

Housing Management Services

Advice and Assistance

Lewisham Homes

February 2009



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The Engagement Letter and attached documents relating to this report explain the respective responsibilities of the Audit Commission and the authority.

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Advice and Assistance - Lewisham Homes

Introduction

- 1 The Audit Commission Housing Inspectorate undertook an assessment of Lewisham Homes' services between 17 and 28 November 2008. The assessment was conducted as voluntary advice and assistance work to assist Lewisham Homes in preparing for a full inspection which is likely to take place in 2009/10.
- 2 It was agreed after discussion with the ALMO that the Audit Commission would undertake a service assessment based on the inspection process and reality checks undertaken in a full ALMO inspection. This was designed to help the organisation gain a clear understanding of the current strengths and weaknesses of the service and the way in which the real inspection would be conducted. A full inspection timetable was agreed with the ALMO and undertaken in a similar manner to a real inspection. The exception to this is in respect to the report, as it was agreed that a table of key strengths and weaknesses rather than a full inspection report would be produced as it is not intended for a wider audience, but as an internal service improvement tool.
- 3 This document therefore pulls together the key strengths and weaknesses reported on site. We have also provided recommendations which arise from these findings, to assist Lewisham Homes in its planning and preparation for its full inspection.
- 4 It should be noted that while this work encompassed the range of interviews and reality checks that would normally form part of an ALMO inspection, there may be some changes when the real inspection takes place. This is because all inspections have a focus related to what we know about the organisation; our or others expectations may change, affecting the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLoEs) or national priorities, or as standards of practice generally improve. In this context the ALMO should not only take account of this work, but be continually aware of the changing housing environment.

Acknowledgement

- 5 We would like to thank the staff, board members, tenants and partners of Lewisham Homes who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Judgement 1 – How good is the service?

Access and customer care

Key Strengths

- **There is a range of ways to contact the service.**
- Residents can access the service by phone, letter, email, via the website, in person at four area based offices, via estate based surgeries or home visits, and SMS texts for gas servicing.
- **Well produced written information.**
- A range of informative leaflets, a comprehensive new tenant handbook with translated straplines and an informative, quarterly residents newsletter 'Home', and an involved residents newsletter 'Involver' are provided.
- **Informative and interactive website.**
- The website has useful information and is accessible with facilities for changing font size, colour schemes and has speech enabling facilities. Non urgent repairs, ASB and complaints can be reported and rent payments made on line.

Key Weaknesses

- **No customer service strategy is in place.**
- **Customer care training has not been delivered.**
- There has been a lack of customer care training to date to improve customer service and to support cultural change management. Training has very recently started (November 2008) with priority given to staff involved in direct service delivery.
- Customer services staff have also not received training on working with vulnerable residents, but there has been some training on deaf awareness and dealing with difficult customers.
- **The standard of customer service is variable and knowledge of services is not of a consistent standard.**
- There is no single contact number for all customers. Different phone numbers apply for different services and offices, which can make access to services more difficult.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Pleasant offices with useful customer facilities**
- The area offices have private interview rooms and a good selection of information leaflets on display, TV screens, a courtesy telephone for contacting services directly, a computer for customer use, children's play facilities, hearing loops, and IT facilities and panic buttons in interview rooms. The reception areas are clean, well kept, with public toilet facilities and seating for tenants.
- The head office at Holbeach is easy to find and close to regular public transportation. There is easy access with wide automatic doors and lowered counters for wheel chair users, although the reception area was very crowded at times.
- **An effective, freephone telephone service for repairs.**
- A freephone number for reporting repairs (launched November 2008) is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Any repair can be ordered at any time - emergency repairs will be carried out outside of the core hours of 08.00 to 17.00 Monday to Friday, and 08.00 to 13.00 on a Saturday.
- Staff answer calls in a professional and polite manner and have a reasonable understanding of the range of repair works and have a diagnostic toolkit to help them accurately identify and log a repair. The system can identify how many calls have been taken by each member of staff for monitoring purposes, and vulnerability is flagged up automatically and staff have access to interpreting services.

Key Weaknesses

- The 2008 STATUS survey found that only 67 per cent found staff to be helpful, 29 per cent stated that staff were unable to deal with their problem, and only 56 per cent were satisfied with how the enquiry was dealt with.
- Reception staff are generally welcoming and treat service users with respect, but some did not demonstrate knowledge about and could not answer the full range of enquiries they receive. Not all reception staff have received appropriate training and there is a high number of temporary reception staff in some offices who have not received appropriate training.
- Customer Service staff cannot make appointments for tenants with the appropriate housing officer. If an officer is not available when a tenant calls, there is no arrangement to access appointment times using for example, MS Outlook in order to provide the tenants with an appointment at their first contact. Tenants have to wait for the officer to call them back in order to make an appointment.
- From file checks and views expressed by tenants in focus groups we found that tenants have to make repeat calls to achieve action, they are not kept informed about changes to appointments eg when a staff member is off sick, and responses to letters are often unsatisfactory not resolving the issue.

Key Strengths

- **Clear service standards that are promoted to customers and staff.**
- There are published comprehensive and generally challenging customer service standards that were developed in consultation with residents. A leaflet sets out the standards but the font size promoting the availability of other languages and larger print is too small.
- Customer service staff have a clear understanding of the service standards and what is expected of them, and are aware of compensation policies if the standards are not met.
- **Resident mystery shopping and tenant feedback of customer service is improving reception services.**
- Resident involvement in mystery shopping has resulted in improvements to services. Issues about customer services staff knowledge of, and ability to respond to, rent arrears queries and domestic violence was identified through tenant mystery shopping and as a result, staff training has been planned.
- Tenant feedback has been used to improve the reception service. For example, in response to tenant complaints about delays in getting through to the repairs line a Callpoint officer was based in reception areas to take repairs requests. However, this resulted in queues to see the Callpoint officer, so further reorganisation of reception services is underway so that all reception staff will be able to log repair requests.

Key Weaknesses

- **Overall satisfaction with landlord services is low.**
- 2007/08 benchmarking data shows the lowest level of satisfaction with overall service provided by the landlord among the London ALMO peer group.
- The 2008 STATUS survey found that 60 per cent of tenants were satisfied with services overall which is in the bottom 25 per cent of London ALMOs.
- Satisfaction with opportunities to participate in decision making is in the bottom quartile nationally and the lower middle quartile among London ALMOs.
- **Not all customer service standards can be measured, but where they are, performance is weak.**
- Correspondence into area offices is logged and monitored by dedicated officers who send reminder emails to the relevant officer twice a week, but telephone calls to area offices and waiting time for customers visiting the office cannot currently be monitored against the service standards.
- Telephone answering, where it can be monitored, is not meeting the target of 15 seconds. Performance from 1 April to 31 October 2008 is 70 per cent against a target of 95 per cent and has declined from 80 per cent at the end of 2007/08.
- An unchallenging target of 10 per cent for abandoned calls has only been achieved since October 2008 when it fell to 9 per cent.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Calls made from the courtesy phone in reception to contact the ASB service found that the number is always busy.
- In mystery shopping calls to the North office the telephone was not answered.
- Between 1 April and to 30 September 2008, 81 per cent of letters were responded to within the ten days target.
- **Performance information for tenants is not well developed.**
- Performance information provided to all residents, for example in the newsletter, does not have a consistent format or content and does not provide any information about how performance compares to other social landlord services. Area panels have been consulted about the range and format of performance information they wanted to receive but this has not been extended to residents generally.
- **Complaints handling and management is poor.**
- Expressions of dissatisfaction and informal complaints are not centrally recorded and analysed. Informal complaints are only registered as formal complaints if they cannot be immediately resolved or if the resident requests it to be recorded as a complaint.
- Response timescales for stages 2 and 3 of the procedure are not challenging at 20 and 30 days respectively.
- Complaints performance is below target. Current performance is 68 per cent of complaints responded to within time against a target of 95 per cent.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Cases are being closed before they are fully investigated and resolved so performance data on complaints is unreliable.
- Repair and service requests are being logged as complaints.
- Not all complainants are sent an acknowledgement letter.
- Not all letters inform the complainant of the next stage and do not make it clear that the complaint has been closed.
- Compensation is not always offered to tenants in line with criteria - tenants are not for example always offered compensation for missed appointments.
- There is a policy commitment to feedback to residents on complaints performance via the newsletter, but this is not implemented in practice – it was only included in two out of five issues from July 2007- September 2008.
- Complaint records are not well maintained with closed cases still showing on the system as 'Assigned' and letters sent to tenants not filed under 'Letters Sent'.
- The complaints system does not allow for effective identification and analysis of complaints. For example, logged complaints can be identified by a service area such as tenancy services, but lacks a coding system to identify particular aspects of the service to pinpoint any trends or particular areas of concern.
- Learning from complaints is not systematic. A learning log has recently been introduced but this relates to any lessons from individual complaints. Complaints are not analysed to identify any trends and wider lessons that could be learnt.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Number of complaints is increasing: 2007/08 had 806 complaints in total. In the first four months of 2008/09, 419 had been received.
- Comparatively large numbers of complaints to the Ombudsman. From July 2007 - August 2008 there were 11 complaints to the Ombudsman.
- Limited reporting on complaints to the Board.
- Low satisfaction with complaints service at 35.7 per cent although this has improved. Customer views of complaints handling are regularly surveyed but response levels are low. For April - June 2008, half of 14 respondents were dissatisfied with way their complaint had been handled.

