

Local Authority Housing Inspection Report

February 2006



Housing Inspection

London Borough of Redbridge

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 The London Borough of Redbridge is a London borough council in the eastern area of London. The population is 245,000 of which 37 per cent are from Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. The Council has projected that by 2010 almost 50 per cent of young people will be from BME communities.
- 2 The Council is Conservative led with 33 of the 63 seats, with the Labour party holding 20 seats, Liberal Democrats nine and one Independent.
- 3 In terms of investment needs and meeting the Decent Homes target the Council has completed its stock option appraisal and this is currently with Government Office for London to be signed off. The conclusion of the Redbridge Stock Options Community Forum is that in order to meet the shortfall in resources, estimated at approximately £8.3 million up to 2010/11, the Council should set up an arms length management organisation (ALMO) and bid for extra resources in round 6. This recommendation was accepted by all political parties of the Council.
- 4 The Council's gross Housing Revenue Account budget for 2005/06 is £21.1 million. There is a major works programme of £5.8 million. The Major repairs Allowance is £3.7 million.
- 5 The Audit Commission carried out a previous inspection of the Housing Management service in 2004 when the service was judged as a poor service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 6 This inspection of Housing Management services covered the following areas:
 - housing income management;
 - resident involvement;
 - tenancy and estate involvement;
 - allocations and lettings; and
 - leasehold management and right to buy.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have found that the housing management service provided by the London Borough of Redbridge to be a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

		Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent						'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement' A good service?
Promising		☀				
Uncertain						
Poor						
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	
			★	★★	★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 8 We consider the service to be fair for the following reasons.
- There is a customer focus in the delivery of services, demonstrated through feedback from residents that we met.
 - The blocks on estates seen during the stock tour and other reality checks were observed to be in a satisfactory condition. Communal areas appeared clean and tidy.
 - Welcoming offices - offering Freephone for the repair line, children's play boxes, and online kiosk for the Choice Based Letting scheme.
 - Through specific tasks the Council has started to involve wider and more representative members of the community in planning services, such as through the Redbridge ALMO forum, leaseholder services forum and local service panels.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

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- There is close working with the voluntary sector to provide support for people with mental health problems and there is targeting to fast rising rent debt cases to maximise income to authority.
- Rent collection is meeting the 97.5 per cent target of the Housing Service.
- Rent statements are received every three months and they are clear and well set out.
- There are clear links between the Housing Service and the corporate anti-social behaviour team and tenants representatives considered the Council had improved its approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour.
- A strategy for value for money and efficiency has been produced, although it is at an early stage of implementation.

9 However, we found several weaknesses.

- Office signage and notices visible after opening times need to be updated.
- Some office information was out of date and there were only two housing related leaflets found at the One Stop Shop. Staff at the One Stop Shop did not have a list of housing information/leaflets to be held.
- The true level of complaints is not being captured, recording of information is incomplete and there is a lack of clarity on the availability of complaints and compensation provided to tenants.
- Feedback from residents is not being used strategically to improve the service.
- The diversity strategy is four years old has been weakly implemented across the authority.
- Offices are not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- While performance on the collection of former tenant arrears is satisfactory there is an absence of targets to measure performance.
- The communication of information around estate inspections is inconsistent with limited feedback to residents and other stakeholders.
- The caretaking review commissioned by the Council benchmarked against other authorities and found it to be broadly comparable but commented that the service as it currently stands is not cost effective. This was a key recommendation made in our previous inspection and it is disappointing that it has not been fully met.
- The provision of addressing anti-social behaviour across the borough by the service is inconsistent with poor case recoding on tenancy files.

Prospects for improvement

- 10 We judge that the housing management service has promising prospects for improvement. We have reached this decision for the following reasons.
- There has been a positive cultural change within the Service in the last two years. Improved senior manager leadership has provided the direction required for the service to be more responsive to customer needs and be performance focused.
 - There has been an improvement in void re-let times, a consequent reduction in void rent loss and performance in relation to rent collection is amongst the highest in London.
 - There are clear objectives identified within the housing management improvement plan, which is monitored on a monthly basis and reports on progress are made to the scrutiny committee and residents on a regular basis.
 - The Service has identified key risks in relation to the delivery of new IT and establishment of the ALMO and responded accordingly.
 - There is a corporate commitment to deliver diversity in service delivery, through the corporate customer care strategy and compulsory equalities and diversity training.
 - There is a structured approach for performance to be considered up the organisation. This occurs through the housing management service and is fed through the corporate management structure and then to Cabinet.
 - There is an improved understanding of budgets by managers. This has been achieved through the provision of budget training for managers and regular monthly reviews of budget positions. Work with finance has also enabled costs to be broken down into separate services to provide clearer and accountable information.
 - The capacity of the housing service to deliver key projects has been added to by the use of consultants with expertise in their particular fields.
 - The key focus of training for staff is in relation to customer care, service delivery and performance management and training.
 - Management development training is to be piloted within housing and the Council is examining trainee and mentoring schemes.
- 11 There are weaknesses that we have identified and they are as follows.
- Until recently, there has been an absence of resident involvement in monitoring performance, and no development of local performance indicators.
 - The council has missed some key recommendations from our last inspection.

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- Benchmarking has shown that core housing management pay costs per employee are forecast to be 10 per cent higher than the median of the comparator group in 2005/06, which will result in a high housing management pay cost per property.
- Benchmarking has shown that the cost per property of providing both empty properties and lettings functions were high in 2004/05 due to the low number of properties managed per employee.
- There is a service level agreement between the housing management service and legal services, but it is very old and has not been reviewed.
- There are a number of strategic aims around diversity that feed into a range of departmental plans and strategies. There is no clear system to co-ordinate these plans and strategies.
- The corporate target for the reduction of sickness levels is 0.74 days lost per employee, though sickness levels within the housing management service stood at 1.38 days per employee.
- The council has been reliant on external expertise, and does not yet have the long term capacity to sustain the drive forward and deliver improvements.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the opportunities for resident involvement by ensuring that:

- *better Information on the service is consistently publicised in accessible places;*
- *the complaints system is publicised, used effectively and that complainants are advised of the outcome of their complaint; and*
- *take steps to publicise the compensation policy so that residents are clear about the council's position.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased resident involvement and awareness of the service; and
- residents are clearer about their rights and that the Council meets its obligations.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2006.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the approach to diversity by ensuring that:

- *all the actions to improve diversity are brought together in a more joined up approach;*
- *better measures are put in place to assess the level of racist incidents; and*
- *consistent levels of support are provided to the BME focus group.*

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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that the Service is more efficient in delivery of services to its diverse community;
- racist incidents are more effectively measured; and
- BME focussed groups are assisted in helping shape service delivery.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Improve rent collect rates and the cost effectiveness of the service by:

- *setting targets for increasing the take up of direct debits;*
- *setting clear collection targets for FTAs; and*
- *carry out a review of the effectiveness of other mechanisms for improving collection rates, such as text messaging, rent campaigns.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reducing the cost of rent collection; and
- increasing the level of former tenant arrears that are collected.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs with the potential for some savings. This should be implemented by April 2006.

Recommendation

*R4 Improve co-ordination and communication of estate inspections.
Report on value for money across the service within six months.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council is in a better position than it is now to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of its service.

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

Recommendation

*R5 Ensure that follow-up visits to new tenants conform to procedure of four weeks target.
Provide information of the letting standard at viewing stage.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will be able to tackle any rent debt issues at an early stage and other relevant tenancy issues.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

Recommendation

*R6 Take steps to improve service charge collection rates.
Place summary of rights and responsibilities on bills.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will maximise income due from leaseholders.

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

Recommendation

*R7 Improve overall budget monitoring and devolvement of information.
Introduce an effective administrative system to ensure that new tenants complete all decorations before the release of part two of the decorations allowance.
Report on value for money for the Housing Service as a whole and for existing service contracts within six months.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater control and financial efficiency.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented as stated above.

- 13 We would like to thank the staff of London Borough of Redbridge, particularly Mike Gammack, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 19 - 30 September 2005.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 14 The London Borough of Redbridge is a Council in the eastern area of London. The population is 245,000 of which 37 per cent are from Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. The Council has projected that by 2010 almost 50 per cent of young people will be from BME communities.
- 15 Redbridge is a borough of contrasts with areas of affluence and deprivation. In the north of the borough, the ward of Monkham's is amongst the 5 per cent least deprived wards in England. Whereas in the South, Loxford is one of the 11 per cent most deprived wards in England.¹
- 16 According to the 2001 Census a third of the population are under the age of 25, whilst 14 per cent are over the age of 65. About 33 per cent of households are married or co-habiting couples with dependent children and the elderly account for 21 per cent of the household population.
- 17 The unemployment rate in Redbridge stands at 3.6 per cent compared with the London average of 4.5 per cent.
- 18 Redbridge's housing stock covers a wide range of dwelling types, including pre and post-war detached, semi and terraced houses, bungalows and low, medium and high-rise blocks.

