

# Lewisham

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# Homes

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London Borough of Lewisham

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September 2010

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# Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) inspections

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

## Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) inspections

From April 2010, inspections of landlord services of social housing providers are undertaken on behalf of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA). The TSA stated, in para 4.16 of its regulatory framework (March 2010), that the 2010/11 ALMO inspections required for Decent Homes funding will continue under existing arrangements. This inspection has, therefore, been carried out using the current published ALMO inspection methodology and key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) and not the seven national standards which the TSA published in March 2010.

# Summary

- 1 Lewisham Homes provides a two-star housing management service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The service is easy to access with good quality information and comprehensive service standards. The organisation consults tenants well on diversity issues and identifies vulnerable tenants effectively. Capital and major work plans are based on reliable information and residents have a positive input into major works. The responsive repairs service produces good, cost-effective outcomes. Re-letting is quick and the cost of voids repairs is better than average. Performance in servicing gas appliances is excellent. Aids and adaptations are carried out quickly with a strong customer focus.
- 3 Lewisham Homes helps residents who are financially excluded or in debt. Tenancies are successfully audited, staff work well with partners to address antisocial behaviour and respond robustly to domestic abuse and hate crime. Estate management problems are easy for residents to report and the caretaking service is effective.
- 4 Lewisham Homes offers effective help to leaseholders with financial difficulties and costs remain low. Lewisham Homes has succeeded in delivering efficiency savings and in improving the value for money of the services provided by the Council. It manages procurement well and reinvests efficiency savings appropriately.
- 5 However, resident satisfaction with the response to complaints and the response to antisocial behaviour is low. Lewisham Homes has insufficient information about the needs of non-English speaking residents and about the outcomes of support provided to residents by other partner organisations. Rent arrears performance is below average and the rent service does not offer value for money. Eviction levels are high.
- 6 Grounds maintenance is not consistent or properly publicised. Leaseholder satisfaction with the overall service is low and Lewisham Homes does not calculate sufficiently accurate and substantiated service charge bills. The ratio of planned to responsive repairs work is not efficient.
- 7 Services are all improving and becoming more efficient. Stakeholders have an appropriate input into priorities and the approach to performance is robust. Effective learning is leading to improvements and the relationship with the Council is positive. Management and communications are effective with clear values that motivate staff. Staff management and training opportunities are positive.
- 8 However, Lewisham Homes has not fully developed its strategies on environmental sustainability and most action plans are not SMART<sup>i</sup>.

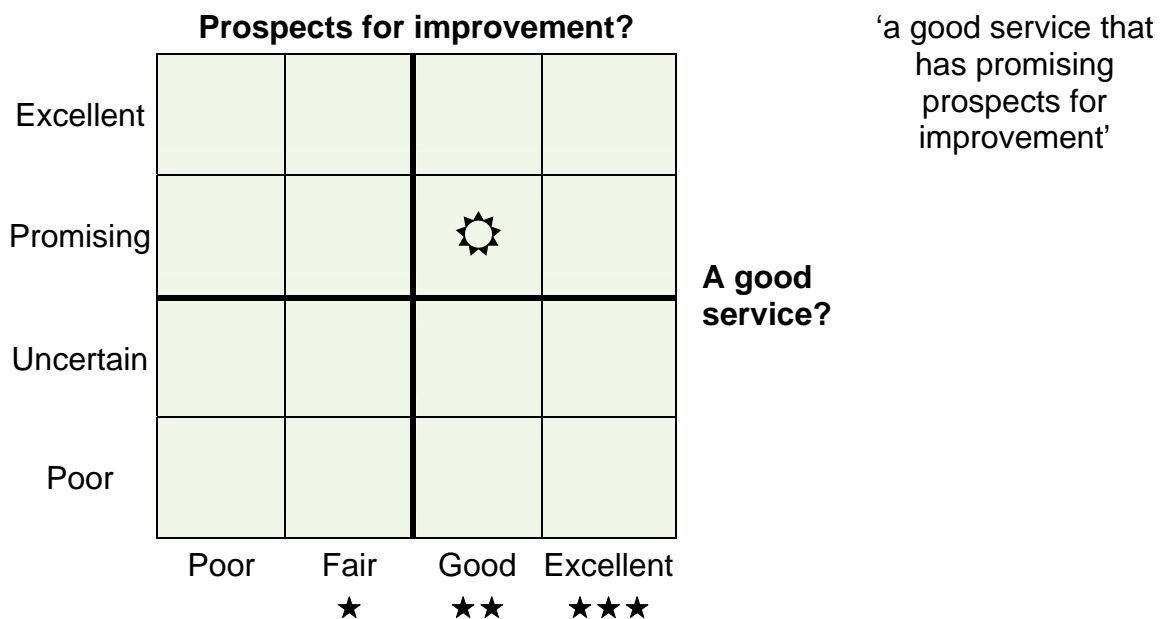
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<sup>i</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound. This usually refers to targets in improvement plans.

# Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Lewisham Homes as providing a 'good' two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Figure 1** Scoring chart<sup>i</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- the service is easy to access with good quality of information available and staff who have appropriate skills and knowledge. Service standards are comprehensive, well consulted on and monitored;
  - the organisation is learning and developing well on diversity. It has collected good proportion of profiling information and consults tenants well on diversity issues. Effective arrangements are in place to identify vulnerable residents;
  - capital and major work plans are based on reliable information about the stock and residents have a positive input into the major works, which have a strong customer focus;
  - the responsive repairs service is well promoted and easy to access. It produces good cost-effective outcomes with an effective customer focus and a strong performance on carrying out repairs on time;

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

## Scoring the service

- the overall re-letting time is good and the cost of voids repairs is better than average and continuing to reduce;
- performance in servicing gas appliances is excellent;
- aids and adaptations are carried out quickly with a strong customer focus;
- Lewisham Homes works well with the Council's Housing Benefits service and helps residents who are financially excluded or in debt;
- tenancies are successfully audited, staff work well with partners to address antisocial behaviour and respond robustly to reports of domestic abuse and hate crime, making good use of a full range of tools;
- estate management problems are easy for residents to report, caretakers are well trained and equipped and the caretaking service is effective; most residents are satisfied with estate management;
- Lewisham Homes offers effective help to leaseholders with financial difficulties including flexible payment options for those who receive large major works bills. The methods used to estimate service charge costs are thorough and reasonable and costs remain low; and
- Lewisham Homes has succeeded in delivering efficiency savings and in improving the value for money of the services provided by the Council. It manages procurement well and reinvests efficiency savings appropriately.

11 However, there are some areas that require improvement. These include:

- resident satisfaction with the responses to complaints and antisocial behaviour is low. The quality of responses to email is not adequate;
- Lewisham Homes has insufficient information about the needs of non-English speaking residents and about the outcomes of support provided to residents by other organisations;
- some properties are in significant need of cyclical decorations and advanced information for residents about planned works is limited;
- rent arrears and collection performance is below average, eviction levels are high and the rent service does not offer value for money;
- welcome visits are not carried out for all new tenants and grounds maintenance is not consistent, well planned or properly publicised;
- leaseholder satisfaction with the overall service is low, some aspects of the service are not customer focussed and service charge bills are not always as accurate as they could be; and
- the proportion of emergency and urgent repairs and the ratio of planned to responsive repairs work are not efficient.

- 12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- services are all improving, some significantly, while becoming more efficient;
  - stakeholders have an appropriate input into priorities, the approach to performance measurement and assessment is robust and Lewisham Homes manages projects well, including service reviews;
  - effective systems for learning both internally and externally are leading to service improvements and the relationship with the Council is positive;
  - Lewisham Homes has a strong, well-managed Board, management and communications are effective with clear values that motivate staff; and
  - staff management and training opportunities are positive.
- 13 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- strategies on environmental sustainability are not fully developed; and
  - most action plans are not SMART.

# Recommendations

**14** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. These recommendations reflect the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) standards. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>i</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### Recommendation

- R1** Improve customer service and satisfaction, in consultation with residents, by:
- setting up a more robust way of monitoring email responses and acting on the lessons learnt;
  - carrying out welcome visits more consistently;
  - charging estate costs based on more robust methods of calculation;
  - ensuring that fuel meters for communal areas are read at least once a year;
  - informing leaseholders about the costs of payment methods;
  - sending out or making available communal repair details to leaseholders more regularly;
  - regularly looking into sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in lower performing areas and acting on lessons learnt; and
  - maintaining personal contact with residents receiving services that have low satisfaction like responses to complaints and antisocial behaviour to ensure issues are understood and addressed.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reliable responses to email;
- better starts for many tenancies;
- greater satisfaction with leasehold charges;
- higher satisfaction with responses to complaints, antisocial behaviour and other services; and
- the delivery of outcomes set out in the customer service, choice and complaints section of the tenant involvement and empowerment standard.

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

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

### Recommendation

- R2** Improve services to residents who are vulnerable or have diverse needs in consultation with them by:
- monitoring the effectiveness of support provided by other organisations;
  - assessing the communication needs of non-English speaking residents and responding efficiently and proactively to identified needs;
  - promoting interpretation services better;
  - reviewing the approach to evictions to ensure that they are appropriate, value for money, used as a last resort and take account of vulnerability;
  - ensure that that contact details and information on vulnerability are collected early on in arrears and other relevant cases;
  - ensuring that tenants who might be able to obtain a transfer have no barriers to bidding for properties in the choice based lettings scheme; and
  - improving plans to address diversity issues to ensure they focus on outcomes that residents will notice and are measurable.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved and better value provision of support and interpretation;
- a reduction of barriers to services for diverse residents;
- a more effective use of resources focused on outcomes; and
- a greater ability to understand and respond to the diverse needs of tenants as required under the tenant involvement and empowerment standard.

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

### Recommendation

- R3** Improve the approach to health and safety in consultation with residents, staff, contractors and relevant agencies and good practice by:
- ensuring that residents and contractors have information on asbestos in areas that might affect them;
  - improving clarity about the responsibilities and consequences of leaseholders replacing flat doors as well as other components like windows that are not their responsibility and developing a clear policy response to the issue; and
  - addressing all relevant health and safety risks promptly.

## Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- less risk to the health and safety of residents; and
- less chance of conflict with leaseholders; and
- a contribution to the delivery of the home standard.

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

### Recommendation

- R4** Improve the efficiency and value for money of services in consultation with residents by:
- improving processes and outcomes on charging and recouping rechargeable repairs;
  - introducing a policy for dealing with high cost adaptations;
  - monitoring the effectiveness of debt, welfare and support agencies so staff can refer to the most effective ones for each type of problem;
  - researching cheaper ways of managing payments by residents and implementing them;
  - carrying out better assessments of the effectiveness and impact of resident involvement activities;
  - encouraging residents to take a more active interest in reporting estate problems like poor grounds maintenance, graffiti and dumped rubbish;
  - reducing the proportion of emergency and urgent repair orders to a more efficient level; and
  - improving the ratio of planned to responsive repairs.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are the improved quality, efficiency and value for money of services required under the value for money standard.

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

### Recommendation

- R5** Understand and respond better to the rehousing needs of the borough in consultation with residents by:
- improving the approach to under occupation by research into successful methods used elsewhere and better advertising and promotion of options to staff and residents; and
  - increasing the use of mutual exchanges by promoting and supporting them.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more tenants who are happy with where they live;
- a better understanding of the profile of new tenants and how they compare from year to year and across areas; and
- better compliance with the tenancy standard.

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

### Recommendation

**R6** Improve longer term outcomes for residents by:

- producing a broader strategic approach to asset management that addresses all relevant issues;
- producing a comprehensive strategic approach to environmental sustainability with help from relevant agencies and clear commitments and targets, systems that demonstrate sustainability and published progress and results; and
- ensuring that action plans are SMART.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better long-term use of the housing stock;
- better protection for the environment; and
- more effective plans that deliver outcomes.

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

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

Dates of inspection: 21 June to 2 July 2010

# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 16 The London borough of Lewisham is located in inner south-east London and 260,000 people live there. It is a diverse borough, with a large black African/Caribbean population. Sixty-five per cent of school pupils are from a minority ethnic background.
- 17 The main town centres are Lewisham, Catford, New Cross and Deptford. To the north, Lewisham is densely populated. The south has more parks and open spaces with larger local shopping areas and town centres. Lewisham is also home to Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham College, and Lewisham Hospital.
- 18 Lewisham is a relatively poor borough, although the poorer areas are concentrated in Evelyn ward in the north and the southern parts of Bellingham. These are also the areas with the largest public housing estates. Lone parent families make up 18 per cent of all households, which is the highest rate in London. Seven in ten people commute out of Lewisham to work. The health of people in Lewisham is worse than the England average.
- 19 The Lewisham Strategic Partnership brings together relevant individuals and organisations to ensure that Lewisham's public, private, voluntary and community sectors can work together to make improvements in local quality of life. It is chaired by Lewisham's directly-elected Mayor.

### The Council

- 20 The Council has a directly-elected Labour Mayor with a cabinet of seven members. After the 2010 elections, the Labour Party holds 39 out of the 54 seats. The Liberal Democrats hold 12 seats, the Conservatives two seats and the Green Party one seat.
- 21 In its organisational assessment of the Council in December 2009, the Audit Commission said that Lewisham performed well, in terms of both managing performance and in its use of resources. We particularly highlighted its strong approach to community engagement and the empowerment of local people.

### The service

- 22 The Council established an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Lewisham Homes on the 22 January 2007. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services, receiving a £20 million management fee for this service. It manages the Council's £14 million capital budget and £20 million responsive repairs budget. Lewisham Homes manages 13,500 social housing tenancies and over 5,000 leasehold properties. Until October 2010, it manages 3,400 additional properties for the Council on an interim basis as they move from management by a private company to ownership by a housing association.

23 The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:

- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
- rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
- consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
- promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
- enforcement of tenancy conditions;
- similar functions for leaseholders;
- managing lettings, voids and under-occupation; and
- estate management and caretaking.

24 The functions retained by the Council include:

- overall housing strategy and enabling;
- determining policies on lettings and antisocial behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
- managing the Supporting People programme;
- homelessness, general housing advice; and
- administering the Housing Register.

25 The ALMO is managed by a board that is made up of seven residents, three Council nominees and five independents. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team, headed by a Chief Executive. The ALMO currently employs 484 staff including 96 caretakers and 87 repairs operatives.

26 We have not published any reports on housing services since April 2005 when we inspected Housing Repairs and Maintenance and judged it to be a fair, one star service with uncertain prospects for improvement. We carried out voluntary inspections of the housing service in 2006 and 2008/09. Although the Commission did not publish these reports, the Council and ALMO have made them available on their websites. Later in the report we explain what progress the ALMO has made in addressing our recommendations from 2009.

# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

27 Lewisham's sustainable communities' strategy<sup>i</sup> lists its strategic priorities as the following.

- Ambitious and achieving – where people are inspired and supported to fulfil their potential.
- Safer – where people feel safe and live free from crime, antisocial behaviour and abuse.
- Empowered and responsible – where people are actively involved in their local area and contribute to supportive communities.
- Clean, green and liveable – where people live in high quality housing and can care for and enjoy their environment.
- Healthy, active and enjoyable – where people can actively participate in maintaining and improving their health and wellbeing.
- Dynamic and prosperous – where people are part of vibrant communities and town centres, well connected to London and beyond.