Diversity

Key Strengths

- **There is a clear corporate approach to diversity.**
- A comprehensive equality and diversity strategy for 2008-2012 with an action plan for 2008/09.
- Diversity board chaired by CEO.
- Board equality champion and resident member 'buddy' on the Board.
- Staff champions on youth and domestic violence issues.

- **An EIA programme is informing service development.**
- Existing data and knowledge have been used to inform the EIA programme, and 19 EIAs have been carried out across all services with the input of the relevant section heads and the service improvement team.
- The assessment of rent arrears procedures revealed that young 16 to 19 year BME tenants leaving care were particularly vulnerable to accruing arrears and difficulties in sustaining their tenancies, so income officers are being involved at sign up to ensure payment methods and debt advice are appropriate for younger tenants.
- Targeted EIAs have been conducted to maximise involvement, for example for African Caribbean and female service users.

Key Weaknesses

- **Not all offices are DDA compliant.**
- Despite an access audit having been carried out, the Honor Oak office is not DDA compliant. The main access has a large mat obstructing the entrance and one of the automatic doors was locked down. The interview rooms do not have adequate space for wheelchair use and the public toilet lacks facilities such as lever taps.

- **Profiling data is not comprehensive.**
- No diversity data is held on sexuality and limited data on faith.
- Diversity profiling data for leaseholders is low (10 per cent).

- **The vulnerability flagging system is not linked to diversity profiling data and is not reliable.**
- Diversity profiling and vulnerability data are held different systems (Open Road and Academy) that are not integrated, so staff may not have automatic information about all tenants needs. For example, profiling data may indicate that a tenant is deaf but this would not create a vulnerability flag on the Academy system. Likewise if a vulnerability flag is created in Academy this does not update the diversity profiling data.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Diversity profiling data has been used to inform some, although not all, service development.**
- Diversity profile data is held for 89 per cent of tenants (but not for all six diversity strands). It has been used for example, to recruit single mothers to become mystery shoppers, to identify particular groups of tenants with arrears as part of the EIA for income management, to inform particular tenants of events they may be interested in or to invite them to EIA work. The data has also been used to inform the internal decorations and aids and adaptations policies.
- **Use of translation and interpreting service.**
- Staff can access an interpreting and translation service including while on home visits using mobile phones.
- Some use is made of bi-lingual staff within the ALMO and in other support services.
- Sign language training is provided for a range of staff including caretakers.
- **Most information materials have translated straplines and information about other formats.**
- Documentation has translated straplines that explain what the document is about.
- Materials that are translated are stored on the intranet for wider use.

Key Weaknesses

- A facility for automatically alerting staff to vulnerable tenants is available but the failure to consistently record the information makes it unreliable. It is not consistently recorded as not all staff are trained in how to add the information. For example, details of a tenant with mental health issues where a referral had been made to another agency did not have a vulnerability flag on the system.
- **Corporate diversity training has not been delivered to staff or board members.**
- There is no corporate diversity training programme as the decision was taken to mainstream diversity in to all other training. However, this means that some staff are yet to have training and it does not ensure that all staff have a consistent or minimum understanding of what diversity is or why it is important to the organisations business.
- **Mainstreaming of diversity within other training has not been effective.**
- Diversity is not consistently and effectively mainstreamed into all training provision, as required under the equality and diversity strategy. Programmes for two courses - managing conflict and personal safety and breakaway (non violent intervention) - have nothing in the programmes about diversity or working with vulnerable people.

Key Strengths

- Language identification cards are used in the area offices.
- Alternative formats such as large print, audio and Braille offered.
- **There are effective support arrangements for vulnerable tenants including victims of DV and harassment.**
- A DV champion within the ASB team attends the DV forums that are held across the borough.
- Recently revised DV and vulnerable tenants policies and procedures are widely publicised.
- Referrals can be made to a sanctuary scheme for DV victims.
- Victims of racial harassment receive ongoing fortnightly support and perpetrators are interviewed by the service manager.
- Repairs for vulnerable tenants are prioritised, and additional security to harden properties for domestic violence victims is provided.
- Referral arrangements to floating support services are in place.
- Call centre staff have specific guidance in the procedures manual on the specific considerations for vulnerable tenants.

Key Weaknesses

- Few examples could be given on how diversity had been addressed in training or how services have been tailored or delivered flexibly to meet diverse needs of residents, but a few staff could cite awareness of different needs and how they have adjusted their service for example, avoiding prayer times for Muslim tenants when making appointments.
- **Diversity issues are not explicitly highlighted within board reports.**
- Board papers do not have a section where diversity issues can be systematically and explicitly addressed to ensure that diversity is integral to all decisions.
- **Partnership working with marginalised communities and community groups is under developed and some key aspects of diversity are not being addressed.**
- There is limited engagement with marginalised communities to develop an understanding of particular needs to inform service development. Officers were unclear about how marginalised groups within the community can best be reached, or indeed what such groups are.
- There is very little or no activity across the organisation in respect to issues such as sexuality, faith, or illiteracy. There is a lack of information or communication aids for people with low or no literacy such as service DVDs or pictorial guides, and there is a lack of available guidance on different religious or cultural norms and behaviours.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- **Reporting of harassment and domestic violence (DV) is not pro-actively encouraged.**
- There are no third party reporting arrangements for harassment and DV.
- Information about DV is not displayed in all offices or on block noticeboards.

Stock Investment and Asset Management

Key Strengths

Capital improvement, planned, cyclical and major works.

- **An appropriate asset management strategy that addresses decent homes issues is now in place.**
- The asset management strategy was approved in November 2008 (there was previously an interim strategy) and is based on current (2008) stock condition information which will be updated by surveys as DHS works, works to voids and other capital and planned works progress. The strategy takes into account an affordable warmth strategy and is linked to the business plan and aims to meet the Council's agreed revised DHS target of 2014. There are only detailed financial projections up to 2014 for maintenance programmes.
- **Up to date stock condition data is in place.**
- An appropriate survey of stock condition was carried out in 2008 that will allow 30 year financial planning.

Key Weaknesses

Capital improvement, planned, cyclical and major works.

- **The asset management strategy needs further development as it will be out of date in a relatively short period of time and the implementation plan requires a detailed programme of action.**
- **Limited resident involvement with assessment of tenders and monitoring of works.**
- **Limited information on asbestos for domestic properties**
- A programme of testing for asbestos in domestic properties is planned to increase the level of information held.
- **Electrical testing programme for domestic properties not in place.**

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Good SAP rating**
- The Council held SAP data for all Council housing which could not be disaggregated for Lewisham Homes. The ALMO has had the data on which to base the SAP rating, but this could not be calculated until an additional programme was added to the system in December 2008. This has now been completed and shows that Lewisham Homes properties have a SAP2005, rating of 67.0 which compares favourably with other ALMOs.
- **There is an adequate 8 year programme of cyclical works with a plan to include cyclical and repair works within the future DHS programme.**
- The external appearance of stock is generally of a reasonable standard with a wide use of PVC windows and doors that do not require painting.
- **Reasonable choice and consultation for residents on planned and cyclical works.**
- Tenants have been proactively consulted and given appropriate advance notice of works and consulted on a range of choices including colours, materials, components and layouts of kitchens and bathrooms and central heating equipment at public meetings, by post, individual visits to homes and meetings with tenant and leaseholder representative groups.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- Information on capital and decorations programmes is on the website.
- Residents have been involved in some contractor selection eg for large capital and gas contracts.
- **Asbestos management plan and register meet legal requirements.**
- There is a comprehensive and appropriate asbestos management policy and plan and an up-to-date asbestos register of offices and communal areas, and for domestic dwellings where the presence of asbestos is known or can be assumed.
- Information on asbestos is on the website and in tenant handbook.
- Many staff and building services operatives have had asbestos awareness training and contactors and repairs operatives have access to IT systems that identify the likelihood of asbestos and are warned on works orders.
- **Health and safety programmes are generally well maintained.**
- Appropriate health and safety policies and procedures and programmes are in place, including portable appliance testing (PAT) of electrical equipment, lift maintenance, fire alarm systems and testing for Legionella in communal water installations to flats and sheltered schemes. Although see comment about electrical testing for domestic properties.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Effective remote monitoring of lifts**
- There is an effective system for monitoring lifts, alarm and communal boiler systems.
- **Number of disrepair cases is reducing.**
- Good progress has been made in reducing the number of disrepair cases. The number of live cases has been reduced from 185 in 2006 to 49 to date using appropriate procedures.

Responsive repairs

- **Repairs and maintenance services are well advertised**
- There is good information on the repairs and maintenance service in the new tenant handbook and information on capital and decorations programmes on the website.
- **The ratio of emergency, urgent & routine repairs at 9:20:71 is good.**
- **Staff are supported in diagnosing repairs calls.**
- Many Callpoint staff are experienced in dealing with repairs calls and have access to a diagnostic facility and an experienced technical member of staff based in the Callpoint centre.

Key Weaknesses

Responsive repairs

- **Poor performance on completing repairs at the first visit and in time.**
- 83.8 per cent of repairs completed on the first visit in the year to date is below the mean for comparable organisations, and the target of 80 per cent is not challenging. However, the appointment system is not monitored correctly. Appointments not kept by tenants and appointments made to suit the tenant outside of normal target completion times are counted as failures. Performance for appointments made and kept is therefore likely to be better than stated.
- One third of repair calls are to chase a reported repair (July 2008)
- Benchmarking data for 2007/08 shows the worse performance among its London peers for completing repairs in time, but this has recently improved.
- **Tenant satisfaction with the repairs service is comparatively low.**
- 67 per cent of all complaints are about repairs and maintenance.
- Performance in respect to tenant satisfaction with the repairs service was 13th out of a group of 14 London ALMOs in 2007/08.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Satisfaction is measured via a postal survey. Performance for satisfaction with the last repair for the year to date in October 2008 is 73 per cent (based on a 16 per cent response rate) against a target of 85 per cent, but 87 per cent were satisfied with the quality of the repair.
- Tenants at focus groups were concerned about the number of visits to complete a repair, the quality of repairs, operatives not always cleaning up properly, and communal repairs such as security doors being left broken for unacceptable lengths of time eg a year or more. Satisfaction surveys found that for the year to date in October 2008, only 55 percent of repairs were completed in one visit and 34 per cent had to chase up the repair, but 87 per cent stated the worker did clean up afterwards.

