

Local Authority Housing Inspection Report

May 2006

Repairs and Maintenance Re-Inspection Report

Kingston Upon Hull City Council

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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.

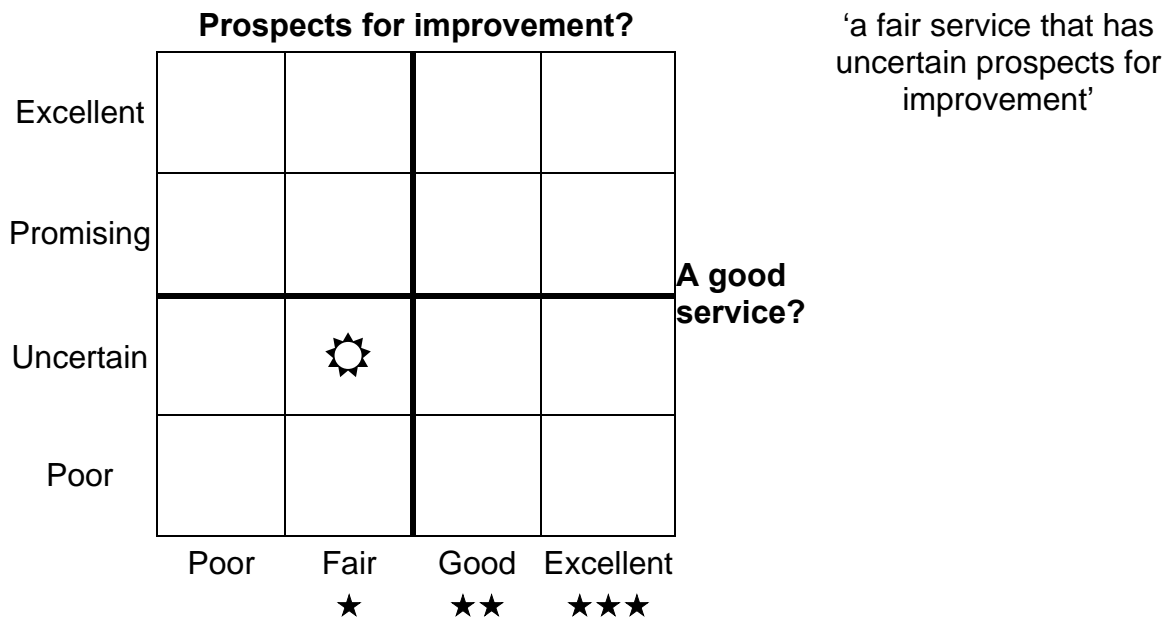
Summary

- 1 Hull City Council is a unitary authority in the North of England. The population is estimated to be 248,000, which has reduced from 253,000 since the 2001 census. Five per cent of the population are from minority ethnic communities, which has increased from 2.3 per cent over a four year period.
- 2 The Council is currently run by a minority labour administration which holds 27 of the 59 seats. There is a leader and cabinet system in place.
- 3 The Council employs approximately 14,000 staff across all services.
- 4 The repairs and maintenance service re-inspection covered asset management, major cyclical and planned programmes, responsive repairs, voids, gas servicing and aids and adaptations. The housing revenue account (HRA) budget is £89 million of which £19.1 million is the repairs and maintenance budget. The contract to manage the service was awarded to the Council's in-house building services team and began in 1998.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Hull City Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



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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.

6 The service is judged to be **fair** because:

- Hull is developing its corporate approach to access and customer care. Customer service standards have been produced and there is a reasonable range of customer access arrangements in place. Feedback from customers is actively sought and positively responded to and there is a range of information for tenants. Customer service centres and area housing offices are prominently located, well sign posted and accessible.
- The Council is raising awareness amongst key stakeholders about its work on equality and diversity to ensure that services are accessible to all and there is also an effective approach to dealing with harassment.
- There is a range of choice for tenants within the capital improvement programme and the product delivered is of a high standard.
- There is improving performance and high tenant satisfaction with repairs and maintenance. The standard of vacant properties for reletting is high. The Council complies with the Gas in Use Regulations 1998 and performance is good on gas servicing.

7 However, there are a number of weaknesses that need to be addressed, including;

- The Council is developing structures to help improve opportunities for customers to be involved in developing and shaping services but outcomes to date are fragmented and limited.
- There is a limited understanding of the diversity of the customer base and therefore the repairs service cannot be systematically tailored to meet those specific needs.
- The Council is currently in breach of its legal responsibilities in relation to compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) with only 42 per cent of its public offices being DDA compliant.
- There is a lack of a strategic approach to stock investment and asset management and the current capital improvement programme is based on outdated and unreliable stock condition information, so the Council is unable to demonstrate it is investing in the right properties at the right time.
- There are some significant weaknesses in strategic planning around long-term voids and in performance management, which means efficiency is not being maximised.
- There is no strategic approach to value for money (VFM) and the Council is unable to show how the delivery of existing services demonstrate VFM.

8 We have judged the Council as having uncertain prospects for improvement:

- There is an improved corporate focus on performance management. A robust performance management framework is in place and there is a developing culture of taking ownership of performance issues at an early stage so corrective action can be taken.
- Structures are being developed which have enabled tenants to have some influence over the way the service is developed and delivered, although outcomes within each individual service area has been variable.
- There have been some recent customer focused benefits, particularly in improvements to gas servicing, responsive repairs completed 'right first time' and the quality of homes being re-let.
- Performance indicators have improved and there are growing levels of customer satisfaction with the overall repairs service.
- Recent senior appointments in the Council have been a key driver for change and provided leadership and there is now significant political recognition of the need for change within housing.

9 However, we identified the following weaknesses in relation to prospects for improvement:

- The service has no track record of sustaining improvements. Performance on implementing recommendations from previous inspection reports, diagnostic reviews and self-assessments has been varied and not always at a pace to demonstrate significant improvements.
- Value for money has not been demonstrated within the service. VFM is not an established part of the service's culture or embedded in day-to-day management decisions.
- The Council cannot currently demonstrate that it has the financial capacity to deliver the Service's aims, priorities and work programmes and a number of key plans are short-term.
- Despite the appointment of a new Housing Director there is still some uncertainty about what will happen to address future gaps in staff capacity once interim arrangements in key senior management positions come to an end.
- Current human resource strategies do not support continuous improvement and succession planning.

Recommendations

- 10 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 costs, indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and identify 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.

Recommendations

R1 Complete a high proportion of customer profiling that ensures comprehensive information is available which is then used to inform the future of the service and estate offices, policy and procedural reviews, involvement structures and ensure that services are tailored accordingly.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved access to services;
- greater involvement in service design and delivery; and
- appropriately tailored services to meet customer needs.

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

Recommendations

R2 Develop and start to implement a fully resourced action plan to ensure that the Council fully complies with the Disability Discrimination Act in relation to both public offices and to housing schemes with communal access.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved physical access for customers.

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

Recommendations

R3 Develop an overarching asset management strategy that is based upon robust and up-to-date stock condition information, other repair and maintenance programmes and stock option appraisals of all low demand and unpopular housing.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- medium to long-term investment plan for the housing stock;
- well informed investment decisions; and
- sustainable housing and communities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with high/medium costs. This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendations

R4 Develop a strategy for responsive repairs to build on recent improvements in processes. The strategy should aim to:

- ensure average response times for each repairs priority fall consistently within target timescales during 2006/07;
- increase the percentage of appointments made and kept to top quartile over a reasonable timeframe;
- introduce a comprehensive rechargeable repairs policy and embed it within both building services and the landlord service;
- take a strategic approach to improving the planned:responsive repairs ratio (by increasing planned work and particularly by 'batching' more low priority repairs) and to reducing emergency and urgent repairs to good practice levels within a reasonable time frame.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- enhanced customer service;
- income maximisation; and
- optimal value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. The strategy should be in place by July 2006.

Recommendations

R5 Develop a robust approach to managing voids including:

- *formalising strategic decisions about all long-term voids and speedily taking action to either demolish, remodel or market, as appropriate;*
- *review existing procedures and focus performance improvement activity in both building services and the landlord service, paying particular attention to 'non-mainstream' activity such as specialist lettings and voids requiring major works;*
- *set challenging but realistic modular targets for each element of void management procedures and put in place effective performance management systems; and*
- *make effective use of refusal, satisfaction, cost and other data to drive service improvement.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduce the blight of long-term voids on estates;
- increase the speed of letting, thereby maximising income and reducing housing need.

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

Recommendations

R6 Develop an overarching corporate value for money strategy that not only embraces the Government's modernisation agenda and determines the Council's approach to cost and quality but assists in supporting and delivering the long-term strategic approach to housing and sustainable communities.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an appreciation of costs and quality in decision-making;
- tailored customer services;
- streamlined efficiencies and effectiveness.

