimises void and handback costs as usage falls. The procurement and compliance team holds regular liaison meetings with the four housing associations that manage leased properties at which the associations are required to submit performance information. There are examples of the Council ending the use of certain landlords and agents where standards of accommodation or management were not being met. This is ensuring that appropriate accommodation is available when needed, while maintaining management standards.
- 124** The standard of temporary accommodation used is generally satisfactory, although there were instances of disrepair. In 2007, a significant amount of the temporary accommodation used by Haringey was of poor quality.ⁱⁱⁱ The Council has used its leverage as a major leaser of accommodation to improve and enforce standards in the private sector and has offered grants to renovate and convert emergency accommodation into longer-term rented housing.

ⁱ At 31 March 2010 Haringey had 3,547 households in temporary accommodation and L.B. Newham had 3,526 households; the previous quarter Newham had slightly more households in temporary accommodation than Haringey.

ⁱⁱ L.B. Haringey spreadsheet of 'Average time spent in TA by tenure 2009-2010'.

ⁱⁱⁱ L.B. Haringey's Self Assessment for this inspection, para. 6.14.

How good is the service?

- 125** Our visits to temporary accommodation were positive overall, but did find some disrepair that had not been addressed. We visited a sample of the full range of property types.ⁱ Homes were generally in good condition and staff and tenants reported that the landlords concerned were proactive in attending to maintenance issues. However, repairs had been slow to be completed in some cases, and in one case the managing housing association and private landlord had failed to address water penetration, evidence of settlement or movement and a mouse infestation. The Council took prompt action to inspect this property and address the problems, but this indicates that landlords and managing agents are not always taking appropriate action when disrepair is reported by residents.
- 126** The hostel portfolio has been reviewed to ensure that it provides fit for purpose accommodation. The number of hostels has been reduced from 35 to 18, one of which provides more suitable accommodation for people who have disabilities. Our visit to specialist accommodation for people with alcohol problems was generally positive. This is a dry house run by a local project. A good level of support is provided and there has been an appropriate level of move-on from the scheme. However, there was some minor disrepair that had not been addressed by the landlord. Overall, however, appropriate hostel and other supported accommodation are available.
- 127** Appropriate arrangements are in place to support people living in temporary accommodation. Every resident, including those living outside the borough, has a named tenancy support officer whose responsibility it is to ensure that their accommodation is well managed and in a good state of repair. There is a planned programme of visits, including a six-week settling in visit. The frequency of visits is based on a risk assessment, for example, everyone receives at least one visit per year (which includes an occupancy check) with those living in hostels receiving four visits as they tend to be more vulnerable. There are additional visits by Home Connections staff, to discuss housing options and to provide advice and support on bidding. Tenants receive welcome packs when moving in and know who to contact if they have any concerns or queries. Staff show good awareness of their tenants' needs, including translation requirements, and are proactive in liaising with support providers and making referrals to services if necessary. Tenants, while keen to find more permanent housing, are generally well supported while in temporary accommodation.
- 128** Floating support services are in place for those who need more intensive support. The vulnerable adults' team arranges and co-ordinates support and works closely with the support providers, probation and Connexions. This is promoting tenancy sustainment and reducing the number of evictions from temporary accommodation.ⁱⁱ
- 129** Steps are taken to support residents to pay any charges due. The income team ensures that details are provided to Housing Benefit as soon as possible so that claims are assessed quickly, and liaises with Housing Benefit and residents to resolve any problems. Residents who have arrears have their benefit entitlement checked and staff sign-post them to local money advice services with a focus on agreeing affordable repayments. Staff will also liaise with floating support workers if they have concerns about a resident's ability to sustain their accommodation.

ⁱ The types and quantity of temporary accommodation used at January 2010 were: 1,551 private sector leased units; 1,071 'annex' units; 821 housing association leased units; 13 bed and breakfast hotel units; 172 hostel units; and 106 units of council stock on licences.

ⁱⁱ There were 26 evictions in 2009/10.

130 Although some households are placed in temporary accommodation outside the borough, this is tightly controlled and the Council now has a commitment to only procure accommodation within 1.5 miles of Haringey. In the past, large numbers were placed in other parts of the country, including Birmingham, but this practice has now changed. There are now no households outside London; there are 755 households (around 20 per cent of the total) placed in ten other London boroughs, but these are all in east and north London with the majority within 1.5 miles of the borough; all receive the same support as people placed within the borough.