Empty homes (Voids)

- **Void properties are not always being let in a reasonable condition in accordance with the lettable standard.**
- Although properties shown to inspectors were of a good standard, nearly all of the tenants spoken to were vociferous in their view that the standard of works was poor when they moved in. Problems included:
 - broken tiles;
 - loose floor tiles;
 - glue remnants from previous carpeting;
 - chipped baths and sinks;

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- stained baths and toilets;
 - broken kitchen unit doors;
 - holes in walls;
 - water marks on walls from previous leaks;
 - broken boilers; and
 - cockroach infestations.
-
- The average cost of void works is high. The average cost of void works per property per annum was £3,000 in October 2008 which is high compared to other London ALMOs.
 - **Void lettable standard not recently consulted upon with tenants.**
 - The minimum lettable standard leaflet for tenants is basic and has not been reviewed in consultation with residents. It does not give details of minimum storage provision in kitchens or about the decorations allowance scheme. It does have information about security standards and expected levels of cleaning. Gas and electrical checks are included together with installation of new door and window locks where appropriate.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

Gas servicing

- Performance on gas servicing is weak.
- Large number of properties have been without a CP12 for extended periods, and failure to comply with legal requirements puts tenant lives at risk and leaves officers exposed to the risk of prosecution.
- At 9 November 2008 only 86.6 per cent of properties had a current gas safety certificate. A high number of properties were without a current safety certificate for over six months and ten for over four years. Even excluding 2300 properties that the ALMO took responsibility for in October, performance is still poor at 89.2 per cent. It is not clear whether any properties are all electric and so not subject to gas checks.
- Expired gas certificates are not automatically flagged up to all staff that may have contact with the tenant so an opportunity is being missed to improve gas servicing performance.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

Aids and adaptations

- **Performance of Council service for ALMO residents not monitored until recently.**
- The ALMO is unaware of how well the aids and adaptations service provided by the Council meets the needs of its tenants. The Councils performance data on the service cannot be disaggregated for the ALMOs residents, but they do show that the service generally is performing well with the 91per cent of minor aids and adaptations under £500 fitted within a seven working days target and for 65 major aids and adaptations over £500 to November 2008, 60 were completed within an average of 15 weeks. Seventy-one per cent of assessments are completed within a 28 working day target period.
- No satisfaction surveys of Lewisham Homes' residents are carried out to monitor the service.
- Criteria for A&As excludes people with moderate to low needs.
- Satisfaction with OT assessments (90.9 per cent) and completed works (81.8 per cent) is comparatively low.
- Data on properties with A&As is not up to date.

Key Strengths

- **Recent performance on completions is satisfactory against challenging targets.**
- Repair completion targets are challenging - emergency four hours, urgent three working days and routine 15 working days.
- Performance on completion times has improved since July 2008 to satisfactory levels. In October 2008 94.4 per cent of emergency, 95.9 per cent of urgent and 97 per cent of routine repairs were carried out within target response times. For the same month 97.8 per cent of urgent repairs were carried out within government time scales and the average time for carrying out non-urgent repairs was 8.8 days against a target of ten days.
- Performance on communal repairs for the current year to October 2008 was 97.7 per cent within published targets.
- **There is a customer focussed appointments system.**
- Performance for making and keeping appointments (which has a verification system) at 95.25 per cent for the current year 2008/09 is high compared with similar organisations.
- There are four appointment slots per day including evenings, and Saturday morning appointments and flexibility eg for school runs.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Empty homes (voids)

- **Appropriate new lettable standard in place and re-let times are within target** (but see weaknesses)
- Performance on void re-let times for 2007/08 was 38 days and this has improved to 24.75 days for the current year up to 31 October 2008.
- Works to empty property takes an average of 11.2 days (as at October 2008) against a target of 15 days.
- **Decorations scheme gives new tenants choice.**
- New tenants are offered a decorations allowance to redecorate their property. Properties are fully decorated for people over 70 or with a disability/vulnerability or where the amount of work required is considered to be excessive. The allowance is between £40 and £120 per room, paid in vouchers redeemable at a number of local stores.
- The decorations allowance was reviewed in October 2008 and benchmarked against other ALMOs. Customers are advised at the property viewing how much decorations allowance they will be given.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Meeting legal requirements of providing energy performance certificates.**
- Energy performance certificates are being provided for newly let property by a specialist consultant at the cost of £75 per home. In house staff are being trained to prepare and issue certificates in the future to reduce the costs.

Gas servicing

- **Recently introduced access procedures are robust.**
- Robust and timely procedures for gaining access to properties have recently been introduced. A range of methods to gain access including the use of out of hours appointments, a ten month servicing cycle, warning flags on the IT system, gas limiters, taping of final notices over front door locks, advertisements in newsletters and handbooks, promotion through tenant and resident associations and at fun days and warrants to force entry where required.
- Where access is difficult and the tenant is considered vulnerable support workers, social services, housing officers and income staff are involved in gaining access.
- Appropriate gas servicing quality assurance checks are made.
- 800 carbon monoxide detectors fitted and further 800 issued.
- Gas servicing requirements are well advertised to tenants.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Aids and adaptations

- **New leaflet on service is informative and shows service standards.**
- There is an informative leaflet that sets out the service standards for the aids and adaptations service which is also published on the ALMOs website.

- **Proactive recycling of homes and adaptations for disabled tenants in conjunction with the Council.**
- A policy is in place to match, where possible, disabled applicants to a list of adapted or suitable homes managed by Lewisham Homes through the Council's choice based lettings service.
- There is a scheme for recycling major adaptations such as lifts where economic to do so.
- A £100,000 budget for minor A&As to be carried out without OT assessment has recently been introduced.

Key Weaknesses

Income management

Key Strengths

- **Range of ways to pay rent including direct debit and 24 hour on line payment facility.**
- Direct debit is encouraged and promoted at sign up.
- **Rent payment and arrears prevention is actively encouraged and promoted.**
- Introductory tenancies are used, rent accounts are set up promptly in two working days and new tenant visits are conducted.
- Ways to pay are explained on the back of quarterly rent statements. Statements are also sent with arrears letters and can be issued to tenants on request.
- **Direct access to HB systems and HB protocol in place.**
- There is a positive working relationship with housing benefit. Regular liaison meetings are held to monitor the SLA and income officers receive weekly reports of all cancelled or suspended HB claims. Income officers can verify documentation, have direct access to HB officers and can check the HB system for progress with assessments.
- An on line HB calculator assists staff to advise on HB entitlement.

Key Weaknesses

- **Revised rent arrears policy and procedures have had limited impact to date.**
- The rent arrears policy and procedures were revised in 2007 but lack clear timescales or are not sufficiently detailed or clear for all actions and all stages, and have not delivered against the targets set.
- **Arrears priorities are too broad and not understood by staff.**
- Arrears recovery priorities are not clearly defined or consistently understood. Priorities cited by staff and managers differed and the priorities set out in the recovery plan are very wide - it includes breaches of payment at all stages - where court order is held, where a case was adjourned, where a NOSP has been served and arrears are increasing and where a NOSP is required, and new tenants. As this will include almost all tenants other than tenants at the early stages of the procedures there is less focus on preventing lower levels arrears escalating to the stage of serving a NOSP. Organisational priorities are not consistently followed by all staff. For example, some staff prioritise their caseload by arrears bands rather than the action categories as set out in the arrears recovery action plan.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Legal action is more efficient through PCOL and outsourced legal services.**
- Court dates are secured more quickly and several cases can be heard on the same date, which reduces the amount of time to attend court hearings.
- **Direct debt line pilot and debt self-help pack developed for tenants and leaseholders**
- Staff can refer tenants in arrears to a debt advice service that contacts the tenant directly
- A useful self-help debt pack provides information on what to do if residents have debt and are finding it difficult to pay rent or service charges. It contains some standard letters to send to debtors to negotiate repayments as well as a personal budget planner. However, it has no information about translations or other formats so will be of limited assistance to people with language or other needs.
- **Partnership working with local credit unions to support residents.**
- Credit unions have been promoted to residents via leaflets, the newsletter, the website and the open day and involvement conference, and staff had briefings on credit unions in October 2008.