28 Two core principles are:

- reducing inequality – narrowing the gap in outcomes for citizens; and
- delivering together efficiently, effectively and equitably – ensuring that all citizens have appropriate access to and choice of high quality local services.

29 Lewisham Homes' mission is 'To deliver great housing services for thriving neighbourhoods'. Its values and strategic objectives which underpin the mission are to:

- deliver excellent services;
- instil a value for money (VFM) culture throughout the organisation and demonstrate business efficiency;
- improve customer satisfaction to top quartile performance in London; and
- improve our homes to the Decent Homes Standard (DHS).

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<sup>i</sup> Shaping our future 2008-2020

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

**Access and customer care**

- 30** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The service is easy to access with good quality of information available and staff who have appropriate skills and knowledge. Service standards are comprehensive, well consulted on and monitored. Lewisham Homes makes good use of customers to improve services but is not yet meeting the expectations of its customers when responding to complaints despite reasonable processes. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is below average and the quality of responses to email is not adequate but improving.
- 31** The service is easy to access. Customers can use a single free phone number with a landline alternative for mobile phone users. Calls are answered promptly, 87 per cent of calls to the customer call centre were answered in 15 seconds in 2009/10. It has four attractive and well used recently refurbished local offices that are compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act<sup>i</sup> and it sees 79 per cent of those waiting in reception within ten minutes.
- 32** Staff have the skills and knowledge to provide a customer focused and informative service. Lewisham Homes achieved the Customer Service Excellent Standard in November 2009. All staff receive customer care training, which is also part of the induction, and staff must be given customer care objectives in the performance management scheme. Mystery shopping found staff polite and helpful. The 2010 STATUS<sup>ii</sup> survey shows that 66 per cent of tenants find it easy to get hold of the right member of staff and 76 per cent find staff helpful. Both these are better than the average for all London boroughs in 2008. However, 34 per cent of the calls to the repairs centre are classified as avoidable contact as they are residents calling about issues they have already reported on. Residents get served well when they contact the ALMO.
- 33** Lewisham Homes provides good quality information. The handbook is up-to-date, newsletters are regular, fact-filled, colourful and visually lively. All documents have a clear, distinctive and accessible style and the language is free of housing jargon. The resident-approved copy contributes to clarity. The website is inviting, easy to navigate, comprehensive and up to date. It is interactive with the ability to view rent and service charge statements, order repairs, complete surveys and register for resident involvement or training opportunities. The website is well used with 4,130 visitors in March 2010. However, performance information does not show how well performance compares leaving residents without a clear idea of how good the outcomes are. The 2010 STATUS survey shows that 74 per cent are satisfied about being kept informed compared with an average of 70 per cent for all London boroughs in 2008.

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<sup>i</sup> The Disability Discrimination Acts (DDA) 1995 and 2005 aim to end discrimination against disabled people and require that public buildings should be made accessible for people with disabilities

<sup>ii</sup> STATUS – The Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey. All local authorities had to carry out this standard survey in 2008. Lewisham Homes carried out another one in 2009/10.

## How good is the service?

- 34** Lewisham Homes makes good use of customers to improve on standards of service. Residents have input through mystery shopping, inspections and consultation on standards and literature. Customer satisfaction follow-up calls are made for over 50 per cent of responsive repairs jobs. These processes have led to improvements, including those around reception services, and help to ensure that services meet customer needs.
- 35** Service standards are comprehensive, well consulted on and monitored. The service standards were updated and expanded in 2009 with consultation at the area panels and service specific improvement groups. Some 76 standards cover eight different service areas. Of these, 61 are monitored and residents have prioritised 13 of these that are reported on in residents' newsletters. The first review and performance assessment of the new standards is not due until September 2010 but initial assessments show that the standards are being kept reasonably well. Residents know what service to expect and can rely on the service.
- 36** Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is improving and now average. In 2008, 60 per cent were satisfied compared with 68 per cent for all London boroughs or 70 per cent for all London based social landlords and 80 per cent for social landlords nationally who used a large benchmarking club. In 2010 satisfaction with Lewisham Homes increased to 68 per cent but later benchmarking is not available.
- 37** Lewisham Homes has a reasonable process for dealing with complaints.
- It advertises the complaints and compliments procedures well and complaints are easy to make and online complaints go straight into the database.
  - 95 per cent of stage one complaints are replied to within the target ten days.
  - Lewisham Homes checks the response letters for quality, we found them to be written well, addressing complainants' concerns and, in 2009/10, 98 per cent of complainants found them easy to understand.
  - Stage three complaints are looked at by an independent adjudicator and managed by the Council.
  - A robust system is in place for learning from service failures that lead to complaints, with learning packs from complaints and other sources discussed in monthly team meetings and a responsive repairs complaints forum.
- 38** However, customers are not satisfied with the complaints process. In 2009/10 only 21 per cent were satisfied with the handling of the complaint and only 20 per cent agreed their issues were eventually resolved. This compares with the worst performing ALMOs and social landlords in London. Complaints are closed when the letter is sent out not when the complaint is resolved which is reflective of a system focused on process, not on outcome. Lewisham Homes is not monitoring reasons for dissatisfaction effectively. It does not know why responses are not meeting customer expectations and is not learning from potential weaknesses in the complaints process. Compensation payments have not been consistent as a system to report and track payments has only just been set up. The complaints processes and learning from complaints have improved but are still not meeting customer expectations.

- 39 The quality of responses to email is not adequate but improving. In 2009 mystery shopping showed a poor (but improving) response with 37 per cent of email receiving no response at all. Lewisham Homes has not set up a system to check that staff do respond to email. In May 2010 57 mystery shopping email were sent out. Of these 67 per cent were fully replied to, 10 per cent were partly replied to, 17 per cent did not answer the question asked and 5 per cent were not replied to. A third of the emails sent to Lewisham Homes do not receive an adequate response.

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### Diversity

- 40 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Lewisham Homes shows commitment to diversity. It has collected a good proportion of profiling information and consults tenants well on diversity issues. Effective arrangements are in place to identify vulnerable residents but information on the support provided to them is limited. The approach to diversity with involved residents is positive. Some of the communication needs of residents are met but there are weaknesses in this area. The equality and diversity strategy action plan is not SMART<sup>i</sup> or outcome focused.
- 41 Lewisham Homes shows a strong corporate commitment to diversity. It has an equality and diversity challenge group made up of staff from across the organisation and a diversity champion on the board. It is addressing diversity issues for example by joining Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme<sup>ii</sup> and training 435 out of 450 staff in diversity in 2009/10. It has consulted residents and partners and carried out self-assessments to improve performance on diversity. The leadership sends out an appropriate message that it takes diversity seriously.
- 42 The organisation is learning and developing well on diversity. It assesses itself against the former Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing and the Audit Commission Key Line of Enquiry on diversity. It is ahead of others by assessing itself against a draft version of the LGID<sup>iii</sup> Equality Framework for Social Housing<sup>iv</sup>. It has carried out 37 Equality Impact Assessments since 2008 covering all customer facing aspects of the service. This systematic approach has enabled Lewisham Homes to identify gaps in service provision and develop actions in response. Outcomes are many and varied and include systems to identify vulnerable tenants, producing a DVD for new tenants and the promotion of tenant involvement opportunities for residents with mental health issues.

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<sup>i</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound. This usually refers to targets in improvement plans.

<sup>ii</sup> Stonewall runs a Diversity Champions programme which works with over 480 organisations to develop and share best practice for creating an inclusive environment for lesbian, gay and bisexual employees.

<sup>iii</sup> LGID stands for Local Government Improvement and Development which is the new name for the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) which is part of the Local Government Association Group and supports improvement and innovation in local government.

<sup>iv</sup> The Equality Framework for Social Housing is a new performance measurement and improvement tool which had not yet been published at the time of the inspection.

## How good is the service?

- 43 Lewisham Homes has collected more data profiling information than most other landlords. Compared with 10 to 15 London ALMOs<sup>i</sup>, it has collected more data than average on age, sexuality and gender; although information on age is limited as information is only held on 96 per cent. Information on ethnicity, disability and religion is among the highest with 93, 82 and 66 per cent respectively. This information allows Lewisham Homes to adjust services according to the needs of individuals and groups.
- 44 Lewisham Homes consults tenants well on diversity issues. When developing the vulnerable tenants policy in 2009, Lewisham Homes interviewed 288 tenants and a further 27 residents participated in focus groups. These residents came from 13 different categories of vulnerability. Similarly with the consultation on the revised 2010 equality and diversity strategy a diversity forum made up of tenants with a range of needs was consulted. Outcomes include surgeries with tenants from the Somali and Vietnamese communities who have been identified as being less likely to engage and text messaging to target young African Caribbean males in arrears.
- 45 Effective arrangements are in place to identify vulnerable residents.
- Through the unauthorised tenants visiting and checking system the ALMO has identified 43 tenants with support needs who were previously unknown and has helped them access the help they need.
  - When contractors complete works they carry out an occupancy survey that includes looking for signs of vulnerability.
  - The Council has provided awareness training on safeguarding<sup>ii</sup> issues for frontline staff and more detailed training for those who are local leads on self guarding issues.
  - Lewisham Homes works well with partners to explore and address the diverse needs of its residents. It has protocols in place with Action for Refugees in Lewisham, Age Concern, Federation of Refugees from Vietnam in Lewisham and Lewisham Disability Coalition.
- 46 However, Lewisham Homes has limited information on the support provided to residents. The protocols with the partners above have only been signed recently so Lewisham Homes lacks information on outcomes and benefits for residents. Some support is offered by Lewisham Homes. In 2009/10, 64 elderly or vulnerable tenants' properties benefited from a well advertised internal decoration scheme costing £50,000. This was enough to cover all requests. Welfare benefit and debt advice is strong.

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<sup>i</sup> A different number of ALMOs benchmarked for each diversity strand.

<sup>ii</sup> Safeguarding arrangements ensure that adult and child protection issues are managed and addressed in a structured and co-ordinated manner and that all staff with customer contact are aware of, and react to, concerns as well as ensuring that customers know how to report concerns.

- 47 The approach to diversity with involved residents is positive. The ALMO trained 65 residents on diversity in 2009 and 28 in the first half of 2010. It monitors the diversity strands of the 110 residents who are regularly involved, those who receive training and special interest groups that meet. All are reasonably representative. Lewisham Homes is able to ensure that involved residents are representative and diversity is understood by many leading involved residents.
- 48 Staff are reasonably reflective of the community they serve although management is not. Lewisham Homes recognises this and is using a management development programme to better ensure managers are more representative of the community.
- 49 The approach to meeting the differing communication needs of residents has positive aspects but more could be done.
- An introductory DVD helps tenants who cannot read and it is available in seven languages plus British Sign Language and in subtitles and 81 per cent of new tenants find it useful.
  - The website has Browsealoud, an online instant translating system and high accreditation for accessibility.
  - Ten staff are trained in British Sign Language.
  - The residents' newsletter is sent out in a large print version to 353 residents.
- 50 However, good work is recent and led from the centre and weaknesses remain in the approach to communication needs. Although the ALMO knows that 20 per cent of tenants do not have English as their first language, it does not know how many need help with translation or interpretation. Lewisham Homes does not promote the offer of an interpretation service in tenant literature or at housing offices. In 2009/10, Lewisham Homes carried out only 26 translations, 11 face to face interpreted interviews and 35 interpreted telephone calls. This low number shows that staff are not using the service proactively when contacting residents with known language needs. Similarly relatively few residents are asking for it. Despite some good initiatives, the organisation is not yet meeting the recorded needs of residents.
- 51 The 2010-2013 equality and diversity strategy action plan is not SMART<sup>i</sup> or outcome focused. For example an action focuses on addressing the higher arrears levels of younger tenants. The plan assesses the action as done. However, it does not include an assessment of whether the action was successful in its aims. Where a real outcome is mentioned such as increasing resident satisfaction, it does not indicate what it might increase from and to. Most of the focus of the plan is on internal organisational actions that will not be noticed by residents although some valuable ones would be.

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<sup>i</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound. This usually refers to targets in improvement plans.

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### Stock investment and asset management

#### Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 52** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The strategic framework for asset management is robust for meeting Decent Homes but limited in some other areas. Plans are based on reliable information about the stock and residents have a positive input into major works, which have a strong customer focus and provide satisfaction. The approach to health and safety and environmental sustainability are satisfactory but are areas for improvement. The properties lack an up-to-date cyclical decoration programme and advanced information about planned works is limited.
- 53** The strategic framework for asset management is robust in the most important areas but limited in others. The asset management strategy provides a solid basis for planning Decent Homes work and is reasonable on health and safety issues. However, the strategy does not make comprehensive links to all issues affecting the stock and land or explain how it will support the Council's (and other partners') high-level plans. For, example, links are not explicit to meeting the housing needs of older persons, affordable housing or health and safety issues. Lewisham Homes also lacks a strategic approach to replacing high maintenance materials with lower maintenance products. However, while limited in overall asset management terms, the strategy provides a solid basis for maintaining the stock.
- 54** Plans are based on reliable information about the stock. The 2008 stock condition survey covered 100 per cent of the external parts and 25 per cent of the internal parts. Lewisham Homes is building this up with surveys of void properties and when components are renewed. Information from the responsive repairs service is regularly fed into investment planning. A specialist condition survey in 2009 looked at the condition of non-traditional and high-rise stock.
- 55** Residents have a positive input into the planning and procurement of major works. Since December 2008 the Major Works Improvement Group (involving residents) has negotiated the priorities within the available budget in discussion with wider residents. The agreed priorities were health and safety, wind and weatherproofing and external decorations. The group looked at best practice elsewhere and visited other providers. Residents have agreed a 'Lewisham Homes standard' with specified standards for kitchens and bathrooms like numbers of electrical sockets and baths tiling and attachments for easy fitting of over bath showers. A project team (including five residents) has overseen issues like appointments of specialists and residents are involved in assessing tenders for schemes.
- 56** Lewisham Homes has a strong and effective customer focus within the planned works programmes. Newsletters set out when works will be carried out, the duration of works and include photographs and contact details for key staff. A series of letters inform residents about key stages in the process. 'Meet the contractor' evenings are arranged and the contractor provides a more detailed booklet describing the works, what to expect, a code of conduct and other information relevant to tenants. A vulnerability survey identifies any specific needs and Lewisham Homes engages a private Occupational Therapist to integrate aids and adaptations into the works.