Is the service delivering value for money?

131 The 2007 inspection found that this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. A focus on value for money was 'under development' and not embedded throughout the service. There was a lack of reported performance data, and limited comparative information.

132 This re-inspection found that this is now an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is still a lack of comprehensive benchmarking and comparative data and some areas of the service do not promote value for money, such as the speed of homelessness decision making and the failure to review the housing register. However, the Council has made good progress in reducing the overall and unit costs of temporary accommodation, while maintaining standards.

How do costs compare?

133 The Council has little information on how costs in the services inspected compare to those of other organisations. The approach to benchmarking strategic and community housing services is under-developed. Some comparison has been made, for example, before the introduction of the Home Finder scheme. However, there has been a lack of systematic and comprehensive comparison with others of the cost, quality and performance of all the services inspected to inform value for money decision making. The Council recognises that this is an area for improvement and intends to develop this further. At present comparative costs are not fully understood or used to improve efficiency.

How is value for money managed?

134 Corporately, the Council has a focus on achieving value for moneyⁱ and, through a rolling programme, 14 value for money reviews have taken place since 2008. Efficiencies of £2.7 million have been achieved in Strategic and Community Housing Services, with a potential for further efficiencies of £0.6 million.

ⁱ This is set out in, 'Haringey Council – The Council's Approach to Value for Money' March 2010.

How good is the service?

- 135** Steps have been taken to embed the consideration of value for money within strategic and community housing services, although this is still developing. To improve value for money, there have been awaydays for managers to look at remodelling services in response to the reduced use of temporary accommodation. The department is planning to deliver savings in 2010/11 and more markedly in 2011/12 to reflect this reduction. It is working to address this in a planned way, recognising that if staffing levels fall below a certain level, it could impact on prevention, safeguarding and income recovery issues. Also, value for money targets are now being set for staff through the appraisal system although it is too soon for this to have led to outcomes.
- 136** There has been a strong and successful focus on reducing the overall and unit costs of temporary accommodation (the highest area of spending), while maintaining standards. The service has successfully reduced the use and unit costs of expensive nightly-paid accommodation over the past year, targeting the most costly accommodation for early disposal. In May 2009 there were 1,652 households in 'emergency' nightly-paid accommodation, by March 2010 this had reduced to 947, following visits and housing options discussions with all residents. By the end of December 2009, 149 households had moved into private rented accommodation, 49 had their temporary accommodation converted into assured shorthold tenancies and 177 were placed in permanent social housing. This has reduced overall costs by an estimated £600,000 at the same time as reducing the unit costs of the remaining temporary accommodation.
- 137** Performance on recovering rent and other temporary accommodation charges is generally good. In 2009/10, 97.95 per cent of emergency (nightly-paid) accommodation charges were collected, against a target of 96 per cent; 97.33 per cent of private sector leased income was collected (just below the 98 per cent target) and 95.21 per cent of hostel income (with a 95 per cent target). This means that potential income is being maximised.
- 138** The Council has shown a willingness to invest in order to improve outcomes. For example, it has funded the Home Finder Scheme to reduce the use of temporary accommodation (see 'Housing advice, homelessness prevention and options services' earlier in this report). A recent review of the scheme has resulted in lower costs to the Council without a significant fall in lettings. Landlords now receive a smaller incentive payment (£200) in return for the Council guaranteeing the deposit and eight weeks' rent. Investment in the scheme enabled over 1,000 households to choose to move into the private rented sector in 2009/10.
- 139** Other examples of a positive approach to achieving value for money include:
- sub-regional funding totalling £400,000 has been used to de-convert eight hostels into large family homes which are in short supply in Haringey and these were used to house families at the top of the overcrowding list;
 - a new 'supply and manage' temporary accommodation scheme offers improved value for money. A framework agreement was tendered last autumn and six letting agents have been appointed. The agents procure accommodation (which the Council will inspect and approve) and then manage it for the Council; 70 leases have been completed in the last few months and the first round of contract monitoring meetings has taken place;

