

Repairs and Maintenance

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 London Borough of Redbridge is a London borough council in the east area of London. The population is 245,000 of which 37 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities (BME). 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 The Council employs 7,500 staff across all services.
- 4 The repairs and maintenance service is carried out within the housing management section of the housing service, which is part of the housing and social services cluster, and is responsible for the management and maintenance of the Council's 7,070 tenanted and leasehold homes.
- 5 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.
- 6 The Audit Commission has carried out two previous inspections of the Council's repairs and maintenance service. In June 2001 the service was judged as a fair one-star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement - the inspection excluded voids and capital improvements. In September 2003 the service was judged as a poor zero-star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement - the inspection included all aspects of the current re-inspection.
- 7 The inspection of this repairs and maintenance inspection focused on the following:
 - access and customer care;
 - diversity;
 - stock investment decisions and business planning;
 - capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance;
 - responsive repairs;
 - void repairs;
 - gas servicing;
 - resident involvement; and
 - value for money.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed London Borough of Redbridge as providing 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?				‘a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement’
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	
A good service?	Excellent					
	Promising		⚙️			
	Uncertain					
	Poor					
		Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 9 We consider the service to be ‘fair’ because of the following strengths.
- The repairs service is accessible and provides a customer-focused approach, and offers a range of reporting methods that include a free-phone.
 - A high level of appointments are made and kept for responsive repairs.
 - Newsletters to residents are clear and informative, and aim to deliver messages on key changes affecting the service and how residents can be involved.
 - Performance to respond to correspondence within the corporate timescale has been at 100 per cent since April 2005.
 - Alternative formats of information are offered, and there is a wide number of initiatives in place to provide translation and interpreting facilities.
 - Satisfaction levels with the repairs service have improved, and recent data continues to show this trend.
 - Residents have been actively involved in the development of major projects, including the stock option appraisal and repairs procurement process. And there have been some pro-active consultation with leaseholders that led to the development of the leaseholders’ handbook.

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.

- There are two dedicated project officers in place to lead on consultation with residents on improvement projects, and an increased level of residents are receiving new kitchen and bathroom refurbishments due to the new partnering agreement.
- Tenants are offered a range of choice in internal improvement programmes, and the Council has used tenant feedback to refine the delivery of projects.
- There is robust process in place to re-let voids.
- There is a high-level of completed gas servicing checks on a rolling programme, and customer focused appointment facilities provided.

10 However, we found the following weaknesses.

- Information on the repairs and maintenance service is not adequately or consistently publicised in the housing offices, one stop shop or on the website. New tenants do not receive a copy of the repairs handbook.
- Complaints are not sufficiently encouraged or effectively responded to, and the Council does not have a compensation policy in place.
- The Council is not tailoring services to the needs of its tenants. It has not used its tenant profile to target services and individual tenant needs are not always captured to deliver services. It does not capture or use ethnicity data in order to identify any potential disparities in service delivery.
- The three housing offices do not comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- The provision of aids and adaptations is not pro-actively publicised by the housing service (although the budget was increased to £500,000 for 2005/06).
- Some residents did not receive improvement work when indicated in 2004/05 due to a £776,000 underspend on the capital programme; and there was an underspend on the quality of life budget in 2004/05 by £205,000.
- Residents are not adequately informed of the intended improvement programme for their properties, in particular leaseholders who will be required to pay for a proportion of the work.
- Repairs are not being effectively delivered. Pre-inspection requests are not consistently captured, performance on the level of jobs completed within one visit is low, post-inspections are not targeted or routinely carried out and the Council does not monitor the level of repairs jobs varied.
- The Council is not providing an efficient or value for money repairs and maintenance service, due to the high proportion of emergencies/out-of-hour and urgent repairs it raises.
- There has been ineffective management of the voids budget. Average void costs are high, and value for money is not demonstrated. A high-level of tenants reported that repairs were outstanding.
- Residents have not consistently been involved in monitoring current service delivery, or evaluating the value for money of the current service.

8 Repairs and Maintenance | Summary

- Estate inspections are not consistently providing residents with clear details of how repair and improvement needs will be addressed by the Council.

11 The prospects for improvement are 'promising' because the following drivers exist.

- There have been customer facing improvements made in the access arrangements to the repairs service and gas servicing.
- There have been improvements in some key performance indicators including the level of appointments made and kept, void re-let times and SAP rating levels.
- Resident involvement is starting to be more inclusive and representative, and the Council has implemented a new tenant participation framework.
- There are key projects in place to improve the service of the repairs' procurement and the stock option appraisal and pending ALMO² bid. These have made the Council more externally focused when comparing performance with its peers.
- Improved leadership has provided the service and staff with a clear direction for the service and improvements to be delivered.
- There is corporate commitment to deliver diversity in service delivery, through the corporate customer care strategy and mandatory equalities and diversity training.
- Internal capacity has been developed through reduced sickness levels (albeit some increase in long-term sickness in repairs and management), financial training and staff involvement in major projects.
- IT improvements are developing the capacity of the service for complaints and repairs and maintenance.
- The service is starting to review value for money. A benchmarking exercise has been completed and a draft value for money and efficiency strategy has been produced.
- The housing department has progressed to achieve Investors in People (IiP) status following a number of years as 'retaining recognition status'.

12 However, the following barriers to improvement exist.

- Overall performance of the responsive repairs service has not improved, and there are key weaknesses in value for money.
- The Council has not put in place all of the recommendations from the previous inspection that it could have.
- Performance management is weak at service delivery level. The Council has not effectively monitored Redbridge Building Maintenance (RBM) as there have been no development of local performance indicators to measure service delivery of the responsive repairs service and there is no clear process to how this will be performed with the new partner.

² Arms length management organisation (ALMO).

- The repairs and maintenance improvement plan is not SMART³ and the draft asset management strategy is in its early days of development.
- The service is not using complaints as a learning tool to improve services.
- The Council has been reliant on external expertise, and does not yet have long-term capacity to sustain the drive forward and deliver improvements.

Recommendations

- 13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs⁴ 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:

- *information on the service is consistently publicised in accessible places;*
- *the complaints process is adequately publicised, responded to and used to improve service delivery; and*
- *tenant profile information is comprehensive and used to inform service delivery.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clear outcomes for tenants on how diversity will be delivered within the repairs and maintenance service;
- increased ability to learn from tenants and meet their needs; and
- Increased resident involvement and awareness of the service.

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

This recommendation should be implemented by June 2006.

³ Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Resourced, Time-bound.

⁴ 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.

Recommendation

R2 Improve performance management by ensuring that:

- *the capital programme is effectively managed and delivers work to budget;*
- *targets for responsive repairs are met;*
- *challenging targets are set and monitored to reduce the level of emergency and urgent repairs; ultimately in line with Audit Commission guidance;*
- *decoration allowances are monitored to ensure they are consistently issued and appropriately validated; and*
- *the value for money of voids costs are reviewed and targets set to align with comparative organisations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improving delivery of the capital programme;
- saving money on the premium paid for urgent/emergency works;
- improving performance in delivering responsive repairs; and
- more effective use of decorations allowances and reducing the potential for their misuse.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact with low cost with the potential for some savings.

This should be implemented by April 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the approach to service and improvement planning by ensuring that:

- *all elements of the service reflect best value principles;*
- *all elements of the service and improvement plans are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound); and*
- *benchmarking data is effectively used to drive up performance in poorly performing areas.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improving the quality of the service to residents;
- increased ability to identify and implement options for improvement; and
- better organisation responses to areas of weak performance.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and low cost with the potential for savings.

This should be implemented by June 2006.

Recommendation

R4 Ensure housing offices comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act legislation.

This should be implemented by April 2006.

- 14 Take action to address all of the other weaknesses identified in this report.
- 15 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 - 23 September 2005

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Report

Context

The locality

- 16 The London Borough of Redbridge is a 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.
- 17 Redbridge is a borough of contrasts with areas of affluence and deprivation. In the North of the Borough, the ward of Monkams is amongst the five per cent least deprived wards in England. Whereas in the South, Loxford is one of the 11 per cent most deprived wards in England⁵.
- 18 According to the 2001 Census, a third of the population are under the age of 25, while 14 per cent are over the age of 65. About 33 per cent of households are married or cohabiting couples with dependent children and the elderly account for 21 per cent of the household population.
- 19 The unemployment rate in Redbridge stands at 3.6 per cent compared with the London average of 4.5 per cent.
- 20 Redbridge's housing stock covers a wide range of dwelling types including pre and post 1945 detached, semi and terraced houses, bungalows and low, medium and high-rise blocks.

The Council

- 21 The Council is Conservative led with 33 of the 63 seats, with the Labour party holding 20 seats, Liberal Democrats nine and one Independent.
- 22 A new constitution was adopted in May 2002, which established a Council with Leader, a Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and seven Area Committees.
- 23 The Chief Executive and Directors have direct accountability between them for 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.
- 24 The Audit Commission Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2004 rated the Council as 'fair', with the Housing Service receiving a rating of 1 out of a possible 4.

⁵ Indices of Deprivation 2004 ODPM.

25 The Council adopted a new vision and aims in November 2004, following consultation with customers, residents, members, 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 cleaner, greener place to live;
- a better place for care;
- a better place to learn;
- a better place for business; and
- a better place to live together.

The service

- 26** 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.
- 27** The average Council rents are £71.49 per week, management costs £26.98 per week and repair costs are £17.56 per week.
- 28** Redbridge Building Maintenance (RBM) is the Council's direct labour organisation that has been in place since 1995 and provides the services for responsive repairs, void refurbishments and gas servicing. Engineering Building Services (EBS) provide management and support to delivering the capital and planned maintenance programmes.
- 29** The repairs hotline is based at one of the Council's three housing offices on Orchard estate. It has six customer services staff and a manager, and receives all repair orders and places them with RBM. Housing Technical Services (HTS) deliver surveying services and the repairs and renewal team manage the delivering of the capital and planned maintenance programmes.
- 30** 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).
- 31** The Audit Commission's previous inspection in 2003 judged the Council's repairs and maintenance service as a poor zero-star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement and made the following recommendations to the Council.
- Address those recommendations identified in our initial (2001) inspection, which have not been completed, as re-iterated below.
 - In conjunction with tenants, make the action plan performance-targets more challenging so that the organisation achieves top quartile performance across all key service indicators.

- In conjunction with tenants and leaseholders, prioritise the development and introduction of modern, more efficient, customer focused contract arrangements to support the delivery of a consistent, cost effective repairs service.
 - Agree and communicate a clear and transparent strategy for the procurement of a new repairs provider.
 - Simplify arrangements for the reporting of individual repairs.
 - Introduces and enforce arrangements to carry out forced entry to properties where access has not been gained by other means within the statutory timescale, by April 2004. Ensure targets are based on meeting the statutory requirements and that there is a continual review of performance and quality systems to monitor performance.
 - Review the improvement plan to ensure targets are realistic and achievable.
 - Develop a strategy for ensuring that profiling data collected is used to develop services appropriate to the needs of tenants and leaseholders.
 - Develop new initiatives to involve more residents in monitoring and improving the service with localised performance information provided.
 - Improve performance of the free phone repair 'Hotline' response time and address unsatisfactory performance on customer care issues highlighted by our survey of tenants and our own mystery shopping.
 - Carry out an annual satisfaction survey for the repair service and publicise the results.
 - Improve IT and performance monitoring information to ensure it is timely and appropriate and that staff have the tools to carry out their jobs that are 'fit for purpose'.
 - Ensure staff and financial resources are appropriate for business needs and that they are regularly reviewed to reflect the changing profile of the council's housing stock. Ensure there is systematic and effective progress against the plan that is reported regularly to members, officers and tenants.
- 32** This inspection considered how the Council had implemented these recommendations as well as met the Audit Commission's KLOEs⁶.