- 57** The relationship with contractors is positive with robust contract and project management. Lewisham Homes holds regular performance monitoring and site progress meetings with contractors, which focus on quality and performance issues using a range of performance indicators. The culture is of joint working and support to resolve problems and improve services. Lewisham Homes offers the smaller contractors the opportunity to attend training courses. Several contractors find the relationship in the standard contract with Lewisham Homes more constructive than with partnering agreements they have with other landlords.
- 58** Overall, Lewisham Homes has a satisfactory approach to key areas of health and safety although not all actions that might have been taken to mitigate risk have been taken in three of the four areas listed below. Lewisham Homes has addressed all high risks and a sufficient number of other risks that safety compares well to other landlords.
- 59** The approach to lift maintenance and safety is positive. Every lift has voice contact and a remote monitoring system and the lift maintenance contract sets out a higher level of regular testing than required under legislation (the processes have been accredited as compliant with ISO9000).
- 60** The ALMO has dealt with the main fire risks but smaller challenges still remain. It has met its statutory obligation to complete a programme of fire risk assessments in all communal areas. It has carried out remedial work to all high-risk properties identified and to some medium-risk ones. Reassessments have shown that all high risks have been brought down to a 'tolerable' level and more work is planned. Lewisham Homes has been working with the Fire Authority to carry out and address risk assessments in other properties (for example, houses in multiple occupation). Lewisham Homes has promoted fire safety to residents effectively. However, many front entrance doors to leaseholders' flats in high-rise blocks are not fire rated and the ALMO has yet to establish a robust approach to this issue.
- 61** The approach to asbestos in communal areas is satisfactory but more could be done in tenants' homes. Lewisham Homes has a satisfactory approach to gathering information on asbestos and removing it where appropriate. It has clear and appropriate procedures. It has completed surveys in the communal areas of all high-rise blocks and will survey the remaining 9 per cent of low-rise blocks by August 2010. Where appropriate, asbestos is removed. Staff and contractors have received training on asbestos and have access to survey data that exists on the property they are working on; in-house operatives see flags on their hand held computers and can access the information from there. Residents are well informed about the asbestos in general. However, records on asbestos inside homes only cover a third of properties based on surveys carried out in voids and as part of major refurbishments. This will only be a comprehensive approach if all properties have such work in the next few years. Also Lewisham Homes does not know if the system for informing contractors about asbestos is effective - whether contractors are looking up this information when they should be. Residents are not informed about the location of asbestos in their individual homes. The main safety concerns are being addressed but more could be done.

## How good is the service?

- 62 Lewisham Homes is making progress in addressing Legionella. A specialist consultancy has helped them adopt a Legionella Policy. It has completed risk assessments on the high risk properties and is carrying out a remedial programme of replacing the main risks along with regular water testing which will be completed by March 2012. The programme is 80 per cent completed for the high risk properties. However, all the relevant risks have not been addressed yet.
- 63 Lewisham Homes is taking appropriate steps towards improving energy efficiency but does not have a robust approach to support the sustainability agenda. The Sustainable Resources Group has helped draft tender documents for the major works programme. The Social Housing Energy Savings Programme has provided £818,000 to improve insulation in 900 hard to treat homes. Lewisham Homes is starting a pilot of photovoltaic solar panels in which a third party supplies the capital. However, there is no clear strategic approach to energy efficiency or wider sustainability issues.
- 64 Resident satisfaction with the quality of major works and the way they are carried out is not high compared to better performing landlords. The results of the surveys are acceptable, with eight out of ten schemes having satisfaction levels at 85 per cent or above. However, the remaining schemes showed that one in four residents were not satisfied.
- 65 A cyclical decoration programme is in place but it has not caught up with requirements yet. Lewisham Homes has an external painting programme based on an eight year cycle. This has been risk assessed the 2008 stock survey identified properties in poor and very poor decorative order which will all be addressed by March 2011. However it will take between four and five more years before this programme 'catches up'. Meanwhile various estates suffer from peeling paint, unprotected woodwork exposed to the elements and internal paintwork that cannot be cleaned effectively. Tenants are living in less attractive conditions and value for money is not being achieved due to late cyclical work.
- 66 Advanced information for residents about planned works is limited, although as stated above, once works are due to start, communications work well. Only some of those due to receive cyclical decoration or major works can see this from the website. A list of 3,000 addresses shows which properties will be surveyed in 2010/11 for possible work in 2010-2012. Most residents do not know whether their properties will be subject to works in the next year or two.
- 67 The stock is in poor condition due to lack of investment over a long period. In 2008, 57 per cent of the stock failed the decent homes standard (projected to rise to 69 per cent by 2010). It has a SAP rating of 67 which is below average for London ALMOs. Seven sheltered housing schemes are substandard and hard to let due to bedsit-type accommodation or poor facilities and local transport links. This contributed to the high 68 days average time to let sheltered housing in 2009/10 and the Council has commissioned a feasibility study into these schemes. Some ordinary estates and blocks look run down as the fabric is worn and hard to keep clean and well maintained. This results in low tenant satisfaction with the quality of homes and condition of property. Satisfaction with quality of the home is 61 per cent compared with an average of 70 per cent for 14 London ALMOs and satisfaction with condition of property is 58 per cent compared with the London ALMO average of 65 per cent.

## Responsive repairs

- 68** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The responsive repairs service is well promoted and easy to access. It produces good cost-effective outcomes with a successful customer focus and a strong performance on carrying out repairs on time. Satisfaction with the repair service is rising fast but the approach to rechargeable repairs is weak and the proportion of emergency and urgent jobs is too high.
- 69** The service is well promoted and easy to access. The repairs leaflet provides comprehensive information about all of the repairs service. The call centre answers telephone calls quickly and operatives find job descriptions accurate, helped by the repairs diagnosis booklet the call centre staff use (however, residents do not have access to a repairs diagnostic system). Technical staff are based in the same office and provide guidance to the call centre staff. It is easy for residents to report repairs.
- 70** The service has a strong customer focus. Appointment times are mainly just morning or afternoon but early morning, evening and Saturday morning appointments are advertised and available on request. Appointments are made and kept for 97 per cent of repairs which meets the target. After residents order a repair, they receive a letter confirming the appointment date, the repair, and a prepaid customer satisfaction questionnaire with incentives to complete it. Repairs were completed in one visit for 93 per cent of the time in 2009/10, which is better than the 87 per cent average in London and nationally of a large benchmark of landlords.
- 71** Performance in responding to repairs on time is strong. Response targets are challenging with a three-day target for urgent repairs. Lewisham Homes completes a higher proportion of urgent repairs in three days than most landlords complete against a target of a week. The results are as follows for 2009/10.

**Table 1** Repairs completed on time in 2009/10

	Repairs target	Completed on time	Performance target
Emergency	2 or 24 hours	98.4%	97%
Urgent	3 working days	97.5%	97%
Routine	4 weeks	98.4%	97%

- 72** Effective practices and budget management improve the service and the value for money.
- The new schedule of rates has fewer items as it uses more generic repair specifications. This means that contact centre staff are better able to put the correct coding on the repair and there are fewer delays through the need to authorise variations.

## How good is the service?

- Lewisham Homes has reduced the number of pre-inspections and shifted the responsibility for accurately identifying the work required to the operative. The hand-held technology allows the operative to photograph a repair and discuss it with the supervisor while still on site. The reduction of pre-inspections speeds up the service and reduces the number of appointments for tenants.
  - The approach to post inspection is appropriate and results in inspections of about 12 per cent of jobs. Post-inspections had an acceptable pass rate of 92 per cent in 2009/10.
  - Arrangements for the supply of materials to operatives provide value for money. Operatives carry a core range of stock for each trade in their vehicles and a robust system is in place to monitor the replacement of these materials. Operatives can collect the materials from a store or have the materials delivered by a Lewisham Homes staff member enabling them to complete work faster. The service is moving to a new supplier, which will reduce costs further.
  - A strong performance management regime involves managers analysing many performance indicators monthly. This enables them to consider performance by individual operatives and contractors, by contact centre staff, cost, time and customer satisfaction. They analyse properties where the most repairs are being done and arrange visits to properties where no repairs have been done in three or more years.
  - Budget management practices are strong. Reports show detailed monthly spend and commitment along with historical spend profiles.
  - Lewisham Homes is rolling out a new electronic scheduling system that is helping to meet challenging targets for appointments and response times as well as improving customer focus, health and safety and value for money. It leads to a more accurate scheduling of work and reduces the time it takes staff to assign appointments to available operatives and makes operatives more accountable for their performance.
- 73** Satisfaction with the repair service is rising fast although not all tenants are aware of improvements. Satisfaction rates have risen from 73 per cent in 2007/08 to 87 per cent in 2009/10. However, Lewisham Homes has not yet won the confidence of some residents who told us they are resigned to erratic and poor performance based on their past perception of poor performance and so are reluctant to order repairs. Most tenants appreciate the improvements.
- 74** The approach to rechargeable repairs is weak although some elements are positive. Contact centre staff are required to identify rechargeable repairs and the system identifies staff and operatives who have not been recording them. The technical team takes photographs as evidence. However, management is not using the available information to check that staff are identifying and appropriately dealing with rechargeable repairs. Staff are not aware of the charging arrangements. Consequently, performance has been poor with just 12 per cent of debts recovered between 2008 and 2010. By not robustly raising and collecting rechargeable repairs, resources available to the service are reduced.

**75** The higher than average proportion of emergency and urgent jobs is not efficient. The proportion is 18 and 29 per cent respectively in 2009/10 and 20 and 25 per cent in the first three months of 2010/11. This is higher than standard good practice<sup>i</sup>. Managers are able to track this back to different practices by contact centre staff and are working to address it. While there is no uplift in cost for these works, too many repairs in these categories can make it more difficult to schedule repairs efficiently.

### Void (empty property) repairs

**76** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The overall re-letting time is good, the lettable standard is reasonable with some positive elements and the cost of voids repairs is better than average and continuing to reduce. Lewisham Homes helps vulnerable tenants with decorations. Most properties are let in a reasonable condition but standards are not high.

**77** The overall re-letting time is improving and now in line with the best performing organisations. In 2009/10, the ALMO let empty properties in an average of 28 days, which improved to 23.2 days in the six months to June 2010. This compares with an average of 33.6 days for all re-lets<sup>ii</sup> in England in 2008/09 or 24.9 days for the best of the London ALMOs in the same year. By letting properties ten days faster than average for over 1,000 properties a year Lewisham Homes are generating more income and housing more people.

**78** The recent strong performance is helped by the improving repair performance. From January to June 2010 the inspection and work were done in less than 11 days on average. Prompt repair work is contributing to the recent strong overall performance on re-letting properties.

**79** The lettable standard is reasonable and easy to follow and includes some positive elements. For example Lewisham Homes provides new toilet seats, changes the door locks and provides hard wired smoke alarms. The original standard was set up in consultation with tenants and amendments have been approved by a small number of tenants. Tenants know what to expect when they sign a tenancy agreement.

**80** The cost of voids repairs is better than average and continuing to reduce. In 2009/10, the average cost to repair a void was £2,460 which is below the £3,470 median for a benchmark of 11 landlords within the M25 area and £290 less than the previous year. The costs reduced, at a consistent pace, by £480 between the first three months and the last three months of 2009/10. However the ALMO lacks clear benchmarking on this. If only the void properties that were re-let during the year are included, then the cost per void for 2009/10 is £4,640, as many voids are being demolished. These properties are not being brought up to the decent homes standard, which some other landlords are doing. Overall Lewisham Homes is carrying out void works at a reasonable cost.

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<sup>i</sup> Best practice is for emergency and urgent repairs to account for no more than 30 per cent of all repair jobs completed.

<sup>ii</sup> Based on 11,500 non major repair general needs re-lets by both housing associations and local authorities using CORE

## How good is the service?

- 81** The void cost per property managed is high but that is due to the large number of voids. In 2008/09 Lewisham Homes let proportionally more voids than any other London ALMO, more than three times the average but the overall costs per property managed were not in the highest 25 per cent of these ALMOs. The cost per property for the works reduced from £216 per property managed in 2008/09 to £162 in 2009/10.
- 82** The approach to decoration is flexible. Lewisham Homes decides which rooms need decorating and will decorate them for vulnerable tenants and provide vouchers for most other tenants. However, if a tenant who is not vulnerable will have difficulty painting an area like a hall or stairs, then Lewisham Homes will consider doing that for them. Around a third of re-lets had some decoration done to them. This is a flexible and helpful service as some tenants find decorating difficult.
- 83** Most properties are let in a reasonable condition but standards are not high compared with organisations that perform strongly in this area. We saw various properties which were clean and tidy but had some weaknesses. Around a third of tenants are not happy with the cleanliness or the state of repair of their new home, which is a high proportion. Most tenants can expect reasonable standard but it is not consistent or high.

## Gas servicing

- 84** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in this area. Performance in servicing gas appliances is excellent. The approach to servicing includes good practice, contract management and quality assurance are strong and customer satisfaction is high. The response to tenants who do not provide access is robust and the database is validated properly. However, the level of referrals to the Environmental Health service for forced entry and the number of forced entries are both high.
- 85** Performance in servicing gas appliances is excellent. During the inspection all 14,500 properties with gas appliances had a current gas safety certificate. The average during the first three months of 2009/10 has been 99.96 per cent and the worst performance in the last year was in November 2009 when 99.7 per cent had a current certificate. The risks to tenants are small.
- 86** The approach to servicing demonstrates good practice.
- Lewisham Homes will service gas appliances while carrying out repairs that are ordered within 12 weeks of the service due date.
  - About 3,000 gas interruption devices have been fitted to encourage residents to provide access for service.
  - Appointments are available each weekday between 7.00am and 7.00pm or up to 1.00pm on Saturdays.
  - The gas engineer will also assess tenancy issues such as vulnerability and unauthorised occupancy.
  - A 'flag' on the repairs system shows when a service is due.
  - A sticker is placed on the front door after any missed appointment.
  - Tenants who give access on the first visit enter a £100 prize draw.

- Lewisham Homes has ISO 9000 accreditation for the gas service.
  - Leaseholders are offered gas servicing at the competitive price of £50.
  - Gas engineers inspect tenant-owned gas appliances while servicing Lewisham Homes' appliances and shut them down if they are unsafe.
- 87** Contract management and quality assurance processes are strong. Lewisham Homes uses a comprehensive range of performance indicators and reviews them in regular meetings with contractors. It reduces the contractor's share of savings where there is underperformance. An external contractor checks 10 per cent of services, breakdowns and boiler replacements. The checks show a 98 per cent pass rate in April to June 2010. Meetings with the contractors look at a learning log in which good practice and problem solving is shared. This helps maintain quality and value for money.
- 88** Customer satisfaction is high. Surveys from January to May 2010 show that 99 per cent of gas appointments were made and kept and 99 per cent were satisfied with the way the contractor dealt with the service. All tenants made positive comments about the quality of work, attitude of contractors and keeping mess to a minimum.
- 89** The response to tenants who do not provide access is robust. They are sent a text to remind them of the service before sending a letter by recorded delivery and through the ordinary post, giving them 48 hours to make an appointment. The envelope is branded and carries a red warning that the letter is important. The housing management team comment on whether there are any known issues. Where access is not provided, the Council's Environmental Health team<sup>i</sup> serve a notice under section 80 of the Environmental Protection Act giving the tenant 21 days to make contact for an appointment for access. If the tenant does not respond after the 21 day notice, the team applies to the magistrate's court allowing forced entry. In the last six months 1,475 tenants have been referred to Environmental Health which has forced entry to 49 properties which is high. Procedures ensure that gas servicing is carried out.
- 90** The database is validated properly. Gas engineers visited all properties that were on the Council list as not requiring a gas service to check if there was a gas supply and to cap it off if it was not being used. Lewisham Homes regularly cross-references the gas contractors' IT systems with its own property system to ensure that all systems are reporting the same property lists. The chances of properties being missed off the list for gas servicing are small.