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

Recommendations

R7 Develop and implement a medium to long-term service delivery plan for the service that includes:

- *the service aims, ambitions and strategic objectives;*
- *how the service will achieve local, regional and national priorities;*
- *a medium to long-term financial plan based on robust intelligence.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clarity about the future direction of the service;
- a comprehensive approach to strategic planning;
- long-term sustainability.

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

Recommendations

R8 Develop a comprehensive and robust corporate human resource strategy to fully support the service delivery plan in relation to recruitment, retention and development and succession planning.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a robust corporate support service;
- flexible working arrangements leading to improved staff satisfaction and greater productivity; and
- continuity of service.

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

Recommendations

R9 Develop a robust corporate IT strategy that will help support and deliver the service delivery plan, the strategic approach to stock investment, human resource planning and VFM procurement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- integrated information systems;
- support for business planning; and
- improved performance management.

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

- 11 We would like to thank the staff of Hull City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 16 to 20 January 2006

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Report

The locality

- 12 Kingston Upon Hull, situated in the north of England is Yorkshire's largest port and is the country's twelfth largest conurbation.
- 13 Due to outward migration, the city's population has been steadily declining and has seen a fall of 5,000 from 253,000 in 2001 to an estimated 248,000 currently.
- 14 The city's black and ethnic minority (BME) population, although small in proportion, has seen significant increases from 2.3 per cent to 5 per cent over the past five years. This is largely due to inward migration and the asylum seekers dispersal policy. There are currently 75 languages spoken in the city.
- 15 The city has high levels of deprivation, being the ninth most deprived of England's 354 council areas in 2004, with over 50 per cent of its wards being in the 10 per cent most deprived. In contrast, most of the city's affluent suburbs lie within the boundaries of East Riding of Yorkshire Council, which surrounds it on three sides.
- 16 The city has high unemployment at 5.6 per cent, which is almost double regional and national averages. In addition, benefit dependency is high, with 17 per cent of the adult population in receipt of income support¹.
- 17 A declining demand for properties in certain areas, has led to the Government designating the 'Gateway' Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder with neighbouring East Riding of Yorkshire Council.
- 18 Much of the city's housing stock is of low value, with the majority being within council tax bands A to C. House prices in March 2005 averaged £72,000 compared with an average of £144,000 in the East Riding.

The Council

- 19 The Council is a unitary authority run by a minority Labour administration, which holds 27 of the 59 seats, with 22 seats held by the Liberal Democrats, eight by Independents and two by the Conservative and Unionist Party.
- 20 There is a leader and cabinet system in place, with one councillor holding a specific housing portfolio. In May 2005 the administration elected a new leader and a reshuffle resulted in the appointment of a new portfolio holder.
- 21 The Council employs approximately 14,000 full time equivalent staff.
- 22 The Council appointed a Chief Executive (CEO) in November 2004 and a Deputy CEO early in 2005. There are three Strategic Directors and 27 Service Heads.

¹ August 2003

- 23 Council expenditure is estimated to be £326 million (net of HRA which is £89 million) for the year 2005/06.
- 24 The Audit Commission carried out a corporate governance inspection of the Council in 2002 that identified a number of weaknesses. Because little progress was made before the re-inspection in the summer of 2003 the Council was made the subject of a statutory direction from the Secretary of State. The recovery process is being supervised by a Government Monitoring Board and an Appointee has been providing support and supervision since November 2003. More extensive intervention remains an option if satisfactory progress is not made.
- 25 The Council's corporate performance assessment has improved from 'poor' in 2003 to 'one-star and improving adequately' in December 2005. Housing is now the main focus of priority for the Council.
- 26 There is a large but declining council housing stock within the city. The Council owns 29,927 homes, which represents 26 per cent of the total stock. Reductions are largely due to the number of homes sold under the right to buy, which accounts for 1144 properties in the past two years.

The service

- 27 The landlord and building services and strategic housing functions are the responsibility of the Director of Community Health and Wellbeing Services, supported by an Interim Director of Housing who oversees both services. The landlord and building service employs 957 full time equivalent staff.
- 28 The landlord and building service has completed phase 1 of an integration plan initiated in February 2005.
- 29 Building services staff work from six operational depots located across the city and a dedicated empty property team was established in April 2005.
- 30 The 2005/6 budget for the housing improvement programme is £31 million, of which £25.2 million is capital expenditure. The repairs and maintenance budget is £19.1 million.
- 31 In 2004/5 the Council carried out a stock options appraisal to establish, in consultation with tenants, the preferred means of reaching the decent homes standard by 2010. The option chosen was a 'retention plus 2.5' model, which involves stock retention and ensures tenant involvement in future decision-making and management of the service. This approach was agreed in March 2005, resulting in proposals for new governance structures, and was endorsed by Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) in July 2005.
- 32 GOYH has assessed the Council's housing strategy as 'fit for purpose'. It has agreed that the Council does not have to submit a traditional HRA business plan because it will be piloting an innovative approach to area-based business planning over the next twelve months.

- 33** The Council's stock condition survey was updated in 2004. It indicates that 56 per cent of the housing stock does not meet the decent homes standard.
- 34** All responsive repairs and a third of the capital improvement programme is carried out or managed under partnered arrangements by building services. The responsive repairs contract was awarded in-house in 1998 and although this has been renegotiated periodically, it has not been market tested since.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 35** The Council's vision for the city is for a unique, vibrant European city, rich in culture and confidence, where people are proud to live, learn, work, play, visit and invest.
- 36** Its mission is to strive to secure a positive and sustainable future for the city through decisive leadership, partnerships and the support of active and empowered communities, with an aim to become an excellent authority by 2008.
- 37** The housing service aims to deliver excellent customer focused housing services and quality homes for the people of Hull by:
- involving customers and staff in setting standards and continuously improving services, achieving excellence by 2008 and beyond;
 - delivering at least the decent homes standard by 2010;
 - contributing to building sustainable communities throughout the city; and
 - tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion.
- 38** In March 2004, the repairs and maintenance service was inspected, resulting in a 'poor' rating with 'uncertain prospects for improvement'. A diagnostic review carried out by the Audit Commission, ODPM and service managers in August 2005 showed evidence of some progress although this was not at the scale or rate expected. As a result, service improvement plans have been developed in response to all the findings and four 'work streams' have been set up to drive through changes at an accelerated pace, working with corporate colleagues. They focus on:
- access and customer care/diversity;
 - asset management;
 - aids and adaptations; and
 - repairs and maintenance.
- 39** Following recent cabinet decisions and the Council's 'Making the Difference' customer promises, the service delivery plan was reviewed in October 2005 and the housing service now has seven areas of focus until the end of March 2006.
- Implement action to drive up performance on all key performance indicators.
 - Set standards and achieve compliance with all statutory duties – including equality and diversity, health and safety and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA).
 - Implement and embed a clear performance management framework that links the Council's strategic goals to individual performance and secures value for money.

- Achieve 1* rating with promising prospects for improvement at this re-inspection of the service.
 - Guarantee enhanced customer service with customer focus and tenant involvement.
 - Implement decent homes, planned maintenance and responsive repairs procurement decision and develop an asset management strategy to reduce surplus stock.
 - Incorporate the housing function into the Council's new neighbourhood management model for organisational delivery.
- 40 Recently, there has been a fundamental review of the way housing delivers services. A paper 'The Vision for Area and Neighbourhood Management', agreed by cabinet in October 2005, outlines the key recommendations for the establishment of a more locally focused and integrated delivery structure, based on principles of localised neighbourhood management.

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

Access and customer care

- 41 In our previous inspection we found that access arrangements for reporting repairs via the Council's call centre and website were generally good. However, they were overshadowed by a number of complicated internal processes which, when coupled with unclear and unpublished policies and service standards, meant that the service was not customer focused. In addition, feedback and satisfaction surveys were non-existent to drive forward service improvements.
- 42 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. During this inspection we found a corporate approach to access and customer care developing through the introduction of customer service centres (CSCs). There is improved access to the service through extended operating hours. There is better information for customers and a more consistent service through streamlining procedures and centralised reporting through the call centre. However, there has been limited involvement of customers in determining the location of the CSCs or the future of the area housing offices and limited information on customer needs, meaning that the Council cannot currently tailor services to meet customer needs.
- 43 The Council has developed a corporate approach to access and customer care. There are currently six CSCs offering advice and support on a range of council services, including housing and repairs, with an accelerated roll-out programme for a further three over the next 12 to 14 months. This allows customers to access a wide range of council services from a single contact point.