- a homelessness prevention fund is available to, for example, provide private tenants and home owners who are threatened with homelessness with small loans to prevent eviction;
 - since the introduction of a nominal fee for furniture storage, many customers have asked for their goods to be returned to them or disposed of. This has saved the Council £150,000 a year; and
 - a fraud project within the housing needs and lettings service, using National Fraud Initiative data, identified 366 cases with data anomalies. A temporary fraud officer has worked through these with action being taken on six cases for substantial amounts; in two cases around £56,000 of temporary accommodation costs will potentially be recovered. The Council is now looking to establish a corporate fraud team which will include a resource to continue this work.
- 140** However, the high void turnaround times result in reduced rental income and longer waits for people on the housing register. Also, the service still directly manages a high proportion of its temporary accommodation and has yet to assess whether this role might be more effectively delivered by another organisation.
- 141** The size of the housing register (over 20,000) and failure to review it in recent years means that there are unnecessary administrative costs and inefficiencies. Also, slow performance in making homelessness decisions means that more is being spent on interim accommodation than would otherwise be necessary.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 142** The 2007 inspection found that this was an area where strengths and weaknesses were in balance. There had been some significant improvements that customers would recognise but there was more to do in many areas. The service had a good track record of responding to Audit Commission recommendations, but the delivery of targets in key strategies had not been consistent. Insufficient progress had been made in improving customer access and value for money.
- 143** This re-inspection found that this is now an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. There has been good progress against the recommendations made following the last inspection. The service has focused successfully on the prevention of homelessness and has achieved a steady fall in the use and unit costs of temporary accommodation. There has also been an improvement in performance indicators and in the delivery of value for money. However, not all of the objectives in the homelessness strategy have been achieved and there has been slow progress in reviewing the housing register and introducing a new allocation scheme.
- 144** There has been good progress against the recommendations of the last inspection (see Appendix 1), all but one of which have been completed or substantially met. For example, the recommendations concerning 'Developing a proactive and holistic approach to preventions and options' and 'Reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the Midlands' have been fully met, as has the updating of information, the systematic visiting of residents, and a reduction in staff sickness and the use of agency staff. There are some areas where recommendations have not been fully met, such as the systematic measuring of satisfaction and the speed of telephone access, although improvements are underway in these areas.
- 145** The service has a strong track record in implementing change that benefits customers over the past three years. Most notably, the improvements in the approach to preventing homelessness and offering housing options has prevented homelessness in over 1,000 cases in the past year, and reduced the number of households in temporary accommodation by 40 per cent since the high point of 2006. The quality of temporary accommodation has been improved through more robust procurement and inspection, and the government targets to limit the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met. The Council has made more effective use of the private rented sector. There have also been improvements in customer information and support to people bidding through choice-based lettings. There are however areas in which progress has been slow, such as in reviewing the housing register, producing a revised allocation scheme and developing a rent deposit scheme for non-priority homeless households. But, overall, service delivery has improved significantly since the last inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 146** Progress against the 2008-2011 Homelessness Strategy action plan has been mixed. Although this multi-agency strategy provides an effective framework for improvement (see ' Homelessness strategy, applications and assessments' earlier in this report), of the 59 key actions for the first year of the strategy, 29 were achieved, 25 were in progress and 5 were not achieved. A further mid-year review in 2010 shows 23 actions achieved, 18 in progress and 3 not achieved, however, this was following the extension of target timescales for a number of items.
- 147** Also, there has been slow progress in completing equality impact assessments and insufficient progress has been made in collecting comprehensive customer profiling data and using this to shape services and ensure that there is fair and equal access across all services.
- 148** The recent track record in performance indicators is positive although there is more to do to deliver further improvement:
- the number of households in temporary accommodation fell from 5,909 in December 2006 to 3,547 in March 2010;
 - the number of cases in which advice prevented homelessness rose from 540 in 2007/08 to over 1,000 in 2009/10; and
 - the average time to relet council homes fell from 50 calendar days in 2007/08 to 44 days in 2009/10.
- 149** There has been an improvement in the value for money of temporary accommodation, which is the main area of expenditure. The Council has driven down the unit costs of the accommodation it procures while maintaining or improving standards. This has enabled it to limit the impact of subsidy reductions by central government.
- 150** There has been increased partnership working, particularly in implementing the homelessness strategy. Partners consider that the Council has made significant progress over the past two years in the inspected areas, and that the service has improved its attitude towards involving partners, which is now one of openness and inclusiveness. This involvement is helping to sustain improvements.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 151** The 2007 inspection found that this was an area where strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a clear commitment to driving improvement from both councillors and senior managers. The service demonstrated an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness that was reflected in its future plans. The performance management framework was sound and, generally, performance monitoring and reporting were also sound. However, the service was not consistently learning from customer feedback to improve performance.
- 152** This re-inspection found that this is now an area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Appropriate plans and strategies are in place and performance monitoring and reporting are generally robust. There has been strong leadership of the service and a culture of continuous improvement is now in place. However, more can be done to learn from other organisations and from customer feedback.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 153** The service has appropriate strategies and plans in place to continue to deliver improvement. For example, the Homelessness Strategy 2008-2011 (as discussed under 'Homelessness' earlier in this report), the temporary accommodation reduction strategy and the Housing Improvement Plan 2010-2012. These plans address the key weaknesses outlined in this report and are realistic and deliverable. The content of plans should ensure that outcomes for service users and the community are improved by, for example:
- introducing a more transparent allocations policy and on-line housing register applications;
 - continuing the prevention of homelessness and the reduction in the use of temporary accommodation;
 - completing the voids transformation project, which has already improved void turnaround by process mapping and identifying blockages, such as inefficient decanting procedures;
 - introducing a deposit guarantee scheme for non-priority homeless people;
 - part-funding a credit union from September 2010, as part of the Council's response to the recession;
 - implementing the draft move-on strategy and rough sleepers strategy; and
 - diversity training for private landlords and agents who take part in the Home Finder Scheme.
- 154** Although it has taken some time to develop a new housing allocations policy, the draft policy supports a more strategic approach to meeting housing needs and making best use of social housing in the borough. The move to a banding system provides clarity and transparency on how competing housing needs will be prioritised. Consultation with partners and stakeholders is planned for June to December 2010 and will include targeted consultation with applicants who are likely to gain or lose priority compared to the current arrangements.
- 155** The approach to improvement planning has been strengthened. The 2010-2012 Housing Improvement Planⁱ covers a longer timescale than the previous one-year plan. It is generally robust, but would benefit from more measurable targets (although these are contained in subsidiary plans) and details of the resources required to deliver it. The Housing Improvement Plan flows from, but does not duplicate, the Business Plan and is supported by more detailed project plans, such as for producing the new allocations policy. This ensures that managers and staff are clear about the priorities and targets they are working to achieve.
- 156** There is appropriate reporting of progress against plans. Progress against the Housing Improvement Plan and the Business Plan is reported to the Senior Management Team monthly and to the Housing Improvement Board quarterly.