### Aids and adaptations

- 91** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The service has a strong customer focus and carries out adaptations quickly. Joint working arrangements with the Occupational Therapists are effective and the service is well promoted with clear literature and challenging service standards. Customers are satisfied and effective use is made of previously adapted properties. However, the service lacks a policy for dealing with high cost adaptations and Lewisham Homes makes limited use of cost comparisons to understand value for money.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on a service level agreement

## How good is the service?

**92** Adaptations, particularly minor ones, are carried out quickly. The average time taken for major adaptations from first request to completion in 2009/10 was 34 weeks, improving to 30 weeks for the first three months of 2010/11. The average time for minor works is 16 days.

**93** The service has a strong customer focus.

- Where tenants ask Lewisham Homes for small works, the in-house operatives carry out the adaptation without referral to the Occupational Therapists. Staff have been trained to decide if a full assessment is required and what work will meet customer needs.
- All referrals for an assessment come to a single point in the Council's Social Care Advice and Information Team. An Occupational Therapist will decide if an assessment is needed and make a risk assessment to determine the priority for assessment. Occupational Therapists assess 74 per cent of people within the target 28 day period and the longest wait is just under four months.
- New tenants are asked about their support needs and a protocol is in place with the Occupational Therapists service to ensure that new tenants requiring an adaptation to their home are quickly assessed to avoid delays in moving in.
- A similar approach is taken before major works are commenced so that any adaptations can be integrated with these improvements. Lewisham Homes directly employs an Occupational Therapist to facilitate this process.

A fast and flexible service ensures minimal inconvenience for service users.

**94** Joint working arrangements with the Occupational Therapists are effective. The Council's Occupational Therapy team manages the aids and adaptations budget, carries out the work and records the results directly onto the Lewisham Homes computer system. This efficient approach saves resources.

**95** The service is well promoted with clear literature and challenging service standards. A useful leaflet sets out the assistance that can be provided and sets out the service standard of 15 days for minor adaptations and 28 days for assessment by an Occupational Therapist. Residents know what to expect if they need adaptations.

**96** Customers are satisfied with the service. In 2009/10:

- only 2 per cent were dissatisfied with the overall A&A service;
- only 4 per cent were dissatisfied with the quality of the work;
- only 6 per cent thought it took too long;
- 94 per cent said the adaptation fully resolved their problem and 2 per cent said it partially resolved their problem; and
- 89 per cent were satisfied with the information they received.

- 97** Effective use is made of previously adapted properties. When a tenant leaves a property that has received an adaptation, the system sends an automatic notification to the Council's Occupational Therapy team. This enables the team to inform clients with a need for an adapted property that the property is to become available. This enables the team to consider any further adaptations to the property for a particular client at an early stage to minimise delays in the re-letting process.
- 98** The service lacks a policy for dealing with high cost adaptations. While the aids and adaptations policy is generally strong, this omission increases the risk that decisions on this type of adaptation (which can involve the need for extending a property) are not consistent and may not involve a proper value for money consideration of whether relocation of the tenant is more appropriate.
- 99** Lewisham Homes makes limited use of cost comparisons to understand value for money. It has made some comparison of the cost of purchasing and fitting equipment with other London boroughs on some equipment but this has not been well structured or comprehensive. The OT service has negotiated discounts for some but again the approach has not been well structured or comprehensive. No assessment is made after the adaptation has been fitted to check that it is fully meeting the tenant's needs.

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### Housing income management

- 100** Strengths and weaknesses in balance in this area. Information for tenants is clear and comprehensive and payment options are varied and convenient. Lewisham Homes works well with the Council's Housing Benefits service and the collection rate for former tenant arrears is reasonable, although the arrears and write offs are high. Effective work is beginning to address financial exclusion and tenants are given useful help with debt but the monitoring of external agencies doing this work is mixed. Rent arrears and collection performance is moving from poor to below average, the service is not value for money and eviction levels are high.
- 101** Information on the rent payment and arrears service is clear and comprehensive. Rent statements give clear rent account information and reminders of help that is available if tenants need it; the freephone number for contacting Lewisham Homes and the services of its welfare advisor are promoted as well as support services provided by external agencies. Rent arrears letters include leaflets setting out payment methods and rent increase letters show which charges are eligible to be paid by Housing Benefit. Tenants can also get information through the website. The sign up process includes details on the importance of rent payment and the rent payable. Tenants can resolve any difficulties in paying the rent more easily if they are well informed.
- 102** Payment options are varied and convenient for tenants. Options include payment by cash at council offices, at retail outlets, online, by direct debit and card payments over the phone 24 hours a day, bank standing order and direct debits. But some costs are high as shown in value for money below. Payment cards are printed by Lewisham Homes and available at sign up so tenants can pay in advance of their tenancy starting. Flexibility in payment methods helps tenants pay.

## How good is the service?

- 103** Lewisham Homes works well with the Council's Housing Benefits service. Staff have direct access into the Housing Benefit computer systems, enabling them to check claims, payments and over payments. A service level agreement sets the framework for joint working which helps to minimise delays. Claims are fast tracked by Lewisham Homes staff who present information collected from claimants to the Benefits service. This has speeded up backdated payments by Housing Benefit which reduces arrears, as well as stress for tenants and administrative work.
- 104** The collection rate for former tenant arrears is reasonable, although the arrears and write offs are high. At the end of March 2009 Lewisham Homes was owed £2.7 million in former tenant arrears worth 4.3 per cent of the rent roll, more than any other London ALMO. In 2009/10 it wrote off £1.2 million or 44 per cent of the debt. This is one of the highest write offs in London as a percentage of the debt and particularly as a percentage of the rent roll. It collected £290,000 or 11 per cent of the debt which is better than average for London ALMOs. Collecting this debt increases the resources available.
- 105** Effective work is beginning to address financial exclusion and help reduce arrears. A local Credit Union offers tenants loans with Lewisham Homes paying a subsidy of 10 per cent or more by offsetting £100 from the arrears to compensate for the interest payments. A condition is that they end up with savings at the end. Twenty tenants took out such loans in 2009/10. Some early work with an external employment and training agency has resulted in a job offer for one tenant. While clear outcomes are yet to be seen these initiatives are starting to prevent tenants from accruing debt and maximising their income.
- 106** Tenants who need it are given useful help with debt. Income officers attend all sign ups and help identify potential problems at the start of the tenancy. Tenants who are having or might have financial difficulties are referred to the in-house welfare benefits adviser. This adviser has been in post less than a year but has seen 164 tenants face to face and assessed 500 benefit and grant related cases. This has helped tenants gain benefits and grants worth over £100,000. Staff also refer those who need support to external agencies but do not report how many or what the outcomes are.
- 107** The monitoring of the quality of the work carried out by external agencies is mixed. Referrals can be formal or informal and some agencies actively report back to Lewisham Homes on outcomes of work with tenants. Lewisham Reach helped 176 Lewisham Homes' residents in 2009/10 but only 40 of these were formally referred by Lewisham Homes' staff. Support covered areas such as maximising income, reducing debt, obtaining work and participating in training or education. Staff referred 180 residents to three other agencies. However, Lewisham Homes does not use this information to inform the strategic delivery of services or to establish which agencies provide the best outcomes for tenants. Support would be more effective if Lewisham Homes knew which agencies produced the best results.

- 108** Rent arrears and collection performance is moving from poor to below average. Lewisham Homes started off 2009/10 with high arrears. At 5 per cent of the rent roll, arrears were the third highest of 16 London ALMOs and almost twice the 2.7 per cent average. Rent collected (excluding arrears brought forward) in 2008/09 was 99.3 per cent which is worse than the 100 per cent average for both 2008/09 and 2009/10. At the end of June 2010 rent arrears have reduced to 4 per cent which while a respectable improvement remains high and compares with the worst performing ALMOs for March 2010. Rent collection for 2009/10 improved to 99.9 per cent but this is still below average performance. On all four of Lewisham Homes own benchmarked PIs, it remains among the worst performers of 17 London ALMOs but improving at a reasonable rate.
- 8.5 per cent of its tenants owed more than seven weeks rent In May 2010, down from 10.4 per cent in March 2009.
  - 4.3 per cent had been served a notice of seeking possession in May 2010, down from 4.8 per cent in March 2009.
  - Former tenant arrears write off is among the highest in London as mentioned above. Lewisham Homes wrote off 1.9 per cent of the rent roll in 2009/10 compared with worst performing ALMO that wrote off 1.3 per cent in 2008/09.
  - 21 tenants were evicted for arrears in April to June 2010 which is an annualised eviction rate of 0.5 per cent which compares with worst performing ALMOs in 2008/09 but it is better than the 0.75 per cent in 2009/10 which was worse than any other ALMO in London in 2008/09.
- 109** The rent arrears and collection service is not value for money. In 2008/09 the cost per property of managing rent arrears was one of the highest among London ALMOs. Costs have only reduced marginally since.
- 110** Eviction levels are high; The figures above show that Lewisham Homes evicts more tenants than any other London ALMO. It had a target to evict even more, 1 per cent, in 2009/10 and 0.85 per cent for 2010/11 which remains twice as high as the worst performing ALMOs in London and inappropriate.

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### Resident involvement

- 111** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Lewisham Homes offers residents a good selection of well advertised ways of being involved with structures that link usefully to the workings of the ALMO. It successfully captures residents' views, offers them a positive range of training opportunities and a resident inspection programme helps monitor the quality of the service. Residents have successfully influenced priorities and service outcomes, and tenant satisfaction that views are taken into account is above average. The service is value for money. However while plans for involving more hard-to-reach groups are well developed such residents are not well involved and Lewisham Homes lacks robust assessments of the impact of resident involvement.

## How good is the service?

- 112** Lewisham Homes offers residents a good selection of ways of being involved which are well advertised. Dozens of different involvement opportunities are available many of which are described below. Residents can choose topics of interest and levels of involvement and commitment. More than 3,000 tenants and residents have registered an interest in becoming involved and over 1,000 have actively taken part in involvement activities. Dates, addresses and maps of meetings are on the website along with relevant papers and minutes. The options offer convenience and flexibility for residents that will encourage participation.
- 113** Involvement structures are well linked to the workings of the ALMO.
- Local engagement is facilitated through 32 tenants' and residents' associations which address estate-based issues.
  - Three area panels and a combined area panel with elected resident members look at performance and broader issues facing the organisation. This feeds into the governance structure.
  - Assemblies, partnership boards and community forums link Lewisham Homes with local partners, the council and the wider community.
  - Six forums and improvement groups specialise in providing input into service areas such as leasehold management, equality and diversity, written material and property services. They help to improve the service.
  - Two tenant management organisations allow greater resident control in two areas.
  - Projects like service reviews and procurement activities have project groups. Residents participate in these to improve transparency and input resident ideas and a resident focus.
- 114** A resident inspection programme helps Lewisham Homes monitor the quality of the service. Eighty inspectors have been trained in five different areas; mystery shopping and inspecting contact centres, voids, repairs and estates. The programme has been running for two years and provides regular feedback on specific service issues. Services are more transparent and residents can see and challenge the quality delivered.
- 115** Lewisham Homes successfully captures residents' views through surveys and consultation. It conducts various surveys across most services including leasehold, antisocial behaviour, new lettings, repairs, resident involvement and estate services. Some surveys such as those of repairs allow investigation and resolution of problems identified. In other cases, such as complaints handling, the surveys identified a weakness that the ALMO now has to investigate further to resolve. Consultation on window cleaning helps ensure the service meets residents' priorities. Lewisham Homes can respond better to customer needs and improve services more effectively as a result of regular information from service users.

- 116** A positive range of training opportunities are available. The ALMO offers training through a mix of in-house and external training, with topics based on feedback from residents. Topics available include diversity, computer software, English language, employment and DIY skills. A training budget of £25,000 provided 48 courses to over 300 residents in 2009/10. Training is helping to build the capacity of residents to improve their ability to be involved, develop their community and find employment.
- 117** Lewisham Homes has well developed plans for involving more hard-to-reach groups. It has developed a hard-to-reach engagement plan in consultation with under represented groups with the aim to improve involvement from these residents. However, the plan was adopted in April 2010 and there are no outcomes yet.
- 118** The residents' business plan has helped the ALMO focus on resident priorities. Various activities and surveys have helped residents prioritise areas for improvement. The ideas were shaped around five key themes; safety, looking after your home, environmental, community and youth projects. Those ideas have become a series of projects, services and activities which are now part of Lewisham Homes' Business Plan for 2010/11.
- 119** Resident involvement has successfully influenced and improved services as the following examples illustrate.
- In 2008 residents applied for a share of £500,000 to help make improvements to their communities. The money was used to improve communal areas, security on estates or develop play areas. Judging of entries was led by ten residents from the Area Panels, 70 applications were received and 18 projects were selected to receive funding. Residents were involved in the design and selection of contractors for the projects which have now been completed.
  - 'Out of office hours' estate cleaning is being introduced in some estates in response to requests from working residents.
  - The website and written material has improved and become more accessible following work by residents trained to check publications for readability, plain English and usefulness.
  - Leaseholders can now contact staff for extended hours after bills are sent out.
- 120** Lewisham Homes provides adequate support to involvement activities. It helps set up and support tenant and resident associations and ensure they operate at a reasonable standard through recognition criteria. It provides training, publicity and runs many of the activities already mentioned plus various conferences, open days, away days, one off focus groups, surveys and online consultation. Residents get support to make it easier to be involved.
- 121** Resident involvement is value for money. An annual budget of £0.5 million is available just under half of which pays for staff and almost a quarter is raised from external sources. This works out at £25 per home which is the second least of the London ALMOs and half the average spent compared with 2008/09. The outcomes are positive on a relatively small budget.

## How good is the service?

- 122** Tenants satisfaction that views are taken into account is better than average. The STATUS survey in 2010 shows that 56 per cent are satisfied, up from 44 per cent in 2008 when the average for London local authorities was 50 per cent. London satisfaction levels tend to be below the 62 per cent national average in 2008/09 using a large national benchmarking system.
- 123** Lewisham Homes lacks robust assessments of the impact of resident involvement. The organisation does carry out individual assessments of activities like training, away days or the resident inspector programme. Some are clear what the objectives are and some point to useful outcomes. However, the reports tend to be descriptive or comment on what the resident thought of it. The focus on what the activity wanted to achieve and whether it achieved it is weak in most of these assessments. The activity itself appears to be the desired outcome with no reference to the strategic aims of resident involvement and limited analysis of outcomes beyond the existence of the activity itself. Lewisham Homes has no overarching assessment of resident involvement, whether it is trying to do the right things, whether it is succeeding and what difference this makes. The ALMO cannot demonstrate properly whether resident involvement activities are effective.

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## Tenancy and estate management

### Tenancy management

- 124** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Tenancies are successfully audited, welcome visits are useful but not consistently carried out and staff are well equipped to deal with different aspects of antisocial behaviour. They work effectively with partners, respond robustly to reports of domestic abuse and hate crime and make good use of a full range of tools. Residents are well informed about responses to antisocial behaviour and appropriate support is available. Lewisham Homes has taken some limited but positive steps to design out crime from estates and the service is reasonable value for money. However, satisfaction with the Lewisham Homes' response to antisocial behaviour is low and Lewisham Homes makes limited use of diversionary activities.
- 125** Robust processes for auditing tenancies are in place. Lewisham Homes checked over 2,000 tenancies in 2009/10 leading to over 140 properties becoming available to let again and 33 tenants referred for potential support. A government grant is helping pay for more tenancy audit in 2010/11. Previous weak processes make tenancy audits more difficult. Lewisham Homes does not know the date of birth of 4 per cent of tenants and only started taking photographs of tenants in 2008. This makes identifying people more difficult. However, freeing up 140 homes - almost 1 per cent of the stock - is an important contribution to meeting local priority housing need.