- 44 However, decisions about customer service centre locations have been made with limited customer consultation. These locations were based on projected customer demand, public accessibility, support from other partnerships and backing from local residents, but only limited consultation with customers. Therefore, there can be no certainty that customer needs will be adequately met or customers satisfied with plans which include closure of estate offices.
- 45 There is clear leadership in relation to customer care. All customer service staff have undertaken customer care training to ensure they are better equipped to deal with enquiries efficiently and effectively. Staff wear identity badges and are focused on assisting customers when accessing the service. Staff are polite, courteous and very helpful. Current customer satisfaction levels exceed 90 per cent in a number of areas, which is an improvement on the last customer satisfaction survey¹ which showed satisfaction with the overall service at 73.5 per cent and with the attitude of staff at 78.3 per cent.
- 46 Offices are prominently located and clearly sign-posted and all have opening times and telephone numbers clearly displayed. Most offices are well-decorated and welcoming, have sufficient seating, child facilities, and tenant notice boards which are prominently displayed. There is also access to a free-phone which tenants can use to contact other council services.
- 47 Although CSCs are open until 7pm one evening per week, the operating hours for the 16 area housing offices are very traditional. Opening hours for the housing offices are 9 to 4pm Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 10.30 to 4pm Wednesday to allow for training and 9am to 3.30 on a Friday. This is not consistent with the Council's commitment to extend service access to its customers.
- 48 Reporting a repair is easy. There is 24-hour access to the repairs service via the Council's call centre, which operates from 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings. The 'out-of-hours' service is well-publicised and readily accessible through the Council's security team. Customers can also report repairs on line, through the network of CSCs, or by using free phones to the call centre from any housing office. The service is both responsive and effective in dealing with emergency situations. This ensures that tenants can access the service in a way that suits their preference.
- 49 The Council's website is comprehensive and easy to navigate. Although 'interfinder' is not yet in place to further aid repairs reporting, repairs can be easily reported and appointments made on line, with the option for customers to make special arrangements, such as leaving house keys with neighbours. The website also includes a copy of the lettable standard, which is clear, comprehensive and includes sample photos illustrating what is and what is not acceptable. Customers using the website are, therefore, clear about the quality of the product they should receive.

¹ Status 2003

- 50 The Council does not fully understand the needs of its customers. Customer profile information is currently being collected. Although it is only 37 per cent complete, the profile will provide useful information about customers. However, the information already collected is not being used to shape services around identified needs and the needs of all tenants are unlikely to be met without this information.
- 51 Not all repairs information is accessible in translated form. The website does not offer community language translations. Although the repairs handbook's availability in alternative formats and community languages were publicised when it was issued, it does not contain straplines to this effect, so new customers may not be aware of its availability in different formats. Plans are in place, however, for straplines on future reprints.
- 52 There is sufficient information available to customers about the repairs service. The tenancy agreement is clear about repairing obligations and the repairs handbook is a useful, well presented document which mirrors repair finder, to aid diagnosis. It was designed in conjunction with the Service Improvement Group (SIG), includes the right to repair and complaints process and gives advice on key issues such as gas servicing and asbestos. Such information informs tenants of their repairing rights and obligations.
- 53 There is a comprehensive suite of service standards in place for the service. These, which include repairs priorities, have been developed with customers and publicised in the repairs handbook. Similar information can also be found in the Customer Charter and the new tenants 'starter pack'. Tenants can therefore be clear about how to access the service and what to expect as a customer.
- 54 However, there are no service standards place for the aids and adaptations service. Proposals are being consulted upon which prioritise needs and are intended for adoption in April 2006. At present customers cannot be clear about how long they will have to wait at each stage of the adaptation process.
- 55 The repairs call centre operates efficiently. This is demonstrated by its performance in handling calls. On average the call centre handles 65,000 calls per month. The last available report, for December 2005, shows that 89 per cent of calls were answered within 15 seconds and only 1,054 or two per cent, were missed calls. There was 97 per cent tenant satisfaction with the politeness of staff and 96 per cent satisfaction with their ability to deal with requests. The service is staffed up for peak times and has a specialist team dealing with repairs. This is supplemented by generic staff in an emergency, which has improved performance. This demonstrates that staff performance is well managed and ensures the majority of tenants can easily access the repairs service.
- 56 Performance against service standards is sound. Since the standards were introduced in October 2005, tenant satisfaction has averaged over 90 per cent. However, performance in displaying ID badges has only averaged around 75 per cent and managers are currently addressing this issue. The Council can demonstrate that it is effectively managing how well its service standards are embedded and customers can be confident of a consistent service.

- 57** Customers have been able to influence the service. The approach to customer involvement has been radically revised over the past 18 months. Tenants conferences have been held where weaknesses across the service were openly discussed and workshops began to look at solutions. As a result customers have been involved in determining priorities, setting standards, developing the compensation scheme for service failure, monitoring performance and reviewing new initiatives within the repairs service.
- 58** Complaints are dealt with effectively. The corporate complaints system is widely publicised and customers are encouraged to use it. Complaints received are analysed and reported at different levels within the Council, including at service improvement groups. Trend analysis identifies areas for service improvement, with recommendations made to the various service improvement groups. The Cabinet Housing Committee considers individual customer complaints, where customers remain dissatisfied with the outcome.
- 59** There is an effective tenant's compensation scheme for service failure. The compensation scheme covers failure to undertake repairs within the agreed standards and has resulted in payments of over £4,000 this year to date. The scheme is explained in the repairs handbook and on the website and call centre staff are familiar with the policy. In the past two years there have been no right to repair claims, which is an indication of how well the service has improved its responsiveness in undertaking repairs.

Diversity

- 60** In our previous inspection we found that the Council had still not developed processes, monitoring and reporting systems to improve performance in this area. The culture of the organisation was such that it did not represent the needs of its communities and it failed to adequately invest in staff training and development to ensure the service complied with corporate priorities and delivered appropriate service for hard to reach groups.
- 61** Weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. In this inspection, we found that there is evidence of a corporate commitment to improve Hull's approach to diversity. An equality and diversity strategy and process to meet the Equality Standard in Local Government has been produced, for which it has achieved level one status. However, the fact that historically there has been little consideration of this aspect of the business means that significant improvement is needed before the Council can be sure that it is responding to the needs of the community.
- 62** The service has self-assessed itself as having reached the Commission for Racial Equality's (CRE) Code of Compliance for social rented housing. However, the degree of compliance could be improved especially as new, more demanding requirements come into force in April 2006. The monitoring system in place provides limited evidence of how the information collected is used to assess the impact of services in relation to equality and diversity. It is apparent that more work needs to be done to embed policy and procedure in order to comply with the new code.

- 63 The Council cannot currently identify customers who are not accessing the service. Customer profiling is currently being developed through the census survey and although some information is collected on age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and so on, it is only collected from people who have already accessed the service. Information from all customers including applicants is not routinely gathered across the service and examined to identify potential barriers to access. The Council cannot demonstrate that its services are accessible to all.
- 64 There are no targeted repairs services offered for excluded groups. For example the recharge policy does not specifically exclude damage caused by cases of domestic violence or hate crime and culturally sensitive services such as same sex appointments are not available for repair work. Therefore policies, procedures and services are not tailored to meet the diverse needs of the community
- 65 There are no system flags or 'pop ups' in place to alert staff to vulnerable customers or to potentially dangerous situations and these details are not printed on job tickets. Building services is currently considering what data it should hold and how this should be presented but there are no outcomes from this work to date. The absence of such information does not safeguard customers or staff.
- 66 The Council remains in breach of disability legislation. Whilst there is a clear and resourced plan to bring offices up to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) standards, the timescale for completion has slipped again. Originally all offices were intended to be compliant by January 2006. In an amendment recently agreed, offices that have a longer-term future will either be DDA compliant or will have reasonable adjustments made by Spring 2006. In total the Council has been in breach of legislation for over a year and customers who experience access difficulties will continue to do so until at least Spring 2006.
- 67 Local performance indicators on diversity are limited in their use. Draft local performance indicators have been developed but only to address staff representation. None have been developed on service specific issues and there is no analysis of customer satisfaction data on the basis of diversity. This means that the Council cannot be sure that it is not delivering differential services and problem issues cannot be routinely identified or addressed.
- 68 Impact assessments have not been comprehensively undertaken. Building services has begun to make use of impact assessments in reviewing the repairs handbook which will be fed into the service improvement group review of the document in the Spring. However, assessments are not systematically applied elsewhere to ensure that services are fully accessible.
- 69 The Council cannot demonstrate that it is monitoring contractors' or suppliers' compliance on diversity issues. Staff have begun this process by surveying all sub-contractors and suppliers about their employee profiles and are currently processing this baseline information. However, no strategy will be put in place to take this issue forward until there is some clarity about the shape of the client and contractor functions in the future.