ⁱ A single integrated Housing Improvement Plan has been produced for 2010-2012, to incorporate a range of previous plans. This aligns with the Business Plan, and sits above detailed operational plans.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 157** The approach to managing risk within the service is sound. Risk assessment is integrated within the business planning process and is managed through the corporate performance management system. A risk register, which identifies key risks to the service including further subsidy changes and housing market changes, is reviewed quarterly alongside the Business Plan. Contingency plans include details of 27 temporary accommodation suppliers who could be called on in the event of a major emergency. This ensures that the impact of future risks is minimised.
- 158** There are arrangements in place to deliver continuous improvement, including Service Improvement Groupsⁱ and the Housing Improvement Board. Staff appraisals are carried out annually and our review of a sample of appraisals showed that they had been completed well and included clear objectives and measurable targets.
- 159** However, there is an inconsistent approach to managers carrying out one-to-one supervision. This should take place regularly and be recorded, but this was not the case across all of the staff teams in the inspected services.
- 160** Performance is generally monitored and reported appropriately. Performance is monitored by the fortnightly Housing Improvement Board and by the Local Strategic Partnership's 'Integrated Housing Board'. Performance is reported to councillors in a range of ways, including through the directorate's 'dashboard', through overview and scrutiny, and fortnightly meetings with the Cabinet member for housing. There is also an annual multi-agency review of progress against the Homelessness Strategy.
- 161** However, there are some gaps in performance monitoring and management. For example, there is not systematic monitoring of service delivery against all diversity strands, or comprehensive monitoring of customer satisfaction. Although it is positive that progress against the Homelessness Strategy is reviewed annually, this has not been reported to the temporary accommodation users' forum or to service users in other ways. Also, while the Vulnerable Adults Team is providing a positive service, there are not yet outcome measures to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of the work it does, although work to address this is planned.
- 162** Leadership of the service by senior staff and politicians is effective. The restructuring of the service over the past three years has led to improved outcomes, while retaining skilled staff and enhancing overall staff confidence in the management of the service. The inspected services are benefiting from a period of more settled senior management, which was not the case prior to the last inspection. Staff are now clearer about their roles and how they contribute to the overall aims of the service. Also, the portfolio holder takes an active role in service improvement and championing the service among councillors. This has enabled the Council to deliver improved outcomes for service users and tackle the weaknesses identified during our last inspection.