- 126** Welcome visits are useful when carried out but this is not consistent. Lewisham Homes aims to carry out these visits within six weeks of every new tenant moving in. They are thorough and staff cross-check that the tenant has read and understood the tenancy handbook, tenancy agreement and that the tenant thinks the property meets the lettable standard. However, staff do not consistently carry them out. Lewisham Homes has only been monitoring this since April 2010 and even then is unable to provide reliable and consistent figures. The figures it has for April in May 2010 show that 106 new tenants should have received a welcome visit. Only a third received a visit within the target six weeks and only 38 per cent received a welcome visit at all. This service is useful at helping to sustain tenancies but most tenants do not benefit from it.
- 127** Staff are well equipped to deal with different aspects of antisocial behaviour. They have received general training and specialist training, for example on young people or domestic abuse. The police have told them about information sharing and solicitors provide regular technical briefings. Staff are trained to level two in the restorative justice approach and one staff member is at level 2. Staff can help the perpetrator see that they are causing difficulty for somebody else. Staff have the knowledge they need to tackle problems they face.
- 128** Lewisham Homes works effectively with partners to address issues. It has organised its staff into patches which mirror those of the Safer Neighbourhood police team to help with communication. It uses geographical mapping of cases to help identify trends and hotspots which are then matched with police mapping information to produce an overall view of activities in an area. This has led to the holding of open days in targeted areas. Lewisham Homes attends partnership forums in the borough at a strategic and senior level as well as maintaining positive multi-agency links at an operational level. Staff attend 16 different partnership meetings related to ASB at least every three months, some monthly. Lewisham Homes' residents have access to the Council's 24-hour Housing Emergency Support Team. Effective cross agency work improves outcomes for residents.
- 129** The response to domestic abuse and hate crime is robust. The ALMO now has specialist domestic violence officers and has referred 13 cases to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). This has provided specialist support and assistance to those suffering abuse. Staff also enabled 18 victims to move so they are no longer in danger. Few residents suffer from hate crime but Lewisham Homes has robust processes of response and support similar to those for domestic abuse. Tenants in fear of domestic abuse and hate crimes can rely on help and support.
- 130** Staff make effective use of a full range of reconciliation, investigation and enforcement tools to tackle antisocial behaviour. In 2009/10 Lewisham Homes used 18 acceptable behaviour contracts, referred 54 residents for mediation, served 11 injunctions, 66 notices of seeking possession and carried out 11 evictions. It referred 290 tenants to police or other partner or support agencies and held two restorative justice conferences, one of which successfully led to the noise maker installing their own carpets. Staff make good use of noise recorders with 17 out of 19 cases showing that there was no proof of noise. Effective and flexible use of the right tools improves the chances of a successful outcome.

## How good is the service?

- 131** Performance on resolving cases is positive. In 2009/10 Lewisham Homes resolved 88 per cent of cases that it closed. This is in line with the best performing landlords in London and better than 72 per cent average and the national average of 82 per cent according to the largest national benchmarking survey.
- 132** Residents are well informed about the processes and outcomes of antisocial behaviour. The handbook, website, newsletter and information screens in all receptions are used well to tell residents about how antisocial behaviour is dealt with. Outcomes and performance information are useful and case histories show actions taken by Lewisham Homes and the importance of witnesses. This helps residents have realistic expectations on both the importance of reasonable behaviour and the tasks needed to tackle antisocial behaviour.
- 133** Appropriate support is available. Lewisham Homes has its own youth specialist who helps address the support needs of young perpetrators. During 2009/10, staff referred three residents to drug or alcohol support services, three to a family intervention project and 16 to mental health or community care services. Most of these referrals led to the problem being resolved. Vulnerability flags on the computer system include information on the support worker if known which helps with coordination between enforcement and support. Legal action is often averted when vulnerability is identified. Both victims and perpetrators of antisocial behaviour get help to overcome difficulties and prevent problems.
- 134** Lewisham Homes has taken limited but positive steps to design out crime from estates. In the last year to 18 months, Lewisham Homes has installed 18 secure entry door systems, 60 CCTV systems and ten blocks and two estates benefited from improved lighting. However, this still leaves 41 blocks and 640 properties waiting for a secure door entry system. Lewisham Homes has not invested as much in its stock as many other ALMOs and so there is scope for more work in this area. Investing in security measures is an effective way to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour.
- 135** The service is reasonable value for money. Comparing Lewisham Homes' 2009/10 costs with 16 London ALMOs in 2008/09, Lewisham Homes spent less than £400 per case on antisocial behaviour, which is the third lowest and well below the average of £650. It spent about £23 a property, the third lowest and half the London ALMO average of £45 a property and less than the national average of £32. Against this it resolved a high proportion of cases but to a low level of customer satisfaction.
- 136** Satisfaction with the Lewisham Homes' response to antisocial behaviour is low. In 2009/10 only 37 per cent of tenants who had reported antisocial behaviour were satisfied with how their complaint was dealt with and only 36 per cent were satisfied with the outcome. Both are in line with the worst performing ALMOs in London and social housing landlords in London. In most other measures like helpfulness of staff or being kept informed, Lewisham scored the worst of any London ALMO. In response Lewisham Homes has created a liaison officer to keep residents who report antisocial behaviour better updated. It now contacts residents in advance of closing cases to see if any problems are outstanding. However, it is too early to see what the outcomes are and various residents we spoke to reported continuing antisocial behaviour and estate problems to us. Case handling of antisocial behaviour does not meet expectations.

**137** Lewisham Homes makes limited use of diversionary activities to encourage young people away from being antisocial. In 2007 Lewisham Homes started the 'brighter futures' programme and continues it on three challenging estates aiming to involve young people in the management and maintenance of their estate. As a result nine young people on one estate no longer get in trouble but evidence of the impact is limited. Lewisham Homes promotes less activity and has less involvement in and understanding of the impact of diversionary activity than other similar ALMOs.

### Estate management

**138** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. Estate management problems are easy for residents to report to the ALMO and the Council has an innovative and effective system for residents to report on the areas it is responsible for. Caretakers are well trained and equipped and the caretaking service is effective; most residents are satisfied with estate management which is improving significantly. Residents are involved and informed appropriately about estate actions and inspections and the estate inspection regime has produced improvements but has some weaknesses. The response to overgrown residents' gardens on estates is mixed, grounds maintenance is not consistent, well planned, monitored or well publicised. The charging systems for estate services are not robust.

**139** Estate management problems are easy for residents to report. A team of staff dedicated to estate management answer calls, log repairs and faults and provide updates including an anticipated date for action. Issues can also be reported online. With communal repairs the caretakers or the person reporting the repairs are sent a text to say when a repair is due and told if there is a subsequent delay. In 2009/10, 98 per cent of repairs in communal areas were completed on time at a response average of eight days.

**140** The Council has an innovative and effective system for residents to report on the areas the Council is responsible for such as external graffiti, fly tipping, abandoned cars and grounds maintenance problems. The lovecleanstreets.com website enables residents and Lewisham Homes' staff to use smart mobile phones or PDAs to report issues in seconds by sending in a photo with the time and geographical location automatically attached. People can also phone in problems and monitor the resolution on the website and see the time and date it is resolved and before and after photos in many instances. Unfortunately only some staff have the software to send in instant photos in this way. Caretakers have to either phone it in or send in the photograph later when they are in an office. It is easy for residents and staff to record and monitor external estate problems.

**141** The caretaking service is effective. Caretakers are only responsible for internal areas (the Council is responsible for all external areas). We found internal areas to be almost uniformly clean and tidy, with only low levels of minor graffiti. Ninety-one per cent of estates passed their inspection of internal areas in 2008/09 and 96 per cent passed in the first three months of 2010/11.

## How good is the service?

- 142** Most residents are satisfied with estate management which is improving significantly. The results showed that dissatisfied residents made up less than 20 per cent in most categories. The worst two of the ten results were for internal cleaning and for communal repairs which had 82 per cent positive and 18 per cent negative results. The best was for household refuse collection with 95 per cent positive and 5 per cent negative. Results have improved significantly over three years when only 50 to 60 per cent were positive.
- 143** Caretakers are well trained and equipped. Improvements in the caretaking service have been put down to investment in equipment, better training, increased supervision, uniforms and greater appreciation of the role. These have all combined to improve morale. All caretakers have been trained to British Institute of Cleaning Standards (BICS) level 1. The plan is to reach level 2 in 2010. Caretaking achieved ISO9001<sup>i</sup> in December 2008 and passed the annual review in 2009. The quality of estate cleaning is improving due to these inputs.
- 144** An effective estate inspection regime has produced improvements. Lewisham Homes has three levels of inspection. The caretakers look around most estates daily and are supposed to report items such as graffiti and fly tipping. The estate supervisors inspect every couple of weeks and the quality team inspect every three months. The guidance for how to grade and mark estates is clear. Caretakers find the inspection systems fair, helping to guide and motivate them.
- 145** Residents are involved and informed appropriately about estate actions and inspections. The timetables for the routine caretaker actions are displayed at the entrance to blocks. The dates and times of the quality team inspections are advertised on the website as are the weeks that the window cleaning is due in each block. Lewisham Homes has 18 trained resident estate inspectors who lead on quality team inspections outside their own area. In the past three months a quarter of these quality inspections have been attended by a trained resident inspector and 41 per cent have been attended by resident associations and other residents, up from a third in 2009/10. The results are published on the website (although some are missing) and those attending and the residents' associations are sent the results.
- 146** The response to overgrown residents' gardens on estates is mixed. We saw various estates where overgrown gardens had a negative impact on the appearance of the estate. However, Lewisham Homes is making some progress in addressing this. Since August 2009, the Tenancy Enforcement officers have logged 51 cases of overgrown gardens of which 27 have been successfully cleared.

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<sup>i</sup> ISO9001 is an internationally recognised standard for Quality Management Systems. Certification indicates that processes are robust, monitored, recorded and reviewed.

- 147** Grounds maintenance is not of a consistent quality. The majority of areas we saw had short grass and pruned planted areas but some estates had areas where greenery was severely overgrown. Residents complained to us about this and in some cases the dense overgrown shrubbery made them feel less safe. We have seen reports and photographs from staff and residents of neglected lawns in the month before the inspection with grass reaching 18 inches. Self seeding trees have been left to grow wild for several years without attention. Only 14 per cent of the 1,122 residents surveyed were dissatisfied with grounds maintenance in 2009/10. However, the standards were particularly low in some places and satisfactory but not very good in most areas.
- 148** The planning, monitoring and publicity of grounds maintenance is inadequate. Lewisham Homes has not questioned or challenged the Council having responsibility for the work and a new contract started in March 2010. The procurement process led to a new contract for the existing contractor but with tighter conditions and higher penalties. Lewisham Homes did not ensure a rigorous monitoring regime, leaving that to the Council. It has provided residents with almost no information about grounds maintenance. The only information has been an article in a newsletter giving the contact details of the contractor. However, when residents phone the contractor direct with problems, the contractor avoids a fine and those monitoring the contract are ignorant of the problems. The regular meetings between Lewisham Homes and the Council to monitor this contract are inadequate as they look at performance for the whole borough not Lewisham Homes estates. Poorly thought through contract management leads to less effective services.
- 149** The charging of estate services is reasonable but it is not on a real time or actual outcome basis. For caretaking work, Lewisham Homes estimates the time that caretakers will take on each estate and charges accordingly. However, caretakers are sometimes called out to deal with challenges on other estates leaving work unfinished. Residents dispute the routine time taken in some places having timed the caretakers at their work. Lewisham Homes has no verifiable controls in place to ensure caretakers attend the block for the advertised and charged hours. This was audited in October 2009 and the auditors criticised this last point and could find no justification for the Council's charge for external sweeping where the input is not measured. The new grounds maintenance contract is outcome based but Lewisham Homes has not told this to residents who are the best eyes on the ground. If leaseholders knew that where standards were not met the contractor would receive a penalty and they would get compensation, they would provide much more effective monitoring. Residents are not always confident that they are getting what they pay for.
- 150** Some estates and blocks look run down due to lack of investment. Some of the buildings are difficult to keep clean and do not look that clean due to the condition of the paint on the walls, the nature of the floor surface and the fabric of the estate which is tired and worn. In places paths are cracked, worn and overgrown, boundary fencing is broken internal decorations are worn and peeling and areas like pram sheds are burnt out. The appearance and upkeep of estates looks worse where there has not been enough investment in the buildings and environment.

### Allocations and lettings

- 151** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. Efficiency is improved through access to the Council's computer system and Lewisham Homes offers applicants flexibility, decorating part of the property if the tenant wants it. Lettings to people who need adaptations is well organised, the sign-up is comprehensive and properties are re-let quickly. However, satisfaction with the overall lettings process is improving but not high, the approach to under occupation is not robust and the needs of vulnerable applicants are only beginning to be addressed. Lewisham Homes does not promote mutual exchanges adequately and some working practices could be improved.
- 152** Efficiency is improved through access to the Council's computer system. In 2009 the Council and Lewisham Homes carried out a joint exercise to ensure data by applicants is up to date. Lewisham Homes' staff can access the Council's systems to find information relating to applicants on the Council's computers. This direct access is quicker and more accurate, enabling staff to address applicants' needs quicker.
- 153** Lettings to people who need adaptations are well organised. Lewisham Homes has a database of properties that have been adapted. This means that as soon as a property is empty, the Council can look on its register for appropriate applicants who need that adaptation.
- 154** The sign-up is comprehensive. An incomes officer attends the sign-up to offer payment choices and a check of the tenant's declared outgoings and income budget. A call is made on the spot to Housing Benefit to ensure smooth transfer of payments and inform them of change of circumstances where the tenant is in receipt of benefits. The welcome pack includes a rent card and staff encourage tenants to pay at least a week's rent on the new property immediately. Tenants start their tenancy well informed.
- 155** Performance in re-letting properties quickly is strong as shown in the voids section above.
- 156** Satisfaction with the overall lettings process is not high but it is improving. In 2009/10 only 59 per cent of new tenants were satisfied with the service. Performance is improving with 65 per cent satisfied from January to May 2010.
- 157** The approach to under occupation is reasonable but not well advertised. The Council offers residents a small incentive of £300 per room released if they move as well as moving expenses. However, the existence of incentives is not advertised in leaflets, the handbook or the website and staff are not aware of the details; when we asked, they referred us to the Council. The Council estimates that a third of social housing properties are under occupied but does not have an accurate figure. That would represent over 5,000 tenants of whom only 213 of these have registered for a move. In 2009/10 Lewisham Homes moved 83 under occupied tenants. If the approach was better advertised and supported more homes could be freed up.