Key Weaknesses

- **Rent collection and arrears management is weak with high levels of rent arrears.**
- Rent arrears increased in 2007/08 by £660,662 to a total of £3,376,252 (£589,167 above target).
- Current rent arrears at £3,042,574 (end of July 2008) are high.
- The level of rent arrears as a percentage of the rent due is in the bottom quartile nationally and compared with the London ALMO peer group.
- Rent collection is bottom quartile among ALMOs: declined from 94.6 per cent in 2006/07 to 93.5 per cent in 2007 /08. It is now 94.24 per cent against target of 96 per cent and has been declining since June 2008.
- Number of rent accounts more than seven weeks in arrears is above the eight per cent target. The number of cases rose from 12 per cent in 2006/07 to 13.7 per cent in 2007/08, but has declined to 11.8 per cent (at the end of September 2008)
- **The arrears management system does not allow all aspects of the procedures to be monitored.**
- The system cannot monitor response target timescales and does not automatically alert officers to missed payments eg if arrears direct payments cease for a case awaiting a court hearing.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Rent file checks revealed lack of compliance with procedures for recovery action and cases where officers had been prompted for the next stage but no action, or late action, has been taken.
- **Rent advice is not of a high standard.**
- Reviews of case records showed that income officers are not checking tenants' income sources and levels, identifying other debts, or providing advice or referrals about welfare rights, debt counselling services or information about credit unions. Some indicate arrangements are made but there are no diary notes to indicate that the tenants has been contacted or interviewed.
- Tenants stated that they receive arrears letters but don't understand why their account is in arrears when for example they pay by DD, and staff are unable to explain it clearly to them.
- **Rent statements are not clearly presented.**
- Rent statements are not clear or user friendly. Service charges are referred to as 'non rebateable charges' and are shown in the 'rent due' column, and rent is referred to as 'all other charges'. Housing benefit payments are not clearly identified and rent charges are only shown net of housing benefit, so tenants will not know the full rent charge.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- **Independent debt advice is limited.**
- A direct debt line is currently being piloted where tenants are referred to the service which then makes contact with the tenant, but there are no referral or other arrangements such as advice surgeries with other agencies such as the CAB, Lewisham Reach and Age Concern.
- The direct debt line pilot was not effectively publicised – it was not promoted in the newsletter when it was launched.

- **Service charges for tenants have not been annually reviewed.**
- Tenants and leaseholders in the same block have been paying different amounts for common services such as caretaking.

- **FTA tenancy arrears are not effectively managed and former tenancy arrears are increasing.**
- There is a backlog of FTA cases which are yet to be passed to the tracing agencies. 610 cases have been referred to date but a further 1140 cases over £100 are yet to be processed.
- The outsourcing of tracing and recovery is too recent to have had any significant impact.
- There are no targets for staff processing FTAs, and undertaking the initial investigation or for passing them to the external agencies.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Monitoring of FTAs is undertaken on a stand alone spreadsheet which requires manual monitoring and limits performance reporting.
- There is a lack of cross team working between income management, tenancy officers and debt recovery staff to ensure that FTAs are avoided or minimised in the first instance.
- Limited debt advice or referrals for former tenants who want to make repayment arrangements.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Resident involvement

Key Strengths

- **Dedicated community involvement team that has increased involvement options.**
- There is a dedicated community involvement team that has been effective in getting more people involved, supports new TRAs to become registered and accredited and arranges training for other staff and customers.
- **Wide range of ways to become involved.**
- There is a range of informal and formal opportunities for residents to become involved in the work of the organisation. Formal structures include board membership board (seven of 15 Board members are tenants including the Chair); TRAs and area panels. Residents are also involved in mystery shopping, and there is a 'sounding board' database of 947 residents who are interested in less formal opportunities such as surveys, focus groups, on line discussions and conferences, and 350 have participated.

Key Weaknesses

- **Diversity is not effectively monitored and addressed in participation structures.**
- Diversity of area panels and TRAs is not monitored and there are no requirements for them to work towards becoming representative or demonstrating a commitment to equality and diversity.
- Diversity data is only held on approximately 20 per cent of residents on the sounding board database as this does not link in to the tenancy profiling data.
- Diversity targets in the Residents Charter are not SMART.
- There is limited engagement with community based organisations to encourage minority or marginalised groups to become involved.

Key Strengths

- **Training opportunities and support are available (although take up is low).**
- Resources are available to support resident involvement, and 23 different courses have been offered and 134 places taken up this year. In addition, training has been used to facilitate people into employment. Residents are also being enabled to become 'recognisers' when working with other residents to help get them in to training opportunities.
- TRAs can receive grants from Lewisham Tenants Fund (a fund raised via a 13 pence per week levy on tenants rents).
- £120,000 external funding has been secured to support community activities and involvement
- **Area panels are beginning to influence decision making.**
- In discussions at area panels and TRAs, resident expressed concerns about the lack of facilities or security on their estates, and as a result £500,000 was allocated to a resident led programme of improvements. Residents groups could bid for funding and 24 bids were approved by a residents' panel Improvements include increase security, community space and play areas, planting and paving.

Key Weaknesses

- **Resident involvement in service reviews has been limited, and the emphasis to date has been on informing rather than consulting and engaging in decision making.**
- A review of the complaints procedure in June 2008 did not involve residents.
- Residents were not consulted on office opening hours during the consultation on office rationalisation.
- There was no consultation with tenants on the review of income management policy and procedures, but arrears performance is discussed at the area panels and residents are asked to comment and give their views.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **EIAs have been used to develop the resident involvement service.**
- A number of methods of communication have been used to encourage involvement, including social networking web sites aimed at younger people.
- There has been outreach work from the community involvement team with the Chinese and Somali communities.
- Initiatives such as carer's allowances and transport assistance have been used to maximize involvement of vulnerable people.

Key Weaknesses

Tenancy and estates management

Key Strengths

- **Tenancy audit programme in place.**
- A programme of 150 audits per month is on target, with approximately 700 undertaken to date. The checks have identified abandoned properties and identified needs resulting in referrals to social services. The audits are also used to collect diversity profiling data.
- **Percentage of rent lost through voids is just above target at 1.72 per cent and has decreased since 2007/08.**
- **£500,000 resident led estate improvement programme.**
- **Improved caretaking services in response to customer concerns.**
- Satisfaction with the caretaking services has increased.
- Caretakers have received a range of relevant training.
- Logo branded uniforms has made the teams more noticeable.
- The use of signs and better information informs residents of actions taken and when work should be carried out.

Key Weaknesses

- **Settling in visits are not consistently being conducted within three to six weeks, and are not effectively planned and managed.**
- Officers do not try to make contact by telephone to arrange the appointment. One tenant visited had had two previous appointments made that were not kept by officers. Another had already had a settling in visit but this had not been recorded.
- **Caretakers are not being involved in estate inspections.**
- **A few estates were of a lower standard.**
- In a few areas shrubberies are overgrown, bin stores are not secured, some doors have broken locks or glass, some stairwells have several bicycles, and untaxed vehicles are present on the estates.
- **Number of enforcement action against breaches of tenancy is limited.**
- Enforcement action against breaches of tenancy is limited. Although actions such as ASBOs, injunctions and mediation are being used this has been limited with most cases being responded to with a warning letter.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Estates are generally well kept and graffiti free.**
- Estates and communal areas are generally well maintained. There is very little graffiti or litter and grass and shrubberies are well maintained. Corridors, lifts and stairwells are clean although in need of refurbishment.
- **Quarterly programme of estate inspections are advertised via the website.**
- A programme of estate inspections allow for a more pro-active approach to repairs and environmental issues. Work identified from inspections is emailed to the relevant section and are coded to indicate the response deadline. In some instances before and after photos are posted on the web for tenants to see what action has been taken.
- An estates quality team established to improve caretaking performance management. Quality inspectors carry out estates quality checks - between June and October 2008 approximately 2,100 checks have been carried out.
- **Effective partnership working on ASB is in place.**
- There are good links between the ASB team and other agencies across the borough, including the police and the safer neighbourhoods team. Joint initiatives such as dealing with a serious drug dealing problem on the Evelyn estate have had an impact. Officers attend meetings of, for example, the Youth Intervention Support Panel and the DV Forum and the ALMO is seen as a key partner in the borough.

Key Weaknesses

- **There is no out of hours ASB service (apart from for hate crimes)**
- Residents can only report an incident of ASB to a Council run service, which records the information and passes it to the ALMO for investigation - there is no out of hours response service.
- **Satisfaction with ASB services is low**
- Almost half of respondents in the 2008 STATUS survey were dissatisfied with the support that is provided, being kept informed, the speed at which their problem was dealt with and the final outcome. Surveys conducted between April and September show a higher rate of 85 per cent but the response level was low (only 34 responded).
- **Low satisfaction levels for estate management (June – August 2008).**
- Abandoned vehicles 46 per cent.
- Communal grass cutting 46 per cent.
- Graffiti removal 50 per cent.
- Litter picking 62 per cent.
- Bulk refuse removal 67 per cent.
- Up keep of green areas 57.73 per cent.
- Caretaking and cleaning: internal 64.15 per cent and externals 69.37 per cent (August 2008).

Key Strengths

- **Clear, comprehensive and widely advertised ASB policy with a range of enforcement actions.**
- A range of enforcement actions are used to deal with ASB., including ASBOs, ABCs, closure orders and injunctions and some actions have been publicised. Regular monitoring of enforcement activity is undertaken with the manager reviewing cases and the caseload with staff, both individually and at team meetings. Caretakers are also involved in monitoring and have the results of their actions fed back to them.
- **Work with perpetrators and victims is in place.**
- Restorative justice techniques are used for working with the perpetrators and victims of ASB, and mediation is used to respond to neighbour disputes. There is an SLA with a mediation service and payment is made on a case by case basis.
- Out of hours emergency support team for advice to victims of race or hate crime.
- **ASB cases files are generally well maintained with appropriate actions being taken.**
- File checks revealed that there is a consistent approach and a good standard of note taking showing the actions taken in response to the initial complaint and the agencies involved in the case. Letters to tenants clearly explain the outcome of the case and the reasons for the intention to close a case.