ⁱ Service Improvement Groups involve staff from across the housing service and are used to monitor and drive performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 163** Arrangements for financial planning and budget management are sound. A zero-based budgeting approach is taken, informed by likely levels of activity in the coming year such as the number of homelessness approaches and acceptances, the numbers in temporary accommodation, and the possible impact of the recession on those assumptions. Spend against budgets is monitored and reported monthly, with corrective action taken as necessary. For example, rising storage costs were identified as an issue and addressed. Monitoring also highlighted overspend on the Home Finder Scheme but, as this was supporting savings on temporary accommodation costs, this was seen as acceptable. This demonstrates a good level of awareness and appropriate responses to variations against budgets.
- 164** The plans that are in place include appropriate proposals for improving value for money. The focus on value for money is supported by targets within the Business Plan and the Housing Improvement Plan, which are monitored through the Housing Improvement Board and quarterly reporting to the Chief Executive's management board.
- 165** There is evidence of the service learning from others and from its own experience, although more could be done in this area. For example, the service investigated the structure and costs of other deposit guarantee schemes when developing the Home Finder Scheme, and there is evidence of regular learning from complaints and from statutory reviews. However, not all areas of the service have looked at best practice elsewhere and the inspected services have not been systematically benchmarked against other organisations. Also, there has been limited gathering of customer feedback. This means that the inspected services are not maximising the benefits that might be obtained through learning, both internally and externally.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 166** The 2007 inspection found that this was an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council had taken positive steps to address capacity issues at all levels within the service. The IT systems were capable of supporting the service well. However, staff capacity was reduced by high levels of sickness absence and the high proportion of agency staff.
- 167** This re-inspection found that this is now an area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. There has been effective financial planning and a substantial amount of external funding has been attracted to support the service's objectives. Staff capacity is strong and this is supported by effective training arrangements. However, the level of sickness is still high and there are some IT issues that the service needs to resolve. Capacity has been enhanced through effective partnership working in a number of areas.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 168** There has been effective financial planning and an appropriate medium term financial strategy in place. This has taken account of the reduction in temporary accommodation subsidy. The Council planned for the subsidy changes which were due to take effect in April 2009 (and took effect in April 2010) and it has taken steps to manage and mitigate their impact. Modelling showed a gap of £7 million under the new arrangements and the Council has reduced the deficit to £2.7 million by reducing the numbers in temporary accommodation, negotiating lower prices with providers and ending the use of the most expensive accommodation while at the same time ensuring that accommodation is of good quality. Work is continuing to achieve a balanced budget by the end of 2010/11 although central contingency funding is in place if this target is not achieved.
- 169** Staff capacity has been increased through the restructuring by, for example, bringing special needs teams together and separating housing advice and housing options into specialist teams. The housing advice and options teams benefit from having a number of legally trained staff with specialist expertise in areas such as mortgage repossession, harassment and illegal eviction. This enables the teams to provide a broad range of advice on preventing homelessness and housing options. Staff were positive about the improved communication, especially with social care colleagues, which is enabling them to work together to share information and concerns about vulnerable families, adults and children. Overall, staff showed a commitment to service improvement.
- 170** Capacity is enhanced through a sound approach to training needs assessment and delivery. Training needs are assessed through the annual appraisal process and staff have had a range of relevant training to support them in their roles. For example, training on customer focus, immigration law, rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, dealing with difficult customers, mental health and domestic abuse. The approach to maintaining staff training records has been strengthened and shows that staff at each level have received appropriate training. The system also includes a training profile for every role in the structure to support managers in identifying training needs.
- 171** The approach to managing sickness absence has been strengthened since the last inspection and sickness levels have improved, but are still an area of concern. There are monthly absence reports and a monthly sickness review panel, chaired by the assistant director. Managers are required to attend and provide evidence of the action they have taken to address sickness absence in their teams. Staff returning to work receive an attendance review interview with agreed follow-up action recorded. However, although the average decreased from 20.4 days in 2006/07 to 12.7 days in 2008/09, it increased to 15.7 days in 2009/10 (although this is affected by a small number of long term absences). This means that resources to deliver services are not yet being maximised.
- 172** IT is generally supporting service delivery. The website is helping people to access services and the plans to introduce on-line housing applications will free up staff resources and provide a more customer-focused service. However, the lack of reliable printers and photocopiers at Apex House was a widespread complaint by staff. There are now plans to address this.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 173** The service has been successful in attracting inward investment to help to deliver improvement. For example, Overcrowding Pathfinder funding from the CLG of £90,000 in 2009/10 (with a further £121,000 anticipated in 2010/11) enabled 102 under-occupation visits resulting in 70 moves, and contact with 130 severely overcrowded families, six of whom have successfully moved into larger accommodation in the private rented sector. A successful under-occupation event was held in December 2009 with follow-up casework for some of those that attended.
- 174** Also, the service attracted North London sub-regional empty homes grant funding of £900,000 in 2009/10 and, linked to this, £252,409 was recovered in Council Tax for empty homes. From this investment, 37 units of accommodation were created for use as assured shorthold tenancies for temporary accommodation residents. All of these properties had been empty for more than a year, were in a very poor condition and were either eyesore properties that were causing a nuisance to the community or were the subject of enforcement action. It is estimated that, excluding the grant assistance, the creation of the 37 homes levered in additional funding from the property owners of more than £2 million. This effective use of funding has increased the supply of rented homes in the borough.
- 175** Capacity is being enhanced through partnership working in a number of areas. For example, in delivering the homelessness strategy and through the 'Hearthstone' domestic violence service. Also, partnership working is enhancing the Vulnerable Adults Team's service, with workers from external agencies co-located within the team to provide specialist skills and knowledge, and support a seamless approach to assessing people's housing related support needs. The delivery arrangements for the Homelessness Strategy have levered in resources from partners that have made it possible to be both more efficient and more effective. These partnering arrangements are achieving better outcomes with the same level of Council resources.