- 158** The needs of vulnerable applicants are only beginning to be addressed. The Council appointed a new home search support officer in January 2010. This person has started to visit people who are not bidding and has successfully assisted 33 vulnerable applicants to bid and be re-housed. However, it has not established yet who all the people are who find bidding on the choice-based system difficult, so they are not all getting help. Lewisham Homes' has a list of vulnerable tenants who have difficulty bidding and helps them to bid. Again robust systems are lacking to ensure that all such tenants are known. Some people who are entitled to rehousing may be missing out due to vulnerability and lack of support.
- 159** Lewisham Homes does not promote mutual exchanges adequately. The existence of mutual exchanges is mentioned on the website but it gives no information on how or what support is available. An exchange database for Lewisham Homes' tenants exists on the Council website, but no mention of it is made in Lewisham Homes' literature and Lewisham Homes staff do not support tenants to find an exchange. In 2008/09, Lewisham Homes made 20 mutual exchanges which was 0.11 per cent of stock which was the lowest out of 29 London local authorities. Failing to promote mutual exchanges adequately leaves some tenants in homes that they do not want to be in and puts pressure on the waiting list.
- 160** Some working practices could be improved.
- There are no pre-termination checks on properties to make sure they are left in an acceptable condition and there are no incentives for tenants to leave properties in a lettable condition.
  - The Lettable Standards are only seen and signed by the tenant at sign-up whereas this information would be more useful at the viewing of the property.

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### Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 161** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. Leaseholders have reasonable input into services they receive. The leaseholder team provides a prompt and responsive service. The performance on collecting service charges and major works charges is strong although the debt remains high. Lewisham Homes offers effective help to leaseholders with financial difficulties. The methods used to estimate service charge costs are thorough and reasonable and costs remain relatively low. However, leaseholder satisfaction with the overall service is low, Lewisham Homes sent out the statements of actual bills late in 2009 and does not calculate sufficiently accurate service charge bills. Leaseholders do not receive regular or up-to-date information on communal repairs and Lewisham Homes cannot provide all leaseholders with an adequate breakdown of time taken on estate management.
- 162** Leaseholders are consulted well and have reasonable input into services they receive. Involvement by leaseholders has led to clearer information, Saturday opening and expanded telephone hours after bills go out. It has led to plans to offer leaseholders access to the Lewisham Homes internal repair service. Lewisham Homes has involved leaseholders in the planning and procurement of major works through the major works improvement group. Services are more responsive thanks to effective involvement.

## How good is the service?

- 163** The Leaseholder team provides a prompt and responsive service. Staff answered the phones within the target 15 seconds for 85 per cent of the time in April - the peak period for calls following the issuing of annual bills. The amount of correspondence received by the leasehold service is decreasing, indicating that information is clearer. Most of the leaseholders we spoke to found staff polite and helpful. The service is easy for leaseholders to access.
- 164** The information provided to leaseholders is mainly comprehensive and clear. Leaseholders receive the residents' newsletter every three months and a leaseholder newsletter twice a year. They have a comprehensive, up-to-date handbook and website and most appear to find the literature useful. Lewisham Homes has consulted on a robust way of charging the management fee, although this breakdown is still being calculated and leaseholders will not see it until September when they receive the statement of actual costs for 2009/10.
- 165** Information is not clear on some issues. The handbook is not clear who is responsible for flat doors or the consequences of the leaseholder replacing items like windows that the freeholder is responsible for. Some leaseholders are replacing fire doors with less safe ones. The costs to Lewisham Homes of leaseholders using different payment methods for service and major work charges is not explained and so leaseholders cannot minimise the costs that they end up paying for.
- 166** The responses to enquiries on the Right to Buy are prompt. In 2009/10 Lewisham Homes responded to all RTB<sup>i</sup> forms and Section 125<sup>ii</sup> forms within the statutory targets. Tenants who want to buy their properties are served well.
- 167** Lewisham Homes offers leaseholders a range of methods to pay their bills. Leaseholders can pay using the bank by credit card, debit card, direct debit, standing order, cheque, online, or by telephone. They can also pay at the post office and town hall. However, direct debit payments are not flexible with only one day a month available.
- 168** Leaseholders who receive large major works bills are now able to pay in a flexible way. A new interest free option allows up to 24 months interest free for bills less than £3,000; or 36 months interest free for bills over £3,000. For bills over £10,000 the option exists to pay the whole bill over more than three years but with interest after three years. This compares reasonably with other London ALMOs and will make paying large bills easier.
- 169** The performance on collecting service charges and major works charges is strong although the debt remains high. Lewisham Homes collected the equivalent of 107 per cent of the annual service charges in 2009/10, reducing the debt by £370,000. However, this left a debt of £1.3 million equivalent to over one third of a years charge. The collection rates of major works are reasonable. In 2009/10, the ALMO raised £0.9 million in the first 11.5 months of the year and collected £1.4 million. However, most bills are relatively small and due to be paid within one year while the debt is £2.8 million equivalent to over two years worth of charges. The ALMO is catching up on collecting bills which reduces costs for leaseholders.

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<sup>i</sup> RTB 2: this notice must be served by councils when they receive a Right to Buy (RTB) request from a tenant.

<sup>ii</sup> Section 125 notices advise new leaseholders of council properties (following the right to buy) what major works will be carried out within the first five years of their lease. If accurate information is not contained in the notice, the landlord is unable to recharge leaseholders the full amount for these works.

- 170** Lewisham Homes has created a positive link between the service charges levied for tenants and for leaseholders. Service charges for tenants are disaggregated which means that they pay for the services delivered to their block in the same way as leaseholders do. This allows leaseholders and tenants to talk with one voice about the cost and quality of the services they receive.
- 171** Lewisham Homes offers effective help to leaseholders with financial difficulties. The three dedicated leasehold case workers are trained in welfare benefits and can signpost leaseholders to relevant debt, money and benefit agencies. They sent out 252 budget planners to leaseholders with payment problems and got 98 back in 2009/10. This enabled them to engage effectively with those residents and help them. Leaseholders have benefited from £10,000 in benefits following this help. Some leaseholders have their financial difficulties eased due to Lewisham Homes.
- 172** The positive aspects of service charges are that they are well estimated, checked and relatively low cost. The methods used to estimate service charge costs are thorough and reasonable. In 2008/09, the more predictable costs were within ten per cent of the estimate. External auditors check the overall approach to service charge calculation and check a sample of the actual charges which improves accuracy and accountability. Costs have risen fast but remain relatively low. The average cost of services went up by 30 per cent in three years from £470 in 2007/08 to an estimate of £609 for 2010/11. The last comparison was for 2008/09 when the average bill at Lewisham Homes was lower than average for ten London ALMOs and Lewisham Homes increases since then have been lower than inflation. Charges compare well and leaseholders can plan their finances appropriately.
- 173** Lewisham Homes does not calculate service charge costs as well as it could. The last statement of actual costs for 2008/09 was audited and the auditors found potential errors and unsubstantiated costs which mainly balanced themselves out but taken separately added up to over 10 per cent of costs. The value of variations following challenges to charges is increasing from £6,000 to £21,000 to £25,000 in 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 respectively. Charges for communal electricity are frequently not based on actual consumption as electricity meters are not read regularly. The charge for caretakers and Council sweepers on each estate is not based on actual time but on a calculated average. Because of the unsubstantiated charges, leaseholders are not being charged the full cost of the service and some are concerned about the accuracy of the charges.
- 174** Information on charges is not as up-to-date as it could be. Lewisham Homes sent out the statements of actual bills late in 2009; all of them were at least a month late and some were three months late. Leaseholders do not have access to up-to-date information on communal repairs, although this is planned. Not all advertised standards are being met and Leaseholders lack timely information on which to assess the accuracy of their charges.
- 175** Leaseholder satisfaction with the overall service is low. The last survey in 2008 showed that only one in three leaseholders are satisfied with the overall service. This is well below average for London ALMOs and Lewisham Homes has the advantage that it has not sent out large major works bills to leaseholders yet.

## How good is the service?

- 176** Lewisham Homes has to write off bills due to poor charging systems. Before 2009 estimates on planned work were unreliable and poorly specified in section 125 notices and as part of section 20 consultation. These errors have led to refunds or cancellations of £500,000 of bills so far with a further £208,000 in dispute and under investigation. Better procedures would have allowed this money to be collected.
- 177** Leaseholders receive limited information about forthcoming work to their building. Although leaseholders are given the required statutory notice for major works they have not been given information on the longer term costs of maintaining their building might be. Information on the website is vague. Leaseholders have had up to three separate major works done on their building in the same year without knowing that one bill will be followed by another. This is being addressed by the development of the stock condition database. However, it has made financial planning difficult for leaseholders.
- 178** The approach to dealing with sub tenants is not clear. Lewisham Homes lacks an agreed approach on what relationship it is trying to establish with subtenants of leaseholders. There is no standard place to record their details on the system to make it easy to contact them quickly in response to leaks or antisocial behaviour. They are not included in any updates about the estate or resident involvement initiatives unless they are posted through the door. This is despite subtenants making up over 25 per cent of all leaseholders.

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## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 179** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Costs compare well. The leadership around value for money is positive, the strategy is effective and service reviews have led to positive value for money outcomes. Lewisham Homes has succeeded in delivering efficiency savings and in improving the value for money of the services provided by the Council. Procurement is well managed and effective and efficiency savings have been reinvested appropriately. However, Lewisham Homes does not use value for money targets enough, it is not always quick to realise the savings that are available and some payment costs for income collection are high. The ratio of planned to responsive repairs work is not efficient.

## How do costs compare?

- 180** Costs compare well. In January 2010 Lewisham Homes benchmarked its 2009/10 latest spend forecast and 2008/09 figures against the costs of 17 other London ALMOs in 2008/09. This showed the following.
- Lewisham Homes has low overhead costs compared with its peers. Finance costs per employee are the lowest while overheads, as a percentage of direct costs, are improving and are now average.
  - Cost per property of housing management and major works have reduced and are now lower than average. But satisfaction is low in these areas.
  - Resident involvement costs are among the lowest with reasonable outcomes but only average levels of satisfaction.
  - Responsive repairs costs are higher than average but so is performance.

- Estate service costs per property are average as are outcomes, although over the last three years costs and quality have both increased.
- The cost of the ASB service is among the lowest while the quality of service is reasonable.

### How is value for money managed?

**181** The leadership around value for money is positive.

- The Board and the Council have placed a clear expectation on Lewisham Homes to make savings. Savings targets have been in place since the ALMO was formed and these are now set out in the value for money strategy.
- A '10 per cent smarter' initiative is an efficiency register setting out where savings have been made in each area and is being developed into a list of things that service teams would like to do. This promotes the importance of value for money while encouraging staff to share good ideas.
- Lewisham Homes has a Value for Money Forum attended by Heads of Service. It is used to publicise board strategies and communicate savings and targets.
- Managers have been trained on how to approach value for money.
- A value for money template is used in the business planning process to make sure managers consider the issues set out in the template in both day to day work and in planning for the future.

**182** The value for money strategy is effective but lacks some details. The 2010 strategy provides a clear framework and highlights the importance of involving residents in shaping services and procurement. It sets out activities and responsibilities, with clear targets for efficiency savings in all key areas up to 2013. The previous 2008 strategy delivered on the core goals of reducing management costs and increasing investment in maintaining assets. Senior managers have some ideas such as better use of information technology and selling services but these are not set out. The right frameworks are in place to improve efficiencies.

**183** Service reviews have led to positive value for money outcomes. The reviews have been prioritised to address core objectives, the areas of highest concern or those services which had the greatest potential for producing savings. Savings following these reviews include:

- savings from the responsive repairs review has realised savings worth £900,000 a year so far. Lewisham Homes estimates a further £700,000 a year will be realised as more aspects of the review are carried out; and
- the income management review has generated around £25,000 of efficiency savings through automation and Lewisham Homes believes that the loans from the credit agency will save £10,000 by avoiding expensive evictions.

## How good is the service?

**184** The overall approach to benchmarking is positive but not comprehensive. Lewisham Homes assesses the cost and quality of its services every year against the available peer group of London ALMOs. Benchmarking information is also obtained from a nationally recognised organisation and some service-specific comparisons are made through joint arrangements with other organisations (for example, involving the repairs services). The benchmark outcomes are appropriately reported, they play a role in planning service reviews and the information has been used to identify areas where improvements can be made. However, Lewisham Homes does not have a clear approach to benchmarking which ensures that it is comprehensively undertaken and that the information which it delivers is used to inform service improvement. Consequently, we found examples where costs and outcomes had not been well compared (for example, in the 'aids and adaptations area) and where benchmarking did not lead to a robust analysis of comparative practice. Lewisham Homes struggled to provide a meaningful comparison of how void costs compared. Benchmarking is helping improve services but not as much as it could be.

**185** Lewisham Homes has succeeded in delivering efficiency savings. It has already delivered £3.3 million and a further £1.8 million is planned in the current year. It has set challenging targets for the next three years of £1.3 million in 2011/12, £0.8 million in 2012/13 and £0.8 million in 2013/14. Examples of where these savings have been made include:

- moving to an online system for applying to court in rent arrears cases and outsourcing cases to lawyers in bulk is saving £85,000 a year;
- Lewisham Homes has transformed the efficiency and effectiveness of the responsive repairs service. Reducing reliance on subcontracting from 45 per cent to 17 per cent for 2009/10 saved £420,000 per year. The ALMO introduced new information technology and a new phone system and schedule of rates. New software and handheld computers have reduced administrative overheads and distributes jobs more efficiently. Using multi-skilled operatives and carrying out more jobs in one visit has helped reduce calls to the contact centre from 51,000 to 36,000 a year; and
- restructuring the housing services saved £310,000 in 2009/10 contributing to a reduction in direct costs per property for the housing management function from £300 to £210 over two years.

**186** Procurement is well managed and effective. The procurement strategy and action plan sets out a strong approach to procurement. Lewisham Homes has a dedicated procurement team and a service level agreement with the Council's procurement team which enables it to buy in services and information sources at competitive costs. This strong approach is evident in recent procurement activity involving the gas contract, an outsourced supply contract for materials for the responsive repairs service and the review of the repairs service when it was taken over from the Council in November 2008. A strong approach is being taken in preparing the ALMO for the delivery of its decent homes programme. Lewisham Homes is able to buy into key Council services at a reduced cost where economies of scale can produce price benefits which would not be available to the ALMO. Successes include:

- materials for the direct responsive repairs service will save £320,000 per year from 2011/12;
- a partnering arrangement for two gas contracts, one in the North and one in the South leading to improvements in the service produced savings of £1.2 million per year. The price moved from a very poor value to £150 per property which is in an acceptable average range for London;
- the new contract for subcontracting responsive repairs reduced costs by 12.5 per cent, saving £190,000; and
- the change in out-of-hours service provider saved £100,000 and produced a better service.

**187** Lewisham Homes has been successful at improving the value for money of the services provided by the Council. It reviews and renegotiates all service level agreements with the Council every year and has secured cost reductions of £2.6 million a year in services procured from the Council. Examples include taking £112,000 of the £900,000 ICT budget in-house saving £18,000. The Council's £131,000 out-of-hours answering service was considered to be underperforming and a new provider saved £100,000 per year as shown above. Some costs which have reduced, such as processing rent payments, could be better value but overall the improvements provide valuable resources for the service.