- 70 The various resident involvement groups are not representative of the community. Although an engagement strategy has recently put in place to address this issue, there has been no targeted recruitment of hard to reach groups to the various service improvement groups to date. This means hard to reach groups do not currently influence service design and delivery.
- 71 Domestic Violence is not identified or reported on as a specific issue within the service, although this is done corporately. Within housing, the incidence of domestic violence is hidden in anti social behaviour reporting. Whilst there is evidence of appropriate service planning, including multi-agency working in this area, if monitoring is not tailored, the effectiveness and continuing development of these service responses will be reduced.
- 72 Tenants' diverse needs are catered for in the census survey. Interpretation services can be accessed as well as further assistance and support from within the specialist asylum support team. Respite facilities are in place for tenants having the Decent Homes (DHS) work done to their homes. Such support ensures that the needs of vulnerable people are known and addressed.
- 73 Equality plans are detailed, resourced and monitored appropriately. Senior managers receive reports on progress and an Equalities Steering Group ensures actions are delivered. Resources are agreed at corporate strategy team. The census project has a specific budget and dedicated staff budget to ensure delivery. This indicates the importance given to equalities improvement.
- 74 Equality and diversity training for staff is mandatory. Front-line staff have already been trained and there is a rolling programme in place to train others. Within building services 45 managers have undertaken training on diversity awareness and on challenging racist, homophobic and sexist behaviour. Feedback was thoroughly reviewed and lessons learned about rolling out the training to operatives. Plans are in place for this to be done as part of enhanced customer care courses. Staff are therefore well positioned to assist vulnerable customers and customers from black and ethnic minority (BME) communities.
- 75 Staff are well versed in the use of language line. For example building services operatives are able to deal with language problems on site. They have had training in the use of language line, carry mobile phones and are beginning to use the system. One recent example is where a tradesperson had been able to assist through language line a non-English speaking customer without a power supply because she did not understand how to use her prepayment meter. Language barriers are overcome through staff understanding and their ability to use the facilities available to them.
- 76 Racial harassment and hate crime procedures are established and well publicised. Front line staff have been trained, there are five hate crime reporting centres, some of which are customer service centres. Race or hate crime incidents are monitored and are automatically referred for individual support through the Council's Citysafe scheme, a witness support package has been developed, clear leaflets are provided and personal contact stressed. This encourages victims to come forward and report such crimes.

- 77 However, race incident reporting, actions and recommendations do not reflect a commitment to go beyond compliance. Main drivers are seen as legislative, responses to previous inspection reports, codes of practice and key performance indicator monitoring demands. As a result the Council is not challenging itself to produce improvements for tenants affected by racial harassment.
- 78 There is little evidence of effective analysis of race incident figures. The report covering the period April to December 2005 revealed 11 race incident cases. This apparent low incidence should lead to some questioning about the level, possible under reporting or inconsistent recording. This appears not to have occurred at Steering Group or HCMT. If monitoring information is not used for effective enquiry opportunities to improve services are lost.

Stock investment and asset management

- 79 In our previous inspection we found that the Council did not have a clear picture of its investment requirements to meet customer priorities and had not articulated the Hull Standard for meeting decent homes. Although it was aware of its investment costs, the Council was failing to focus effectively on meeting its obligations due to a lack of comprehensive market intelligence and stock condition information and analysis, to help to make informed investment decisions.
- 80 Weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. During this inspection we found that there is no comprehensive strategic approach to asset management. The investment programme up to and including 2006/07 is based on inadequate stock condition information, option appraisals have still to be undertaken on housing stock whose future is uncertain over the long-term, the working relationship with the housing market renewal pathfinder is only just developing. Contingency planning has not been comprehensively developed to ensure the Council can meet the decent homes standard by 2010.
- 81 There is no long-term strategic approach to asset management. A draft asset management plan has been produced based on unreliable stock condition information undertaken in 1999 and very little other information. Very few decisions have been taken on the future of estates that are deemed to be unsustainable and no option appraisals to address problems have been undertaken on unpopular and non-traditional housing. In addition, the decision to retain the housing stock without a city wide view of the housing issues prevalent and the resources at its disposal means that the Council can only aim to achieve the minimum decent homes standard (DHS) and cannot demonstrate the viability of the housing stock post-2010.
- 82 The Council cannot demonstrate that it is investing in the right properties at the right time. The investment programme up to and including 2006/07 is based on an eight per cent stock condition survey which was commissioned in 1999/00 and updated in 2004 to inform the housing stock options. A validation of the data concluded that the information was not robust enough to allow detailed interrogation of the work that was required or to predict the cost and therefore assess whether the work was required or affordable. Therefore improvement work is not targeted accordingly.

- 83 The stock condition database is not yet fully operational. Although the new approach adopted is far more comprehensive and robust and the stock condition survey sample has been increased to over 20 per cent sample of all stock types, the new database has not been fully populated with the additional information. Therefore the Council cannot accurately determine priorities and investment decisions.
- 84 Opportunities are missed to link capital investment decisions with other strategic objectives. Planned programmes are developed based solely on stock condition information and therefore do not consider broader objectives such as environmental, security and sustainability issues which link to other corporate objectives.
- 85 The new approach adopted to gather stock condition information is much more comprehensive. Consultants were commissioned to review the stock condition information previously undertaken. Recommendations included the need to revise the survey forms and capture further details of the stock. The new system is currently being validated and analysed and is about to go live. This will allow the Council to produce predictive investment modelling and scenario planning.
- 86 The housing market renewal pathfinder (HMRP) has started to develop close working relationships with the decent homes investment team (DHT) to ensure a co-ordinated approach to regeneration within the pathfinder areas. Area master planning is currently being undertaken by the pathfinder with involvement from DHT. Both organisations are working on the same time frames with the asset management plan and HMR delivery plan both out for consultation. This ensures that decisions made are complementary.
- 87 There is a sound approach to managing asbestos. An asbestos policy and database is in place with a sample of surveys already undertaken and a rolling programme in place to improve the sample size. Operatives have been trained in dealing with asbestos and there is a specialist in-house asbestos team. Safe working procedures have been issued to all contractors. This helps ensure that, if operatives or sub-contractors were made aware of the presence of asbestos in a property or of they found it accidentally, they would be able to identify and deal safely with it.

Major, planned and cyclical works programmes

- 88 In our previous inspection we found that there was no long-term capital investment plans in place and only limited planned improvement work had been carried out over the past five to ten years. Customer priorities did not inform the programme and the potential to help meet the (DHS is not being fully met. The programmes themselves were not widely publicised. Budget and programme management within the Council was weak.

- 89 There is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. During this inspection we found that there was customer focus from a service delivery perspective however, only the minimum DHS is being achieved through the capital improvement work. The limited resources at its disposal means that the Council can only aim to achieve the minimum DHS, which is not a high standard and fails to address sustainability issues such as the environment and security.
- 90 To date tenants have had limited involvement in relation to the stock investment programme. Tenants are currently being consulted on the new asset management plan which includes the principals for prioritising the DHS programme. Tenants are also involved in the procurement of the new contracts through the Procurement Working Group which was established in October 2005. However, tenants have had limited involvement in the current programme in relation to its prioritisation, the selection of contractors and in performance monitoring. Opportunities to feed customer views into the initial programme have been lost.
- 91 There is no process to fast track aids and adaptations within the DHS programme. There is a lack of information on tenants needs which could be used to inform the programme. Generally, tenants with disabilities or other special needs are identified through the pre-works surveys. However, there are no special arrangements in place to address any special needs as part of the programme. Tenants have to go through the normal route to access the service which could cause an inconvenience to the tenant and delay the programme.
- 92 DHS work is not offered to homeowners or leaseholders. No consideration has been given to the potential benefits to the sustainability of an area, by including homeowners and leaseholders in improving their homes. Not only would this improve the outlook of the neighbourhoods by keeping property prices buoyant, it would also offer opportunities to access improvement work at competitive prices.
- 93 Performance on stock investment does not compare favourably with similar organisations. The current programme is delivered by replacing elements at different times but not necessarily within the same year. As a result the number of homes brought up to the DHS^I and the average SAP rating at 59 per cent^{II} places the Council amongst the bottom 25 per cent authorities.
- 94 The DHS programme is starting to develop a customer focus. A disturbance allowance is payable to tenants if either bathroom or kitchen is replaced and an appeals system is in place for DHS assessment of work. If the tenant is not happy with the pre-site survey outcome then a second opinion by a different independent surveyor can be requested. The potential cost impact of appeals has been factored into the budget. The disturbance payment ensures that tenants are not left financially worse off whilst the appeals system provides a transparent capital investment process.