⁶ Key Lines of Enquiry.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 33** The Housing Service 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 Centre⁷ and 'a better place to live together' which includes Affordable Housing, Housing Repairs and Housing Stock Options⁸.
- 34** 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'.
- 35** The Housing Service 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.
- 36** 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?

- 37** 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 of our clients and potential clients.
 - Improve access to services for all of 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 perception of crime and actual crime for our residents.

⁷ Corporate Strategy May 2005 page 9 and14.

⁸ Corporate Strategy May 2005 page 15.

- 38 The plan includes actions, timescales and key milestones but does not indicate the measure of success, to measure whether the objective has been delivered.

Access and customer care

- 39 The previous inspection found weaknesses in this area, including a lack of customer focus with poor customer care provided by the repair hotline, lengthy waiting times for calls to be answered and 29 per cent of calls not getting through. There was a lack of localised performance information provided to residents and the Council were found to be consistently failing to meet its own service standards.
- 40 There is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Telephone access to the repair hotline is accessible, responsive and customer focused, through extended reporting hours and methods. There is adequate performance on the quality of call answering and high performance on responding to correspondence with target time. The Council has recently expanded its methods of satisfaction monitoring, and overall satisfaction levels with the repairs service are high. There are weaknesses in the provision of information regarding the repairs and maintenance service, including service and performance information and the development of local performance information. The Council is not adequately encouraging or handling complaints, or using them as a method for improving the service.
- 41 Customer services within the London Borough of Redbridge scored highly when compared with 15 other local authorities. At the end of February 2005 a mystery shopping benchmarking exercise scored Redbridge as first for personal visits and telephone scenarios, and fifth for speed and greeting of callers.
- 42 The Council provides an accessible repairs service. It has extended access to the service through an email reporting facility on the Council's website for non-urgent repairs, and both the Orchard and Manford Way offices have internet kiosks with access to the website for public use. Residents can now report repairs on the free phone hotline number during the extended hours of 5pm to 8pm, Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm, Saturday. This means that residents are able to report their repairs through a variety of means that are accessible and residents that we spoke to are happy with and valued the extended service.
- 43 Telephone access to the repairs service is of a high quality. There is a direct telephone link to the hotline for residents provided at the three housing offices. The three housing offices are well signposted, located and two of them are positioned on the Council's larger estates. This is a positive aspect of the service as it enables residents to use the local facilities at the housing offices to report repairs. Although the telephones could be better positioned as they are situated on the reception desks which could impinge not only on confidentiality for the caller but those waiting at the reception desk.

- 44 The response to telephone calls by the hotline is effective. The response time of answering a call has improved from 13.7 seconds (2004/05) to an average of 10.2 seconds for the period April to August 2005. Similarly the level of abandoned calls has reduced from an average of 118 per month (2004/05) to 82 for the months April to August 2005, or 4.3 per cent. Tenants are able to get through to the hotline and are not experiencing lengthy waiting periods in doing so.
- 45 The telephone system is not recording the level of abandoned calls accurately, and this is not in the Council's favour as the system counts an abandoned call as one that is picked up in the hunt group by another officer. Therefore while the call may not be picked up in the Council's service standard of four rings, it is answered but logged as an abandoned call.
- 46 Hotline staff provide a customer focused service. Customer care training has taken place and the Council's satisfaction data shows a high-level of satisfaction with the response from the hotline. Our observations of the hotline found that staff handled reports and queries in a competent and friendly manner. The majority of tenants and leaseholders that we met were complimentary of the hotline, and the improvement in customer care.
- 47 There are high-levels of satisfaction with the repair service. Table 2 shows the level of satisfaction with various aspects of the repairs service taken from the returned satisfaction slips that the Council send out with every urgent and routine repair order.

Table 2 Responsive repairs satisfaction levels

Satisfaction (percentage) with	2004/05	April 2005	May 2005	June 2005	July 2005
Repairs hotline	95.1	97	97	100	93.3
RBM Operative	98.7	99.3	99.4	98	100
Non-RBM operative	100	100	100	100	100
Repair completed by RBM	96.8	98.6	99.4	100	100
Repair completed by non-RBM	95.6	100	75	100	100

Source: London Borough of Redbridge satisfaction slip data

- 48 The Council has widened the methods used to monitor satisfaction of the repairs service. It continues to send out satisfaction slips with urgent and routine repairs with a return rate of 26 per cent (2004/05) and 18 per cent (2005/06 to date). And in August 2005 it introduced telephone surveys to measure satisfaction levels across all job priorities, including out-of-hours and emergencies.

This is a pro-active method of obtaining feedback from residents and informing future service delivery. During August to November 2005 four per cent of all repair orders were surveyed in this way, finding high levels of satisfaction and repairs performance (see paragraph 99 for details).

- 49 Overall satisfaction with the repairs service show an upward trend. The 2005 housing service satisfaction survey found that 67 per cent of tenants were very/fairly satisfied with the repairs service, and 18 per cent fairly/very dissatisfied. This is an improvement to the 2003 STATUS survey that found 59 per cent satisfied with the service and 26 per cent dissatisfied.
- 50 The Council has not introduced an annual satisfaction survey for repairs as recommended in the September 2003 inspection. The annual 2005 housing service satisfaction survey found that satisfaction with Redbridge's repairs service exceeded benchmarking data of London local authorities⁹. This was in the areas of attitude of workers, quality of repair, speed with which work was completed, keeping dirt and mess to a minimum, on being advised when an operative would call and time taken before the work commenced. However, the survey details provided only represented the outcome for those returned by tenants, and did not include the responses from leaseholders. Neither did it adequately capture the more prominent areas of weakness that we found in this inspection, including the level of satisfaction with the accuracy of reporting repairs and the level of jobs completed 'right first time'.
- 51 Correspondence is responded to within corporate timescales. Since April 2005 100 per cent of the correspondence to the hotline, repairs and renewals staff has been responded to within the 14 calendar day timescale. This is positive performance when compared with the previous inspection findings of 91 per cent.
- 52 There is a lack of repairs and maintenance information consistently provided by the Council. There were no repair and maintenance based leaflets or information found in each of the three housing offices. This included general repairs information for example the priorities, response times and performance, gas servicing, DHS related information and the provisional capital/planned improvement programme. Similarly we found only two housing related leaflets at the recently opened one stop shop in Ilford High Street, that was opened in direct response to the corporate best value review of 'Contacting the Council'.
- 53 While the Council's website is easy to navigate and access it provides limited information on repairs. It includes information on the repairs hotline compact that details the service standards for reporting a repair and repair priorities. However, it does not inform tenants how the service is performing in delivering these standards or priorities. We found that performance information had only been included in the Spring 2005 Tenants Extra newsletter within the last year, and was not on display in the housing offices. This limits residents from being able to make an assessment on the level of service they are provided with, and determining the level of service that they should receive.

⁹ This was based on benchmarking data across 17 local authorities and completed STATUS surveys since 2001

- 54 Neither does the website provide diagnostic information for tenants reporting repairs. The tenants' handbook is on the website and this provides some examples of repairs and their priorities, but the website does not include the repair handbook that provides diagnostic information to identify a repair. The Council is due to review the repair handbook upon commencement of the new contractor, and informed us that the current handbook would be too costly to provide electronically on the website. However, the Council has not made arrangements to provide diagnostic information in the interim, and this limits residents from having access to diagnostic information to assist them in diagnosing repairs.
- 55 The 'Tenants extra' newsletter and stock options appraisal newsletters are clear and detailed, and have provided information regarding the extension of the service and methods for involvement in the stock option appraisal. Leaseholders that we met did not consider the 'Tenants extra' newsletter reflected their needs and Redbridge had previously agreed that it would send out a specific newsletter to leaseholders from October 2005.
- 56 There has been insufficient development of local performance information as recommended in the 2003 inspection, and overall the service is not routinely publicising its performance. The Council informed us that it had taken steps to develop local performance information with the former Repairs Forum, and newly convened Repairs Procurement Group. Although the progression has been hampered by the relationship between the Council and previous tenants on the Forum, and the recent focus of the Procurement Group on the new partnership. While these points are accepted, the Council has not sufficiently demonstrated that it has considered initiatives outside of these two forums to develop local performance information.
- 57 Complaints are not sufficiently encouraged or recorded within the repairs and maintenance service. The corporate complaints system is publicised within the housing offices and on the website however, tenants that we met had not been encouraged to make a formal complaint when they had experienced a service failure. The majority of staff we spoke to are proactive and focused on trying to resolve a problem, and we acknowledge that this is a positive approach; however, this level of informal reporting is not captured and prevents the service from gathering relevant information to inform service delivery and areas of weakness.
- 58 Complaints are not always handled effectively and the Council does not have a compensation policy. Our telephone survey of residents that had made a complaint found that many had experienced lengthy waiting times for a response. They had not been made aware of the stage, resolution or options open to them within the complaints process. Our reality checks of complaints files also found a lack of detail on how the complaint had been investigated, including illegible notes, missing complainant letters, confirmation that the complaint had been resolved and action taken as a result of the complaint.

While the Council use Ombudsman guidance on compensation payments and plan to introduce a compensation policy, the current absence does not provide a clear indication on how the Council will recompense residents for service failures. With the poor handling of complaints the Council is not demonstrating to residents that it takes complaints seriously as a means to address and improve service failures.

- 59 From April 2005 a corporate complaints system has been introduced and the data provided shows that 106 member enquiries and complaints were received by the housing department between April and 9 September 2005. The data also shows that 19 of these related to repairs and maintenance issues however, only four of them were formal complaints and one was not responded to within timescale. The remainder were from Councillors. The Council aims to use this system in the future to provide further trend analysis information regarding complaints.

Diversity

- 60 The previous inspection found that the Council had not used its tenant profile information to determine or tailor services to meet the needs of the community, in particular the BME community.
- 61 Weaknesses remain and outweigh strengths in this area. There is a systematic approach within the Council to deliver the diversity agenda, and through the stock options appraisal the Council has widened the representation of residents in planning future service delivery. However, these are in their early days and are yet to be transformed into service delivery outcomes for residents. Given the diverse profile of the borough the Council has done limited work in the area of diversity to make an impact on service delivery. The three housing officers are not fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. The Council has not used tenant profile information to tailor, deliver or consistently monitor current service provision. And individual tenant information is not consistently captured or considered to deliver services. The Council has been responsive to the need for aids and adaptations by increasing the financial resources available, but has not been pro-active in publicising the availability of the service.
- 62 The diversity profile is now being given a higher corporate priority than before. The Council has a systematic approach in place to deliver the diversity agenda and there has been a commitment of internal corporate resources to support its delivery. There is a corporate equalities plan and steering group, two corporate equality officers, a disability assessment officer and within the housing and community services cluster, a diversity programme manager and a dedicated equalities post. Diversity and equality training is now compulsory for staff. Managers have received equalities impact training to ensure that impact assessments are incorporated within policy and procedure reviews, and frontline staff training in diversity took place in September 2005.