The Council

- 19 The Council is Conservative led with 33 of the 63 seats, with the Labour party holding 20 seats, Liberal Democrats nine and one Independent.
- 20 A new constitution was adopted in May 2002, which established a Council with Leader, a Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and seven Area Committees.
- 21 The Chief Executive and Directors have direct accountability between them for all services and responsibility for the line management of Senior Officers. In addition they give overall leadership on strategic and cross cutting issues. The Chief Executive and Directors each head up a cluster of Service Areas, the heads of which form a Cluster Management Team. There are 19 Service Areas, which provide operational day to day services. A Head of Service (Chief Officer) then leads a Service Area.
- 22 The Audit Commission Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2004 rated the Council as 'fair', with the Housing Service receiving a rating of one out of a possible four.

¹ Indices of Deprivation 2000 DETR.

- 23 The Council adopted a new vision and aims in November 2004, following consultation with customers, residents, councillors, stakeholders, partners and staff. The consultation concluded that the Council needed to better identify 'who we are, where we are and what we are here for'. The key ambition of Redbridge Council 'is to make Redbridge a better place to live,' and this is underpinned by the supporting aims, which will be delivered through six priority programmes each with a number of individual projects. The supporting aims of the Corporate Strategy are as follows.

A safer place to live	A better place to learn
A cleaner, greener place to live	A better place for business
A better place for care	A better place to live together

The service

- 24 There are approximately 95,000 homes within the borough. There were, at the time of the inspection, 4,800 Council tenanted and 2,270 leasehold dwellings.
- 25 The housing management service is delivered through three area offices - Orchard estate, Manford Way and the Tiptree estate.
- 26 The average rent is £71.49 per week, management costs £26.98 per dwelling per week and an average repair cost of £17.56.
- 27 The service has been going through a period of change through the re-structuring of its functions. Specialist teams dealing with rent collection, tenancy and estate management had been established at the time of the inspection. Further changes to estate caretaking and services to leaseholders were in development and likely to come into force in April 2006.
- 28 The demand for affordable housing in Redbridge is considerable and the total housing stock is low in relation to meeting this demand. There are approximately 3,000 dwellings provided by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) for affordable housing. This is important in relation to meeting housing need. Over 5,000 households are on the Council's housing register with a significant number of homeless households in temporary accommodation.
- 29 The Council's housing strategy and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan have both been assessed as 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for London (GoL), which means that the Council does not have to submit an annual return to the GoL.

- 30** In terms of investment needs and meeting the Decent Homes target the Council has completed its stock option appraisal and this is currently with Government Office for London to be signed off. The conclusion of the Redbridge Stock Options Community Forum is that in order to meet the shortfall in resources, estimated at approx £8.3 million up to 2010/11, the Council should set up an arms length management organisation (ALMO) and bid for extra resources in round 6. This recommendation was accepted by all political parties of the Council.
- 31** We undertook an inspection of the Council's housing management service and delivered a report in November 2004. We assessed the service as a poor, no-star, with promising prospects of improvement.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 32** The Housing Department contributes to the Council's corporate aims. It is reflected in two of the priority programmes; 'a better place for business' which includes the regeneration of Ilford Town Centre¹ and 'a better place to live together' which includes Affordable Housing, Housing Repairs and Housing Stock Options.¹¹
- 33** The Council's supporting aims also reflect the ambitions of the Community Strategy, which seeks in ten years time to make Redbridge 'a safe and clean place where people are proud to live, work and invest'.
- 34** The Housing Department has linked its strategic priorities with the Council's overall corporate priorities. An example is in relation to the corporate priority of 'a safer place to live':
- promoting sustainable and vibrant communities; and
 - promoting and enhancing the environment.
- 35** A further link with these priorities is in relation to 'a better place to live':
- increasing the supply of affordable homes; and
 - good quality homes.

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

- 36** The Housing Service equalities and diversity action plan 2005/08 sets out how it aims to deliver diverse services to the community and includes the following objectives.
- Improve information provision for all our clients and potential clients.
 - Improve access to services for all our clients and potential clients.
 - Improve access and effectiveness of complaints processes.
 - Provide services that are sensitive to the range of vulnerabilities, needs, fears, health and cultural needs of our clients.
 - Enhance Community Cohesion on our housing estates and with surrounding areas.
 - Enhance the security at home and on the streets of the borough to reduce the perception of crime and actual crime for our residents.

¹ Corporate Strategy May 2005 page 9 and 14

¹¹ Corporate Strategy May 2005 page 15

- 37 The plan includes actions, timescales and key milestones, but does not indicate the measure of success and whether objectives had been delivered.

Access and customer care

- 38 In our previous inspection, generic housing management services were delivered through the housing offices via 17 patches of approximately 417 properties. There were specialist divisions for RTB, tenant participation (TP) and leasehold activity, and repairs and maintenance.
- 39 In that inspection the key issues raised were as follows.
- Access for users to Housing Services was patchy and not focussed on the customer.
 - Existing access times for housing management were limited to 9.00am-5.00pm, Monday to Friday.
 - Calls made to all three area offices out of office hours found no answer phone facilities to direct callers to the council's main emergency out-of-hours' numbers.
 - The housing management service response rate for complaints within the corporate target time was low at 72 per cent, and there was no clear process for using the complaints system to inform service improvements.
 - The STATUS survey undertaken in 2003 showed a low level of tenant satisfaction level of 71 per cent with overall services provided by the council. This showed no change from the previous STATUS survey and brought comparative performance to other London councils to just above the bottom 25 per cent.
- 40 This is an area where we judged that the housing management service had given greater attention to in relation to access and customer care following our previous inspection and that strengths outweighed weaknesses.
- 41 In this inspection we found that access to services had expanded to include the following and that specialist teams had been established at the offices for rent issues and estate management and tenancy enforcement.
- The three housing offices are now open from 8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.
 - Local surgeries are being held in certain blocks and there is now a generic e-mail address for enquiries.
 - When offices are closed there is answer-phone coverage directing callers to the out of hours' (OOH) service.
 - As part of reality checks we found that calls to the OOH service were answered within 30 seconds with the service name and requests for information to identify the location and issue for callers. Residents in focus groups said they were satisfied with the response times when calling the OOH emergency service and the manner that they were dealt with.

- In addition, there is now a One Stop Shop in the Ilford region to provide services to residents.
- 42 Office locations are close to transport links and two offices are situated on housing estates. However, they do not have automatic door-opening systems or low counters, which may cause difficulties to people with disabilities or frail elderly residents and therefore do not comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995.
 - 43 Nevertheless, the offices are welcoming - offering a Freephone for the repair line, a children's play box, and online kiosk. There is Language Line, document translation and loop system facilities available to all service users accessing the service.
 - 44 There were private interview rooms with phones and emergency panic alarms. However there were no IT facilities within interview rooms, meaning that staff would have to go elsewhere to obtain information concerning any query.
 - 45 Tenants are provided with access information through the Tenants Handbook and the website has details of how to access all services, including in respect of emergencies. Changes appear in the Tenants Extra newsletter, which is sent quarterly to all council residents and housing staff.
 - 46 The housing management service has a database that covers over 92 per cent of tenants and can identify first language, disability and vulnerability. The database has been used to identify and expand potential members of the BME residents' forum.
 - 47 The impact of these changes has meant that there has been some improvement in accessibility to the Service.
 - 48 There has been a positive change of direction around the attitude of frontline staff according to resident representatives which we welcome. Residents that we met felt this was due to new, approachable and contactable senior managers. Customer care training has been rolled out to front line staff and the feedback received has been positive both from staff and residents. The impact of this has been to respond to resident queries in a positive manner and this has impacted on the view of residents to the Service as a whole.
 - 49 The Council's corporate customer care standards set out what residents can expect when dealing with the service.
 - 50 For example correspondence should be responded to within ten days, 90 per cent of calls should be responded to within 15 seconds, and name badges should be worn by staff having face-to-face contact with customers. Customer care standards are publicised on the website and in all reception areas of each of the housing offices, which makes it clear to residents what can be expected from the Service.