Key Weaknesses

- **Estate inspections are not effectively promoted.**
- Most residents stated they were unaware of them and had not seen them advertised. A few had seen posters but for the first time in the past week. A couple of tenants had contacted the service to find out when their estate was to be inspected but couldn't be given any specific information.
- Pre-site visits to estates found no information about cleaning schedules and estate inspections on block notice boards.
- **Estate security is a concern for tenants.**
- Estate security was the most common area of concern for tenants spoken to. Tenants expressed concern about CCTV not working or not being used to take action against perpetrators, security doors being left broken for long periods despite being reported (in some case up to a year), and poor lighting with long distances from parking areas to flats.
- **Ongoing problems with cockroach infestations.**
- Several new tenants stated they were let property with known infestations.
- Estate visits found evidence of tenants not maintaining cleanliness in tenancies and gardens.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **A range of diversionary activities have been developed.**
- A number of events have been organised to bring communities together and provide diversionary activities for young people. For example, annual open days, a local talent contest, inter-estate football, 16 to 19 years football versus police and fire service that attracted £1500 funding from the ward assembly.
- A 'Brighter Futures' project worked with ten young people between the ages of 10 to 14 over every Saturday for ten weeks to design and refurbish a ball court working with caretakers and professional graffiti artists. Other activities have included gardening work, painting and decorating.

Key Weaknesses

Allocations and lettings

Key Strengths

- **Accompanied viewings take place.**
- Lettings have been incorporated into the work of the voids team and there are weekly meetings with the repairs service and others involved in the re-let process to address any problems.
- **Comprehensive welcome pack for new tenants.**

Key Weaknesses

- **The sign up process is not comprehensive.**
- Staff have a check list to follow at sign up to ensure that all issues are covered but this is not consistently used. At a sign up observed by inspectors, the key parts of the tenancy agreement were explained and ASB conditions were highlighted. Rent payment methods were explained and HB entitlement checked. However, gas servicing was not always explained, nor how to turn off utility services in an emergency.
- The lettable standard and outstanding repairs are not discussed with tenants at the sign up. Even though the lettable standard is included in the sign up pack for tenants to sign to confirm that the property meets the standard and will be handed back in the same condition, this is not always happening in practice.
- **There is poor practice in the letting of property. From focus groups, complaints letters and telephone calls to new tenants, consistent views about poor practice were expressed.**
- Some were asked to sign a tenancy agreement before works are completed and two new tenants said they were required to sign the tenancy agreement before they had viewed the property.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- Inadequate time between viewing the property and having to move in – many said they viewed the property on the Friday and had to sign the tenancy agreement immediately and move in on the Monday.
- Tenants are being advised that if they do not accept the property they will not be offered another without a clear explanation about the lettable standard and condition of property.
- Tenants not being properly advised about the condition of the property and what recourse they have if the property is not of a reasonable condition. One new tenant said she was only informed that the building was listed as an infested building after she found an infestation of cockroaches on moving in).

Leaseholder and right to buy services

Key Strengths

- **Leasehold services are generally well managed.**
- There are clear policies and procedures in place that have been reviewed with staff that are and available on the intranet. Staged payments are available for general service charge bills, and mandatory and discretionary loans are available for major service charge bills. Referrals are made to the CAB or debt line for leaseholders who have difficulty in making the payments.
- **Amount and quality of information provided to leaseholders is meeting their needs.**
- Leaseholders receive good information about the service charges and letters and bills are clear, and finance staff are very helpful and knowledgeable.
- A leaseholder's guide, produced in consultation with leaseholders at focus groups, is issued to new leaseholders and is available on the website.
- There is a good quality document on major works service charges specifically designed to answer leaseholders' likely questions and there are a range of good quality leaflets on leasehold issues available at local office receptions.
- There is a leaseholder newsletter that provides advice and details of forthcoming events which is issued twice yearly and has been consulted on with leaseholders, and a leaseholder section on the website.

Key Weaknesses

- **Service charge arrears are high and there are no incentives for prompt payment.**
- Service charge arrears are in excess of £4.7m at week 16 of 2008/09
- Although consultation has taken place recently with leaseholders on incentives the ALMO has yet to introduce them.
- **Lack of service standards or targets for the preparation and issuing of service charge estimates and invoices and annual service charge estimates were sent out late.**
- **Estimates issued to leaseholders for major works are not sufficiently detailed.**
- The description of work on invoices sometimes states 'decent homes works' and gives no detail of works likely to be carried out, so leaseholders are unable to query if works are needed or not.
- **Lack of direct debit payment facility for leaseholders.**
- **Diversity profiling of leaseholders is limited at 10 per cent**

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Some outcomes from a new Leaseholder Special Interest Group and focus groups.**
- The groups have considered property insurance, local surgeries, management expenses and incentives for paying early and as a result extra information on insurance has been included in newsletters and local surgeries are to be held from April 2009.
- Extended telephone service for leaseholders from 8am-7pm in the two weeks after the issue of invoices was introduced as a result of feedback at focus groups.
- Leaseholders attend TRA meetings and there are two leaseholders on the Board. Leaseholders are also invited to tenant and leaseholder conferences where there are some leaseholder specific workshops.
- **Consultation for leaseholders on the major works programmes is satisfactory.**
- Statutory consultation around major work is being undertaken within relevant timescales. Leaseholders have been invited to take part in major works procurement and delivery groups although there are no outcomes at present.

Key Weaknesses

- **A lack of information on leaseholder satisfaction.**
- The ALMO is in the process of carrying out a survey that will cover three thousand of its leaseholders. The only information available is from a 2006 Council survey which found that only 34 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied with overall Council leasehold management. A leaseholder focus group rated satisfaction at 4.1 out of ten.
- **Management fees have only recently been reviewed.**
- Management charges had not been reviewed for several years or benchmarked against other comparable organisations. A review of the charges and consultation with leaseholders has taken place during 2008/09, but the recommendations are yet to be approved by the Council's Mayor and Cabinet with revised charges being implemented in 2009/10.
- **Service charges for leaseholders had previously been incorrectly calculated or inaccurately identified.**
- Leaseholders had not been charged for all the services from which they derive benefit and future bills will rise as a consequence.

Key Strengths

- **Satisfactory performance for collection of annual service charges.**
- The overall service charge collection rate for 2007/08 was 101 per cent. Performance in the current year to 30 September 2008 was on target to meet the annual target of 105 per cent. Major works service charge collection was at 23 per cent as a percentage of total charges outstanding including arrears for current year to 30 September 2008 against the annual target of 45 per cent.
- **Former leaseholder debt is being effectively addressed.**
- Staff are reviewing 1279 former leaseholder arrears files, some over ten years old, and have written to 860 residents requesting payment. 419 arrears cases, mainly involving major works, are being examined by a legal expert before progressing. Debts under £10 have been written off and others are under consideration.
- **Recent performance on RTB2 and S125 Notices is now satisfactory.**
- In August and September 2008 100 per cent of RTB2 and S125 notices were issued within the statutory timescales. Performance has previously been weaker, with the year to date (to 30/09/08) figures at 84 per cent of RTB2 notices issued within 4 weeks, 80 per cent of S125 forms for freehold properties within 8 weeks and 81 per cent of S125 forms for leasehold properties served within 12 weeks .

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **There is satisfactory advice and information available for homebuyers**
- The Right to Buy application process now includes early telephone contact and interviews for applicants to give advice about the maximum discount and eligibility for the scheme. Staff members are available to support applicants and initial advice is available about sources of finance. Information is also on the website. Anyone likely to be suspended from the RTB process would be written to or spoken to over the phone. Applicants that are unlikely to qualify for the scheme are referred to the Council for advice on other forms of home ownership schemes.

Key Weaknesses

Value for money

Key Strengths

- **There is a strong focus on VFM and annual efficiency targets are being exceeded.**
- Efficiency reviews saved £1.3m in 2008/9 including £736,523 from SLA reviews with the Council over the two years 2007/09.
- Savings have been re-invested in caretaking equipment, health and safety and towards responsive repairs in 2008/09.
- Efficiency savings for the next three years have been defined in the three year financial plan and are to be generated from the service SLA review process.
- **Restructuring, outsourcing and new practices are achieving efficiency savings.**
- Rationalisation of housing offices from eight to four reduced the costs of premises management.
- SLAs with two FTA tracing agencies are on a 'no-success- no fee' basis which provides good value for money.
- Restructuring of legal services saved £227k. An in-house team was replaced by an external panel of legal practitioners which ensures competitive practise and added value such as free surgeries and legal updates. Panel membership was tendered on price, scope, quality and customer focus.