- 63** The Council's aims to deliver diverse services are not clear. The Council has produced a consultation draft of its equalities and diversity strategy that takes into account the corporate work to achieve the CRE¹⁰ equality standard (and has currently achieved level 1). It is hard to distinguish from the document what the diversity issues are for the borough, and the document is not user friendly, despite it being a consultation draft.
- 64** The housing and community services cluster has self-assessed itself at level 2 of the CRE equality standard, and the housing equalities draft action plan contains several equalities actions that aim to ensure housing address key issues around all resident needs, systems and procedures and recruitment. While the Council has revised the action plan since the on-site inspection period and made some improvement to how SMART¹¹ the document is, there is still a lack of clear measurable outcomes to some objectives. The equalities and diversity strategy has yet to be agreed by the Council, following public consultation and at this stage it is unclear how the Council is to drive forward and deliver diversity directly to residents and through services, and in particular how the impact will be measured.
- 65** The three housing offices are not fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995. There is Language line, document translation and loop system facilities available to all service users accessing the service, and the future location of housing offices are to be considered as part of the stock option appraisal. However, currently there are no automatic doors, low reception counters or easily accessible toilets, which may cause difficulties to people with disabilities or frail elderly residents. In particular those tenants wishing to access the repairs service through the telephone facilities offered at the housing offices.
- 66** There are a number of initiatives in place to ensure residents have access to a translation and interpretation service. This includes language line that frontline staff we met were familiar with and had used for communicating with residents over the telephone and use of an ID card for face-to-face contact to identify the required language. There is a list of staff that speak various languages within the housing management service, who are requested to interpret where required and are quite happy to do so. The availability of these services are publicised and enable residents to access information in their chosen language.
- 67** A range of alternative formats are offered to residents through the strapline on information and letters. The strapline is in the eight community languages offering translation, as well as audio, large, Braille and computer formats. The strapline used in the gas servicing letters has enhanced the level of contact with tenants, and the ability for the annual gas service to be completed. However, there is no apparent link on the website to request alternative formatted information.

¹⁰ Commission for Racial Equality.

¹¹ Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Resourced, Time-bound.

- 68 The housing service has strived to raise the level of staff employed from the BME community. Thirty-seven per cent of the borough's population is from the BME community, and the most up to date tenant profile information indicates that 23 per cent of tenants are from the BME community. The Council has used various targeted ethnicity media to recruit staff and a mentoring scheme is in place for BME staff. Against the 2005/06 corporate target to have 22.5 per cent of staff employed from the BME community, the housing department exceeded this with 31.1 per cent of staff from BME backgrounds. This included 60 per cent of new recruitments in 2004 and 2005 that indicated that they were from BME backgrounds, and provides the housing department with a representative staff group who can influence provision from their own experiences to meet the needs of the community.
- 69 The Council has not used its tenant profile information to tailor current service provision. Resident profile information is collected through various methods, including corporately through Council-wide profiling, and more locally within the housing department for new and current tenants. This information has not been used to tailor the delivery of the current repairs and maintenance service, to ensure that services are targeted to the community. This is of particular relevance in Redbridge that has an older and ethnically diverse customer base, and does not demonstrate that the Council is meeting the needs of these tenants.
- 70 Information regarding individual tenant needs and circumstances are inconsistently captured. The repairs database has a flagging system to record tenant vulnerability details and those who are potentially dangerous, and this information is directly printed onto the job ticket that the operative receives. However, we were advised by both operatives and repairs staff that this information is not always consistently recorded. Therefore operatives are not always aware of the needs of the tenants that could prevent the tenant from receiving the level of service they require to meet their needs. It could also place operatives in unnecessary risk.
- 71 Diversity needs have been inconsistently considered in the delivery of improvement programmes. We found examples of where this had been applied, including the provision of additional drawers in a kitchen replacement programme for a Jewish tenant for the separate holding of cutlery, and the supply of specifically designed taps for a blind tenant. However we also found an example where an older tenants needs were not addressed during the bathroom replacement that consisted of him finding the bath too deep and experiencing difficulties in using it.
- 72 There has been an overall absence of measuring BME satisfaction levels across the service. It has only featured as a measurement in the STATUS survey and the 2005 annual housing service satisfaction survey. It is not a factor that is built into the satisfaction slip or recently introduced telephone surveys for the repairs service. This prevents the Council from identifying service disparities on a consistent basis and rectifying potential barriers in delivering equal and fair services to all.

- 73 The Council have started to widen the representation of residents in considering future service delivery. The stock options appraisal has been a catalyst for widening resident involvement and awareness opportunities to a more diverse resident profile. There has been a wide range of involvement in the consultation process through the community forum, Insight groups with the independent advisor, the BME working group and the sheltered housing working group. During the test of opinion survey housing targeted a programme of door to door surveys in the south of the borough, in addition to conventional postal and telephone surveys. This was in recognition that a high proportion of residents living in the south of the borough did not have English as their first language, and of those surveyed 52.7 per cent indicated that they were from a BME background. In the provision of specific forums and door to door surveys the Council has been able to inform and involve residents from hard to reach groups on the plans for future service delivery.
- 74 The housing service has worked well with the BME working group and is consulting with them on the equalities and diversity strategy, as well as accessing the group as a means of external challenge to the equality impact assessment process. However, the group were concerned that it is not receiving sufficient support from the Council. This could have an impact on the future level of commitment from group members.
- 75 The Council has been responsive to the demand for aids and adaptations. The budget for aids and adaptations was increased for 2005/06 to £500,000 from £350,000 in recognition of the high demand and need to reduce the waiting list. And in recent months liaison with occupational therapists at an earlier stage in the process has been introduced to identify aids and adaptations for new tenants moving into void properties. While these provisions open up the accessibility to the service, the housing service has not been pro-active in publicising the service, and there is an element of reliance on self-referrals from residents and the awareness of housing staff recognising the potential need of residents in their day-to-day functions. This could mean that residents who are in need of the service are not accessing it.

Stock investment decisions and business planning

- 76 The previous inspection found that there had been limited progress by the Council in achieving the DHS. There had been limited activity in progressing its stock option appraisal, and 60 per cent of the commissioned improvement programme in 2002 did not directly take account of DHS.
- 77 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The achievement of the DHS remains one of the Councils corporate strategic and housing strategic objectives and in the last 18 months the Council has started to develop how this will be financially accomplished. It has taken steps to establish the level of non-decency within its stock. Consultation exercises have taken place with residents to determine how finances should be invested to meet the DHS.

There are weaknesses in the maintenance of stock condition data, clarity of how stock investment will actually be delivered and the lack of a strategic approach in delivering value for money in stock investment due to the high-level of emergency and urgent repairs against routine repairs.

- 78 The Council has a partial stock investment framework in place. Its housing strategy and HRA business plan have been approved as fit for purpose and set out the priority of delivering the DHS by 2010. However, it has only recently established a draft asset management strategy that aims to underpin how this will be delivered. The plan is in its early draft stage and provides an overview of Redbridge's stock, DHS level and priority reinvestment areas of kitchen, bathrooms, central heating and rewires. However, it is to be further informed by the further stock condition survey currently in progress and is not yet a robust and clear document on how the priorities will be achieved.
- 79 The Council's stock condition data has not been robust and accurate. An external validation exercise in summer 2004 and internal audit in summer 2005 found the inaccurate and inefficient updating of stock condition data. The Council has responded to both of these findings by completing manual corrections to the data however, it has meant that it's BVPI184 for properties failing to meet the DHS has been qualified for 2004/05, and while we were on site we were advised that the level of properties not meeting DHS was 35 per cent, rather than the 26 per cent originally quoted in 2004/05.
- 80 A further independent stock condition survey was commissioned and completed in October 2005 and covered 26 per cent of the stock internally. While this will provide the Council with firmer information that it intends to use for its ALMO bid submission to the Government office for London, it could also mean that the level of properties that do not meet DHS could again change.
- 81 The Council currently has an ineffective approach to updating stock condition data. It is reliant upon manual updating of the data that can lead to inaccuracies, and delays in updating the position of the Council's level of non-decent properties that has already been referred to. There is also no automatic link with the responsive repairs that are carried out on a day-to-day basis to inform the data.
- 82 There is a lack of strategic approach to stock investment. The Council is not adequately linking responsive repairs into its long-term stock investment programme, and are reacting to repairs rather than planning ahead to avoid properties falling into disrepair and requiring urgent attention. This results in a high proportion of responsive repairs carried out by the Council that fall into the categories of emergency/out-of-hour and urgent repairs, which were 80 per cent in 2004/05, and the level of cost associated with these repairs through additional premiums.
- 83 The Council has progressed how it will deliver the finances for DHS. Following consultation with residents it has agreed to deliver a level of DHS plus essential work plus five per cent environmental work. The financial gap of £8.3 million is to be funded through the ALMO bid. Should the ALMO bid be unsuccessful the Council has given some consideration to alternative methods of raising the revenue, including the possibility of land disposal.

- 84 There has been consultation with residents on the stock option appraisal, and how the DHS will be achieved by 2010. There are eight residents on the Redbridge Housing Option Appraisal Community Forum (RHOACF) that has focused on the stock option appraisal, and in April 2005 the RHOACF agreed a recommendation of an ALMO as the preferred housing stock option that was agreed by cabinet in June 2005 following a test of opinion in May 2005.
- 85 The test of opinion aimed to reach as wide a range of residents as possible. Residents were surveyed through postal surveys, phone calls and targeted door-to-door surveys in the south of the borough. Results of the 1,357 tenants and leaseholders surveyed found overall support of the ALMO:
- 72.14 per cent supported the set up of an ALMO;
 - 18.57 per cent did not support the set up of an ALMO;
 - 9.29 per cent were unsure or did not wish to state their views;
 - 25.28 per cent of all respondents said retention was their preferred option; and
 - 1.84 per cent of all respondents said transfer was their preferred option.

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance

- 86 The previous inspection found that the Council had not developed any partnership arrangements and did not have a strategic approach to delivering capital works and value for money due to the high percentage of emergency and out-of-hours work carried out.
- 87 There is a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The strengths are the development of a partnering arrangement to deliver kitchen and bathroom refurbishments, with satisfaction levels that have improved following positive action taken through the partnership. Consistent consultation methods are in place for individual projects, and the Council has responded to tenant feedback to refine its delivery of projects. There is a robust and informative process in place for the management of asbestos, and some initial signs of a more strategic approach to capital work. Weaknesses in this area are the inadequate arrangements in place to publicise the improvement programme and the improved strategic approach has not yet demonstrated outcomes in consistently delivering the programmes. There is still a high percentage of emergencies and out-of-hours work that demonstrates a low-level of pro-active planned maintenance programming. This issue is further explored in the following responsive repair section.
- 88 The Council did not fully deliver the capital programme in 2004/05. There was a £776,000 underspend, and while the scheduled work was carried over to 2005/06 residents that were expecting the work in 2004/05 would have been disappointed. The Council have introduced separate monthly monitoring meetings for repairs and the capital programme that enable more financial and qualitative focus on each area.