^I 6 per cent in 2004/5 and a target of 5 per cent in 2005/06

^{II} 2004/05

- 95 Customers are involved and consulted more widely regarding the choice of fixtures and fittings in their homes on planned maintenance schemes. Tenants are informed well in advance of any planned maintenance and or cyclical programme and access is arranged via appointments. A range of choices is also offered during cyclical painting works and consultation takes place with residents' associations where blocks of flats are being repainted. For example they are involved in choosing the colour schemes to high rise flats and communal areas and have a choice of kitchens, front doors and window openings. In addition, tenants have the opportunity to influence the design and installation of improvements within their homes.
- 96 A suite of information has been produced to publicise the range of work to be undertaken through the DHS programme and this has been sent out to all tenants within the programme. A roadshow was planned to commence in January, aiming to publicise the programme to all tenants. Tenants will therefore become more aware of the nature and timetable of the work to be carried to their homes.
- 97 Tenants have ease of access to contractors undertaking the improvement work. Three Tenant Liaison Officers (TLOs) are employed to provide the interface between contractors and tenants. This ensures the capital improvement programme runs smoothly and any complaints are addressed
- 98 The quality of the product achieved through the DHS programme is of good quality. Although the work undertaken is the minimum standard the quality of materials used and the workmanship is of high quality. Tenants report high satisfaction levels averaging in excess of 90 per cent with both the quality of the work and the attitude and cleanliness of the contractors.
- 99 The Council carries out basic cyclical maintenance in accordance with industry standards. For example, it carries out ten-year electrical checks and has a six-year painting cycle which involves mostly render and metal fencing because windows and doors are mostly UPVC. Appropriate quality assurance arrangements are in place on cyclical and planned works. Effective cyclical and planned maintenance programmes contribute towards the long-term well being of the stock.
- 100 Although planned maintenance does not currently complement decent homes work because DHS programmes are still under development, some joined up working does take place. For example, plans are in place to carry out security lighting upgrades, flooring upgrades and internal repainting of common parts of multi-storey blocks in 2006/07 to follow on from DHS works in two blocks. All of which complements the work undertaken by the DHS programme.

Responsive repairs

- 101 In our previous inspection we found the Council was poor at delivering responsive repairs within target times. The absence of a strategic approach, a robust performance management framework and systems for capturing customer feedback were barriers to improving the service.

- 102** Strengths now outweigh weaknesses in this area. During this inspection we found a more customer focused approach to service delivery. There is improved access to the service through an extended appointment system and the revised prioritisation of repairs categories makes it less confusing for customers and staff. The repairs call centre is operating efficiently, the number of emergency and urgent repair jobs being undertaken is reducing and there is improving repairs performance and customer satisfaction. However, there are no arrangements for making appointments during the evenings and weekends and the number of appointments, though improving, remains below average.
- 103** An appointment system is fully operational and available for all urgent, routine and planned works. The system exploits technology, and tenants with mobile phones are reminded by SMS text messages the day before their appointment. Automatic emails are generated to managers if slots are filling up. Flags appear on the system for the call centre to ensure appointments are made within priority timescales and data reports on demand allow a sophisticated system of workforce planning whereby tradespeople can be moved between depots. This system has resulted in less time being spent fielding chase up calls, meaning staff resources are more effectively spent on improving productivity and repairs and inspections are arranged at a time to suit the customer.
- 104** However, with the exception of gas servicing, there are no evening and weekend appointments available. Plans are in place to extend the appointment system by introducing weekend and evening appointments until 7pm for all trades, once trade union negotiations are complete. The current appointment system means that tenants who work during the week have to make special arrangements or take time off work, which is not customer-focused.
- 105** Performance on appointments made and kept is below average but improving. The number of appointable repairs made and kept has steadily increased from 21 per cent in August 2005 to 55.2 per cent in December, but the Council's poor performance at the beginning of the year means the cumulative figure is still only 35.8 per cent. It cannot, therefore, demonstrate that it has maximised opportunities to carry out repairs at a time which suits customers until very recently and the impact of improvements has been limited to date.
- 106** All repair reports are confirmed in writing. All tenants who report a repair receive a repair receipt confirming their repair order and the date and time of the appointment agreed. This ensures that customers understand how quickly their repair is due to be carried out and are able to chase it up.
- 107** Satisfaction with the responsive repairs service is high. Call back satisfaction surveys on the repair reporting process are carried out by the call centre and a 15 per cent survey is also done via returned repair receipts. These indicate that 93 per cent of tenants reported that operatives kept to the agreed appointment, 100 per cent reported the job completed in one visit and 100 per cent reported that the operative advised them on how to operate and maintain any new appliance fitted, if appropriate. This demonstrates an effective and customer focused approach to service delivery.

- 108** Action on negative feedback is taken seriously. The call centre survey indicated that only 81 per cent of tenants reported that the worker behaved professionally whilst in the home and this is currently being investigated by repairs managers. Analysis and action of negative feedback is important if satisfaction levels are to continuously improve.
- 109** The Council is reducing the number of repairs undertaken on an emergency and urgent basis. The level of emergency and urgent repairs has reduced from 40 per cent to 36 per cent since new repair priorities were introduced in October 2005. Although this still falls outside Audit Commission good practise recommendations of 30 per cent, the improvement indicates that the new priority system is encouraging customers not to report routine work as urgent or allow staff to record it as urgent.
- 110** The Council has developed an effective method for measuring 'right first time' which indicates improving performance. This involves identifying the repairs which were done within priority timescale, without variation and in one visit. This indicates that 'right first time' rose from 49 per cent to 74 per cent between October and December 2005. Right first time ensures less disruption to tenants and improved service efficiency.
- 111** The service is performing well against its new repairs priorities. A suite of reports is produced weekly which allows managers to drill down into trades as well as looking at performance by geography. Since new repair priorities were introduced in October, average response times across all contracts for all types of repair have improved month on month. By December, for example, the Council was completing routine work in 9 days against a target of 20, urgent work in 3.65 days against a target of 5, 24-hour emergency work within 20 hours and two-hour emergency work in 1.36 hours. This demonstrates performance is improving against challenging targets.
- 112** Legal disrepair is effectively managed. Twenty-six cases have been registered in the past two years, of which only eight remain active. The Council carries out remedial works as quickly as possible, where it has liability, and settlement figures indicate that problems are not significant, with £25,000 paid out in 2003/04, £23,000 in 2004/05 and only £2,000 by June 2005. The Council was awarded £19,000 over the same period. Effectively managing disrepair cases means that much needed resources are not spent on expensive compensation claims at the expense of service delivery.

Void repairs

- 113** In our previous inspection we found a lack of customer focus, inefficient procedures, no lettable standard in place leading to poor quality voids and poor value for money from contractors. The absence of strategic planning and joined up working meant that processes were overly complex and performance management was none existent.

- 114 Weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. In this inspection we found improved void management procedures and more joined up working between building services and the landlord service, which is beginning to improve performance. A lettable standard has also resulted in properties ready for letting being of a consistent and reasonable standard. However, there remain some significant weaknesses in strategic planning around long-term voids and in performance management, which mean efficiency is not being maximised.
- 115 There is no strategic approach to managing long-term voids. Although a specialist officer has been appointed to take on this role and a review of long-term empty properties was carried out last year, no financial provision has been made to address the recommendations of the review, which includes bringing some properties back into use, re-modelling, decommissioning and demolition. The problem is illustrated by the example of eight properties on the Bilton Grange estate, where proposals are in place to convert them into four larger homes. These properties have been empty for a number of years with a void rent loss to date estimated at £112, 000 excluding security and council tax costs. Failure to identify funding and address this problem means the Council is continuing to lose revenue and the area around these properties is blighted.
- 116 Performance on voids although improving is still poor when compared to other similar organisations. The backlog of voids, which earlier in the year totalled 335, has been reduced to 13 but performance to December was still poor at an average of 69 days per property. The service introduced a local performance indicator for all new voids from September and performance against this by the time of the inspection was more positive, at 44 days, with the repairs element of the process taking 35 days. This indicates that newer voids are being more effectively managed than those which came empty early in the year but problems in lettings as well as repairs must be addressed if performance is to improve to target levels in future.
- 117 Performance management on voids is not robust. High quality performance reports can be used by managers to drill down to estate level and include features such as supply estimates and year-end forecasts. This level of monitoring quality, however, is not translated into effective operational tools or systems. Although surveyors inform landlord services staff of planned void return dates, unexpected delays often occur. Targets are either not set or are not being enforced for some parts of the process. There are a number of cases where voids have been refused but not re-offered quickly. There are particular delays in letting sheltered and adapted properties and in returning voids after major works. 18 major works voids have been in the system for over three months with only three having expected return dates. This lack of rigour indicates that some processes are not yet effectively managed and opportunities to improve performance are being missed.