- 51 The response to correspondence is monitored within the housing management service and shows that corporate targets are not being met, even though the volume of enquiries is not high. The statistics for 2004/05 show that across the service inspected 94.6 per cent of correspondence is responded to within ten days across all offices. This is an area where residents that we met expressed some frustration.
- 52 Nevertheless, there are areas that require action from the Housing Service. These include the following.
- Office signage and notices visible after opening times need to be updated. At the Manford Way office the telephone number on the opening hours sign had been altered in black marker pen. There was no promotion of the website, fax or e-mail.
 - Officer and contact information is not consistently displayed.
 - Tenants commented on the lack of privacy at Manford Way and Tiptree offices due to their small size. Some felt that items discussed publicly should be referred to the private interview rooms.
 - There were only two housing related leaflets found at the One Stop Shop. Staff at the One Stop Shop did not have a list of housing information/leaflets to be held; therefore most housing related queries (other than repairs and CBL) were referred to other offices.
 - The area offices' answer-machines do not identify them as being a housing office, or offer additional information. It has a standard answer-machine greeting, 'we are unable to answer your call at this time, please leave a message after the tone', which may cause confusion to the caller.
 - There is a lack of clarity on the availability of complaints and compensation provided to tenants. File checks showed a lack of evidence that complaints had been resolved and closed and that the complainant had been notified.
 - File checks revealed a lack of audit trails, inconsistent use of tenancy file sheets and a general lack of records.
- 53 Therefore, while there has been progress in access and customer care since the last inspection, there is still some work to do.

Diversity

- 54 In our previous inspection we found that there had been progress in relation to addressing diversity issues. However, target dates had not been achieved, and the level of information on services for and employment of BME groups was variable.

- 55** The development of a tenant database has been delayed due to lack of resources. We noted the positive aspects of work on equalities issues in housing including the following.
- A BME housing strategy conference was held in 2003. This was well attended, and 20 issues raised at the conference were fed into the development of the housing equality sub strategy. This forms part of the housing strategy, which was confirmed as fit for purpose in March 2004 by GoL.
 - Six weekly meetings are held at the Fernways sheltered housing unit which has a high percentage of people from an Asian background. A counsellor acts as a translator.
 - All managers in social services and housing cluster have received compulsory equalities training during 2003.
 - Approximately 12 female staff in housing services have received Springboard training to develop empowerment. This training has been well received by attendees.
 - Corporately the council is to consider a new contract for translation and interpretation services. The aim is to be more cost effective and responsive.
 - There is a learning disability housing task group in place.
- 56** In this inspection, we noted that work has continued on diversity issues and there have been some positive examples. However, there is a need for better co-ordination across services, in that initiatives are being undertaken throughout the Council, but are not being pulled together in a consistent manner.
- 57** Redbridge has a very diverse population. The Council has a corporate equalities policy which is supported by two equalities officers, a disability assessment officer and a dedicated post within Housing and Community Services.
- 58** We are satisfied that the Council and the housing management service are endeavouring to reach out to BME and vulnerable communities, but there is much work to be done. For example, the area offices are not DDA compliant and while the service has undertaken work in relation to compiling a resident profile, it still has to tailor, monitor and deliver to a diverse community.
- 59** There are publicised procedures for racial harassment and hate crime. Information leaflets are available in community languages, Braille and audio-tape. Language Line and other interpreting and translation services are available for immediate access. This can only improve the understanding that such groups can expect of the services that are provided.
- 60** A sheltered housing residents group and BME focus group have been established and have been used to help focus service delivery and explore access issues.
- 61** There is close working with the voluntary sector to provide floating support for people with mental health problems and there is a tenancy sustainment officer and resettlement officer to support vulnerable tenants.

- 62 The stock option appraisal exercise undertook considerable work to drive up the profile of diversity and equalities. Work undertaken included the following:
- targeting BME households;
 - door to door exercise and telephone contacts;
 - information in languages and formats;
 - identification of additional five languages; and
 - representation on the ALMO community forum and insight groups.
- 63 We met with a number of residents who had participated in the forum actively and those who had some involvement, though not to the extent of others. They confirmed to us that the process had been inclusive and meaningful to them.
- 64 There have been positive outcomes from this exercise in that a broader range of people have become involved in looking at the Housing Service both in terms of the ALMO, but also in terms of current service delivery. The BME focus group was particularly positive about the housing management service when we met with them, but were concerned about the level of support it was receiving.
- 65 The Council had recently had a successful prosecution for a racial harassment case and obtained an outright possession order. In addition, it has been successful in obtaining possession orders in domestic violence cases, following the re-housing of survivors.
- 66 The Council aims' to deliver services to a diverse community need greater clarity. It has produced a consultation document that takes into account the corporate to achieve the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) equality standard at level one. However, it is hard to distinguish from this document what the real diversity issues are for the Council. The document is not user-friendly, despite being used for consultation.
- 67 However, there are areas that the Council, and the housing management service in particular need to tackle.
- There is significantly less satisfaction with the service from BME residents in comparison to non-BME residents¹.
 - The diversity strategy is four years old has had weak implementation.
 - There is no formal portfolio-holder to promote diversity issues at a political level.
 - There is no diversity champion within the Housing Department overall to drive forward diversity and equality issues.
- 68 In conclusion, there has been some positive progress in relation to tackling diversity issues, but further, sustained work needs to be done by the housing management service and the Council overall.

¹ ALG Customer Care Project, March 2005.

Housing income management

- 69 In our previous inspection we found that the Council had a clear rent arrear procedure in place and that working with other Council officers was positive and supportive.
- 70 However, we found that adherence to the procedures was not consistent, and that the then existing IT system undermined effectiveness. In addition, the Council was not meeting best practice in relation to the notice period for rent increases.
- 71 In this inspection we found that this is an area that shows positive performance, where there are clear targets and leadership within the housing management service. In addition, the focus is on debt recovery rather than property recovery. This means that the Council is more concerned at recovering debt due, rather than taking possession action as the first action, which could create additional cost in relation to dealing with an application for homelessness and the provision of temporary accommodation while the application was assessed.
- 72 Quarterly rent statements are provided to tenants. These statements provide additional information on the reverse of the statement to encourage tenants to take up direct debit or standing order rent payment methods, which are cheaper payment methods and reduce the administrative cost to the Council of processing rent payments by traditional means.
- 73 Rent accounts and means of payment for new tenants are established within 48 hours of tenancy sign up to reduce the opportunity for arrears to accrue. During the tenancy sign up process information is provided on the various methods of rent payment as well as assistance with submitting a Housing Benefit (HB) application.
- 74 Payment methods are wide ranging and include payment by standing order, direct debit, post offices, by the Internet, telephone, banks and cashiers. Promotion of direct debits has led to an increase to 286 residents paying by this method. This demonstrates that the Council is widening the access for residents' to pay their rent and in a manner that is appropriate for individual circumstances or preferences.
- 75 There is an interface with the HB system, where information on claims that have been processed can be accessed and a separate system that shows the position of a claim and whether additional information is required from the claimant concerned.
- 76 Regular HB and welfare benefit surgeries are held at area offices that not only resolve HB queries, from either party, but also provide debt advice to maximise an individual's income as well as encouraging rent payments.

- 77 A target of 97.5 per cent has been set for rent collection and monitoring information shows that this is being met. Benchmarking with 16 other social landlords has demonstrated that the Housing Service came top of its group for the increase in collection rates for 2004/05 by 2.1 per cent. This has been assisted by the performance of the HB team. In the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report of the Council's CPA of 2004 it found the following.
- The average time for processing new claims was 39 days as against top performing authorities at 36 days.
 - The average time for processing claims with changes of circumstance was 12 days as against top performing authorities at nine days.
 - The percentage of cases processed accurately was 99.8 per cent which exceeded top performing authorities.
- 78 Overall, the HB team had made significant improvements to its performance in 2002/03. This has had a positive impact in relation to the Council's rent collection rate as well as giving greater stability to residents claiming benefits.
- 79 Staff within rent teams in the housing management service are clear about the performance required of them and positive in the manner in which they undertake work. While there is a 97.5 per cent target, this has been translated into individual cash targets for the members of the specialist team to give a 'real feel' to what is being collected in monetary terms.
- 80 There has also been a conscious shift to concentrating on collection and debt recovery, rather than the traditional approach of possession action. In the event of considering possession action there is a pre-court interview where a case will be assessed to determine whether court action should be taken.
- 81 We attended a pre-court interview where arrears were in excess of £600. There were issues concerning HB and other management issues relating to harassment of the individual concerned.
- 82 The arrears' officer was clear in the advice given to the tenant and the consequences if no response was made. There was a focus on the broader social factors the tenant was experiencing that could be seen to be mitigating and contribute to the action that would be taken. Our view is that this demonstrated a sensitive approach to dealing with rent debt, but also that other tenancy factors, which could have a detrimental impact on resolving the debt, were taken into consideration.
- 83 There is a concentration on tackling debts that are rapidly accruing and this has enabled the Council to identify vulnerable tenants and bring into play the tenancy sustaintment officer to provide additional help and support. In addition, there is a 'fast track' process that has been agreed with the HB team for vulnerable tenants. The Council does not monitor these activities and it may find it helpful to do so in order to gauge the level or potential demand for the service.