This level of focus has resulted in the housing service being a more robust client over EBS that tender and deliver the improvement programmes on behalf of the housing service. The impact of this focus is yet to be demonstrated through this years programme. The Council has also over-commissioned the programme for this year to avoid a repeated underspend. However, without effective performance management, residents will not be receiving works when expected.

- 89 The Council is delivering a cyclical painting programme. The programme is on a six-year cyclical and incorporates all of the housing stock within the cycle period. The programme for 2005/06 is £1 million. Current contracts are addressing both external decorating and concrete repairs where required, to eliminate the necessity for repeat scaffolding and to achieve economies of scale. Elastomeric paint is used for longevity. There have been improvements in this years planning that has led to earlier commencement on site and the avoidance of the winter months that can affect productivity. We saw a number of small blocks where the programme had been completed to a high standard, and 85 per cent of the street properties in the external decorating programme have been completed.
- 90 The Council entered into a five-year partnership in 2004 to deliver some of its DHS works, including kitchen and bathroom replacements, and rewires. A dedicated resident liaison officer and kitchen designer is provided by the partner to work with tenants in the design and ongoing delivery of the improvements. Tenants are offered a range of choices for kitchen replacements including cupboards, work surfaces, wall and floor covering, and bathrooms are fitted with showers. The quality of work seen during our reality checks of kitchens and bathrooms were satisfactory, and tenants were satisfied with the completion of the work although had experienced some problems during the refurbishment.
- 91 The partnership has taken steps to address the initial low level of satisfaction with the kitchen and bathroom replacements. Initial satisfaction levels were low at 68 per cent for June to August 2005. In response the partner reviewed their supply chain and improved delivery time, dealt with inadequate staff performance and improved its management reporting system to oversee the delivery of the partnership. Fortnightly meetings take place between the Council and the partner to discuss operational delivery, and satisfaction levels have improved to 92 per cent in September and 100 per cent in October 2005.
- 92 There are two designated project officers in place to oversee delivery of individual projects. They lead on the consultation, and arrange residents meetings with the consultant surveyor at the beginning of the project to discuss the proposed work and submit suggestions. As well as attending handovers and arranging resident meetings with the contractor at the end of the project to address any outstanding issues. This provides a consistent and direct contact in the Council for residents during the lifetime of the project.
- 93 The Council has used tenant feedback to improve the delivery of improvement programmes. Post satisfaction surveys are carried out for all programmes and high-levels of dissatisfaction determine EBS future consideration to use the contractor for housing work again. Feedback has also been used to influence the design of future programmes.

For example all new fitted light fittings can use energy efficient and traditional light bulbs in response to tenant concerns of the initial higher cost of purchasing energy efficient bulbs; on the installation of door entry phone systems flexibility is offered to residents in determining the operation times of the trade person access; and the kitchen replacement programme accounts for additional cupboards where a back boiler is to be replaced by a combination boiler to address concerns that tenants were losing storage space. These have been responsive measures taken by the Council in response to tenant feedback that provides both immediate and long term benefits to tenants.

- 94 The Council have an effective asbestos management system in place. All housing technical officers have received certificated training to carry out asbestos surveys and a new contractor has been commissioned to carry out asbestos removal. There is a single register for asbestos that is managed by EBS. There are six access points within housing and three within RBM that provide read only data, to ensure controlled and consistent updating of information. The Saffron IT database includes details of asbestos locations and removal that has taken place, and operatives and contractors receive this information on the repair ticket. All RBM operatives have received asbestos awareness training. New tenants are provided with a copy of the asbestos survey that is carried out in all void properties that provides details of the location, and a health and safety guidance leaflet is provided in the welcome pack.
- 95 The Council has attempted to inform residents of the provisional capital/planned improvement programme leading up to 2010. It distributed the programme in Summer 2004, however, it was not fully inclusive as street properties were not included due to their differing range of need. Neither was it user friendly in its design as there was no explanation of the abbreviations or what the work would entail. We also found a varying level of awareness amongst staff of where this programme was located on the IT system, and it was not displayed in the three housing offices. Therefore residents are not being adequately informed of when their properties will be improved, this has particular implications for leaseholders who under the provision of their leases will be charged for a proportion of the work and therefore would be well advised if they knew the year this was due to take place.

Responsive repairs

- 96 The last inspection found a lack of customer focus from the hotline and financial control and performance monitoring in place for delivering the service. There was significant value for money weaknesses apparent due to the day-to-day repairs contract not having been re-negotiated for a number of years and a high ratio of emergency and out-of-hour repairs.
- 97 There are more weaknesses than strengths in this area. The current service is still being provided through a historic negotiated contract which is not delivering value for money. There are significant weaknesses and value for money failings due to the high-level of emergency and urgent repairs and low-level of performance on post-inspections.

There are weaknesses in the Council's performance data on priority times, repairs completed on the first visit, variation orders and pre-inspections that also have value for money and performance implications. The areas of strength are limited to the early stages of the repair process, with the initial reporting of the repair and maintenance of appointments.

- 98 The reporting and appointment related aspects of the service are provided by the Council. The accessible and customer focused hotline service has been referred to earlier in the report. There is a high-level of appointments for responsive repairs made and kept with performance at 96.6 per cent in 2004/05 and 94 per cent in the first quarter of 2005/06. Thus providing an accessible and responsive service to residents at the initial stages of the repairs service, and the majority of residents that we met were clear that the customer service aspect from the hotline had improved and that appointments were maintained.
- 99 There was mixed evidence regarding satisfaction levels with the latter stages of the repair process. The main areas of concern raised by tenants that we spoke to during our telephone survey (for repairs reported in August 2005) and met related to the completion of the repair within target time, repairs completed on the first visit and overall satisfaction with the work. Whereas the Council's telephone survey of tenants during August to November 2005 found high levels of satisfaction. For example 85 per cent of work started on or before the target date, 71 per cent of work completed on the same day, 87 per cent of residents satisfied with the work and 94 per cent overall satisfaction with the service.
- 100 There are weaknesses in the Council's systems for monitoring the completion of jobs within priority time. The data in Table 3 showed some deterioration in the completion of emergencies and out-of-hours in 2004/05, but some improvement in 2005/06. While 2005/06 shows some improvement in urgent repairs in out of hours, urgent and routine repairs, these remain low in comparison to peers. RBM informed us that performance on completion times is not accurately captured as the making of an appointment to suit the resident preferences can sometimes take the repair beyond its priority timescale. While this may be the case the Council has not taken steps so that RBM demonstrate this is the cause and as it appears the Council is not meeting the service delivery standards that it has prescribed to tenants.

Table 3 Level of repairs and completion within priority

Repair priority	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06 April to December 2005	
	Number of jobs	Percentage completed within priority time	Number of jobs	Percentage completed within priority time	Number of jobs	Percentage completed within priority time
Priority 0 - emergency (two-hour response/make safe within 24 hours)	3,385	95%	2,692	88%	2,013	94%
Priority 77 - out-of-hours	1,317	96%	2,117	88%	1,347	89%
Priority 1 - urgent (within five working days)	4,302	61%	7,610	73%	6,003	75%
Priority 3 - routine (within 25 working days)	2,746	87%	3,049	87%	3,014	91%

Source: London Borough of Redbridge

- 101** The Council is not delivering an efficient and value for money service within responsive repairs. It continues to raise an extremely high-level of emergency/out-of-hours and urgent repairs against routine repairs. The level of repair orders for emergencies/out-of-hours and urgent repairs shown in Table 3 equate to; 77 per cent of all jobs in 2003/04; 80 per cent of all jobs in 2004/05; and 75 per cent of all jobs to date in 2005/06. This is opposite the ratio set in the Audit Commission's guidance of 2002 'Learning from inspection', that recommended levels of 10 per cent emergency and 20 per cent urgent repairs.

Not only is there an hourly premium charge of £4.36 for emergencies and £11.82 for out-of-hour repairs, but the high-level of reactive work demonstrates that the Council is not planning how it maintains the condition of its stock through programmed work and ultimately pays a higher cost for responding to the work when it becomes of an urgent nature. Similarly LBR informed us that a high proportion of repairs fall within the remit of the urgent category, to reflect the right to repair and tenant vulnerability. This is the priority with the lowest level of performance however, the Council did not provide us with data to support that there was a high level of urgent repair orders raised as a result of the right to repair or on the basis of tenant vulnerability.

- 102 There has been some initial reduction in the level of out-of-hours work raised by the Council. The service to receive out-of-hours telephone calls was passed to an external agency from mid June 2005 and early data shows a reduction of 10 per cent for the period 20 June to 31 July 2005.
- 103 There is an upward trend in the level of jobs completed within the first visit. Satisfaction slip data provided by the Council indicates that in 2004/05, 67.4 per cent were completed and the most recent telephone survey data up to November 2005 indicates that 73 per cent were. Although our telephone survey indicated a much lower level of 53 per cent, this was of a relatively small survey group from the month of August 2005. The Council did not pose the question of jobs completed within the first visit in its housing service satisfaction survey, and does not yet have a consistent and wide reaching view of this element of performance.
- 104 Post-inspections are not being used in a robust way to determine quality and value for money. The targeting of post-inspections is limited to the random selection of orders over £500 and those that show discrepancies between the original and final invoice cost, and there is no fixed feature for communal orders to be included within the selection. The Council is not achieving its own 10 per cent target for post-inspections, with performance at 6 per cent in 2004/05 and eight per cent for the first quarter of 2005/06. The absence of routine and robust post-inspections prevent the Council from assessing the standard and completion of work, the cost of the work and determining value for money and overall ensuring tenant satisfaction with the work completed.
- 105 Communal repairs are not consistently monitored in terms of completion and quality. Joint estate inspections take place with officers and residents, and housing officers advised us that they would check the completion and quality of work during the following inspection. However, residents that we spoke to who had been involved in estate inspections were not satisfied with the level of information provided and as referred to earlier there is no specific target set within the post-inspection regime for communal repairs. The absence of routinely checking the completion and quality of communal repairs prevents the Council from verifying the standard of communal repairs, and could prevent the Council from delivering a robust service when recovering service charges from leaseholders.