- 118** The Council does not operate any differential systems or targets to take account of demand issues. At an operational level, there is some flexibility to pull forward individual voids on request, but generally all voids are approached in the same way, irrespective of the amount of work required or how quickly they can be relet. This is a missed opportunity to take a more sophisticated approach to managing performance by setting challenging repairs targets for properties where a speedy letting is likely and by allowing more flexibility where the property is likely to stay empty for a period.
- 119** There is no strategic use of satisfaction or refusal data to drive service improvement. For example, only 15 per cent of refusals this year have been due to property condition and twice as many have been because a property of the wrong type or in the wrong location has been offered. Satisfaction survey information indicates that 86 per cent of customers were satisfied with property condition and 94 per cent with the relet process, but there are significant variations between results for different estates. These statistics have not been investigated further in order to establish where systems could be improved and to help ensure more customers are happy to take the first property offered to them.
- 120** Progress has been slow in addressing long-term low demand in four sheltered housing schemes. A number of properties have remained empty with very little action taken on them by way of bringing them up to the lettable standard and actively marketing them for reletting. Again, this has led to void rent loss of over £341,000. An advertising campaign has very recently begun, to gauge interest, but customers will view the properties in their current state and they will only be brought up to the lettable standard if interest is expressed. This decision has been made on a value for money basis. However, given the currently poor standard of these properties, the approach is unlikely to attract potential customers because insufficient thought has been given to relatively inexpensive ideas such as providing a show flat.
- 121** A clear lettable standard is in place for all other voids. This has been agreed with the void SIG and was supported by a budget increase of £1.5 million to £6.8 million this year. The standard is widely publicised and staff have been required to sign up to it. Embedding of the standard has been achieved by requiring supervisors to post-inspect against it, rather than against individual jobs completed, and by discussing reducing numbers of voids returned for extra work at team briefings. Staff now understand the quality required and customers know what to expect when viewing a property.
- 122** The quality and consistency of voids ready for let has improved significantly. They are not brought up to the decent homes standard but they are clean and presentable. Kitchens and bathrooms, in particular, are being made more attractive by the relatively low cost installation of new work surfaces and toilet seats. Where decoration is required, preparatory work to walls and woodwork is done and, in some cases, the decision has been made to strip or redecorate rooms which require significant work. This means that homes being viewed by potential customers are of good quality.

- 123 The Council has tried to influence the condition of properties when tenants leave. A 'leavable' standard has been approved by the void SIG and leaflets are currently being printed for its implementation by late February 2006. Failure to leave the property in a lettable condition will be linked to a future reward scheme and property damage will impact on the suspension of re-housing applications, but this is not yet impacting on the service being delivered.
- 124 A number of procedural improvements have been made since the last inspection. These include a degree of multi-skilling within a dedicated void repairs team, improved key management, the use of accompanied viewings in all cases and the introduction of a choice-based lettings system. Landlord services staff are using 'back to back' lettings in a small number of casesⁱ and have reduced the use of security shuttering in favour of net curtainsⁱⁱ. These improvements have made a contribution to speedier letting and to reducing the negative impact which empty properties can have on a neighbourhood.
- 125 Although the Council has recently carried out a review of procedures and some reengineering will take place over forthcoming months, there remain some procedural weaknesses which will not be addressed as part of this process. For example, systems for issuing decoration allowances are weak. These include an element of negotiation with the potential tenant about the 'marketability' of the property and housing officers can authorise expenditure equivalent to up to four weeks rent. However, this is without any guidance to refer to about how much to offer in different situations. There is also no requirement for them to account for their decisions. This represents a significant risk that a differential service is being delivered.

Gas servicing

- 126 In our previous inspection we found poor performance, with almost 12 per cent of properties not serviced, poor access procedures, poor monitoring and reporting leading to a lack of awareness amongst managers and councillors of the serious breach of health and safety in this service area.
- 127 Strengths now outweigh weaknesses in this area. During this inspection we found that there were appropriate procedures in place to manage gas servicing. Over the past six months the Council has developed a comprehensive suite of procedures to manage every element of the process, including detailed work instructions for sub-contractors, which cover every aspect of gas servicing. The corporate gas policy clearly assigns responsibility for various elements of gas safety across the organisation. All procedures are based on good practice and on CORGI guidance and are tailored to the local context. This helps improve clarity of expectations and responsibilities to ensure compliance with regulation 36ⁱⁱⁱ.

ⁱ 69 in the first 9 months of this year, scattered throughout the city

ⁱⁱ reducing costs by almost £500,000 last year

ⁱⁱⁱ Gas in Use Regulations 1998

- 128** The Council is publicising and providing tenants incentives for gas servicing. There has been widespread publicity of the need for annual servicing and of the fact that the service is provided free of charge. Prize draws are also run on a regular basis to encourage customers to respond to access requests. Both of these techniques help maximise the likelihood of early access and reduce the resources required, in terms of staff time, in obtaining access.
- 129** There is no longer 'silo working' between building services and the landlord service. Two way dialogue has taken place in the development of policies and procedures and 140 staff from both sides of the service have attended CORGI run gas awareness courses to help embed messages about new ways of working co operatively to ensure access is gained for servicing.
- 130** Performance on gas servicing has improved and the 'no access' procedure is effective. There are clear timescales and responsibilities for action including appointments made during the month before the anniversary of the last service date, automatic lettering systems to escalate cases through the system, appropriate vulnerability checks and attempts to gain access before commencing legal action. Process improvements have significantly impacted on performance, with 99.4 per cent of addresses holding a valid gas safety certificate at the time of this inspection and only 118 cases currently with the landlord or legal services, of which none has a safety certificate which is more than 12 months out-of-date.
- 131** The database in use for gas servicing is now adequate to meet the needs of the service. The information it holds is comprehensive and up to date. Copies of CP12s are signed by existing and new tenants and a copy is archived at the Council's depot for future reference. Enhancements are planned to the system in 2006/07 which will improve its ability to interface with other systems, but it is currently fit for the purpose of planning and management.
- 132** There are appropriate procedures in place which are applied sensitively to address the safety of vulnerable customers sleeping temporarily in rooms with fixed appliances. Operatives and sub-contractor staff have all been issued with CORGI guidance. In all cases a CO2 detector is fitted immediately and three monthly safety checks are carried out during the unsafe period. This sensitive approach has helped ensure that vulnerable customers are able to continue living independently for as long as possible.
- 133** There is robust quality assurance on gas servicing. CORGI carries out two per cent post-inspection of works undertaken across all sub-contractors. The Council has further developed the inspection process with its own comprehensive 32 point check, which it carries out on a further two per cent of properties, based on risk. All post-inspection visits include customer-focused checks such as whether ID badges have been presented and whether the appliance has been reset to the customer's satisfaction. All of these practises mean the Council can demonstrate that it is effectively managing risk in this area and using quality assurance to drive service improvement.

- 134 There is no customer satisfaction survey in place for gas servicing. There are plans in place to introduce customer satisfaction for gas servicing shortly. In the mean time however, the Council is not currently able to demonstrate that its customers are happy with the service being delivered and cannot use this information to drive service improvement.
- 135 Not every opportunity is being taken to maximise access for gas servicing. For example, there are no 'pop ups' on the computer system to prompt call centre staff to make gas servicing appointments where they are due, when a customer rings about another matter. This is a missed opportunity to ensure speedy access in cases where letters may have been ignored.

Aids and adaptations

- 136 In our previous inspection we found that although waiting times for assessments had reduced the service was not customer focused. There was no priority system in place and waiting lists were not effectively managed. The service was not widely publicised, there was a limited budget and no comprehensive adapted property database. Performance management was also non-existent.
- 137 There is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses. During this inspection we found some improvements made especially in developing customer focus but very little progress has been made in producing service standards, in developing a priority system and effectively managing the waiting list.
- 138 A range of good quality informative leaflets have been produced to promote the service. These were agreed by the Disability Focus Group and circulated widely to both customers and staff. Additionally, information has been made available on the internet/ A-Z and articles in Hull Talk and Hull in Print. Customers are made aware of the adaptations service and how to access it.
- 139 Letters for customers have been developed to provide updates at various stages of the referral process. These are clear and provide a named contact should the customer require further details. Customers are kept well informed of the progress of their application.
- 140 Customer satisfaction with the adaptations service, where tested, is high. A small sample survey of customers who had accessed the service was conducted. In the 121 cases sampled at the call centre all were positive about the service. The service appears, therefore, to be meeting customer needs.
- 141 Work to reduce waiting times for assessment is being undertaken. Staff resources are being increased to appoint a number of new occupational therapists (OTs) and a second OT clinic was opened in January 2006. Surveys take approximately six to eight weeks, with survey to approval averaging 16 weeks and approval to completion of work at 20 weeks. This performance compares favourably to regional benchmarking information. Waiting times for assessment are intended to reduce and the proposed targets for implementation in April 2006 if achieved, will see critical assessments completed in 9 days, those assessed as in substantial need in 24 days and those needing bathing/showering facilities in 49 days.