Appendix 1 – Progress against recommendations of previous inspection

Recommendation	Current Position; Actions to date
The Council should improve the customer focus of its service by	
<p>Setting up systematic methods of keeping applicants informed of the progress of their cases, measuring satisfaction, and involving users in service improvement, including through the complaints procedure.</p>	<p>Substantially met</p> <p>The Council established a team to carry out occupancy checks of all clients in temporary accommodation at least once a year. At these visits clients are advised of alternative housing options. The team has completed more than 5,000 visits over the past two years.</p> <p>A quarterly Landlords Forum has been set up to promote good practice and to consult with private landlords and housing suppliers on a wide range of issues.</p> <p>A Temporary Accommodation User Forum has been set up and meets twice a year. It is well attended and has enabled the Council to consult residents on matters such as choice based lettings, the repairs service and the range of housing options.</p> <p>However, progress on collecting feedback through satisfaction surveys is limited or recent in most areas of the service.</p>
<p>Updating information provided to service users, improving telephone access to the service, and reducing the time taken to book appointments.</p>	<p>Partially met</p> <p>Information and the website have been updated and are generally comprehensive.</p> <p>Appointments are available either on the day or within a short and appropriate timescale.</p> <p>Customer Service Scripts were reviewed in November 2009 to reflect the new Housing department and services.</p> <p>Telephone advice is of a good quality, but telephone answering is not meeting targets.</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress against recommendations of previous inspection

Recommendation	Current Position; Actions to date
<p>Developing a proactive and holistic approach to preventions and options, linking outreach work carried out by the occupancy, preventions and options and housing management teams.</p>	<p>Completed</p> <p>There are now dedicated prevention and options teams, which offer a good standard of advice and generally link well with other teams.</p> <p>In 2009/10 the service prevented more than 1,000 households from becoming homeless.</p>
<p>Reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the Midlands, while being mindful of the individual wishes of temporary accommodation residents currently living there.</p>	<p>Completed</p> <p>No households are now housed outside London. All 67 households placed in the Midlands were visited by a team of officers in July 2008. Each household received a full housing options appraisal and were given options to either settle in more stable accommodation in Birmingham or return to London into alternative accommodation.</p>
<p>The Council should improve the choice-based letting service by:</p>	
<p>Developing a more efficient and equitable bidding process by: filtering out ineligible bidders, encouraging those with low points to seek alternatives, identifying and supporting those who have not bid, particularly vulnerable applicants.</p>	<p>Substantially met</p> <p>Two Home Connections Support Officers promote Home Connections and engage with those highly pointed cases who are not bidding. The recent introduction of autobidding means that bids will now be made for people in temporary accommodation on high points who have not bid successfully.</p>
<p>Making the verification process more simple, flexible and user-friendly, and ensuring that reasonable efforts are made to contact priority bidders to view properties.</p>	<p>Completed</p> <p>The lettings officers text clients as well as telephoning them and will hand deliver a letter if necessary informing them of the details of the viewing they should attend.</p> <p>Verification checks are now carried out at an earlier stage.</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress against recommendations of previous inspection