- 106** The repairs handbook is no longer provided to new tenants. The 1998 handbook is out of production and the Council intend to work with the new repairs partner to produce a combined handbook. While this is understandable new tenants are not receiving any detail to enable them to identify and assist staff in diagnosing repairs.
- 107** Similarly, hotline staff do not consistently use the repair handbook to diagnose repairs. The staff that we met were unaware of the level of availability of the repairs handbook, and do not consistently refer tenants to it to diagnose repair reports, and relied upon their own access and diagnosis of the repair on the IT diagnostic system. The absence and inconsistent use of the repairs handbook leaves the interpretation for repairs open to both tenants and staff, and ultimately incorrect diagnoses and ordering of repairs.
- 108** Variation levels and amounts are not routinely monitored or analysed. The Council has introduced a composite schedule for costing and coding repair orders and stated that it has increased efficiency and clarity on raising and processing jobs. We found some uncertainty amongst staff as to the ownership for variations and levels that individuals can agree. The Council indicated that the level of inaccuracies in job orders is low and between five and ten per cent. However, variation levels and expenditure is not consistently monitored or records kept on spend as a result the Council did not provide us with details of the level of variations. This prevents the Council from identifying potential barriers in the delivery of responsive repairs, and whether they are at the report diagnostic stage or the repair completion stage and inevitably from rectifying them and improving efficiency of the service to residents.
- 109** Pre-inspection requests are not accurately captured. Pre-inspection requests made directly to technical and housing staff by residents are not routinely captured on the Saffron IT database that provides overall performance statistics. Saffron data for the period April to August 2005 showed 77 per cent of pre-inspections were carried out within the ten day target and an average of 194 pre-inspections per month. However, technical and housing staff do not log all requests and therefore this is not an accurate reflection of the current performance.

Void repairs

- 110** The previous inspection found a lack of effective management of the void budget and the introduction of a new void standard without tenant consultation.
- 111** This inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There are strengths in the overall re-let time and standard of properties seen. However, there are some significant weaknesses in terms of financial management and value for money. They include a continued lack of effective management of the void budget, high void costs that do not demonstrate the delivery of value for money and a lack of robust validation of decorations allowance payments.

- 112** The Council's approach to processing voids is robust. It has introduced a new position into the voids process of a voids co-ordinator who is responsible for ensuring the effective management, ownership, monitoring and processing of all voids. As a result the level of void properties has reduced significantly from our last inspection of 106 (September 2003) to 25 (September 2005). And void performance has improved to 28.4 days (Quarter 1 2005/06 based on the new BVPI 212) against a target of 26 days, from 40.85 days (Quarter 1 2004/05 based on the former BVPI 66).
- 113** The Council has not assessed or monitored the level of expenditure for voids effectively. Until recently housing officers specified void works that included the ad-hoc and inconsistent fitting of kitchens and bathrooms that had not been budgeted for. Due to IT difficulties the Council did not become aware of the impact this was having on the budget until November 2004. Against a projected 2004/05 voids budget of £900,000 (£400,000 for minor and £500,000 for major voids), void expenditure was £1.3 million. In addition to this overspend, there was further void related expenditure of £216,000 accounted to the general repairs budget. This was in relation to £122,000 for asbestos removal and associated reinstatement work and £94,000 for decorations allowances. This brings the total cost of void expenditure for 2004/05 to £1,516,000.
- 114** The Council informed us that the asbestos expenditure had been accounted to a separate budget to enable separate monitoring and the subsequent formation of a working budget for asbestos, however during the inspection it provided us with contradictory information of whether the asbestos costs were accounted for within the void budget. It also informed us that £234,500 of the void costs related to improvements in raising the DHS of voids, and while this is a positive aspect it is not one that is strategically delivered as outlined in the previous paragraph.
- 115** In November 2004 the Council responded to the high level of expenditure by setting a ceiling limit of £1,200 upon which an independent renewals and repairs officer would check the specification. Three weeks before our inspection the process was enhanced by the responsibility for specifying void works being concentrated to three technical officers. However, there remained a lack of clarification on the ceiling level for voids between staff, with some of the view that it had been increased from £1,200 to £2,000. We were informed by senior managers that it was £1,200.
- 116** The Council's void costs are very high. Based on the overall expenditure of £1,516,000 a crude calculation across the 447 voids in 2004/05 would assume an average cost of £3,391 per void. When broken down across the void type the average costs were: £1,651 for a minor void and £6,851 for a major void, however this does not take into account the associated asbestos and decoration costs as we were not provided with a break down of these costs across the void type. The Council informed us that the average void cost for 2005/06 is £2,300 however the basis for this calculation is unclear.

The Council has a basic void lettable standard that does not include decorating the property (unless in exceptional circumstances), there is no clear strategic link to bringing void properties up to the DHS and there was a high level of tenants that reported outstanding repairs in void properties in 2004/05 (detailed in paragraph 120). Therefore current costs do not demonstrate value for money and it is too early to establish whether the streamlining of specifying voids has an impact on reducing the cost.

- 117** Tenants perceive that there is a high-level of outstanding repairs when they move into the property. The lettable standard is provided to new tenants in their welcome pack. However, the Council's 2004/05 new tenant survey found:
- 73 per cent of new tenants indicated that repairs were outstanding when they moved in;
 - 45 per cent reported that their housing officer did not indicate the level of repairs required when they moved in; and
 - in instances where they were advised 53 per cent were not informed of the target date for completion.
- 118** We also found similar results regarding outstanding repairs in our telephone survey. This suggests a low-level of service provided to new tenants, and an element of inconvenience in having to arrange for the completion of repairs. As well as further value for money failings when the cost of voids is so high.
- 119** The quality of work to void properties that we saw was acceptable. The Council has a lettable standard that has been agreed with residents and properties that we inspected had or were in the process of having this standard applied, and were within target of being processed. Our telephone survey of new tenants found:
- 70 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the condition of the property;
 - 100 per cent were provided with the welcome pack, gas/electricity certificates and lettable standard; and
 - 80 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the service provided when they moved into their new home.
- 120** Housing officers do not always follow the procedure to award decorations vouchers. A visit to the property is not always carried out in order to release further sections of the payment or to confirm that decorating has been applied to an acceptable standard. This prevents the Council from validating the vouchers have been used as intended to improve the decorative state of the property and achieving value for money.

Gas servicing

- 121** This was found to be a particularly weak area in the previous inspection with weak contract arrangements with RBM, access arrangements not rigorously applied and only 86 per cent of homes having been serviced.

- 122** This is now one of the stronger areas of the service with high-levels of servicing, improved liaison arrangements for gaining access, extended appointment availability for completing the gas service and robust and clear practices in place to deliver the service. The one area of weakness was the absence of publicity on gas servicing.
- 123** Performance on gas servicing has made significant improvements. Since December 2004 performance has been above 99.4 per cent (averaging 99.7 per cent) with 100 per cent achieved on three occasions (December 2004, July 2005 and October 2005). Access arrangements have improved following the extension of the hotline service and the availability of gas servicing appointments during the early evening and Saturday morning.
- 124** Clear and robust procedures enable all staff involved to take a pro-active role and ownership for administering gas servicing. The programme is on a ten-month rolling programme providing time to deal with difficult access issues. A detailed and useful spreadsheet effectively tracks each property, with automatic triggers that alert the housing technical services that a property is due for inspection. These triggers continue at three weekly intervals until the final stage, which could be a forced entry. Since September 2005 the Council has also started to install carbon monoxide sensors in properties considered to be susceptible to risk, for example those with open flues.
- 125** An external audit of completed gas checks is carried out. This is based on a ten per cent random selection by an external consultant that confirms completion with the tenant and checks the CP12 notices.
- 126** The Council use all means available to obtain access to a property before it uses the clauses of the tenancy agreement to obtain access. We found evidence that supported staff giving consideration to all contact arrangements available, in particular where the tenant had particular vulnerabilities for example; family, neighbours, health and social services. Housing officers also considered that the liaison arrangements between RBM and themselves had improved in resolving access problems to tenanted homes.
- 127** The Council is taking pro-active steps to deal with future access problems. It has recently commenced a trial of fitting time activated devices to gas boilers in properties where access has been difficult to obtain. The device will put the boiler onto a reduced temperature mode if it is not serviced within the specified time, with the anticipated success of improved access arrangements provided by the tenant.
- 128** There is a lack of publicity on gas servicing within the Council. We found no information in the three housing offices or on the website regarding the service, which is preventing the continued publicity on the necessity for an annual gas service. Since the inspection the Council has reviewed its website, and now includes information on gas servicing.

Resident involvement

- 129** The previous inspection found a lack of clear standards for residents to be involved, inconsistent involvement of residents throughout the service and an element of frustration from those who were involved.
- 130** Weaknesses just outweigh strengths in this area. There has been a lack of resident involvement in planning, monitoring and reviewing current delivery of the repairs and maintenance service. While there has been progress made in expanding the level of involvement through the stock options appraisal and procurement for a repairs partner, these relate to future delivery of services and have not delivered current service improvements. Similarly the Council has reviewed its tenant participation framework, however, it again is in early days of implementation and not yet embedded to deliver outcomes for residents.
- 131** There has been limited tenant participation in current service delivery. Other than the implementation of the compact for the hotline in 1998 there has been no overall participation in considering the performance of the current service. In particular the weaknesses that this inspection found in the delivery of responsive repairs, for example the level of jobs completed within priority time and the value for money weaknesses of a high level of emergency, out of hours and urgent repairs.
- 132** There has been a focus on future service delivery. The repairs procurement group took over from the former repairs forum that used to consider performance of the service and this group has focused on the procurement process. And while this is a strong point for the Council in involving residents in future service delivery, there have been no interim or replacement arrangements put in place to consider current performance. This prevents residents from being aware collectively of the performance of the service and challenging its failures.
- 133** Estate inspections have not been consistent in informing residents or consulting them on how estates will be improved. Estate inspections are advertised by the Council, and attendance varies from residents, resident association representatives and estate guardians¹². However, those residents who attend estate inspections receive a varying level of information from housing officers regarding progress on reported items, and the majority of leaseholders that we met were unaware that estate inspections took place. Therefore estate inspections are not currently providing a valuable link for residents in improving the condition of their estates.
- 134** The cabinet member for housing also attends fortnightly estate walkabouts with officers. And uses this as a means to have first hand experience of the estates and the needs/issues relevant to them.
- 135** Tenant participation is supported within the Council through the dedicated resources that are in place. These include the following.
- A dedicated tenant participation team of one manager and two officers. However, the manager's post has only recently been recruited to.

¹² An estate guardian is a tenant or leaseholder on a small estate who acts as a point of contact for the council but has chosen not to be involved as a formal tenant representative.

- A tenant participation budget of £40,000 that includes £3,000 for training.
- An annual quality of life budget of £275,000 that provides residents with the opportunity of submitting bids to improve their environment and quality of life, and has included bids to provide parking bollards, fencing and gates. In 2004/05 there was a significant underspend of the budget with only £83,000 spent. There have since been changes in the group over-seeing the budget, improved publicity through 'Tenants extra', and £3,000 has been ring-fenced for each housing officer to address small scale work on estates, and current commitment of the budget is £180,369.