**188** Efficiency savings have been reinvested appropriately in priority frontline services and in the areas of the service that matter most to service users. Resources allocated to revenue maintenance have increased by 43 per cent since 2007 - the ALMO has invested an additional £6 million in the repairs service and direct costs of estate services increased by 25 per cent in 2008/09 as Lewisham Homes invested in equipment, training and the supervision of caretakers. The decision to fund the 2009/10 ICT programme from the core management fee released nearly £1 million for investment in planned works. These are priority areas for improvement for residents and the investment has improved services substantially.

## How good is the service?

**189** Lewisham Homes challenges the Council effectively every year on what it charges to the Housing Revenue Account for services to residents. These are services that the ALMO is not responsible for but wants to see improved in order to free up resources and improve services for residents. These challenges have contributed to annual cost reductions since 2008/09 as follows.

- HRA<sup>i</sup> client support costs<sup>ii</sup> £300,000 or 15 per cent reduction.
- environmental sweeping costs £250,000 or 29 per cent reduction.
- graffiti removal £ 48,000 reduction down to nothing.
- responding to antisocial behaviour £136,000 reduction down to nothing.
- grounds maintenance £140,000 or 21 per cent reduction.

**190** Lewisham Homes saves money with effective partnership working. It has a formal arrangement with Homes for Islington to share a governance team. This has enhanced the level of expertise available to both organisations at reduced cost.

**191** Budgets are well monitored and managed. Budget monitoring reports are clear and appropriately detailed. Budget holders are supported by corporate finance staff who meet them monthly to assess their budgets and work with them to provide financial information in the way that best suits them. Budget holders are now provided with much better information on their service cost base. In 2009/10, budget holders provided detailed service cost and performance information to residents and discussed them as part of the residents' business plan. Resources are well managed and in 2009/10, the capital programme of £14.454 million underspent by only 1 per cent.

**192** Other examples of value for money successes include:

- tenancy audits in 2009/10 enabled over 140 properties, or 0.9 per cent of the stock to be made available for re-letting. This ensures that properties are used for the purposes intended and increases the housing available for local people;
- tenant satisfaction with the value for money of rents is high at 75 per cent, which is the highest score of 14 London ALMOs;
- when the DLO repairs service was transferred to the ALMO in 2008 it was forecasting a £1.4 million deficit in that year. This service has been brought back into profit even though turnover has reduced from £13.7 million to £11.5 million; and
- obtaining better warranties from the boiler supplier and arranging for the ALMO's contractor to be accepted as its agent reduces repairs costs and increases the speed that the heating system is back on line.

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<sup>i</sup> Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is a separate account used only for council housing.

<sup>ii</sup> This is the cost of the work the Council does to oversee the ALMO and other outsourced housing work

- 193** Lewisham Homes is taking an appropriate close look at payment costs for income collection. As well as looking at bank charges the organisation is looking at internal and Council processing costs. So direct debits cost per transaction from bank charges are £0.04 while average indirect staff costs for each transaction are £1.26 mainly due to the costs of failed debits. The direct costs of paying by an automated phone system are £0.21 while the indirect costs are £1.15. While this looks high, there are no benchmarks available. By looking at costs in detail Lewisham Homes is better placed to improve costs and promote payment methods more appropriately.
- 194** Lewisham Homes does not use value for money targets consistently at service, team and individual level to drive improvements. Some targets relate to the requirements to reduce overheads in response to the 16 per cent reduction in stock in October 2010. Staff may focus less on improving value for money if it is not part of their targets.
- 195** Lewisham Homes is not always quick to realise the savings that are available. For example, the ALMO was aware in December 2008 that it could save money by training its staff to produce Energy Performance Certificates<sup>i</sup> in-house, yet it is still paying an external company to produce them as staff have yet to complete the training to qualify them for this work. Tenants who qualify for aids and adaptations are not 'means-tested' to ensure that those who can afford to pay a contribution do so in order to ensure that the available budget is used to best effect. There have been limited outcomes from recycling equipment used in this service.
- 196** The ratio of planned to responsive repairs work is not efficient. In 2008/09 the ratio was 40:60 and in 2010/11 the forecast is 47:53<sup>ii</sup>. The consequence of under-investment in planned works are evident in the approach to cyclical decorations where Lewisham Homes has not addressed all the substandard cyclical decorations in the three and a half years since becoming an ALMO (some external areas have not been painted for up to 15 years). As a result peeling paint is leaving wood exposed to the elements which will result in extra costs in replacing rotten wood.

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<sup>i</sup> Energy performance certificates (EPCs) give homeowners, tenants and buyers information on the energy efficiency of their properties. The EPC is required by law when a building is built, sold or put up for rent and it is valid for three years.

<sup>ii</sup> Recommended good practice in this area is that at least 60 per cent expenditure should be on planned works.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 197** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in this area. Lewisham Homes has shown that it can implement change effectively leading to service improvements. All services have shown an improvement and some of them a significant improvement in services and in value for money. Lewisham Homes has introduced new services, residents' satisfaction is increasing and independent accreditation shows that processes and standards are getting better. Staff morale is improving, plans are carried out successfully and the organisation is becoming more efficient and cost effective in both the frontline and the back office. However in some service areas, elements of the service have not improved at a fast enough rate.
- 198** Lewisham Homes has shown that it can implement change effectively leading to service improvements. It brought the responsive repairs service and call centre in-house, moved from generic working to specialism in various service areas, invested in changed work patterns for caretakers and centralised the voids team. These and other changes in structure have led to better quality and more efficient services.
- 199** All services have shown an improvement and some of them a significant improvement in services and in value for money. The table in appendix one shows the performance indicators.
- The service is easier to access with a new telephone system and a new call centre that answers the phones promptly. Clear service standards are available and monitored for all service areas.
  - Information available for residents has improved with new handbooks, a DVD and resident approved content. The quality of the website has improved with more information and more services available online. The impact can be seen with the number of unique visitors rising from 2,600 in August 2009 to 4,100 in March 2010. The number of returning visitors rose from 1,950 to 3,200 over the same period.
  - Information on the profile of residents and their vulnerabilities has increased significantly and the information is now accessible and starting to be put to good use. All reception areas are now DDA<sup>i</sup> compliant and translations are more available.

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<sup>i</sup> The Disability Discrimination Acts (DDA) 1995 and 2005 aim to end discrimination against disabled people and require that public buildings should be made accessible for people with disabilities

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- The proportion of repairs responded to on time has improved by between 22 and 30 per cent depending on the category of repair. Repairs appointments made and kept are up from 90 to 98 per cent and repairs completed on first visit are up from 84 to 93 per cent. Repair appointments are more flexible and the tenant is called when the operative is on the way to an appointment. The improvement is demonstrated by avoidable contacts at the call centre falling from 47 to 34 per cent and customer satisfaction rising from 75 to 87 per cent. The cost per property is down by 14 per cent.
  - Void re-let times are down from 38 to 23 days while repair costs per void have reduced from £2,750 to £2,340.
  - Performance in gas servicing is up from 94 to 100 per cent. The cost of the service is down from £234 to £150 per property.
  - Rent arrears are falling and collection rates are rising. Financial inclusion and debt advice work has improved with the employment of a dedicated Welfare Benefits Advisor and the development of a partnership with the Lewisham Credit Union. Costs per unit of collecting rent and recovering arrears, while high, are reducing slightly.
  - Residents have a lot more choice on how to get involved. They can participate through service improvement groups, resident inspections, focus groups, in the selection of contractors, surveys and open days. The proportion of tenants who are satisfied that their views are being taken into account has risen from 50 to 56 per cent. The direct costs per property are low and reducing slightly.
  - The percentage of estates passing a quality check has increased from 87 to 93 per cent. Satisfaction with the internal caretaking and cleaning services is up from 53 to 84 per cent. However, direct costs per property of estate services have risen by 25 per cent although they remain just below average.
- 200** Lewisham Homes has introduced new services or ways of delivering services for residents. This includes: window cleaning, welfare benefits advice, credit union loans, the following up of ASB complainant opinion prior to case closure, confidential interview rooms in reception, out of hours advice for leaseholders in response to bills and gas servicing for leaseholders.
- 201** Residents are more satisfied. Most of the tenants and leaseholders we spoke to recognise and value these improvements although they would like to see more. The STATUS survey shows an increase in overall satisfaction from 60 to 68 per cent.
- 202** Processes and standards have improved as shown by independent accreditation. In the last year Lewisham Homes achieved a number of awards and quality standards. This includes Investors in People, the Customer Service Excellence Standard and ISO9001 for repairs, caretaking, and lift and gas servicing.
- 203** Staff morale is improving. The proportion of staff who say that Lewisham Homes is a good place to work has increased from 67 to 87 per cent. This is an important indicator in customer service organisations, as this has an important impact on the quality of the customer service.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 204** Lewisham Homes carries out plans successfully. The Audit Commission carried out a voluntary inspection in 2008/09, which included recommendations for improvements which are outlined in appendix two below. These have all been carried out. The 2009/10 business plan included 133 tasks of which 85 per cent were completed by the end of the year, the rest are being addressed in the first half of 2010/11. The ability to carry out plans enables improvements to be delivered.
- 205** The organisation is becoming more efficient and cost effective in both the frontline and the back office. Central costs per direct employee are down from £9,250 to £6,500 in two years while direct costs per property for the housing management function are down from £300 to £210. This shows improvement in value for money and provides resources to invest in better services.
- 206** Some areas have not improved adequately. Satisfaction with some services remains low. Despite carrying out a review of complaints, only one in five residents who complain are satisfied with the response and only 37 per cent of residents are satisfied with the response to antisocial behaviour. Staff only carry out welcome visits for 38 per cent of new tenants. Leaseholder satisfaction remains low, eviction levels for rent arrears remain high and residents cannot rely on a satisfactory response if they communicate with Lewisham Homes by email. Lewisham Homes has not assessed the quality of services provided by partners that provide support and other services in response to referrals. Some estates still suffer from peeling paint and lack of cyclical decorations and the approach to rechargeable repairs is weak.

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## How well does the service manage performance?

- 207** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Stakeholders have an appropriate input into priorities and the business plan. The approach to performance measurement and assessment is robust and Lewisham Homes uses benchmarking appropriately and manages projects well including service reviews. The effective systems for learning both internally and externally are leading to service improvements and the ALMO is aware of weaknesses and improvements needed. The approach to reaching decent homes is well thought through and the approach to environmental sustainability is improving. Satisfactory frameworks for risk and financial management are in place and the relationship with the Council is positive. However, not all strategies are robust and comprehensive action plans lack SMART targets and outcomes are not well assessed in some areas. Lewisham Homes did not give enough thought to the new grounds maintenance contract, it lacks detailed plans to structure efficiency targets and the approach to monitoring has weaknesses in some areas.
- 208** Lewisham Homes has a well laid out business plan that sets out the vision and strategic objectives and how these will be achieved through a series of strategies and approaches. It is a clear road map for all relevant parties to understand how the organisation intends to develop and move forward.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 209** Residents, staff and other stakeholders have been able to influence the business plan and overall priorities of the organisation effectively. The residents' business plan has enabled tenants to prioritise some activities and £500,000 of expenditure that have then become part of the business plan. The priorities they put forward through this and other resident involvement initiatives have influenced broader plans and service activities too. Staff have had the opportunity to influence plans for their team and partners, including different departments within the Council, have had a chance to make inputs. The priorities of Lewisham Homes reflect the views and knowledge of all the relevant key players.
- 210** Plans are well coordinated and monitored. Lewisham Homes has a sophisticated and multi-layered planning action system that covers all plans and includes about 300 actions. All main actions are in one spreadsheet that can be filtered and interrogated for many purposes. Some actions are monitored by the board, some by senior management team and some just by directors or teams. Only directors can approve that an action has a red or green light for being on target or not. A corporate programme board monitors the main actions and projects that come from the business plan. Plans are more likely to be effective if they are well coordinated and monitored.
- 211** However not all strategies are robust and comprehensive. The strategic approach to asset management does not address all the issues that the stock faces as indicated under capital, planned and major works above. The diversity and equality strategy does not focus sufficiently on issues that would be noticed by residents as explained under the diversity section above.
- 212** The approach to environmental sustainability is mixed but improving with a positive potential. The organisation is showing good leadership in prioritising this through developing strategies and carrying out valuable initiatives as shown above, under the section on capital, planned and major works. However, the approach is not yet comprehensive, coordinated and well prioritised as the strategy is still being developed. Two strategies have been drafted, one on sustainability and one on affordable warmth with steering groups established. These have the potential to have a significant benefit on the health and welfare of tenants and contribute to the wider challenges of environmental sustainability.
- 213** The approach to measuring outcomes from strategies and plans has weaknesses. Some high level plans and strategies are not linked to SMART<sup>i</sup> action plans. The business plan has an attached task list of actions that need to be carried out to meet the business plan priorities none of which are measurable. The impact assessments of resident involvement activities lack clear methodology and fail to inform whether the action meets either the objectives set for it or the wider strategic objectives of resident involvement. The Board and the executive have no way to determine whether the actions have led to outcomes of benefit to residents and the service. However, significant projects have objectives and measurable outcomes.