- 84 Action on dealing with arrears has shown a sustained reduction from approximately £850,000 in 2004/05 to approximately £650,000 by the end of that financial year. The trend continues to be one of reduction for 2005/06 with the arrear level being approximately £620,000 at the time of our inspection.
- 85 The collection of former tenant arrears (FTAs) is undertaken by Payments and Benefits within the Finance Department and recovery is through external agencies. The performance in relation to the recovery of FtAs shows a small reduction from approximately £570,000 to £544,000 in 2004/05. We were given no information from the Council as to why this debt has remained relatively static, or action being taken to address this area. The impact of this is to produce a potential deficit on the HRA.
- 86 The emphasis on rent collection and debt recovery is by the monitoring that takes place and the feedback that is given to staff: our view is that there is effective performance monitoring, both on a global and individual basis, and this was confirmed from the evidence provided on random cases of rent debt.
- 87 Each member of staff has an individual collection target, as mentioned earlier, and receives fortnightly reports concerning performance which are also discussed at monthly one-to-one meetings. Staff that we met were enthusiastic and focussed on tenants having the maximum opportunity to pay rent and deal with debt in a fair manner.
- 88 While performance is generally positive and improving, the housing management service has recognised a number of weaknesses. These include the following.
- Weak IT systems were still in place. These have now been replaced with a new rents module for an Integrated IT system. In addition, the creation of a specialist rent recovery team had lessened the previous problems by a focus on individual rent debt cases. This has enabled the Council to intervene earlier than it did to tackle rent debt.
 - Assisting with early payment by exploring the potential of using payment cards within 24 hours of sign up of tenancy. This will enable the Council to place individual tenants into the payment system at an early stage.
 - Completing staff training in a variety of collection actions in order to maximise income collection as well as supporting the policy of tackling debt rather than seeking possession of peoples' homes.
 - A need to analyse the reasons for eviction, in order to establish whether there are particular individuals or groups that could receive greater assistance from the Council in tackling rent debt, but debts in general.
- 89 In conclusion, there has been positive progress in responding to our previous inspection and these have been confirmed by the evidence we collected, as well as the feedback we received from staff and residents. However, there are still weaknesses, as outlined above, but also in relation to measuring performance concerning the recovery of FTAs and the impact that this has on the HRA.

Resident involvement

- 90 In our previous inspection, Councillors and officers recognised that tenant involvement had evolved rather than developed in a structured way. This resulted in a fragmented approach, which was not working effectively, and relationships with some representatives were strained and difficult.
- 91 The Council tackled this through an independent review to develop a more inclusive structure and this new structure only came into place during the course of the inspection. The new team was not fully staffed and therefore the Council was in a state of transition.
- 92 However, we view the arrangements that have been put into place will stress the importance of resident participation and involvement.
- 93 This is an area that the housing management service has placed an emphasis upon during the last year and it is an area that it continues to support and sustain involvement and opportunities to participate for residents.
- 94 There has been a drive to involve residents in new structures, but also to facilitate cultural change among front-line staff in the manner that they deal with resident concerns. While there is a specific tenant participation team in development, emphasis has been given about the role that housing officers within tenancy and estate management teams have in promoting involvement and participation.
- 95 The structural changes have involved the establishment of a Borough Panel, which meets in line with the Council's committee cycle and is chaired by a resident. There are a number of key groups that feed into this Panel including the following:
- local housing forums;
 - service working groups, such as the Quality of Life (QoL), neighbour nuisance and repairs Panels;
 - BME focus group;
 - sheltered housing forum;
 - leaseholders' forum; and
 - resident associations and estate guardians.¹
- 96 The new participation framework has been launched and is being implemented. In restructuring the housing management service, more resources are being targeted into supporting resident participation. Training sessions have been run for staff within tenancy and estate management teams to reinforce the role that they now have for promoting resident participation.
- 97 The stock options consultation process was the catalyst for broadening the base of resident who wanted to influence service delivery and direction.
- 98 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has cited the consultation process used for stock options as an example of best practice.

¹ Estate Guardians are on small estates where there is no formal Resident Association.

- 99** This was supported by other work to promote participation and involvement that involved large numbers of residents and new faces becoming involved with the forum. In addition, a communication and consultation strategy has been agreed, not only within the forum, but also with resident groups, which will support and sustain resident involvement and participation levels.
- 100** Significant resources have been placed into resident involvement and participation.
- The QoL panel oversee a budget of £275,000 for environmental improvements on estates, supported by the Council in terms of maintaining records. There have been a number of successful bids for sport and summer arts' programmes on estates across the borough.
 - A £40,000 budget was created for resident associations to access with £3,000 earmarked for training – though in reality spending was approximately £8/9,000 for training.
 - Thirty nine tenants were placed on the Tenant Participation Advisory Service courses for basic training and 20 more have been nominated for these courses.
 - Tenant meetings are supported by staff and Councillors.
- 101** We found a strong perception when we met with residents that they had greater access to senior managers and that their views were listened to. Improvements in participation were seen as leading more opportunities to be involved and receiving support for training. This has generated an increase in trust between residents and the Council.
- 102** While there are a number of positive messages arising from the approach adopted by the housing management service to address involvement and participation, there are still issues outstanding.
- When the last STATUS survey was carried out in November 2003 satisfaction with opportunities to participate was 59 per cent.
 - Although more residents from different groups in the community are now involved there is a need to build upon this by encouraging and improving representation from BME communities and other under represented groups.
 - The Tenant Compact is out-of-date.
 - Publicity on the QoL budget has not been consistent or sufficient, and there was a significant under-spend on the budget in 2004/05 amounting to approximately £200,000.
 - There is significantly less satisfaction with the service from BME residents in comparison to non-BME residents.¹
- 103** Overall, there has been a positive impact in encouraging and developing resident involvement with a number of success stories, but that this needs to be sustained in the long term, particularly in relation to the use of the QoL budget and raising satisfaction among BME residents.

¹ ALG Customer Care Project, March 2005.

Estate management

- 104** In our previous inspection we found that tenants were receiving a reasonable service in respect of general estate management. Services, such as the removal of abandoned cars, were dealt with quickly, and estates were generally clean. We also found a variable response to the standards of caretaking and cleaning from the residents, resident representatives and estate guardians¹ that we spoke to, depending on where they lived.
- 105** In this inspection we found that the services provided to estates were well received by residents, but we did note some inconsistencies.
- 106** The blocks on estates seen during the inspection were observed to be in a satisfactory condition. Communal areas were clean and tidy, and maintenance levels were satisfactory. Our independent reality checks confirmed that blocks on estates were clean and that the surrounding environment was well maintained and generally free of litter and graffiti. There were also a number of points where residents could recycle waste and these were clearly signposted and clean. These latter points are important as they are a key concern for residents.
- 107** The housing management service employs 54 caretakers whose duties are to clean internal and external areas. This appears to be a high complement of staff in that it could be seen to equate to a caretaker for approximately 125 properties. However, the housing stock is scattered. There are 11 resident caretakers on estates with tower blocks, while the remainder are mobile teams. Grounds maintenance is undertaken by an external organisation.
- 108** The caretaking service is responsive to residents. An example is where residents approached the manager of the service concerning conditions on their estate. Following a review of rotas and cleaning schedules, the residents received additional caretaking resources and improved levels of service.
- 109** Door security systems on all the estates that we visited were in working order, which is another area of priority for residents.
- 110** A 'Blitz' team has been established within the caretaking service, although we noted in our previous inspection that this had taken a long time to establish. The role of this team is to carry out a deep cleaning and jetting programme across the borough. We witnessed the team in operation on several occasions and found it to have a positive impact on the appearance of blocks. Feedback we received from residents was positive in relation to its work and the impact it had on their immediate environment.
- 111** Estate inspections are undertaken on a bi-monthly basis by housing officers and caretakers and deal with communal areas and grounds. They are advertised in advance and take place between 10.00am and noon. Where there is a residents' association, invitations to attend are issued. In some areas where there are no resident associations there are estate guardians who should be notified of inspections.