Recommendation	Current Position; Actions to date
The Council should improve its use of resources by:	
Maximising the supply of permanent accommodation by: closely monitoring nominations to housing associations, facilitating a balance between transfer and homeless applicants, developing a comprehensive under-occupation scheme and increasing outcomes from mobility schemes.	<p>Substantially met</p> <p>The Council has recently agreed a new Partnering Agreement with housing associations which contains the reviewed nominations agreement, although the last year's figures indicate that not all nominations were received. CLG funding has been used to target under-occupiers and address overcrowding. An under-occupation day event was held in December 2009.</p>
Building an analysis of risk into the budgeting process in regard to subsidy changes, and maximising rechargeable income;	<p>Completed</p> <p>The impact of subsidy changes were assessed and provided for. The reduction in the use of temporary accommodation, and in particular in expensive nightly-paid accommodation, reduced the impact of the subsidy changes.</p>
Improving data collection by ensuring that documentation is not lost; that data is input accurately onto IT systems and that information is consistent across different databases.	<p>Completed</p> <p>Training has been provided to staff in the registration team. User guides have been updated and are available to all staff on the intranet. New working methods have been brought in and monitoring arrangements are in place.</p>
The Council should improve its approach to staffing by:	
Taking steps to reduce the reliance on temporary and agency staff, and addressing high levels of sickness absence.	<p>Substantially met</p> <p>There has been a significant reduction in the use of agency staff and a reduction in the average number of days sick per employee from 20 in 2006/07 to 16 in 2009/10.</p>
Developing and resourcing a training plan for staff, clearly linked to the aims of the service.	<p>Completed</p> <p>Training plans for staff are in place and training is available when needed.</p>

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - interviews with staff, managers, the Chief executive and portfolio holder;
 - focus groups with frontline staff, partners and residents of temporary accommodation;
 - visits to a range of temporary accommodation;
 - a visit to the Hearthstone domestic abuse project;
 - file checks of allocations, homelessness housing advice and housing options cases;
 - a review of complaints files;
 - a review of the Council's website and information materials;
 - shadowing of interviews with people on the housing register and people requiring housing advice;
 - shadowing viewings of properties offered through choice-based lettings;
 - shadowing the sign-up of new tenants who had successfully bid through choice-based lettings;
 - telephone calls to new tenants;
 - telephone calls to people on the housing register;
 - telephone calls to people in temporary accommodation;
 - visits to three Customer Service Centres and to a library; and
 - mystery shopping telephone calls to the Contact Centre and to the out-of-hours service.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

'Hearthstone' Domestic Violence Advice and Support Centre

- 1** Haringey's 'Hearthstone' service is an effective multi-agency response to domestic abuse within the borough. Hearthstone is a partnership service hosted by the Council, which benefits from having a separate identity and its own premises, including a drop-in service. The service is widely promoted and offers a range of options and support services all in one place, including a police presence; legal advice; floating support services; an out of borough resettlement service; a substance misuse worker; a Turkish women's support agency; independent advisers for high-risk cases; a family support worker; and, shortly, a children's' social worker. It also operates the borough's sanctuary scheme which supports around 80 women each year to remain at home with home security measures alongside legal remedies.
- 2** The service has played an important part in homelessness prevention, with only six cases needing to make an emergency homelessness application in 2009/10 and with 98 per cent service user satisfaction. Hearthstone has used its monitoring data to identify and reach out to under-represented groups in the area, such as Turkish women and lesbian/gay and transgender people.

Temporary accommodation users' forum

- 3** Haringey has an active and effective temporary accommodation users' forum, for homeless households in all forms of temporary accommodation. The forum was formed in December 2008 and is well attended. It enables residents to shape and influence services by, for example commenting on proposed changes to the allocations policy. Other outcomes from the forum's involvement include clearer information for temporary accommodation residents on how to report repairs, improved repairs monitoring, information packs and a 'frequently asked questions' leaflet. The forum's input led to a training and jobs fair for residents in May 2009 and a workshop in March 2010.

The Audit Commission

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