- 136** The Council has commenced wider resident involvement due to the stock options appraisal and test of opinion that it has had to progress with. Information that has been sent to residents over the past year has been clear and consistent, and invited resident comments on their aspirations in relation to the DHS and priorities that the stock option process should aim to deliver. This has been through surveys, road shows and specific 'Insight' groups managed by an independent advisor. This has enabled the RHOACF to make an informed recommendation on the stock option appraisal-based on information collectively gathered from these sources to make a bid to become an ALMO.
- 137** Residents have been given a high profile in choosing the repairs partner. A core group of residents have been involved in the procurement process for a new repairs partner since November 2004 and thirty per cent of the evaluation of the bids will be based on customer satisfaction. The residents have informed the evaluation criteria for the bids, participated in the bid evaluations and continue to be involved in the award of the contract and development of the long-term monitoring arrangements of the partnership. Some of these residents were previously involved in the repairs forum for a number of years, and had previously felt let down by a lack of progression. Members that we met felt confident that this time there would be changes through the new partnership that is planned.
- 138** Both the stock option appraisal and procurement process have established core groups of residents who have an interest in participation. And this includes specific specialist groups including the BME working group and sheltered housing residents group. However, this level of involvement has not yet delivered outcomes to residents in terms of the repairs and maintenance service.
- 139** Similarly the Council's launch of its tenant participation framework in June 2005 sets out various levels of involvement from consistent to ad-hoc involvement, for example, in focus groups. However, this also is yet to be implemented and to set out the level in which residents will be involved and the impact to the wider resident profile.
- 140** Consultation with leaseholders has started to lead to improved communication. The new leaseholders' handbook was issued in February 2005, and in consultation with the leaseholders working group it sets out a clear and concise framework of how the Council will consult with leaseholders on major works programmes. The Council plan to provide leaseholders with a specific newsletter from October 2005 in response to their concerns of the 'Tenants extra' newsletter not being inclusive of leaseholders.

- 141 Various training opportunities have been provided to residents. These have included general training to assist existing tenant participation including chairing, minute taking and newsletter formatting. As well as more specialised training to enhance assertiveness, and resident development including specific training for those who have become involved in the stock options appraisal and procurement of the repairs partner.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 142 The previous inspection found poor budgetary control and planning, due to poor contract management, resource planning, infrastructure arrangements and a lack of detailed stock information.
- 143 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council has started to show an awareness of the value for money principles and compares its cost with other providers. Savings have been accomplished through the kitchen and bathroom partnership, and some initial savings have been seen in the new out-of-hour contract. However, significant weaknesses remain that outweigh these strengths and make a fundamental impact on day-to-day service delivery. These include the high-level of emergency and urgent repairs, lack of consistent and targeted post-inspections, lack of monitoring variation levels, high void cost and the lack of a robust framework for awarding decorations allowances. Contract management has also been weak that has impacted upon the level of performance data available and the delivery of the capital programme.

How do costs compare?

- 144 Service costs vary when compared to other providers. The Council has done limited service cost comparison work until it recently commissioned a benchmarking exercise. The results of which were received just before the on-site inspection. Comparisons of the housing management service were made with ten London local authorities and ALMOs based on 2004/05 data, and found the following.
- Empty property management higher at £57 per property against the median £36. With Redbridge costs anticipated to reduce to £36 in 2005/06 due to housing officers no longer undertaking specifications and a reduction of staff ratio to properties.
 - Responsive repair management lower at £99 per property than the median £134. Direct expenditure per property higher at £577 against the median of £429, with 80 per cent of repair orders raised emergency or urgent in comparison to the median of 64 per cent.
 - Major and cyclical repairs management are slightly lower at £94 per property against the median of £98, with expenditure per property lower at £1,084 than the median of £1,987 (that would remain under the median if the £750,000 programme slippage for 2004/05 had been spent).

- The Council has already implemented some changes to address the high cost areas, for example, streamlining the void specification process to three technical staff rather than all of the housing officers. Longer-term implementations include the procurement of the repairs partnership and to bring the management and delivery of the capital programme in-house from EBS. This will reduce the recharge fees that are currently £482,500 (2005/06).

How is value for money managed?

- 145** Value for money is not consistently monitored or achieved across the service. Where it has been accomplished it has been through specific individual projects and does not yet feature consistently within the service. The production of the housing department's annual efficiency statement has started to focus the housing service on assessing and delivering value for money, as well as a draft value for money and efficiency strategy. Both documents are co-ordinated, with the efficiency statement providing a breakdown of where and how efficiency savings have been accomplished, and the strategy setting out future areas of savings, including the new repairs partnership and new IT system. However, these are in their early days and yet to be embedded and consistently applied throughout service delivery.
- 146** The Council has started to apply a more modern approach to procurement in the repairs and maintenance service. It entered into its first partnership agreement in 2004 for the refurbishment of kitchen and bathrooms and has almost completed the procurement process to choose a new repairs partner. In renewed contracts an element of flexibility is being built in to deliver wider and more inclusive services, for example the renewed central heating contract includes the flexibility to include void properties for central heating installations.
- 147** There have been significant efficiency gains through the kitchen and bathroom refurbishment partnership. Through the increased level of refurbishments the Council has achieved economies of scale and unit costs have reduced from £6,976 (2003/04) to £4,826 (2005/06) for kitchens and £2,972 (2003/04) to £2,154 (2005/06) for bathrooms. This resulted in savings of £73,376 during 2004/05. There are projected recurring and 'in-year' efficiency gains of £637,214 in 2005/06 based on these figures.
- 148** There has been some initial reduction in the level of out-of-hour repairs. The new provider of the reporting element of the service from June 2005 has raised fewer out-of-hour repairs. This has seen a reduction in the period June to July 2005 of 10 per cent when compared with previous months. Based on this initial 10 per cent the Council has estimated that the new provider will provide overall savings of £27,000 for 2005/06. This is due to the clarity and experience of the new provider on the emergency repair obligations of the Council compared with the previous arrangements for reporting out-of-hour repairs. However, the Council has not yet assessed the level of satisfaction of residents that have used the service, to ascertain from their perspective the value of the new provider.

- 149** The Council has sought some external funding, including; £10,000 from the Home Office and in partnership with Redbridge victim support and the Metropolitan Police that will look at support and practical solutions to security; and £15,000 from the ODPM to supply smoke alarm.
- 150** However, these are fairly recent initiatives and improvements, and there are many weaknesses in delivering value for money across the repairs and maintenance service, that have been in place for some time.
- 151** The Council continue to raise an extremely high proportion of emergency, out-of-hours and urgent repairs. Since 2003/04 the level of jobs raised in these categories has exceeded 75 per cent. Audit Commission guidelines recommend that urgent and emergency repairs should account for no more than 30 per cent of all repairs. The additional premium cost attached to emergencies and out-of-hour repairs accounted for an additional cost of £36,781 in 2004/05, and while year to date figures for 2005/06 a five per cent reduction in the level of emergency and out of hours repairs. This means that Redbridge are paying the high-level of premiums as well as failing to deliver value for money through the effective management of the repairs service.
- 152** Post-inspections are not consistently used to verify completed work, and the targeting of post-inspections is limited. The Council has not been able to demonstrate that it is attaining the minimum guidance levels of inspecting 10 per cent of completed repairs. Neither does it target work on trade areas, communal repairs or the high-level of emergency and out-of-hours work. Our survey of residents found a high-level of residents dissatisfied with the quality of work, and the absence of routine and targeted post-inspections prevent the Council from verifying the correct ordering, completed quality and cost of work, in order to demonstrate value for money of the service.
- 153** Variation orders are not monitored or used as a tool of analysis. The Council did not provide us with the level of variations carried out. It does not track variation levels across trades or priorities, and is therefore unable to identify areas of weakness in the repair process from diagnosis through to completion, for example whether the hotline is accurately capturing the repairs ordered.
- 154** Voids costs have not been managed effectively and are high. While through improved re-let performance in 2004/05 the HRA received an additional income of £190,000 (that included rent collection improvements), and this is estimated to increase to £220,000 for voids alone in 2005/06. There have been weaknesses in the management of void expenditure that resulted in an over-spend of the void budget in 2004/05. The average void cost is high, and does not demonstrate value for money as the lettable standard is basic, there is a high level of tenants that reported outstanding repairs in void properties and the Council is not routinely raising void levels to the DHS.

- 155** Housing officers are not robustly verifying that decoration payments are being used appropriately. In 2004/05 £93,880 was paid out in decorations allowances, the maximum level that can be awarded is £792.00. Housing officers do not always visit the property to inspect that the payment has been used to decorate the property. In the absence of the Council decorating properties the majority of re-lets will have a decorations payment allocated. In the absence of a robust validation process the Council is not addressing the potential fraudulent request for payments, as well as ensuring that the payment is being used as intended to decorate and improve the internal condition of Council property.
- 156** There are weaknesses in contract management of the repairs and maintenance service. There has been some reluctance on the Council to pursue data from RBM to demonstrate service delivery. For example, performance on the completion of repairs within priority time is poor. We were informed that this was due to the appointment system that often takes the repair out of its priority. The Council has not requested that RBM demonstrate this. Similarly data to support the level of repairs completed on the first visit was reliant upon satisfaction slips from tenants, rather than the appropriate internal performance data to demonstrate the level of multi-skilling. Absent data regarding the performance of the service not only prevents the Council from making a judgement on the level of service delivery to its residents, but also whether it is achieving value for money.
- 157** The management of delivering the capital programme has also been weak. For the services provided by EBS the housing department are recharged £482,500 to tender and deliver the programmes. However in 2004/05 the programme underspent by £776,000. This shows that the Council is not managing service delivery effectively and delivering programmes as set in the financial year. In addition, disappointing residents that would have expected the improvements during the year. It means the Council is paying a significant level of fees for a programme that was not effectively delivered.
- 158** Residents have not been involved in assessing and reviewing value for money of the current service. The repairs procurement group has been involved in the long-term procurement for the repairs partner that has included the evaluation of the contractor bids, and there are future plans to consult on value for money through the new tenant participation structure. However, currently residents will not be aware of the cost of services and the impact that some areas of poor service delivery have upon achieving value for money.

Summary

- 159** Overall we find that the service provided by the LBR is a fair service. The repairs service is accessible and customer focused at the reporting stage, through improved and extended quality of access and appointment systems. There are high levels of performance in responding to correspondence, and trend data shows that the level of tenant satisfaction is increasing with the repairs service.
- 160** Gas servicing has improved significantly, as has the void re-let times. However, the cost of voids is high and is not delivering value for money, and the payment of decorations allowances is not robustly validated.