¹ An estate guardian is a tenant or leaseholder who acts as a point of contact for the council but has chosen not to be involved as a formal tenant representative. Further details can be found in the section on tenant involvement

- 112 An estates standards panel has been established and meets on a quarterly basis to monitor standards and performance on keeping estates clean. The panel consists of officers from relevant departments and four residents and has the following remit:
- service standards;
 - problem estates; and
 - outcomes from estate inspections.
- 113 Residents have the opportunity to influence service delivery on estates.
- 114 Housing officers have recently been given a budget of £3,000 for works to communal areas. The purpose of this is to identify areas of minor work to external areas in conjunction with local residents. This further enhances the opportunity of residents to influence service provision or enhancements in their immediate locality.
- 115 These are positive initiatives. However, we did find some inconsistencies. For example, feedback from residents active in associations indicated that estate guardians were not always being notified about estate inspections; feedback from residents indicated that not all of them received feedback on the outcomes of inspections; we attended an inspection where the housing officer carrying out the inspection had nothing to record what he had seen during the course of the inspection; and there is a lack of clarity of how residents without resident associations or estate guardians can input or receive feedback on the outcomes of inspections.

Tenancy management and anti-social behaviour

- 116 The issue of tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) is of significant concern to residents within Redbridge. In our previous inspection we found evidence of multi-agency working, training being rolled out to front line staff and that most processes and procedures were in place and further service improvements were planned.
- 117 The Council adopted a corporate approach to ASB in 2003 with the setting up of a dedicated anti-social behaviour unit. The Redbridge Community Safety Strategic Partnership has housing representatives on three problem solving groups and at the strategic group.
- 118 We found that the Council as a whole is making efforts to respond to resident concerns in relation to ASB but that there are weaknesses in certain areas.
- 119 There are clear links between the corporate ASB team and the housing management service, with the former providing support and guidance to housing officers in relation to individual cases. In addition, there is a 24 hour hotline available for people to report incidents of anti-social behaviour with staff available to respond to such reports. However, we were not provided with activity levels, or the nature of the incidents where a response was made.

- 120** Both the housing management service and the corporate ASB team have databases in relation to instances of ASB. However, there is no interface between them and this means that there is a potential for lack of co-ordination in dealing with cases as well as duplication of effort in relation to the identification of areas that could be classed as 'hot spots'. The ASB team also undertake joint surgeries with the Police in hotspot areas.
- 121** The Council's tenancy agreement has conditions regarding ASB and the potential consequences of breaching the terms. Other methods used include possession action, acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs)¹, anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) and introductory tenancies as well as mediation services.
- 122** The Council has two safe houses in the borough to provide support to those of our residents who have suffered from racial harassment or domestic violence. As mentioned earlier, there has been successful possession action for a racial harassment case and that action has been taken in relation to perpetrators of domestic violence.
- 123** There have been other successes in relation to enforcement action by the Council, which are illustrated below:
- two live dispersal orders (five in total);
 - one crack house closed;
 - register of persistent and prolific offenders (PaPOs);
 - name and shame procedure in place;
 - 13 ABCs with another eight served either by the Police or the Council's Public Protection department; and
 - one ASBO with a further 17 from the Police, registered social landlord or another authority.
- 124** In terms of successfully obtaining ASBOs, the evidence suggests that the housing management service is not in this position at this stage undertake this activity at this stage.
- 125** Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the housing management service has invested in preventative measures which include the following:
- controlled access programmes to enhance block security;
 - improved lighting and designing out of crime on estates;
 - youth diversionary activities on estates for holiday periods (£25,000);
 - neighbourhood wardens in the north of the borough; and
 - covert cameras and ASB unit patrolling out-of-hours.

¹ Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) are voluntary agreements between the Council and a resident, possibly involving the police. Breach of an ABC may initiate legal action.

- 126** Residents that we met have recognised that the housing management service was trying to achieve results in responding to ASB. Many had attended meetings with Councillors, and staff to tackle this issue. There had been a particularly good response to problems around noise. A self-help pack for complaints about anti-social behaviour has been funded via the Quality of Life budget resident's committee.
- 127** However, there are areas that need to be strengthened. These include the following.
- The housing database does not indicate case closure or whether complainants have been advised of the outcome of their complaint.
 - The ASB team does not flag closed cases or advise complainants that their cases had been closed.
 - The ASB team has no access to housing database and has its own database that cannot be accessed by the housing management service.
 - There was a lack of clarity among staff in relation to dealing with racial harassment and domestic violence cases.
 - The tenancy files were not well ordered and action being taken to tackle ASB did not reveal outcomes or the manner in which a case was being handled. Notes were interspersed with rent arrear action, repairs and general correspondence. Where ABCs had been signed, there was no record of how they came about or why particular actions had been prohibited. There was no evidence that cases had been reviewed as required within procedures. Any action undertaken and recorded on the ASB database had not been duplicated on files and there were no verbatim records of interviews. It is not possible for the Council to demonstrate that it deals effectively with ASB in line with its procedures.
 - There was no evidence from file checks that the case file booklets issued to housing officers by the ASB team had been used.
- 128** In conclusion, the Council is responding to incidents of anti-social behaviour and violence. However, weaknesses remain in relation to the manner in which cases are dealt with and managed.

Allocations and lettings

- 129** The Council participates with two east London and Registered Social Landlords in a Choice Based Lettings (CBL)¹ scheme which can provide inter-borough movement. The cost of running a CBL scheme is reduced by joint procurement. The volume of properties made available by Redbridge is relatively low, averaging approximately ten per month. This contributes to the low cost of running the CBL scheme.

¹ A CBL scheme is where empty properties are advertised for letting. People on the Council's housing register or existing tenants can make bids for the property concerned. The aim of this type of allocations scheme is to give greater choice to people to find a home that is suitable to their needs, rather than the traditional approach of the Council determining need.

- 130 The previous inspection looked at the management of new lettings, including sign-up procedures, information and visits to new tenants. It did not look in detail at repairs to empty properties, which were covered in the September 2003 inspection of day-to-day repairs. It also did not look at allocations, although it did consider the impact of the Council's CBL scheme on void turnaround times.
- 131 Overall, it found that new tenants received a good range of information and viewings and sign-up procedures were generally satisfactory. However, there was a substantial increase in void turnaround times due largely to the introduction of CBL.
- 132 In this inspection we found that the CBL scheme had bedded down. Access to the CBL scheme is wide ranging with kiosks in two of the housing offices (there is a lack of space in the remaining office for a kiosk), a freephone hotline, the Council's website, a fortnightly magazine and through all libraries in the borough.
- 133 Void turnaround times had improved from 53 days in 2003/04 to 28 days in 2004/05. (The previous inspection concluded that the 2003/04 figures were due to the letting of previously hard-to-let long-term empty properties, and the freedom of people to refuse offers without being penalised).
- 134 However, it should be noted that, on average, only ten properties per month become available for letting.
- 135 The only exclusions from the scheme are those people who are subject to immigration control or whose behaviour as a tenant has been such that the Council would have been able to or have obtained a Notice Seeking Possession.
- 136 Vulnerable people can use advocates to assist them in making bids for available properties.
- 137 A minimum letting standard has been produced in consultation with tenants and housing officers undertake accompanied viewings during the void re-servicing period. At this time they provide information to the prospective tenant in relation to security of tenure, an explanation of rents, repairs and community responsibilities.
- 138 Monitoring is undertaken of the viewing and letting process. Snapshot figures for June 2005 indicate the following in relation to how helpful the viewing and sign-up process was seen by new tenants.

Viewing:

- five people assessed it as very helpful; and
- three assessed it as helpful.
- tenancy sign-up:
 - four people assessed it as very helpful;
 - three assessed it as helpful; and
 - one assessed it as reasonably helpful.

- 139 These are relatively positive results, but it should be noted that the supply of properties within Redbridge is relatively low in comparison to the partners within CBL scheme.
- 140 If a potential tenant is vulnerable or has a disability an assessment is made of the property and locality to ensure that it is suitable and that the tenancy can be sustained. A re-settlement service is also offered to ensure that the move to new accommodation runs smoothly. A tenancy sustainment service is also available for those tenants who fall into difficulties.
- 141 Housing officers are required to visit new tenants within a four week period to determine how they are settling into their new tenancies. We found that this was not consistently applied. It is important that these standards, particularly in relation to vulnerable tenants are met, in order to ensure that tenancies can be sustained and that individuals do not risk the loss of their homes.
- 142 Training on the operation of the CBL scheme has been provided to Social Services, Education and local voluntary organisations working with vulnerable people.
- 143 However, there are some weaknesses in the operation of the CBL scheme.
- The CBL kiosks situated in area offices do not offer languages other than English and the light colours and faint contrast on their screens can cause difficulties of access for people with.
 - The letting standard is not provided to tenants until the sign-up stage.
 - There was a lack of awareness among tenants of how the CBL scheme.
 - Operates and how to access it, including the provision of the newsletter publicising the properties available for bidding.
 - Staff at the focus group advised that the follow-up visit after sign-up was between four/eight weeks, which contradicts the information contained within the sign-up document. An eight week follow-up is not particularly challenging.
- 144 Overall, the CBL scheme is operating satisfactorily though the number of properties available to the Council's partners is limited.