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<sup>i</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound. This usually refers to targets in improvement plans.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 214** The approach to performance measurement and assessment is robust. Service areas have their own detailed list of performance indicators using bespoke reports emailed regularly to staff and managers. The board performance panel looks at performance in detail, asks difficult questions and drills down for more information and explanation. This sets the culture and the executive has a similar meeting that uncovers barriers to more effective working and pushes for solutions. This approach has an impact on middle managers who feel that they need to understand the figures well. Teams and staff have their own targets and measures. Staff know what is expected of them and the organisation knows how to use measures to drive improvement.
- 215** Lewisham Homes uses benchmarking appropriately but not comprehensively. Figures are used to set targets, inform reports and identify weaknesses. Many managers attend benchmarking groups and make contact with others who can help with problems. This helps introduce new ideas, processes and improvements. One of the various examples is the idea of the residents' business plan which came from a finance benchmarking meeting. However some service areas lack comparative information on cost and quality. Benchmarking helps to improve services.
- 216** Projects are well managed. Lewisham Homes introduces many improvements using projects that follow well established project management methodology with a project board, project sponsor and project team. The projects are overseen by a Programme Board (consisting largely of the senior management team) which meets every month to assess progress and provide challenge. Plans deliver improvements when they are well project managed.
- 217** The service review programme is robust and leading to improvements. They are well planned and prioritised focusing first on the areas of concern like income management and the repairs service. A guide helps with consistency and shows how they should be carried out using the project methodology described above. The guide includes requirements for efficiency savings, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, performance indicators and equality issues. Recent reviews have used external expertise and had appropriate challenge, comparison and consultation. A weakness is the lack of a statement as part of the review saying how they will be evaluated to see if the review was a success. The improvements in arrears management, customer service and responsive repairs outlined in this report have in part been as a result of this successful review process.
- 218** Lewisham Homes improves through well structured processes of learning internally. A list of relevant lessons from complaints, surveys and mystery shopping is circulated to staff and discussed at team meetings. A learning report goes to the senior management team. Staff write up what was learned from activities like business planning processes and what can be done better next time. The organisation improves as a result of learning from its own mistakes.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 219** External sources of learning are also used effectively to improve services. The ALMO is a member of various groups, networks and clubs which staff attend. Staff visit other organisations to find out the best way to implement services like the new call centre. Lewisham Homes is partnered with Homes for Islington which has carried out quality checks on Equality Impact Assessments, an audit of customer services and provided advice on collecting former tenant arrears. More joint work is planned. The external challenge of services has resulted in improvements like the recent creation of the vulnerability coordinator's role. By being outward looking Lewisham Homes benefits from learning good practice from many places.
- 220** Lewisham Homes benefits from being aware of most weaknesses and the improvements needed. The organisation was aware of the more significant weaknesses set out in this report and has plans to address them. It recognises the need to reduce high staffing costs and improve performance in rent collection. Plans are being developed to better measure the effectiveness of the value for money strategy.
- 221** Frameworks for risk and financial management are in place and well managed.
- A Risk Forum of managers analyses and identifies the risks and decides what is to be included in the risk register. All high level strategic risks are reported to the Risk forum every three months.
  - When the ALMO was formed, it arranged for an audit by a specialist consultant which identified 52 potential health and safety problems and inadequate policies, procedures and information. Actions to address this are being carried out as shown in the section above on capital, planned and major works.
  - Regular and effective financial reporting is in place. Board members have received training to help them understand these reports and they exercise appropriate governance control. The Council received detailed reports every three months and highlights every month. The reports are clearly presented with good explanations to support the financial information being presented.
- 222** The relationship with the Council is positive. Regular meetings take place at all levels and the key players view each other with a healthy level of both trust and challenge. Council officers sit on groups where services need improving such as rent income management. The ALMO is involved with the wider community strategy and influences the Council to change procedures and reduce costs of service level agreements. The Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Lewisham Homes rent income team share information and work to try to save resources. Many other examples illustrate positive joint working leading to enhanced outcomes for services.
- 223** Some weaknesses still exist in the relationship with the Council. The relationship has matured as the ALMO developed, with the Council having a much more controlling influence to start with and gradually and appropriately stepping back. However, both the Board and the executive do sometimes defer to the Council when either a challenge or some more independent thinking would be of benefit. An example around grounds maintenance is shown below.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 224** Lewisham Homes did not give enough thought to the new grounds maintenance contract. The contract is managed by the Council and covers all the Council's green spaces including those managed by the ALMO. The new contract that started in March 2010 is satisfactory and it has reduced costs by £140,000 or 21 per cent a year. However, it could have been better managed from the beginning. The ALMO relied too much on the Council to set up and manage the contract and did not provide enough challenge. Lewisham Homes failed to tell residents what to do if the standards were not met. Many residents go straight to the contractor with complaints which are then (sometimes) rectified and bypass the penalty system and leave the official contract monitoring system in the dark about these failures. If leaseholders knew they would get money back if work is not done they would monitor and report failures better. Lewisham Homes has failed to ensure that all of its grounds are covered by a contract. Higher quality, lower cost outcomes would have resulted from better planning.
- 225** The approach to monitoring has weaknesses in some areas. Customer satisfaction with complaints and with responses to antisocial behaviour are both particularly low. Although this is monitored, Lewisham Homes has not been doing enough to find out what is causing this low level of satisfaction. The estate satisfaction monitoring survey does not follow good practice in offering an equal number of positive and negative responses. This prevents the figures from being compared with early reports and to other organisations results. These weaknesses are a barrier to understanding performance trends in specific areas.

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## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 226** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Lewisham Homes has a strong, well-managed Board, management and communications are effective with clear values that motivate staff. The human resources function works well and Lewisham Homes offers positive training opportunities. Information and Communication technology is reasonable and improving, Lewisham Homes works well with partners and inward investment has helped improve services and outcomes for residents. However, Lewisham Homes has not yet secured the finances necessary to ensure that properties can be improved to reach a decent standard, current budget provision will not meet the growing demand for aids and adaptations and staff sickness and absence are higher than national averages.
- 227** Lewisham Homes has a strong, well-managed Board. Systems for assessing competence include appraisals and confidential assessments from fellow board members and recruitment drives aim to fill the areas where skills are weaker. All the Board members have their own development programme of courses and training including coaching and external courses. New members benefit from a structured induction programme and a well laid out induction manual. The Board has shown it can take difficult decisions like transferring over the repairs operatives from the Council's poorly performing repairs service. The Board challenges the executive; it strengthened the financial inclusion strategy and performance reporting and made the capital programme less demanding as members saw it as unachievable. The Board has structural challenges in the near future which it is intending to plan solutions for soon. The ALMO benefits from clear direction.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

**228** Management and communications are effective with clear values that motivate staff. Management and internal communications both got a high rating from the Investors in People<sup>i</sup> assessment and the staff survey from December 2009 showed staff satisfaction with management in the mid to high 80s over a range of questions. Staff like the Chief Executive's blog, general communications and the open door culture in the ALMO and they are enthusiastic about inter team work and colleagues attempts to resolve problems rather than just passing them on. Repairs operatives support the new technology and the performance scheme that pays them by the job. High morale improves capacity as represented by 87 per cent of staff saying that Lewisham Homes was a good place to work and 100 per cent of staff saying the values of the organisation do not need changing.

**229** The human resources (HR) function works well and Lewisham Homes offers positive training opportunities.

- A health check against the liP standard was carried earlier in 2009 identifying areas for improvement. As a result of this and consultation with managers, HR brought in a new learning and development evaluation system, improved the appraisal system and brought in behaviour expectations from managers.
- Systems are in place to ensure that one-to-one meetings and PMS<sup>ii</sup> meetings happen. The staff survey shows that 84 per cent of staff have one-to-one meetings every four weeks. The human resources team do a quality check of one-to-one minutes every June and have collected 90 per cent of the PMS forms for March 2010. In 2009 managers received 360 degree feedback and HR have checked to see if their PMS training needs reflects the weaknesses picked up by that approach.
- Staff have positive training opportunities. In 2009/10 Lewisham Homes spent £250,000 on training, or £566 per staff member. Staff we have spoken to are positive about the training and there has been suitable focus on customer care and diversity. Lewisham Homes completed a training need analysis of rent staff in 2009 and included a test on all aspects of the job. Subsequent training has been based on the results of the assessment. In 2009/10 a training priority was multi skilling for operatives. HR has looked at the learning logs from PMS to see if learning needs are adequately addressed. The 360 degree feedback on managers revealed that one of the weaknesses for senior managers is making time to coach and develop team members, so they will receive coaching for performance training in July 2010.
- The management development programme has helped improve the capacity of managers; managers have been on a range of courses since May 2008. Some of these courses have outcome measures. For example sickness and absence is reducing. Lewisham Homes has Introduced ILM6 (Institute of Leadership and Management). This gives skills and knowledge to junior managers and supervisors so they can apply for more senior management posts. Lewisham Homes hopes this latter initiative will promote more talented black and minority ethnic staff to a higher level where they are under represented. Eight senior managers have benefited from one-to-one executive coaching.

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<sup>i</sup> Investors in People (liP) is a national standard for the training and development of people in the workplace.

<sup>ii</sup> Performance Management System (PMS) is an annual process of setting targets, objectives and personal development needs for staff and then assessing performance

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Effective performance management, training and management development improve capacity.

**230** Information and Communication technology (ICT)<sup>i</sup> is reasonable and improving.

- New modules and systems introduced over the past year have improved services. Examples include new telephony, improved functions on the website, an electronic scheduling system linked to hand held computers in responsive repairs and improved software in leasehold management.
- A 2009/10 strategy is in place and plans include a new electronic document records management and workflow system, further expansion of mobile applications and a customer relationship management system.
- The ICT services provided by and for Lewisham Homes have been independently assessed in a service review that says the service is satisfactory.
- In a survey of staff 75 per cent said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the service.
- Weaknesses still exist. Lewisham Homes only introduced performance indicators for the ICT service in the last few months and it cannot show how this service compares or whether it is improving. The current systems are not capable of supporting proposals for asset management but plans are in hand to address this. The HR software is owned by the council and does not include a training database so HR uses a spreadsheet which has limitations. Some ICT projects are slipping. A new training database HR module was supposed to be implemented in January 2010 but is unlikely to go ahead until April 2011. The payroll module has also slipped.

**231** Lewisham Homes works well with partners. The partnership with the Council is strong across many departments, particularly Housing Benefit, Social Services and housing as mentioned under managing performance above. Other positive partnerships include the credit union, the Lewisham group of housing associations, the Fire Authority, the crime reduction partnership (the Council, police and housing associations). Work with agencies has helped tenants develop skills to get them back into work. Lewisham Homes is able to achieve more through joint working.

**232** Inward investment has helped improve services and outcomes for residents. Examples include:

- Future Jobs fund - £39,000 - 6 x placements commenced in March 2010;
- Capital Ambition - £41,400 - customer profiling - project complete;
- Housing challenge fund: Family Intervention Project - £46,500 (with match funding by the Council) LBL;
- SELHP<sup>ii</sup> funds to extend, enlarge or de-convert properties £300,000; and
- SHESP<sup>i</sup> property insulation - £690,710 - programme running.

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<sup>i</sup> Information and communication technology (ICT) is a term used to describe the policies and management of computers, computer software, telephones and modern technology used to help communications and process information.

<sup>ii</sup> The South East London Housing Partnership (SELHP) receives funding from the Communities and Local Government to tackle overcrowding

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 233** Lewisham Homes has not yet secured the finances necessary to ensure that properties can be improved to reach a decent standard. It has passed an important hurdle by achieving two stars in this inspection report. However, the new Government has not carried out its first comprehensive spending review yet and it has not confirmed that the promised funding will definitely be available. Without adequate funding residents would not in the near future benefit from the reasonable quality of housing enjoyed by the vast majority of social housing tenants across the country.
- 234** Current budget provision is unlikely to meet the growing demand for aids and adaptations. At the end of 2009/10, the budget was just about sufficient to cover the demand for adaptations and so the service did not have to create a waiting list. Demand is increasing so this budget will not be enough in this or future years if it remains the same. The Council wants to provide the necessary funding but will wait to see the extent of the shortfall this year before reaching a decision. Standards will fall if resources are not increased.
- 235** Staff sickness and absence are higher than national averages. In 2009/10, 10.4 days per employee per year were lost to absence. This is better than average compared with London ALMOs but worse than the CIPD<sup>ii</sup> average of 9.7 days for the public sector and 9.4 for non profit organisations and 7.4 days for all sectors. The performance for office staff at 9.8 days, while better, does not compare well either. Figures have improved by one day through the year but output would be improved by lower than average levels of absence.

<sup>i</sup> The Social Housing Energy Saving Programme (SHESP) distributes government funds to help social landlords insulate hard to treat cavity walls on the basis of competitive bids,

<sup>ii</sup> The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is Europe's largest HR development professional body.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 2 Lewisham Homes reported performance**

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 <sup>i</sup>	January to June 2010	Target 2009/10
Tenant satisfaction with overall service		58%	68%	Annual STATUS Survey	68%
Telephone calls answered within 15 second target <sup>ii</sup>		76%	87%	87%	85%
Avoidable contact		47%	34%	37%	
Complaints answered within target time	61%	69%	94%	91%	90%
Emergency repairs within target time	76%	94%	98%	99%	97%
Urgent repairs within target time	68%	96%	98%	99%	97%
Routine repairs within target time	76%	97%	98%	99%	97%
Repairs appointments made and kept	90%	95%	97%	98%	97%
Repairs completed on first visit	84%	83%	93%	92%	85%
Satisfaction with repairs		75%	87%	87%	80%
Void re-let times in days	38	31	28	23.2	25
Average cost per void		£2,750	£2,460	£2,337 <sup>iii</sup>	
Gas compliance	94%	94%	99.9%	100%	100%
Rent collection	97.7%	99.3%	99.9%	100.9%	100.4%

<sup>i</sup> All 2009/10 data provided by Lewisham Homes. The data for 2009/10 is for the period April 2009 to March 2010. As such it overlaps with the data provided for Jan to June 2010 which is a six month period to show figures over more than three months.

<sup>ii</sup> Note that this indicator is calculated as a % of all calls answered within 15 seconds, without excluding calls abandoned within 15 seconds which many organisations would exclude from the denominator. Performance reported for Jan to June 2010 is all calls made to the Repairs Contact Centre as this allows for a direct comparison with previous years.

<sup>iii</sup> This figure only includes costs for Jan - Apr inclusive. There are insufficient cleared invoices to calculate a reliable figure for May and June 2010.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>2008/09</b>	<b>2009/10<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>January to June 2010</b>	<b>Target 2009/10</b>
% of rent accounts > 7 weeks in arrears	13.7%	10.4%	10.2%	8.2%	8%
Satisfaction with internal caretaking	53%	71%	84%	87%	

Source: Lewisham Homes' figures

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# Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

**Table 3 Recommendations of unpublished report in 2009**

Recommendation	Progress
<p>1. The ALMO should improve access to the service and customer care by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that all public offices comply with the Disability Discrimination Act requirements;</li> <li>• ensuring that all staff receive appropriate customer care training;</li> <li>• monitoring all the customer service standards and improving performance;</li> <li>• undertaking a full review of the complaints procedures and systems and training staff in receiving and handling complaints; and</li> <li>• clarifying and implementing plans for involving a wide range of service users in service reviews.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed - not all of the new standards are being monitored</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Plans completed Reviews only included 12 residents but area panels consulted on the strategy and standards</p>
<p>2. The ALMO should improve its approach to equality and diversity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that all staff and board members receive appropriate diversity training;</li> <li>• increasing the collection and use of diversity profile data for tenants and leaseholders, including data on sexuality and faith, to deliver service improvements; and</li> <li>• ensuring information on diversity and vulnerability is integrated and automatically alerted to staff.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed (97 per cent of staff)</p> <p>Significant increase in profile</p> <p>Completed - cleansed data and flags</p>

## Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>3. The ALMO should improve its performance on rent collection and arrears management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prioritising a review of rent arrears policy, procedures and monitoring systems and clarifying collection priorities;</li> <li>• strengthening arrangements with debt advice agencies for debt counselling and welfare rights advice service; and</li> <li>• providing clear guidance to income officers on rent advice and record keeping, and undertaking frequent quality checks of rent arrears case files.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed - protocols with agencies and in-house welfare benefits adviser</p> <p>Completed but the eviction example under income management show that checks are not yet robust.</p>
<p>4. The ALMO should improve its management and letting of property by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• immediately conducting gas safety checks on all properties without a valid CP12;</li> <li>• monitoring the provision of aids and adaptations by the Council for ALMO residents in respect to waiting times and satisfaction levels;</li> <li>• reviewing the lettable standard in conjunction with tenants; and</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Partially completed - Applicants are not routinely given the letting standard during the viewing.</p>
<p>5. The ALMO should improve its asset management strategy by developing a SMART action plan to include a detailed and resourced programme for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consultation with residents;</li> <li>• procurement; and</li> <li>• delivery of the DHS contract.</li> </ul>	<p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p> <p>Completed</p>

Source: Audit Commission advice and assistance report 2009

# Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - focus groups with staff, Board, tenants and contractors;
  - interviews with staff and partners;
  - viewing property improvements and repairs;
  - inspection of ready to let properties;
  - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
  - observation at office receptions;
  - estate inspections;
  - talking to tenants;
  - various file checks and reviews of information held on computer systems;
  - a review of website, leaflets; and
  - mystery shopping of services in the area offices.

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# The Audit Commission

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

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