- 161** The Council has entered into a partnership and is delivering kitchen and bathroom replacements to tenants: and in doing so is offering a range of choice to tenants, as well as achieving value for money through the partnership.
- 162** Residents have been involved in the development of major projects, including the stock option appraisal and repairs procurement process. And the consultation process for the stock options appraisal involved targeted activities aimed at reaching the diverse communities. This has provided the Council with a starting point to develop its reviewed tenant participation framework, as; residents have not been consistently involved in monitoring or assessing the level of the service currently provided; and the Council has made limited progress in tailoring services to meet tenant needs.
- 163** There are significant performance and value for money weaknesses in the service. Including insufficient data collection on repairs completed within priority time, untargeted and a low-level of post-inspections to assess quality and a lack of performance data on variation levels. As in the last inspection there continue to be a high-level of emergency and urgent repairs. This not only has a financial impact but also demonstrates that the Council is not adequately programming its planned maintenance work.
- 164** There are deficiencies in delivering budgets, that include an overspend on the voids budget, and underspends on the capital and quality of life budgets. Some of which relate to third party delivery and therefore the contract management ability of the housing department is also a weakness.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 165** This is an area of strength for the Council, as it has made measurable improvements across some of the repairs and maintenance service, including customer focus, gas servicing, re-let times and initial improvements in the delivery of the capital programme. It has started to deliver services through modern methods, and is expanding this further through the repairs procurement. However, there are weaknesses in delivering value for money across its services particularly in the area of responsive repairs.
- 166** An improved and customer focused service is now being delivered to residents. This has been achieved through the extended access arrangements to report repairs by the website and extended hours and a wider variety of appointment slots that reflect customer needs. Customer facing responses have improved including the hotline response to telephone calls, correspondence and general customer care when contact is made, and satisfaction levels have been high with the repairs service.
- 167** The housing services department has developed its management and development of staff. In December 2004 it was awarded liP status. This followed a number of years of previous liP reviews that placed the department in the 'retaining recognition status' due to it not meeting all the liP requirements. The December 2004 liP assessment found that staff development issues had been addressed, with evidence of improved performance and morale.
- 168** There have been improvements in key performance indicators over the last two years. Including the level of appointments made and kept increased from 92.5 per cent (2003/04) to 96.6 per cent (2004/05), and there is an indication that this remains a positive aspect of the service at 94.07 (quarter 1 2005/06). The SAP rating of properties which is a measure of thermal efficiency has increased from 63 (2003/04) to 69 (2004/05) through the Councils focus on installing double glazing, roof renewals and central heating.
- 169** There have been improvements in voids performance. The re-let time has reduced from 44.3 days (2004/05 based on the former BVPI66) to 28.4 days (quarter 1 of 2005/06). This has taken Redbridge from the ranking of 19th to 6th in benchmarking data of comparative local authorities.
- 170** A significant area of improvement has been in the area of gas servicing, and evidence of sustainability has been seen through the achievement of an average of 99.7 per cent since December 2004. The impact of which is significant in terms of personal safety to tenants and the Council as landlord, and the Councils further commitment to sustain this level of performance has been heightened by the pilot use of timing devices in properties.

- 171** There has been some initial improvement seen in the level of emergency repairs since the new contractor took over the out-of-hour service in June 2005, with a reduction of 10 per cent. A projection of £27,000 savings have been initially estimated based on this reduction, however, the Council has not yet determined whether it has provided an improved service directly to residents, although it has only been in place for a number of months.
- 172** The current delivery of the repairs contract with RBM still lacks value for money in its delivery, particularly in the area of responsive repairs and voids. The Council responded positively to this criticism in the previous report and has made steady progress on the procurement of a new repairs partner and maintained the timescale in its progression, with member, officer, union representatives and resident involvement. However, the council has not tackled some of the inherent value for money issues including the high-levels of emergency and urgent repairs, performance on completion times and post inspection of the quality of work. To some extent the Council has not progressed with these key areas, and are leaving them in anticipation that the new partnership will address them from April 2006, however, this does not address the service as it is now or demonstrate a track record of challenging key weaknesses. This makes it difficult to determine how or how well the Council have delivered the recommendations, and reasons why some have not been delivered.
- 173** While the Council has taken a balanced view on delivering the repairs and maintenance improvement plan it has not delivered all of the recommendations from the previous inspection, and could have progressed further with some in the current environment. Neither does the plan provide an easy read across as to whether the 12 recommendations from the previous Audit Commission inspection have been met. This makes it difficult to determine how or how well the Council have delivered the recommendations, and reasons why some have not been delivered.

Table 4 Progress on recommendations from previous inspection

Recommendation	Status
In conjunction with tenants, make the action plan performance-targets more challenging so that the organisation achieves top quartile performance across all key service indicators.	Mixed achievement, not all targets are challenging or SMART and tenants have not been involved in the process.

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Recommendation	Status
In conjunction with tenants and leaseholders, prioritise the development and introduction of modern, more efficient, customer focused contract arrangements to support the delivery of a consistent, cost effective repairs service.	In progress through repairs procurement and aim to implement partnership in April 2006.
Agree and communicate a clear and transparent strategy for the procurement of a new repairs provider.	Achieved.
Simplify arrangements for the reporting of individual repairs.	Achieved.
Introduce and enforce arrangements to carry out gas servicing of properties where access has not been gained by other means within the statutory timescale, by April 2004. Ensure targets are based on meeting the statutory requirements and that there is a continual review of performance and quality systems to monitor performance.	Achieved.
Review the improvement plan to ensure targets are realistic and achievable.	Partially achieved, although the absence of SMART targets across the plan prevents the assurance that they are realistic and achievable.
Develop a strategy for ensuring that profiling data collected is used to develop services appropriate to the needs of tenants and leaseholders.	Not achieved.
Develop new initiatives to involve more residents in monitoring and improving the service with localised performance information provided.	Not achieved.

Recommendation	Status
Improve performance of the free phone repair 'Hotline' response time and address unsatisfactory performance on customer care issues highlighted by our survey of tenants and our own mystery shopping.	Achieved.
Carry out an annual satisfaction survey for the repair service and publicise the results.	Not achieved.
Improve IT and performance monitoring information to ensure it is timely and appropriate and that staff have the tools to carry out their jobs that are 'fit for purpose'.	Current IT and performance monitoring has not yet been improved, although IT plans are on target to improve capacity and performance information.
Ensure staff and financial resources are appropriate for business needs and that they are regularly reviewed to reflect the changing profile of the council's housing stock. Ensure there is systematic and effective progress against the plan that is reported regularly to members, officers and tenants.	Partially achieved, as progress has reported but is difficult to determine due to improvement plan targets not being SMART.

- 174** Resident involvement has been more focused and has started to be more inclusive. The Councils review of tenant participation and development of major projects, including the stock options appraisal and repairs procurement has widened the level of involvement and representation of residents. There are a number of core groups in place, some of which have specific direction in involvement, for example the RHOACF that will now focus on the ALMO bid. However the Council need to continue to develop the level of involvement of other groups, in particular the BME working group who expressed some concern regarding clarity on their future involvement role and support to continue.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 175** There are a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council has effective strategic improvement planning in place to improve the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service, and has prioritised this to focus on some of the key weaknesses. There is a robust corporate performance management framework in place, and clear leadership supports the delivery of planning and improvements.

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The weaknesses are in the monitoring of the day-to-day delivery of services, as there are few local PIs that make an impact on services, residents have not been involved in reviewing current service delivery, the repairs improvement plan is not SMART and the future management and monitoring arrangements of the new repairs partner is unclear.

- 176** The Council has clear aims to improve the repairs and maintenance service and has placed priority and resources into major projects to deliver these improvements, namely the IT implementation project, repairs procurement and stock options appraisal. There is a clear focus on what these projects will deliver including; the infrastructure to underpin performance through the IT improvements; a more customer focused, efficient and robust repairs and maintenance service through the repairs procurement; and the securing of investment to deliver DHS and to continually drive improvements through the future ALMO bid.
- 177** The procurement and stock option appraisal process has resulted in the Council being more aware of the aspirations of service delivery. It has become more familiar with the level of service provided by peers and higher performers through comparing the contractor bids for the repairs procurement and visiting operational sites of delivery. Managers and staff have visited two and three-star authorities to observe their area and methods of operation, in preparation for submitting the ALMO bid. This has raised the level of awareness with staff and residents involved in the process of the level of service that can be aspired to. Residents that we met are involved in the process are confident that this time changes will take place and improvements seen, due to the level of commitment provided by the Council and its staff in developing the projects.
- There is a clear theme through the Council's plans to improve the repairs and maintenance service. The corporate strategy identifies the re-tendering of the repairs contract and stock option appraisal within the vision of 'A better place to live together'. These are transferred into the housing services, service area plan for 2005/06 within the ten objectives set across the housing service.
- 178** A robust and consistent framework is in place to monitor the progression on action plans and performance. Performance indicators are collated monthly and discussed together with progression on action plans at the monthly housing monitoring performance meetings which the Chief Housing Officer leads. This information is then fed up into the housing and social services cluster group, and discussed at the corporate management board.
- 179** Performance and progression on action plans is consistently reviewed at member level within the Council. The adult social services and housing scrutiny committee receive quarterly reports on PIs, action plan progression with exception reports, and ad-hoc reports as requested, for example, a quarterly report is provided to the committee on voids and performance. The cabinet member for housing also meets monthly with the Chief Housing Officer and Director of the housing and social services cluster group, to discuss the housing service.

- 180** The performance management framework is limited at direct service level. There has been some improved focus on managing repairs works through the recent reorganisation to have a separate meeting for this area, with a key focus on performance and financial information. However, there has been no recent development of local PIs and in addition to the BVPIs there are only three local repairs and maintenance PIs that are reported throughout the performance management framework, for correspondence, members enquiries and the average re-let times of voids (which is now BVPI212). There has been no development of local PIs for any other areas, in particular the responsive repairs service in the areas of jobs completed within target time, right first time and satisfaction levels across the service. This prevents the Council from monitoring day-to-day services that have an impact on residents.
- 181** Neither is it clear, how the Council will manage and monitor the new contractor from April 2006. Given the housing departments weak history of applying robust performance management to RBM and EBS in delivering the repairs and capital improvement services, this remains a significant area of weakness for the department and could jeopardise the success of the partnership if the department does not implement a clear performance management framework and expectations from the beginning of the partnership.
- 182** Similarly the repairs and maintenance improvement plan is not a complete SMART document. It was introduced following the previous inspection, and set objectives that incorporated all of the weaknesses identified in the report. But the plan does not sufficiently indicate how the delivery of the objectives would be measured. The plan is also reliant upon the new partnership to deliver some of the tasks, and lacks clear SMART definition as to how these will be measured.
- 183** The draft asset management strategy has yet to be progressed into a SMART document. While it incorporates details on the priority areas for improvement, and a plan to introduce an Asset Manager it is yet to be informed by the current stock condition survey, and does not clarify actually how the Council will comprehensively deliver stock investment.
- 184** There have been improvements in the leadership of the service. Staff complimented the commitment and direct leadership provided by the cabinet member for housing and senior managers within the last 12 months. Staff considered the service now had a clear indication of direction and the necessary guidance to deliver changes. Managers and staff that we interviewed were aware of the priorities and challenges of the service, how the service was working towards addressing them and their contribution in doing so. And also considered that this was being backed up through regular one-to-ones and team meetings. We were not able to establish whether the corporate and service plan objectives fed into the performance appraisal process of individuals. As the Council were unable to provide us with the selection of appraisals that we requested due to the absence of the relevant managers.