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- **Some elements of value for money are not yet embedded across the organisation.**
- VFM service reviews and service specific efficiency targets are still to be developed.
- A '10 per cent SMARTER' initiative has raised awareness of the value for money but has not resulted in measurable outcomes.
- Not all managers have specific efficiency targets.
- **Lack of VFM and procurement strategies**
- VFM and procurement strategies have only just been approved (while inspectors were on site) and are yet to deliver outcomes.
- The VFM action plan is not outcome focused.
- **High management and service costs**
- Benchmarking data shows comparatively high costs per property for central and overhead costs including IT costs and financial management costs, and key service areas such as arrears, void property management and housing management. However, office accommodation costs are comparatively low.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

- Projected 25 per cent savings from outsourced gas servicing contract.
- Possession claims on line (PCOL) is reducing costs for both the ALMO and tenants in respect court costs, and court dates are being secured more quickly and efficiently with a number of cases being heard on the same date.
- £5,000 per quarter has been saved on the distribution of the Home magazine.
- Service efficiencies such as co-ordinating translated materials to get the maximum amount for a flat fee, and market testing of printing company services.
- **Joint procurement has delivered some savings.**
- A joint procurement exercise with four other London ALMOs achieved a 20 per cent discount on the procurement of the 2008 leaseholder satisfaction survey.
- Beginning to use procurement consortia and modern procurement methods to reduce maintenance costs. The two new gas serving contracts were procured using framework agreements of the LAPN procurement club which has saved on procurement administration costs. Replacement boilers have been standardised to three boiler types to reduce future replacement costs.
- **£120k of external funding has been accessed for resident involvement since January 2008.**
- The average cost of void works is high. The average cost of void works per property per annum was £3,000 in October 2008 which is high compared to other London ALMOs.
- **VFM in the Repairs Service can not be effectively demonstrated.**
- The proportion of planned to responsive repairs at 44:56 was low in 2007/08
- The ALMO has been unable to compare its schedule of rates with other providers to know how it costs compare, and full cost and benchmarking data is not yet in place.
- Organisation of stores materials is not efficient. The Repairs Services stores have limited opening times which do not match the working hours of operatives and materials are not always available; the process is seen by staff as overly bureaucratic and there has been no use of store cards.
- Work schedules for Repairs Service operatives are not efficiently organised. Works are not batched and not shared equally between operatives. Examples of one operative having 11 jobs and another having three on the same day, and two plumbers at the same site doing two different repairs.
- Repairs Services operatives are not incentivised to improve the quality of their work. Although the quality of repair works is post inspected for quality of works there are no incentives in place for operatives to maintain or improve the quality of repairs works.

Key Strengths

- **Low average cost of a repair per property per annum**
- In the current year this is about £350 which is low compared with other similar organisations.

Key Weaknesses

- **Not all SLAs and protocols have been fully reviewed.**
- Services are provided by the council under an SLA or protocol but they have not all been fully reviewed. Some SLAs such as health and safety have been discontinued as they did not represent VFM and savings have been made on others such as property and facilities. ICT support services and financial services are yet to be reviewed. Grounds maintenance, road sweeping and graffiti services are managed via protocols.
- **Effective use of benchmarking is limited.**
- Managers have access to benchmarking information but it has not been used to identify best performers and practice to inform service developments and identify potential efficiency savings.
- Leasehold services do not know how management and service costs compare with other similar organisations although benchmarking is now being undertaken through the south east ALMO benchmarking group.
- **The use of procurement consortia is limited.**
- LAPN has been used the service to procure gas servicing contracts, but there has been no recourse to other procurement clubs and little focus on exploring joint procurement or alternative ways of delivering services to share services and costs particularly around back office functions.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

JUDGEMENT 2 – What are the prospects for improvement?

What is the track record in delivering improvement?

Key Strengths

- **Improved access to services by:**
 - improving the range and quality of information provided for tenants and leaseholders about services;
 - refurbishing offices to meet customer needs;
 - centralising all repair requests and one number for all repairs enquiries;
 - providing a new welcome pack, tenants handbook and residents newsletter; and
 - launching an internet site.
- **Improvements in caretaking standards.**
- **Responsive repair completion times have significantly improved and is recognised by tenants** (but this has only been recent, and not yet sustained over a significant period of time).
- **Void re-let times have improved** (but poor quality).
- **Opportunities for resident involvement have increased.**
- **Reduced number of disrepair cases.**

Key Weaknesses

- **Most initiatives and improvements have been too recent to demonstrate a track record of improvement.**
- **Not all recommendations made in the 2006 Audit Commission inspection report have been fully implemented, or have only recently been implemented.**
- **VFM regimes have not been fully embedded.**
- **Improvements in arrears performance has not been sustained and performance is declining.**
- **Complaints handling has not improved and is not robust.**
- **Gas servicing performance is poor and improvements have only been recently achieved.**
- **Customer care training has not been delivered.**

How well does the service manage performance?

Key Strengths

- **Clear annual business planning process with actions monitored.**
- **Clear vision and objectives in the business plan.**
- A three year business plan and financial plan with a clear vision and objectives that contribute to the priorities of the Council and the LSPs has been adopted.
- **Well developed plans are in place to address many current weaknesses.**
- A comprehensive service review methodology has been developed which incorporates VFM and equalities and will focus on customers, although the resident involvement element is still to be developed. A three year programme of VFM service reviews is in place and some initial reviews have been undertaken.
- VFM and procurement strategies were approved in November 2008 which set out a more systematic approach to VFM and procurement and a clear approach to reducing management costs and re-directing efficiency savings into priority areas such as repairs and maintenance.

Key Weaknesses

- **Strategy action plans are not fully SMART or detailed.**
- Although the objectives of the business plan are clear and a performance culture is being embedded, it is too recent to have delivered clear outcomes for residents.
- The business plan action plan is not a SMART outcome focused plan, and the lack of separate service plans results in a very operational focussed business plan.
- The action plan for the asset management strategy 2008 - 2014 is not fully SMART. The action plan is not sufficiently detailed in some areas and lacks milestones and measurable outcomes. For example there's no mention of when consultation with residents will be completed or when contracts need to be in place, and there are no projected deadlines for when actions need to be completed making an assumption of funding.
- The equality and diversity strategy lacks a fully developed, outcome focused, SMART action plan and there is a lack of data and information about faith and sexuality despite a policy commitment to all diversity strands.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- A VFM group has been set up, although this is very recent and to date has not involved residents. The group will oversee the service reviews which are scheduled to start in 2009/10, to ensure consistency, and training for the group in VFM service reviews is scheduled for January 2009.
- A project brief has been developed for developing a customer care strategy which has identified the key issues to be addressed and a project plan for implementation and publication of the strategy in mid 2009.
- The communications strategy refers to plans to improve communications with customers with low literacy skills.
- Direct debit for leaseholders is planned and is part of the Academy review for service charges which is due to report in December 2008.
- **Effective staff performance management framework.**
- There is a strong focus on managing staff performance. Most, but not all staff have regular one-to-ones in addition to an annual performance appraisal and a 6 month review, at which targets are set and reviewed and learning and development needs are identified. Quality checks are undertaken of one to ones and appraisals and they are monitored to ensure that they are conducted. All line managers are required to undertake training on how to conduct appraisals, and in 2007/08, 91 per cent of staff had an appraisal.

Key Weaknesses

- **Service reviews or audits have not been undertaken for all areas or have been ineffective.**
- Review of income management services has had limited impact on arrears performance. A rent scrutiny panel was established to focus on performance but this was discontinued despite some useful improvements resulting from it, and performance subsequently started to decline.
- Service charges for tenants have not been annually reviewed so tenants and leaseholders in the same block have been paying different amounts for common services such as caretaking.
- **Performance information is not reliable for all service areas.**
- Two service areas have had performance audits but other areas such as ASB, tenancy and estates management are still to be reviewed and differing performance data has been provided. The audits that have been carried out have identified anomalies in different systems and reporting fields so it is difficult to identify reliable performance trends.
- Management performance reports on arrears are not comprehensive. Performance reports on arrears indicate how many actions each officer has undertaken but does not indicate whether they have been completed within time. The arrears system identifies non payment or defaults by tenants but does not indicate if an action or timescale has been missed.

Key Strengths

- Business plan objectives cascade to individual work plans. The 2008 staff survey found that more than two thirds of staff understand how their job links to achieving strategic goals and 73 per cent have business plan tasks within their work plans.
- Regular spot checks and quality audits are helping to improve consistency in the quality of service delivered. Quality checks are conducted on correspondence, complaints responses, arrears case, occupancy checks and tenant records, and directors sign off complaints to ensure the quality of the response. The findings of the quality checks are discussed at the housing management team and issues with any individual officers are raised at team one-to-ones.
- **Starting to embed performance management into the ethos and culture of the organisation.**
- There is a focus on performance at all levels with all staff having clear targets and regular performance reviews. Performance is being monitored in a range of ways such as quality audits, spot checks, work inspections, mystery shopping, satisfaction surveying and routine recording and reporting in all service areas.
- Cultural change - to focus on improving performance - is being pro-actively and regularly promoted to staff across the organisation through initiatives such as '10 per cent smarter', the management charter and staff conferences.

Key Weaknesses

- **Quality audit checks are not effectively identifying poor practice or under performance.**
- Audit checks are undertaken to help ensure that procedures are being complied with. For example complaints cases are sampled to check whether timescales are being met for responding and whether responses are clear. However, inspectors checks of complaints files showed that cases were being recorded as closed before they were fully investigated, which will result in performance data on response times being unreliable.
- **Limited learning from complaints.**
- Learning from complaints is not embedded.
- **No systematic use of benchmarking and good practice information to learn from high performers.**
- Benchmarking data is used to indicate how performance compares with London ALMOs, but it has not been used to identify higher performers and to learn from their practice.
- Contact with other organisations has been largely focused on London. Some managers have visited other London ALMOs but this has been on an ad hoc basis as a result of contacts made at the individual level.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- **Staff and resident engagement in reviewing and developing services is limited.**
- Staff engagement in reviewing and developing services is limited. Staff are not routinely consulted about reviews or potential changes that will impact on their area of service, for example, customer service staff were not consulted about the refurbishment of the area offices and the design and layout of the reception areas. The staff survey also found that staff do not feel effectively engaged in decisions that affect their area of work, only 46 per cent felt involved in deciding on the changes introduced to their work area, team or directorate. An employees forum and away days provide opportunities to discuss business planning, but there are no mechanisms for staff to be fully engaged such as service review project groups.
- Residents have not been engaged in all service reviews and how they are to be involved is to be fully developed in the service review methodology.
- **Not all staff have been appraised or have measurable targets.**
- Not all staff have been appraised annually or have regular one to ones. Some staff targets are not SMART for example some staff stated the target was to make a "significant improvement".