- 142** Minor adaptations do not require an OT assessment. Work with an estimated value of under £1,000 can be self-assessed by applicants. This has eased the workload for staff and improved waiting times considerably for many customers.
- 143** There is still no needs-based priority system in place for major adaptations. Cases are dealt with on a date order basis. Proposals for changing this to a needs basis are being consulted upon and it is intended for the change to prioritisation to be in place from the new financial year. At present, those in greatest need are not treated with sufficient priority.
- 144** The adapted property database is not comprehensive. Adapted properties are matched where possible to housing applicants who need them. Adapted properties are identified on the choice-based lettings system (CBL) system. It is recognised however, that there are improvements to be made to the current manual system. Other providers who use more sophisticated property identification systems have been approached and resources are in place to provide improvements. This will provide a more efficient and effective approach as customers will be matched with adapted properties to suit their needs.
- 145** Effective performance indicator reporting is still not available. There are IT difficulties that have prevented a prompt solution. It is now planned to introduce full performance reporting from April 2006 after a programme of training and data validation. Monitoring against service targets is not possible until data collection difficulties have been resolved, therefore poor performance may not be recognised and resolved promptly for customers.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 146** In our previous inspection we found very little focus on providing value for money for customers. Opportunities to maximise income, market test, benchmark and tender contracts had not been taken. There were no plans in place for value for money procurement and partnering.
- 147** During this inspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. The Council is unable to demonstrate a good understanding of the relationship between the cost and quality of delivering the repairs and maintenance service and how this information could be used to inform future policy decisions. The Council has recently produced its corporate procurement strategy as part of developing a corporate approach to value for money (VFM). The Council does not have a full understanding of costs across all aspects of the housing service and whilst there has been some cost/benefit work, there are as yet no outcomes from this work, or from benchmarking to demonstrate transparency/competitiveness. There has been limited testing of the market place to see what it has to deliver and there is no evidence of any VFM calculations that have informed corporate decisions.

How do costs compare?

- 148 The Council does not have a sound understanding of the costs of the repairs and maintenance service, how this relates to quality and compares to others. Staff are aware that on costs for running the stores are 9 per cent but does not know how these compare to other councils. Some benchmarking has taken place but it has not yet been used to drive service improvement or cost reduction. Such information is important to establish the base line position and develop action plans upon which to improve.
- 149 Building services have not challenged where they purchase support services from and if they provide value for money. Some elements of central support services for building services have been identified as high cost and action is not being taken corporately to address this. Costs are not monitored through the year and central recharges which represent 6 percent of the £30 million turnover are difficult to challenge.. Examples include:
- a £100,000 charge for the in house procurement of major works; and
 - £1.6 million non-controllable charges for 2004/05 against a forecast at £1.3 million, which placed the service into deficit by £285,000.
- This affects the transparency of costs and surpluses and efficiencies are not being reinvested in repairs service delivery because they are moved to the corporate centre.
- 150 Managers in building services recognise the need to control central services and to generate non-housing repairs income in future. The organisation has retained a separate trading account and has been given efficiency targets of £1.1 million this year, with £924,000 achieved to date by reducing void on-costs by £490,000, emergency on costs by £42,000, by not making an inflationary increase saving £295,000 and sundry savings of £98,000 for recycling of savings back into the service.
- 151 The Council cannot demonstrate that it has a sophisticated understanding of the real costs of repairs commissioning and the users of other services may currently be subsidising this service. For example, the call centre has a service level agreement (SLA) based on recharging the service for the number of calls taken in the same way it does for other council departments and does not currently take into account their complexity or length, both of which make the service more expensive to deliver in comparison to that delivered to other council departments.
- 152 VFM studies were undertaken by external consultants covering the window programme, heating and electrical installations and kitchen and bathroom installations. Although the studies provide a rough benchmark comparing the current programmes with the market place, it does not demonstrate VFM from both a cost and quality point of view nor does it demonstrate what the market place could offer if the existing programme was market tested and packaged differently.

How is value for money managed?

- 153** The Council's approach to managing VFM in the repairs service is unsystematic. There is no corporate strategy detailing how VFM will be achieved. Without this there is no sustained focus on what will be done and when to improve VFM and how outcomes will be managed and measured.
- 154** The Council is not maximising efficiencies by the application of modern procurement techniques.
- A number of services including gas servicing and planned maintenance are being procured using traditional tendering methods and awarded on a cost only basis. This limits the Council's opportunity to achieve economies of scale and does not demonstrate VFM within the service.
 - The principles of true partnering have yet to be adopted. The Housing Energy Programme (HEP) suppliers for both electrical and gas boiler goods have been involved in improving specifications, negotiated tenders to ensure continuation of the programme and influencing the supply chain for the supply of boilers. VFM studies demonstrate prices are competitive, however, this approach has not been universally applied across the service and very little by way of analysis and benchmarking has been undertaken to establish the success or otherwise of the initiative.
 - The Council is not involved in e-auctions or consortia procurement for supplies required in repairs and maintenance.
 - The potential of joint procurement has not been considered. The HMRP is currently procuring a lead developer who will then procure construction partners whilst at the same time the Council is procuring both the decent homes and responsive repairs service. However, despite working closely together neither organisation has discussed the potential benefits of jointly procuring the work to be undertaken.
- 155** Batching of non-urgent repairs such as baths, doors and fencing replacements are planned but insufficient account has been taken of quality issues. Although some quality measures will be built into negotiations around the batch contracts currently being market tested, these are not fully developed. Managers expect sub-contractors to comply with the appointment system, for example, but tenderers are not aware of this. This means that, while current plans for batching are likely to result in cost savings, there is a lack of clarity about how building services will manage the customer experience and potential sub-contractors are not tendering on the basis that they will probably be expected to comply with the appointment system, which may drive costs up following the initial tendering process.

156 The Council is not able to demonstrate existing service provide value for money.

- A decision has been made to retain 30 per cent of the total budget for responsive repairs and capital improvement budget to be delivered by the in-house team but there are no clear plans as to the nature of the work to be undertaken.
- There has been no recent review of how the adaptations service can be procured. With the exception of stair lifts, all the work is carried out by the in-house team.

Therefore the Council is not able to demonstrate how cost and quality is being challenged.

157 Opportunities are not always being taken to improve working practices within the repairs service which has the possibility of improving efficiency. On the positive side.

- The number of emergency and urgent repairs is reducing. The new repairs categories introduced in October 2005 has helped reduce the levels of emergency and urgent repairs from 40 per cent to 36 per cent. This is still above Audit Commission good practise recommendations of 30 per cent.
- Changes in the way repairs are reported has resulted in a reduction in variations. Variations have reduced from 42.06 per cent to 27.25 per cent between September and November 2005. This saves time and resources and is an indicator of improving repairs diagnosis. variation procedure provides, without reducing customer focus.
- However, a decision has been taken to replace kitchens but not bathrooms and where bathrooms are in disrepair they are being replaced using the responsive repairs budget reducing possible efficiencies through bulk purchase.
- There is an inconsistent and ineffective approach to dealing with rechargeable repairs. Recharging currently only happens in very limited circumstances and systems rely on cumbersome paperwork and customers agreeing payment in advance. Surveyors do not itemise rechargeable items at void stage. This means the Council is not maximising its income from rechargeable repairs, caused by wilful damage.
- The Council appointed two new contractors after a market testing exercise to carry out work to empty homes in excess of £5,000. However, no voids have been referred through this process yet and all large scale voids continue to be repaired by building services on the basis of schedule of rates prices.

This illustrates that VFM is not fully embedded into thinking, priorities and day-to-day decisions.