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- 185** There is a corporate focus to improve access to services across the Council. The Council's customer care strategy approved by cabinet in October 2004 has led to the introduction of a one stop shop in Ilford High Street, with further introductions planned opposite the housing office in Manford Way in 2005/06 and two in the north and south of the borough within five years. There is an aim to improve access and information to services for residents and enhance access for disabled people and those who do not have English as a first language. A report is due September 2005 following commissioning of the ALG to research hard to reach groups. However, it is disappointing that the three housing offices do not currently comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and we found a lack of housing information in the new one stop shop.
- 186** The use of complaints does not yet feature as a tool for learning. Residents are not encouraged to complain resulting in a low-level of formal complaints made to the service. However, one of the areas where complaints are in the majority is repairs and the service has not yet used the analysis of complaints to determine and deliver service improvements.
- 187** There has been an increased level of resident involvement in future service delivery through the repairs procurement group and stock options appraisal. Residents on the repairs procurement group have been involved in determining the level of performance information that is to be supplied by the new repairs partner on a monthly basis, and they are customer focused.
- 188** There has been a lack of resident involvement in determining and reviewing current service delivery and performance. While the repairs procurement group has focussed on the repairs procurement process, the Council have not put into place interim arrangements for residents to monitor or review current performance. This has also been impacted upon by the tenant participation review and there are plans for the Council to consult with the new borough panel and neighbourhood forums to determine the level of involvement they would like that will include performance monitoring, improvement planning and consideration of value for money.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 189** There are more strengths in this area than weaknesses. The Council has clear aims for improving the service that are filtered down to managers and staff, and those we met were aware of the priorities of the service. The capacity of the service has been developed through leadership, staffing and external resources to deliver major projects. And there have been improvements in building the capacity of the service, however, some of these are temporary and the Council does not yet have capacity to demonstrate it will sustain service delivery and improvements. The main focus for improving the service is through the repairs procurement partnership that will cover the majority of the service areas that this inspection covered, and has undergone a robust tendering and selection process.

- 190** The Council prioritises the need for capacity building systematically and where required to deliver key improvements. An interim Head of Housing and consultant have been in place from the end of 2004 to drive forward the repairs and maintenance improvement plan, the restructuring of the housing management service and to drive forward the culture change required to improve the service. Upon completion of the housing management restructure the Head of Housing's position is to be advertised in January 2006.
- 191** Project managers with specific experience have been employed to develop the two major areas of partnering approach and stock optional appraisal. This has been in acknowledgement of the level of expertise required, and the project managers employed both have the track record of delivering innovative partnering solutions and stock option appraisals respectively in neighbouring boroughs. Through close working with members, officers and residents both projects have made significant headway, and the engagement of a leading housing solicitor is also in place to assist in the partnership and contractual documentation for the repairs procurement.
- 192** However, the interim placement of these roles to develop and improve the service does pose a risk to the Council and its long-term capacity to drive the changes and improvements continuously through the service. In particular the previous lack of robust performance management of repairs does not support that the Council will be able to apply a robust and performance orientated client side role of the new repairs partner.
- 193** The capacity of current staff has been developed. This has been through traditional training resources that included training provision for RBM staff to enhance the level of their skills, and use of multi-skilling. Technical staff have been involved in the repairs procurement process, to develop their skills and awareness of the procurement process and arrangements for the new partner.
- 194** The council is skilling all levels managers and their staff to assist in dealing with a range of diverse issues, through the mandatory requirement to attend diversity training. The aim is to try and take diversity higher up the Council's agenda and make all staff fully aware of a range of diverse issues that ultimately impact upon service delivery.
- 195** The Council has developed a partnership arrangement with a local training organisation within the borough to encourage local people to obtain trade training and on the job experience. It currently employs eight trade apprentices in the plumbing, heating and electrical trades, all of which undertake rotational familiarity to gain knowledge of additional building trades and to develop the multi-trade capacity.
- 196** There has been an increased focus on addressing sickness absence. All managers have received refresher training on the procedures, and monthly discussions on overall sickness levels take place. Sickness levels in the housing management service have reduced from 1.61 days in April 2005 to 1.38 days in August 2005, although there has been an increase in the level of long-term sickness in some sections of the repairs and maintenance service.

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- 197** Training on financial awareness and monitoring has started. This not only focused on understanding and interrogating financial information, but also provided background detail as to the source of finances. And financial monitoring is now incorporated within monthly performance monitoring meetings to provide a link between spend and outcomes.
- 198** There is a phased programme of IT improvements planned for the housing service, as current arrangements do not deliver services efficiently. Initial recognition was given to this area by members one year ago with the financial commitment agreed for its implementation. The project is now midway and additional resources were provided in June 2005 to provide a continued level of external expertise. The project plan is to deliver a comprehensive housing management IT system. The first module to go live is rents (October 2005) where an estimated 2,500 hours per annum will be saved through automated processes. This will be followed by the repairs module that the Council plans to develop with the new partner who will be required to integrate with the system, and then the planned maintenance module that incorporates a stock database with an automatic updating mechanism.
- 199** The new complaints database has the capacity to deliver improved complaints information. Its recent introduction to the housing service in April 2005 has set out the basic structure of logging and monitoring complaints, and it has a further report facility that can be used for complaints analysis and the identification of trends across the service. Early trend analysis has identified that the highest level of complaints in the areas of repairs and anti-social behaviour.
- 200** The housing service is working towards delivering a more focused and co-ordinated approach to value for money. Consultants produced a value for money and efficiency strategy and benchmarking information for the service in September 2005. The information is to be used to assist in the production of the mid year annual efficiency submission as well as providing the service with collated and comparative information to consider value for money within service delivery, in consultation with residents.
- 201** As earlier referred to benchmarking information indicates some high cost service areas that the Council propose to review in order to reduce the cost and increase efficiency, including the potential to bring the delivery of the capital programme in-house from EBS.
- 202** The procurement for a repair partner is based on a balanced combination. The basis of the selection criteria is 35 per cent on cost, 35 per cent on quality and 30 per cent on customer confidence. The partnership will cover the majority of the repairs and maintenance service including emergency, urgent and non-urgent/routine repairs; domestic gas servicing repairs; voids up to a maximum of £10,000. The contract will cover 85 per cent housing and 15 per cent non-housing repairs.

- 203** The partnering arrangement has long-term service delivery commitments. It is initially set for ten years with the potential of a five-year extension, and the Council has projected that it will achieve savings of £100,000 in 2006/07 rising to £300,000 by 2008/09, as well as delivery improved customer delivery through a unified call centre and less duplication of work. Therefore achieving efficiency gains as well as service improvements for residents. However, as it is not yet in place, the level of service improvements anticipated are not yet established.
- 204** The flow of communication within the housing service has improved. There are monthly newsletters to staff providing updates and information on developments, and staff that we met considered that communication across the services had developed, particularly between housing staff and RBM that has led to improved areas of performance, including gas servicing and voids. This year the staff survey shows some initial improvement in the level of job satisfaction and understanding of corporate aims, although the report was only received by the Council while we were on site and requires further analysis.
- 205** Staff are more involved in improving and driving the service forward now than two years ago. This has been achieved through the opening of communication, and clear leadership from senior managers that provides direction, guidance and support to staff in order to deliver the improvements. Staff are involved in the major improvement projects and aware of the impact that their implementation will make.
- 206** Overall staff are positive about the changes facing the service, despite the impact of the implementation of the new repairs partner and potential ALMO that will result in a high-level of repairs and maintenance staff who will TUPE¹³ over to the new contractor. While there was some concern from staff regarding their individual long-term job security and an element of unknowing of working for a new contractor, staff could see the benefits for residents in going through this change process and the majority of them welcomed it.
- 207** Resident capacity for involvement has been developed. Specific training has been provided to the core groups of residents involved in the repairs procurement and stock option appraisal, including contract evaluation. There has been training for other residents including general capacity building, for example charring meetings and taking minutes, as well as assertiveness training to enhance confidence.
- 208** The housing department has increased its profile with other departments. The Chief Housing Officer has communicated with all Chief Officers and attended management team meetings to discuss the developments within the housing 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.

¹³ Transfer of Undertaking (Protection of Employment) regulations.

Summary

- 209** There has been a mixed track record over the last two years. There have been strong improvements in the performance on gas servicing and voids, which have been sustained over the last year. However, performance in responsive repairs has not been as strong. While there have been improvements in the initial reporting side of repairs, including the customer focus aspect, performance on the completion side has been poor and does not demonstrate value for money. The service also does not use complaints as a method to improve services.
- 210** The service is currently facing some major changes with the new repairs partnership and that will provide the majority of the services considered during this inspection. The process that the Council has followed in progressing with the procurement, has involved residents in the process of evaluating and considering future service delivery. While the Council has not been strong at monitoring performance of the current service, and has developed limited local performance indicators for the service. This inevitably questions its ability to monitor the new partner in a robust and effective manner, and the process it intends to do this through is currently unclear.
- 211** There is a planning and performance management framework in place that is scrutinised and clear leadership that provides direction and focus for staff and the priorities of the service. And the capacity of the housing department has been increased through reduced sickness levels, training and involvement on the major projects.
- 212** There have also been some initial developments in the diverse profile of resident involvement through the stock options appraisal that provides the Council with a solid foundation to develop its tenant participation framework further. As well as the beginning focus on value for money and benchmarking.
- 213** The Council has put and is continuing to put in place many building blocks that will assist in improving performance, and for this reason we judge that it has promising prospects for improvement.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	2003/04	0204/05	2005/06 (to date)
BV63 - Average SAP energy efficiency rating	63	69	--
BV74a - Tenant satisfaction with landlord	71	71	--
BV74b - Tenant satisfaction with landlord (BME tenants)	74	74	--
BV184a - Proportion of non-decent homes	26	26	35
BV184b - Percentage of change in proportion of non-decent homes	3	5.6	--
BV185 - Percentage of appointments made and kept for responsive repairs	92.5	96.6	94
BV211a - Proportion of planned compared to responsive maintenance expenditure	PI introduced 2005/06	PI introduced 2005/06	58
BV211b - Proportion of expenditure on emergency and urgent repairs compared to non-urgent repairs	PI introduced 2005/06	PI introduced 2005/06	75.7
BV212 - Average time to re-let housing	PI introduced 2005/06	44.3 (based on BV66)	28.4

Source: Audit Commission and London Borough of Redbridge

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going onsite and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - Corporate Strategy 2005/08;
 - corporate procurement strategy;
 - housing strategy and HRA business plan;
 - housing services area plan 2005/06;
 - repairs and maintenance improvement plan;
 - draft strategies for Value for money and efficiency/Asset management;
 - housemark benchmarking data and annual efficiency statement;
 - liP assessment;
 - access audit reports;
 - corporate equalities and diversity strategy;
 - housing services equalities and diversity action plan 2005/08;
 - 'Tenants Extra' and stock options newsletters;
 - tenants handbook/Repairs handbook/Welcome pack;
 - satisfaction data from new tenants and repairs satisfaction slips;
 - complaints procedure;
 - minutes of tenant participation meetings;
 - performance reports; and
 - minutes of internal meetings.

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:
 - stock tour and visits to estates;
 - visits to void properties;
 - visits to tenants who had recent kitchen and bathroom replacements;
 - attendance on an estate inspection;
 - telephone survey of residents - residents who had recently used the responsive repairs service, new tenants and those who had made a complaint;
 - file reviews - tenants, complaints and gas servicing;
 - focus groups with non-active tenants and leaseholders;
 - focus groups with active tenants and leaseholders;
 - meeting with residents on the repairs procurement group;
 - observation of one of the bidders challenge sessions for the repairs procurement;
 - focus group with contractors;
 - observation of the hotline and housing offices;
 - mystery shopping to service; and
 - website visits.