Key Strengths

Key Weaknesses

- **Cross team communication is not fully effective.**
- Some service areas such as tenancy management and FTA /debt recovery and income management, and voids and gas servicing are not closely co-ordinated. Voids staff have difficulty in finding out if gas re-commissioning had been ordered for the contractor to attend.
- From the recent staff survey only 38 per cent of staff thought that the different directorates communicate effectively with each other.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- The mission and values of the organisation are widely displayed around the offices and on the intranet, and staff are encouraged to take ownership of and accountability for their own patch and have an awareness of the need to achieve efficiencies and the wider implications of poor performance for tenants and the achievement of decent homes in particular.
- Performance information is effectively shared with staff. Managers are using performance information with teams and individual staff to drive improvements. Performance information is displayed and reward incentives are used such as £10 vouchers and a 'Gold Member' award for staff 'going the extra mile' is promoted on the intranet. Team performance is discussed at team meetings and the best performing staff share their practice with colleagues.
- Well developed procedures and support are in place for managing absence.
- **Clear PI reporting and a clear approach to developing and improving performance data.**
- Performance monitoring and reporting is tailored to the needs of the board, managers and the resident area panels. Performance reports to the board clearly identify variations against targets and outline reasons for the performance and how performance compares to other service providers.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- Performance information needs are being reviewed and a report to the board in January 2009 will seek approval for a revised dashboard to highlight areas of risk; SMT needs are being reviewed and area panels have been consulted about what information they want and in what format. However, more needs to be shared with residents in a useful and understandable format that shows performance compared to other landlords.
- A dedicated performance team was established from March 2008 that has reviewed what is being measured, and has developed definitions for all performance indicators for which data is being recorded. New procedures have been developed for recording information and to establish an audit trail for each indicator. Performance audits have been undertaken on the complaints and repairs services to date to improve the reliability of data, although inaccuracies in data input still creates difficulties in respect to reliability.
- **Effective internal communications.**
- Internal communications are well developed and acknowledged by many staff. There is an informative and easy to use intranet with regular briefings and useful links to other sites, as well as a staff newsletter. Many staff cite communications as a key improvement since the ALMO was established.
- Staff are kept informed about and can have an input to organisational developments through team meetings away days and conferences, and through suggestion boxes and challenge the CEO sessions.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- Regular Wednesday morning briefing sessions provide staff with a useful learning opportunity and cover a range of relative topics such as DV, mental health awareness, and updates on the progress of the organisation.
- **Some learning from other organisations in London and nationally.**
- Visits have been made to other ALMOs and RSLs to learn about approaches to arrears management, which resulted in the direct debt line pilot. Staff have visited a number of other London ALMOs to view good practice in developing and procuring its DHS works, and there is a peer support arrangement with a 3 star London ALMO.
- Benchmarking and learning from others is also from via the National Federation of ALMOs, Housemark and the HQN.
- Resources are re-allocated and efficiency savings re-invested to reflect organisational priorities
- Resources are re-allocated and efficiency savings re-invested to reflect organisational priorities. For example, investment has been made in to caretaking services which was a priority identified by residents, resources have been moved in to staff training in response to audit findings relating to health and safety issues, and resources fro supporting resident involvement activities such as conferences and for communications have been increased.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- Plans for re-structuring are aimed at improving service efficiency. For example, a specialist operatives to carry out disrepair works with external solicitors carrying out legal services. The voids team has been brought under single management and meets weekly with voids partners to discuss progress of voids against target, which has improved.
- **Positive working relationships with the Council.**
- There is a positive working relationship between the ALMO and the Council. The Council recognises the ALMO as a partner with a clear sense of purpose and separate identity. Regular meetings to monitor the management agreement and discuss performance and resources are held. The Council had been involved in the ALMO rent scrutiny panel, and business plan targets are agreed between the two parties, but the ALMO has an appropriate level of independence over how it will deliver the business plan.
- **Clear leadership from the CEO and SMT.**
- Management actions such as the CEO visiting estates with staff, including caretakers, to understand the issues are and how they may be remedied are valued by staff.
- Directors provide clear leadership and direction and there is clarity in the organisation about what the goals of the organisation are and how to promote this. Management is generally well regarded, with managers seen as approachable and accessible. 'Challenge the CEO' sessions are held and have been used by staff.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **The board is robust in raising issues and making difficult decisions.**
- Board meetings are well chaired and board papers are well presented and easy to follow. Board members have a mix of skills and experience and demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the issues presented to them and a willingness to challenge, although not all members were actively engaged in the discussions.
- The board has taken difficult decisions, For example, the Board took the decision to outsource gas servicing when it was still part to the Council's building services, and have had robust discussions with the Council about the HRA strategy and resourcing of the ALMO.
- There is a positive relationship between the Board and senior management. The Chair and other board members meet regularly with the directors to discuss performance and other issues and the board has the skills to challenge recommendations and ask for further information before taking decisions if they are not satisfied.

Key Weaknesses

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

Key Strengths

- **All staff have had a skills analysis which has identified skill strengths and gaps.**
- Development centres were commissioned to assess core skills and abilities, which all staff have undertaken (except caretakers). All managers were briefed and trained to give feedback to staff and to identify how to address the skill gaps identified, and training for common skill gaps such as planning and organising are being delivered.
- **Staff receive appropriate learning and development opportunities.**
- There is a strong commitment and well developed approach to learning and development, and a wide range of opportunities for staff development. There is an annual training and development plan that is well resourced with a £186,000 budget and most staff have had a range of relevant training, and some are supported to undertake professional development courses, including BICS training for caretakers and an in- house programme of training for management development. Repairs operatives have multi-skills training and ASB staff are to be trained in facilitating their own restorative justice conferences.
- Corporate customer care training started in November 2008.

Key Weaknesses

- **Risk management is not fully robust.**
- Despite a framework being in place for identifying and managing risks, a key risk which could have a detrimental impact on capacity was not identified. A key decision to interim manage an additional 3,500 houses has not been fully debated and approved by the Board, or via Chairs action. A risk assessment, to be prepared at the Boards request, is only due to be considered after the likely transfer of the stock for interim management has taken place.
- **Capability issues in some service areas.**
- **Sickness levels.**
- Sickness absence target of 7.97 days is not being met. Sickness YTD to September 2008 is 12.9 days and housing management and caretaking have been identified as the service areas that are not performing to target being 3.4 and 4.2 over the target respectively.

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Capability issues are pro-actively addressed.**
- Management have identified capability issues within the organisation and have taken steps to support staff who are under performing and to implement remedial action as necessary.
- Under performance is addressed through daily or weekly targets and priorities, coaching or additional training. Persistent under performance is addressed under the capability policy.
- **Strong mix of skills among board members.**
- There is a proactive and effective approach to supporting and developing board members. The Chair has annual appraisal by a suitably experienced external person, and the Chair conducts appraisals of other board members. This identifies training needs and individual interviews are held to identify how to meet the training needs. A partnership arrangement with Homes for Islington provides one-to-one coaching and facilitates board training. There is now a training plan and an induction package for new board members, and the Chair attends a London network of ALMO Chairs.

Key Weaknesses

- **ICT systems are not effectively integrated or developed.**
- The IT systems are not meeting the needs of the organisation although they are due to be reviewed. Current systems are limited in respect to management reporting facilities, customer service functions such as on-line access to rent and service charge information, DD payment for leaseholders, and no use of handheld devices for housing management staff.
- Diversity profiling information which is held in the Open Road system is not linked to the vulnerability flag in Academy.
- The complaints management system has limitations. It can identify complaints by service area but does not enable them to be coded in to any sub categories within a service area. There is a single, final, target date but does not indicate initial response dates for the officer handling the complaint in order to identify where any delays in the process are occurring. It can identify current complaints by officer but does not report a particular officers performance over a period of time or for a particular geographical patch.
- External IT support arrangements provided under the SLA with the Council is not reliable.
- External contractors with links to the ALMO IT system are not informed prior to updates and consequently the system for external contractors crashes and there's no access and disruption of information entry.

Key Strengths

- The board actively engages with residents which enables a strong understanding of and focus on tenant priorities. There are two leaseholders (one of which is the Chair) and five tenants on the board, who are active in their communities and have regular contact with or are members of their TRA. Board members participate in resident activities such as the compact review and, involver conference.
- **A clear approach to supporting and developing financial management skills across the organisation.**
- There is a clear approach to supporting and developing financial management skills across the organisation. All budget holders receive full monthly information on budgets and expenditure and are regularly supported by finance staff in understanding the financial information. Managers and members of the recently established VFM group will receive training in conducting VFM service reviews in January 2009.

Key Weaknesses

- **Lack of training and understanding of diversity issues at all levels of the organisation**
- There has only been limited training on corporate issues. Staff have not received equalities and diversity or customer care training.
- **Projected budget deficit for 2009/10.**
- **The organisation has not been effective in securing external funding to increase capacity for additional activities.**

Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **A robust plan to improve IT systems.**
- There is a robust plan to improve IT systems and a draft IT strategy should be completed in December 2008 , with an action plan to priorities improvements. A full service review is planned for 2009 and will consider the present SLA arrangements for provision of services with the Council. In the interim the ALMO is negotiating changes to the SLA to bring desktop support in-house and investigating new telephone systems. The business plan has £600,000 included for a new IT system to be developed when the existing SLA runs out in 2010.
- **Housing management staff have access to relevant legal advice and support.**
- Arrangements are in place to ensure that housing management staff have access to relevant legal advice and support. A panel of legal service providers provides assistance on rent arrears and tenancy issues, including regular housing law updates and monthly surgeries for officers to discuss casework with them.