Leasehold management and right to buy

- 145 The Council has approximately 2,200 properties leasehold properties. Following the previous inspection of the housing management service in March/April 2004, the authority split the tenant participation function from the portfolio of its Tenant and Leasehold Service.
- 146 In our previous inspection we found this to be a very poor area of service undermined by insufficient staffing, lack of access, integration, accuracy and capacity of the IT support, combined with the fragmented nature of the service. The involvement of leaseholders is limited, information is out of date and there is dissatisfaction with estate services. In addition, there was little involvement of leaseholders in developing the service or in receiving reports on performance.

- 147** In this inspection we found that the service is still in development, in that services are still split between departments, where the housing management service is responsible for the Right to Buy (RTB) process, consultation on major works and the Payments and Benefits Department is responsible for service charge billing and collection and positive work has been undertaken to date.
- 148** Under the reorganisation of the housing management service, these functions will be brought together within Tenant and Leasehold Service.
- 149** Overall there has been progress in delivering the service. The Council established a leaseholder services' forum which was actively involved in the production of the leaseholder manual that has been sent to all current leaseholders, including those who are renting out their properties, and is provided for re-sales.
- 150** The leaseholder services' forum is also involved in receiving and commenting on performance in relation to processing RTB claims and service charge collection rates. We find this to be a positive step forward in that leaseholders are becoming more engaged with the Council and have greater influence in how services are provided.
- 151** Leaseholders stated to us that they have been receiving a better day to day service for enquiries. Any query on issues relating to leasehold management, whether it be about service charges or questions about the lease, are now dealt with by the Tenant and Leaseholder Service, whereas, in the past, individuals were passed to other staff. Leaseholders were frustrated and perceived that they were being passed from pillar to post. Communication with the Council is seen to have improved in that there is now a single point of contact.
- 152** The leaseholder forum established by the Housing Department has its own e-mail address to enable access to individual concerns. In addition, the Council's website contains summary information on home ownership and leaseholder issues and answers to frequently asked questions. We found this to be a positive move and feedback from leaseholders was favourable.
- 153** There is a wide range of payment methods for service charges including through the Internet, credit card hotline, standing order/direct debit and traditional methods such as payments. This is an improvement from the previous inspection and is of greater convenience to leaseholders.
- 154** In the previous inspection, we found that statutory timescales were not being met, either at the application or offer stage, during 2004/05.
- 155** In this inspection we found that all RTB applications had been completed within statutory timescales this financial year. The corporate standards for responded to queries from leaseholders, within ten working days, have been exceeded.
- 156** The housing management service now provides a comprehensive information pack to prospective applicants and purchasers of council owned properties. These packs provide information on the rights and responsibilities of both freehold and leasehold purchases.

- 157** A criticism in our last inspection concerned the production of service charge bills. The housing management service has responded to this criticism and now produces estimated bills in March/April and actual bills in September to avoid confusion for leaseholders.
- 158** Surgeries are held at the time that estimated charges are sent as well as when major works are to be invoiced and leaseholders that we spoke to welcomed this development. On the whole leaseholders understand service charge statements and welcomed the fact that they had been remodelled into a user friendly format.
- 159** Quarterly advice on communal repairs undertaken, so that leaseholders can keep track of work that has been undertaken and have an opportunity to query the work the quality of the work undertaken. However, leaseholders that we met did not have a high regard for the quality of communal repairs and grounds maintenance, although were advised that concerns were dealt with promptly by Tenant and Leaseholder Services.
- 160** Consultation on major works is seen to be positive from leaseholders from the point of issuing notice of intention to undertake work through to the provision estimated costs. Regular site meetings are being held during works which leaseholders found to be helpful.
- 161** When contracts for major works are awarded, leaseholders are involved and reasons for the award of contracts are provided.
- 162** However, there are areas where the Council needs to address. Collection rates of leaseholder service charges have reduced significantly. This can be illustrated below.

Table 2 Service charge collection rates

Period	Raised	Paid	Collection rate (%)	Unpaid
2003/04	£1,164,767	£1,092,633	93.81	£72,133
2004/05	£1,279,964	£1,067,533	83.4	£212,431

- 163** This is a significant reduction in performance and has a negative impact on the HRA.
- 164** Another area where residents expressed concerns is in relation to the number of leasehold acquired properties that had been sub-let by the owners, particularly in relation to anti-social behaviour. Approximately 25 per cent of leasehold properties have been sub-let and there is no requirement within the lease to inform the Council. This is an area where we recognise that the Council is examining and ensuring that staff deal with the issues of concern.
- 165** In conclusion, there is a mixed picture in terms of the delivery of services to leaseholders. For example, while there is a view that communication has improved, services that affect the immediate environment has not done so.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 166 This is an area that the housing management service is now addressing. From its own self-assessment, it recognises that its management payment costs are high. Nevertheless, the Service is looking to the future for achieving efficiency savings and delivering value for money. It has actively benchmarked the cost of its services with other local authorities and social housing providers. It has used the services of an external organisation to produce an annual efficiency statement and a value for money strategy during the period that we were undertaking this inspection.
- 167 The information that the Service has obtained through its comparisons with other organisations will assist it in delivering services and channelling efficiencies into areas that require additional investment.
- 168 There has been an improvement of performance in rent collection and void re-let times and this has delivered additional income to the HRA of £190,000 in 2004/05 and a target set of £240,000 in 2005/06.
- 169 The Council has been promoting rent payment by direct debit and this has led to a doubling of payments, amounting to savings of £13 per tenant per annum in relation to bank charges.
- 170 The Service benefits from corporate efficiency initiatives. The main thrust of the procurement strategy is to develop more partnership arrangements for the delivery of services. Recent examples included the letting of the corporate contract for administration and clerical staff which in the first six months of operation saved the Council £29,000 and the Housing Service £2,500.
- 171 Recruitment advertising has also been reviewed and the new contract will bring a saving estimated as £20,000 per annum.
- 172 While not directly related to the housing management inspection, it is important to note the revenue released by HRA garage sites has yielded over £5 million in receipts to provide social housing and thus tackle the issue of removing households from temporary accommodation. Ten more sites have been identified for 2006/07.
- 173 There are targeted reductions for management costs of £106,000 for 2005/06 and further reductions planned through the HRA business plan of £540,000 in 2006/07 and £980,000 in 2007/08. However, we have not received information as to how these reductions are to be achieved, or whether they will be reinvested into the service as a whole.

How do costs compare?

- 174 The housing management service was compared to ten local authorities and ALMOs in London. Key outcomes that emerged from this exercise included the following.
- Housing management costs are relatively high to the comparator group, but this is offset by relatively low support costs.

- The costs of providing lettings management is above that of the comparator group, but this needs to be seen in relation to the low number of properties available for letting per month (approximately ten per month).
- The cost of providing rent collection and accounting is below the average for the comparator group and should be seen in the light of improved performance.
- The caretaking review benchmarked against other authorities and found it to be broadly comparable in unit costs, but commented that the service as it currently stands is not cost effective.
- The cost per property for leasehold management was substantially below that of the comparator group, but while the collection rate for service charges was above those of comparators, we do not see this as positive performance.

175 The outcome of this exercise has enabled the Council to prepare an efficiency statement for the manner that it will manage future issues relating to value for money of its services.

How is value for money managed?

176 This is an area where work is at an early stage and benchmarking has been undertaken to enable the authority to compare costs. A strategy for achieving value for money and improving the efficiency of the housing management service was produced in September 2005, while we were on site.

177 There are three themes to the strategy:

- maximising available resources;
- working in the most effective way; and
- effective procurement of goods and services.

178 There has been some progress against these themes and include the following:

- improved rent collection;
- improved void re-let times; and
- reduction in recharges of £137,000 from Legal Services as a result of undertaking in-house court proceedings.

179 Councillors monitor progress on value for money, performance and expenditure through the Council's governance arrangements. They are also involved in strategic procurement, for example the new repair contract and have received training in this area.

180 Residents have been involved in key procurement processes, service redesign and savings reviews and understand the renewed commitment to value for money. Examples include the Stock Options Community Forum, Repairs procurement, TP review, caretaking review, Quality of Life Committee.

- 181 However, there is still some way to go for the Council to demonstrate that it is effectively providing value for money in relation to the housing management service. Just a basic example relates to the management of decoration allowances. A visit does not always take place before the release of the second part of the decoration allowance, and the cost of that allowance is not credited to the rent account where a tenant is in arrears.
- 182 In conclusion, the Service is making strides to address the issue of value for money and, while it has had some success, needs to continue its efforts.

Summary

- 183 We consider the service to be fair for the following reasons.
- There is a customer focus in the delivery of services, demonstrated through feedback from residents that we met.
 - The blocks on estates seen during the stock tour and other reality checks were observed to be in a satisfactory condition. Communal areas appeared clean and tidy and maintenance levels were satisfactory.
 - The offices are welcoming offering Freephone for the repair line, children's play boxes, and online kiosk for the CBL scheme.
 - The profile for diversity has become more of a priority within the Council. That has led to compulsory training for staff and the development of an equalities and diversity strategy that residents will be consulted on.
 - Through specific tasks the Council has started to involve wider and more representative members of the community in planning services, such as through the Redbridge ALMO forum, leaseholder services forum and local service panels. Residents have been actively involved in the development of projects, such as the new tenant participation strategy which was launched in June 2005 and significant resources are available for tenant involvement and participation.
 - There is close working with the voluntary sector to provide support for people with mental health problems and there is targeting to fast rising rent debt cases to maximise income to authority.
 - Rent collection is meeting the 97.5 per cent target of the housing management service and rent statements are received every three months and they are clear and well set out. In addition, there are close links with the Finance Department in relation to HB.
 - There are clear links between the Service and the corporate anti-social behaviour team and tenant representatives felt that the Council had a more positive attitude in relation to tackling anti-social behaviour.
 - The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has viewed the process used by the Council in involving residents for its stock option appraisal as a model of good practice.

- A strategy for value for money and efficiency has been produced although work is at an early stage in implementing this strategy.

184 However, we found several weaknesses.

- Office signage and notices visible after opening times need to be updated and when we visited the One Stop Shop we found that it only had two housing related leaflets and staff did not have a list of housing information/leaflets to be held.
- There is a lack of clarity on the availability of complaints and compensation provided to tenants and feedback from residents is not being used strategically to improve the service. There has been limited progress in attracting new Estate Guardians.
- File checks revealed lack of audit trails, inconsistent use of tenancy file sheets, general lack of records and no evidence that complaints had been closed and complainant advised.
- There are a number of strategic aims around diversity that feed into a range of departmental plans and strategies. It is unclear if there is system to co-ordinate these plans and strategies.
- The diversity strategy is four years old has been weakly implemented across the authority and housing offices are not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- While performance on the collection of former tenant arrears is satisfactory there is an absence of targets to measure performance.
- The communication of information around estate inspections is inconsistent and the involvement and feedback around these inspections needs to be shared between all stakeholders. There is a lack of clarity about the process for the input or feedback between housing officers and those estates without Estate Guardians or Resident Associations.
- The caretaking review commissioned by the Council benchmarked against other authorities and found it to be broadly comparable but commented that the service as it currently stands is not cost effective. This was a key recommendation made in our previous inspection and it is disappointing that it has not been fully met.
- The provision of addressing anti-social behaviour across the borough by the service is inconsistent. There was a lack of information on tenancy files in relation to action taken to deal with anti-social behaviour and the reasons why such decisions had been made.
- There was no evidence that cases had been reviewed. Any action undertaken and recorded on the anti-social behaviour database had not been duplicated on the file and there were no verbatim records of interviews.

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- Until recently service charge collection for door entry systems, CCTV, window cleaning and general repairs had not been billed and not collected. Leaseholders are dissatisfied with communal repairs and general ground maintenance.
- Value for money has not been demonstrated for the caretaking service as required in our initial inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 185 Since the last inspection, there has been progress in relation to the implementation of the key recommendations made in our report. These can be illustrated in the table below.

Table 3 Response to key recommendations from the initial inspection

Recommendation	Status
To review accessibility of services provided from area offices.	This has been mainly achieved, although offices are still not compliant with the DDA. However, we note that the future use of current offices is being reviewed in relation to the decision to seek ALMO status.
To ensure that service improvements had challenging targets, realistic timescales and properly resourced.	Achieved and linked into service and individual targets.
To establish a programme of estate inspections with residents.	Achieved, but still some weaknesses in relation to co-ordination and involving residents where there is no Resident Association or Estate Guardian in place.
To consider involving caretaking staff in estate inspections.	Achieved.
Undertake a cost analysis of the caretaking service and ensure that it is delivering value for money.	Partially achieved in that an independent review of the caretaking service was completed by September 2005. The Council is considering the recommendations of this review.

Recommendation	Status
To review the Council's approach to rent collection in line with good practice.	Achieved.
To ensure that residents are provided with adequate, consistent and timely information on services.	Partially achieved, but recognised as work in progress.
Ensure that housing management targets are consistently met.	Achieved through monitoring and reporting performance both to the Council and residents.
Co-ordinate and prioritise plans for service improvements and effective monitoring is in place.	Achieved.
Develop an action plan to address weaknesses in services to leaseholders.	Achieved.
Develop and implement plans to secure appropriate IT support.	This is on target and the plan and capacity issues in relation to the implementation of IT support are in place.

186 There has been a change in the profile of the Housing Department as a whole within the authority. The Council has recognised that greater focus was needed to improve service delivery to residents. It has created a separate housing portfolio within the Cabinet to drive through key priorities. These have included:

- achieving a 'fit for purpose' assessment from the GoL for its housing strategy and HRA business plan;
- completing the stock options appraisal and submitting it to the GoL;
- strengthening the IT infrastructure to support service improvements; and
- re-structuring the organisation into specialist teams to improve focus on specific aspects of service delivery.

187 There have been tangible benefits that have arisen from this approach. The perception from tenants and leaseholders is that customer care, consultation and service delivery has improved over last 12/18 months which can be shown by the following examples:

- a new tenancy sustainment service;
- the establishment of a Quality of Life panel with significant resources;
- the establishment of an estates standards panel and the successful introduction of the blitz team within the caretaking service;

- improvement in void re-let times from a high of 40 days in 2001/02 to 28.4 days in 2004/05;
 - improved performance with regards to rent collection and arrear recovery from £666,146 at the end of 2004/05 to £607,702 during the time of the inspection. This should also be placed in the context that in 2003/04, arrears stood at almost £850,000, which demonstrates the progress that has been made in recovering debt;
 - a rolling programme of customer care training for all staff; and
 - re-award of Investors in People status.
- 188** There has been greater involvement of residents with the service, which can be illustrated by the establishment of the ALMO forum, BME and sheltered housing focus groups, three new Resident Associations and a new participation framework launched in June 2005.
- 189** Performance has improved in key areas and many of these directly benefit service users. Management development training is being piloted within the Housing Department and the Council is examining trainee schemes, mentoring and progression through the ranks.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 190** We found evidence of an appraisal system for staff with links to service and corporate priorities being embedded into individual targets.
- 191** At a local level there are monthly one-to-one meetings with line managers and these are recorded and signed for by housing officers. Information discussed includes:
- anti-social behaviour/harassment cases;
 - estate inspection outcomes;
 - monthly targets - repairs, anti-social behaviour and correspondence;
 - training needs; and
 - personal concerns.
- 192** There are monthly team meetings which are minuted. These minutes are shared between offices in order to make staff aware of any particular issues arising in other offices.
- 193** In addition, there is a system through e-mail to cascade broader housing issues which is sent to all housing staff so they can be aware of any new developments within the department and across the council.
- 194** There are regular performance meetings between Payments and Benefits and the housing management service in relation to rent and service charge collection performance.
- 195** There are regular meetings between Tenant and Leaseholder Services and service contractors to monitor performance in relation to grounds maintenance and other estate services.