Key Weaknesses

Key Strengths

- **Appropriate HR systems in place.**
- HR staff are appropriately qualified and have access to professional journals as well as external legal services on employment legislation and an SLA with the council for employee relations.
- Staff turnover, excluding those due to redundancy, is 4.5 per cent well within the target of 7 per cent which is a positive out turn given the level of change that has been taking place.
- **Good technical skills within property services.**
- The ALMO intends to supplement its in-house technical expertise with external consultants to procure and administer its DHS programme of works.

Key Weaknesses

Recommendations

- 6 This section provides key recommendations made in relation to our key findings, which we would suggest the ALMO implements. It also lists other recommendations to assist with further improvement.
- 7 It should be noted that we have not placed timescales or costed these recommendations as would be done in a real inspection. It is for Lewisham Homes to determine the timetable for implementation, in conjunction with considering its own improvement plans.
- 8 It is important for Lewisham Homes to also consider how the other areas of weakness identified in this report are addressed and improved, and a list of other recommendations are included to help address these.
- 9 It should be noted that implementation of these recommendations will not necessarily guarantee the outcome of any future assessments which will be determined by the quality of service and the outcomes for residents at the time.

Recommendation

- R1** The ALMO should improve access to the service and customer care by:
- ensuring that all public offices comply with the Disability Discrimination Act requirements;
 - ensuring that all staff receive appropriate customer care training;
 - monitoring all the customer service standards and improving performance;
 - undertaking a full review of the complaints procedures and systems and training staff in receiving and handling complaints; and
 - clarifying and implementing plans for involving a wide range of service users in service reviews.

Recommendation

- R2** The ALMO should improve its approach to equality and diversity by:
- ensuring that all staff and board members receive appropriate diversity training;
 - increasing the collection and use of diversity profile data for tenants and leaseholders, including data on sexuality and faith, to deliver service improvements; and
 - ensuring information on diversity and vulnerability is integrated and automatically alerted to staff.

Recommendation

R3 The ALMO should improve its performance on rent collection and arrears management by:

- prioritising a review of rent arrears policy, procedures and monitoring systems and clarifying collection priorities;
- strengthening arrangements with debt advice agencies for debt counselling and welfare rights advice service; and
- providing clear guidance to income officers on rent advice and record keeping, and undertaking frequent quality checks of rent arrears case files.

Recommendation

R4 The ALMO should improve its management and letting of property by:

- immediately conducting gas safety checks on all properties without a valid CP12;
- monitoring the provision of aids and adaptations by the Council for ALMO residents in respect to waiting times and satisfaction levels;
- reviewing the lettable standard in conjunction with tenants; and
- reviewing its lettings procedures to ensure tenants are given full and timely advice about the property and consider how tenants can have recourse to a review if a property is not meeting the lettable standard.

Recommendation

R5 The ALMO should improve its asset management strategy by developing a SMART action plan to include a detailed and resourced programme for:

- consultation with residents;
- procurement; and
- delivery of the DHS contract.

In addition to the above key recommendations, the following recommendations are made to assist the ALMO in addressing other weaknesses highlighted in this report.

Recommendations

Access and Customer care

- deliver training on working with vulnerable tenants to appropriate staff members;
- provide customers with a single contact number for all services;
- explore the potential for Customer Service staff to make appointments for tenants with the appropriate housing officer at the point of contact;
- ensure there are clear guidelines and responsibilities on informing tenants and residents about changes to appointments eg when a staff member is off sick;
- provide training and guidance to ensure that letters to tenants and residents address all aspects of the customers concerns; and
- review, in consultation with tenants and residents, what performance information is provided to them and in what format, and ensure that comparative data is provided.

Diversity

- introduce a section in reports to the Board that highlights equality and diversity issues;
- develop a planned and pro-active approach to engaging with marginalised communities to develop an understanding of particular needs to inform service development;
- review the corporate approach to issues of sexuality, faith and illiteracy, and identify where service improvements may be required;
- provide guidance for staff on different religious or cultural norms and behaviours;
- work with partner agencies to develop third party reporting arrangements for harassment and domestic violence; and
- ensure that adequate information is displayed in all offices and block noticeboards on how to report domestic violence.

Repairs and maintenance

- review how residents are involved in assessing tenders and monitoring quality of works;
- ensure that information on asbestos in domestic properties is available to residents, contractors and staff;
- introduce regular programme of electrical testing for domestic properties;
- review how performance on repairs appointments made and kept is monitored, with a clear definition of what is and is not to be included in the measure;
- introduce an automatic alert facility to all staff where there is an overdue gas safety certificate to maximise the opportunity to arrange access; and
- introduce a system of measuring satisfaction with the aids and adaptations service for Lewisham Homes' residents and explore any low levels of satisfaction.

Income management

- revise the tenants rent statement so that rent charges, housing benefit and other charges and payments are clearly set out;
- review, in conjunction with the Council, the level of provision of independent debt and welfare rights advice for Lewisham Homes' tenants and leaseholders, and explore opportunities such as dedicated advice surgeries in local areas;
- undertake annual reviews of service charges;
- ensure there are clear targets for staff processing FTAs in undertaking the initial investigation and passing them to the external agencies;
- review the IT systems to support the monitoring and performance management of FTAs; and
- provide training to staff in income management, tenancy officers and debt recovery on FTAs to emphasise cross team working and the importance of avoiding or minimising FTAs.

Resident Involvement

- establish diversity monitoring of participants in area panels and TRAs and develop plans to address issues of under representation;
- work with TRAs to develop requirements in respect to ensuring equality and diversity as representative bodies; and
- establish mechanisms to fully engage residents in service reviews at all stages.

Tenancy and estates management

- ensure that settling in visits are routinely carried out within six weeks and that these are monitored by team managers;
- review arrangements for engaging caretakers in estate inspections;
- ensure that estate inspections and cleaning rotas are clearly advertised and explained to tenants and residents including opportunities to take part in inspections;
- explore with partners the potential of developing a responsive out of hours ASB service
- address the issues of cockroach infestations and ensure that this is reflected in the lettable standard;
- arrange for training and guidelines for staff in enforcing tenancy conditions in respect to ensuring properties are kept clean and to a good standard to minimise the risk of infestation; and
- introduce spot checks on tenancy sign ups to ensure the procedures and checklist are being followed.

Recommendations

Leaseholder services

- in consultation with leaseholders, develop service standards and targets for the preparation and issuing of service charge estimates and invoices;
- ensure that major works estimates and invoices to leaseholders are sufficiently detailed to indicate all works carried out;
- explore the potential for a direct debit payment facility for leaseholders;
- VFM;
- review the VFM strategy action plan to ensure it is SMART and outcome focused;
- develop effective benchmarking to compare service costs, identify best performers and practice to inform service developments and identify potential efficiency savings;
- review how the stores materials are managed so that materials are available for operatives during working hours;
- review how repairs works schedules are organised and batched to ensure a more cost effective service;
- introduce incentives for Repairs Services operatives to maintain or improve the quality of repairs works; and
- ensure that all SLAs and protocols are reviewed for VFM.

Prospects for improvement

- review all strategy action plans to ensure they are SMART and outcome focused;
- continue to review performance information to ensure reliability of data and to ensure that performance reports are accurate;
- develop a system to analyse complaints trends and to embed learning from complaints;
- ensure that all staff receive appraisals and have measurable targets;
- review risk management arrangements to ensure that all keys risks are identified and agreed before risks materialise; and
- introduce procedures to ensure that external contractors with links to the IT system are informed prior to updates to avoid lose of service.

Appendix 1 – Management of Inspections

- 1 As stated in the introduction to this report, this advice and assistance work was undertaken in a manner similar to that of the full inspection (based on existing methodology and KLoEs etc) which is likely to be undertaken during 2009/10
- 2 To assist with the planning and preparation for the real inspection, we have highlighted below areas where we feel there is opportunity to make the inspection run more smoothly for both parties.

Area	Comment
Self-assessment and documents.	The self-assessment should have a greater focus on outcomes for tenants and residents and provide clear evidence of these.
Accompanied visits and observation.	<p>It is important that staff who accompany inspectors are aware of the purpose of the visits. For example if it is to observe a new tenant settling in visit, then these should be arranged in advance.</p> <p>Where observation of new tenancy sign ups is timetabled, there should be a few planned for the time allocated, or if this is not possible, liaise with the Principal Inspector to re-adjust the timetable as early as possible.</p> <p>Estate visits for ASB purposes should demonstrate to inspectors what the challenges are and how they are being addressed.</p>
Tenant and residents focus groups.	Make sure that the venues are open and prepared for the meeting and that a member of staff is available at the venue to greet the tenants and inspectors.

Appendix 1 – Management of Inspections

Area	Comment
File checks	If records are kept electronically, make sure the access arrangements are prepared in advance
Demonstrations of systems	This should be by a member of staff who uses the system regularly and can demonstrate how it is used for monitoring and reporting purposes as well as inputting data. Example case numbers should be ready in order to demonstrate how data is recorded etc.
Extra documents	This worked quite well because the PI could access email at home in the evening. If this isn't available documentation may need to be provided on a disc. It would make it easier to manage if the documents stated which inspector and which interview it relates to, and where it's a large document, to highlight the relevant sections.
Parking arrangements	Passes for Lawrence House need to provide access to the lifts in order to access the car park. The side access is not appropriate if it is late or dark.

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