44 Housing Inspection | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 196 Plans for improvement are co-ordinated and clear. The improvement plans sit directly beneath an overall service plan, and are followed through from the one-to-one meetings up to the management board at delivering the aims and objectives of the service.
- 197 There are clear objectives identified within the housing management improvement plan, as well as tasks to achieve those objectives, timescales, lead officers, resources and cross reference to the previous inspection report on this service.
- 198 The improvement plan is monitored on a monthly basis and reports on progress are made to the scrutiny committee on a quarterly basis. In addition, the improvement plan is discussed with residents at the neighbourhood forum and at the borough panel.
- 199 There is an improved understanding of budgets by managers. This has been achieved through the provision of budget training for managers and regular monthly reviews of budget positions. Work with the Finance Department has also enabled costs to be broken down into separate services to provide clearer and accountable information. Plans are in progress for devolution of budgets for front-line managers.
- 200 There is corporate monitoring of all levels of performance and reports are provided, using a traffic-light system, where performance targets can be identified to be likely miss targets and the action that is to be taken to bring the service back to target levels.
- 201 The ALMO bid is driven by the ambition to drive continuous improvements and seen as a challenge for the department. Senior managers are meeting with a top performing ALMO to learn about best practice and discuss possible mentoring arrangements in order to make use of best practice.
- 202 The Housing Service has identified key risks in relation to the delivery of repairs procurement, new IT and establishment of the ALMO.
- 203 There is clarity at a political level of the priorities for the Housing Department with weekly meetings between the Cabinet member for housing and senior management that consider budgets, internal and external developments.
- 204 The Cabinet member for housing has a clear vision to raise the profile of housing within the council.
- 205 The Housing Department has increasing its profile with other departments. The Chief Housing Officer (CHO) has engaged with all Chief Officers and attended management team meetings to discuss the developments within the department, including the procurement and stock options process. Attendees at the ALMO steering group also are from various areas including finance, personnel and property development services.
- 206 Corporately, the council is planning for future demographic changes and re-branding itself to be more meaningful to an increasingly diverse community.

- 207 There has been a positive cultural change within the housing department in the last two years. Improved senior manager leadership has provided the direction required for the service to be more responsive to customer needs and be performance focused.
- 208 Relationships across departmental barriers have been developed to improve the Housing Department's client role and the management of performance and targets are geared to fostering a team approach to delivering objectives.
- 209 Staff are more involved in moving the service forward. This has been achieved in managers providing guidance, support and direction to staff, that was previously lacking two years ago. Staff have been involved in the planning and developing of large projects. An example involves the development of the repairs procurement and development of the stock options appraisal.
- 210 There have been efforts by the housing management service to encourage staff to concentrate on the importance of responsive service delivery. Staff awareness on the potential of delivering better services have been raised through visiting a top performing authority that has an ALMO in place.
- 211 There is a formatted process in place for collating and disseminating performance indicators. The information is manually collated monthly and inputted into the Council's corporate 'pbviews' system which then produces data that is disseminated to team leaders.
- 212 There is a structured approach for performance to be considered up the organisation. The CHO has a monthly performance monitoring meeting with managers in which performance and developments on action plans are considered. This information is then fed up to the management board, cluster management team (for housing and SS) monthly and to scrutiny committee on a quarterly basis. Since April 2005 there have also been leader and cabinet member meetings to discuss performance.
- 213 Benchmarking has shown that the cost per property of providing rent collection and accounting is forecast to be below the median of the comparator group in 2005/06.
- 214 There is a plan to review the bonus and overtime system within the caretaking service as part of the overall process to reach single status for caretakers, as well as introducing bar coding systems to demonstrate the times.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 215 In recognition of the need to improve the co-ordination of delivering value for money, the department commissioned Housemark to produce a value for money strategy and benchmarking information. This is intended to assist in the production of the mid year annual efficiency submission as well as providing the department with collated and comparative information to consider value for money within service delivery. These issues are to be discussed the Borough Panel on how they should be prioritised.

- 216 The Council has taken on additional capacity for the stock options appraisal process, an interim Head of Housing Management, and an additional resource for six months to deliver the housing management service plan. Governance arrangements for the ALMO were agreed in September 2005, while we were on site, and are now subject to broader consultation with residents.
- 217 The capacity of the Housing Department to deliver key projects has been added to by the use of consultants with expertise in their particular fields. In addition, the housing management service is in the process of recruiting an Independent Tenant Adviser for the ALMO.
- 218 The future location of delivery of the service is to be considered in line with the ALMO developments.
- 219 There has been an increased focus on addressing sickness absence. All managers have received refresher training on the procedures and managers meeting discuss overall sickness to ensure that appropriate management support is being provided by personnel and OT. The sickness absence procedures are currently being corporately reviewed.
- 220 Since April 2005 the level of sickness has reduced in the housing management service. The absence rate for August 2005 was 1.38 days overall, that related to 0.85 days long term and 0.53 short term. This is against an overall target of 0.71 days for the Service.
- 221 Staff movement has promoted new ideas and development. New staff have come into the department with new ideas, and those with pre-conceived ideas that the service would not improve have left.
- 222 Staff have been involved in the developing changes within the department. Monthly newsletters and a quarterly briefing by the CHO providing formal information and managers deal with queries on a one-to-one basis. The recent staff survey (received September 2005) shows improvements in the areas of overall job satisfaction and understanding of the corporate aims of the council.
- 223 The corporate complaints system RESPOND has been introduced to the Housing Department as a whole, and nominated officers received training in April 2005. The system will enable reporting on complaint service and type that will enable the service to identify service barriers. Initial analysis shows that the highest level of complaints within the housing management area relate to ASB and repairs.
- 224 The key focus of training for staff is in relation to customer care, service delivery and performance management.

Summary

225 We judge that the housing management service has promising prospects for improvement. We have reached this decision for the following reasons.

- There has been a positive cultural change within the Service in the last two years. Improved senior manager leadership has provided the direction required for the service to be more responsive to customer needs and be performance focused.
- There has been an improvement in void re-let times, a consequent reduction in void rent loss and performance in relation to rent collection is amongst the highest in London.
- There are clear objectives identified within the housing management improvement plan, which is monitored on a monthly basis and reports on progress are made to the scrutiny committee and residents on a regular basis.
- The Service has identified key risks in relation to the delivery of new IT and establishment of the ALMO and responded accordingly.
- There is a corporate commitment to deliver diversity in service delivery, through the corporate customer care strategy and compulsory equalities and diversity training.
- There is a structured approach for performance to be considered up the organisation. This occurs through the housing management service and is fed through the corporate management structure and then to Cabinet.
- There is an improved understanding of budgets by managers. This has been achieved through the provision of budget training for managers and regular monthly reviews of budget positions. Work with finance has also enabled costs to be broken down into separate services to provide clearer and accountable information.
- The capacity of the housing service to deliver key projects has been added to by the use of consultants with expertise in their particular fields.
- The key focus of training for staff is in relation to customer care, service delivery and performance management and training.
- Management development training is to be piloted within housing and the Council is examining trainee and mentoring schemes.

226 There are weaknesses that we have identified and they are as follows.

- Until recently, there has been an absence of resident involvement in monitoring performance, and no development of local performance indicators. In addition, the council has missed some key recommendations from our last inspection.

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- Benchmarking has shown that core housing management pay costs per employee are forecast to be 10 per cent higher than the median of the comparator group in 2005/06, which will result in a high housing management pay cost per property.
- Benchmarking has shown that the cost per property of providing both empty properties and lettings functions were high in 2004/05 due to the low number of properties managed per employee.
- There is a service level agreement between the housing management service and legal services, but it is very old and has not been reviewed.
- There are a number of strategic aims around diversity that feed into a range of departmental plans and strategies. There is no clear system to co-ordinate these plans and strategies.
- The corporate target for the reduction of sickness levels is 0.74 days lost per employee, though sickness levels within the housing management service stood at 1.38 days per employee.
- The council has been reliant on external expertise, and does not yet have the long term capacity to sustain the drive forward and deliver improvements.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	2003/04	2003/04 upper quartile threshold	2004/05	2005/06
BV74a -Tenant satisfaction with landlord	71		71	--
BV74b - Tenant satisfaction with landlord (BME tenants)	74		74	--
BV212 - Average time to re-let housing	PI introduced 2005/06	26	44.3 (based on BV66)	28.4 (quarter 1)

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - outcome of the previous housing management inspection;
 - self-assessment report;
 - housing strategy and business plan;
 - community strategy;
 - HIP submissions to the GoL;
 - the Council's Best Value performance plan;
 - procedures relating to rent collection and tenancy management issues generally;
 - equality and diversity policies and procedures;
 - sickness absence management procedures;
 - recruitment and retention procedures and policies;
 - various leaflets, newsletters and relevant housing related information available to residents; and
 - STATUS survey and other relevant satisfaction surveys.

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:
 - visits to housing offices;
 - unaccompanied visits to estates and inspection of individual blocks;
 - unaccompanied checks on the activities of the Blitz team;
 - interrogation of the website;
 - observation of tenancy sign-up and accompanied viewings;
 - observation of interviews relating to rent arrear action; and
 - file checks across all housing management service areas.