Summary

- 158 There is now a more customer focused approach to service delivery. Access to the service has improved through the introduction of customer service centres and better information for customers and there is no longer a differential service being delivered due to streamlining of procedures and centralised reporting through the call centre.
- 159 Customers are seeing some of the benefits of improvements in the responsive repairs service such as an increased number of jobs completed on first visit, improved performance on gas servicing and improved standard of work to vacant properties. This has resulted in improving customer satisfaction levels.
- 160 Structures are being put in place to enhance opportunities for customer participation, with some proactive tenant involvement in responsive repairs improvements. Information is being gathered on the customer profile but outcomes in terms of the impact customers have had in shaping and developing the service is still variable and the Council is not systematically able to tailor services to meet customer needs.
- 161 The absence of a strategic approach to asset management and investment, informed by a robust asset management strategy and up-to-date stock condition information, means that the Council cannot accurately predict the future investment required to sustain its stock.
- 162 There is no strategic approach to VFM and the Council cannot demonstrate that the service provides value for money in terms of cost and quality. Therefore the service is judged to be **'fair'**.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 163** The previous inspection found that the Council had a poor track record in responding to previous inspection recommendations; the pace of change was invariably slow, there were limited improvements for customers, there was no self-awareness or learning from best practice, there were no robust performance management arrangements in place and capacity was an issue within the service.
- 164** There are still more barriers than drivers to service improvement. During this inspection we found the performance on implementing recommendations from previous inspection reports, diagnostics and self-assessments has been varied and not always at a pace to demonstrate significant improvements. A number of new initiatives are relatively new and therefore have not had time to make an impact in terms of clear outcomes for customers. Performance overall is improving but VFM has not been demonstrated over time.
- 165** The pace of change in several key areas has been slow over the past three years. For example, the Council has missed three deadlines for compliance with the CRE code of practice in rented housing and has taken over two years to progress negotiations with the craft unions about terms and conditions which it had originally aimed to resolve within weeks. It also took over twelve months to address some of the weaknesses identified at the time of the last inspection, such as revising the appointment system, simplifying priorities and producing a repairs handbook.
- 166** However, the Council has responded effectively to the previous inspection's recommendations on gas servicing. For example, after the last inspection where 12 per cent of gas appliances were found not to have a valid safety certificate, the gas servicing team put into place a well resourced and managed emergency plan which saw this figure reduced to fewer than 4 per cent within three months.
- 167** Progress on addressing the previous inspection's recommendations has been poor. The table at appendix five shows that out of the 23 recommendations only nine have been completed, twelve partially completed and two have not been completed at all. The Council therefore cannot demonstrate a robust track record of continuous improvement.
- 168** Although a number of recommendations have only recently been implemented and have not had the time to make an impact, there are some concrete examples of improvements for customers. The introduction of the appointment system, issuing of repairs receipts, simplified repairs priorities, the new tenants repair handbook, service standards and monitoring of customer satisfaction. This demonstrates that the service has delivered some improvements in certain areas.

- 169** The Council's performance over the past two years has been average and poor in some areas. Table one at appendix one shows performance over the past two years. Although performance is improving since October 2005 and with the exception of tenant satisfaction with the overall housing service at 99 per cent, performance when compared with other similar organisations is either in the bottom or middle group of poor performing housing organisations. Some targets are also not challenging and in some cases are not in place. The Council has therefore a long way to go to match the top performing organisations.
- 170** Customer satisfaction is not gauged across the service. Satisfaction surveys are currently not undertaken for gas servicing or planned maintenance and void surveys have only recently started. Lack of customer satisfaction monitoring is a missed opportunity to inform service improvements.
- 171** Some new initiatives have been poorly implemented. For example, the move to a specialist void team did not include discussions with staff about what was working well under the old system, failed to embed the new standard within the first six months or build in effective review after implementation. Although initiatives like this are now becoming embedded, staff and managers feel these processes have been more protracted and painful than necessary and staff morale suffered in the period April to September 2005 as a result.
- 172** Capacity and track record in the service does not demonstrate improving value for money. The Council is currently looking at identifying what services cost and the level of quality being achieved from which they can benchmark. Value for money (VFM) is now a corporate priority and there is more awareness of VFM at middle management level and amongst councillors. However, the absence of such information means that the Council cannot compare its performance on VFM compared to other similar providers.
- 173** The Council cannot demonstrate its ability to use procurement to achieve VFM in delivering both cost and quality that benefits customers. Procurement decisions are currently being made about the future of decent homes and responsive repairs, with 67 per cent of the total programme to be delivered by partners and 33 per cent being reserved for a new arms length direct services organisation (DSO). Although this DSO, in order to continue to receive work, will be required to demonstrate VFM on cost and quality through robust comparison and benchmarking, there are significant risks that it may not achieve single status in the short time required and that cross-party buy-in to the ALMO DSO model may change if there are political changes in May 2006.
- 174** Tenants are now able to influence the way the service is delivered. The service is now more customer focused and tenants are involved in patch walks, service improvement groups and mystery shopping exercises, which have led to a revised repairs handbook, revised repairs priority timescales and service standards. This ensures that the service is tailored to meet tenants' needs.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 175 There is an equal balance of barriers and drivers to service improvement. During this inspection we found that although the Council has a vision for the service, this has not been translated into clear aims and objectives. Most of the current plans are short-term focused with little emphasis on sustainable outcomes for the longer term. Business planning and performance management arrangements have improved with the introduction of performance clinics.
- 176 The aims and ambitions for the service are not detailed into an agreed proposal and action plan. The Council has agreed a proposal to move to a neighbourhood management model of service delivery by April 2007, in which it is proposed to transfer some of the landlord services under the remit of Area Directors. However, agreement has yet to be reached as to what aspects of the service will transfer and where the new DSO will sit within the structure. Lack of clarity and detailed planning will affect the continuous improvement of the repairs and maintenance service.
- 177 Improvement plans are short-term and reactive. The lifetime of most plans is until the end of the financial year and not long-term. Examples include:
- The current service delivery plan focuses on seven outcomes for Housing to be delivered by March 2006. Although longer-term plans will form part of the service's business plan these are still to be formulated. This means the service fails to take a long-term overview of how it plans to meet its objectives.
 - There is no overarching strategy in place for the repairs and maintenance service. Plans and managed processes are now in place to reduce the number of emergencies and urgent repairs, to reduce variations and pre and post-inspections and to begin to increase batching of low priority works. However, it is less clear how building services or the future DSO will demonstrate VFM and how the Council intends to deliver the service in the medium or longer-term.
 - The Council's draft asset management strategy is short-term in its focus. The draft strategy which is currently out for consultation is very much focused on the procurement decisions that need to be taken on delivering the decent homes standard and the prioritisation of the repairs programme. There is no detail as to how the repairs service will fit in with proposals in moving towards a neighbourhood management model for service delivery, how sustainability issues will be addressed or how value for money will be achieved over time by moving to a more planned strategic service approach. In its current form the asset management strategy will not deliver the long-term aims of the service that is intended.

- The repairs service improvement plan (SIP) addressed the key issues from the last inspection and is generally SMART, there has been some slippage against target timescales, the plan has not been revised over time to ensure it remained a 'live' document and elements of it¹ were taken out of the plan and remotely managed by other teams, which has made progress sometimes disjointed. The plan therefore is short term, in that it focuses on re-inspection and does not aim for long-term continuous improvement.
- 178** There is evidence that communication has improved in recent months. Middle managers feel the organisation has a clearer sense of direction which is being transmitted effectively down through the organisation. There are more opportunities to raise questions and concerns, with feedback given on actions taken to address them and some initiatives reviewed in response to staff concerns about unrealistic deadlines. The interim Director of Housing has been providing focused and consistent leadership for the past four months. Weekly briefings with a group of up to 80 key managers and staff has helped embed messages about priorities and given middle managers confidence to progress ideas for service improvement. Policy and procedural changes are better explained, with opportunities to become involved in working groups. This has led to better policy development and implementation and clear ownership of revised policies and procedures amongst all staff.
- 179** Performance management within the service has improved significantly at both a corporate, strategic and operational level.
- A corporate Improvement Board has been established. Membership is cross-party and includes a member of the Government's appointee team. The remit of the board is to focus on preparation for forthcoming inspections and audits and to ensure progress is delivered against previous inspection recommendations and audit reviews. This ensures that the service improvement planning is owned and supported both corporately at all levels of the organisation.
 - Monthly performance clinics have recently begun through out the housing service. This involves a comprehensive review of processes, customer satisfaction data and performance against other targets. One exception we found to this was analysis of low race incident figures which has not been robust.
- 180** However, not all performance management information is consistent or coherent. Performance information has been provided to Members with significantly varying data from one period to the next with inadequate explanations. Regularly, timely and reliable performance management information enables under performance or underlying issues to be addressed in a timely manner.

¹ such as those relating to more general access and diversity issues, for example

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- 181 The Council has made effective use of performance data to assess the impact of new initiatives. For example, the introduction of new repairs priorities was a high risk period in an environment where trades people were empowered to do extra work when visiting. Staff were intensively briefed on the risks that empowerment could make the new system unworkable and explaining how their performance impacted on global performance and satisfaction. Regular reviews of performance gradually resulted in the development of a flexible system whereby extra work is done within a managed process. This has resulted in job satisfaction for operatives, delivering an individually customer-focused service whilst continuing to improve performance against global priorities.
- 182 The Council is developing a learning culture drawing from its own and others experiences such as:
- the Council has actively sought out the best advice in service development. For example, in developing new gas servicing procedures, it brought in specialist support from CORGI and has used them to audit practise as new systems were being embedded. Support from three-star housing organisations has also been obtained to assist in preparing for this inspection;
 - the regular team briefing sessions encourages the promotion and sharing of good practice but this has yet to be embedded within the organisation; and
 - performance clinics and the housing managers forum provide the opportunity for managers to challenge what and how they are doing, compare performance and come up with solutions within clear recovery plans in order to improve service delivery. Senior managers thus endorse what is deemed to be good practice and roll it out across the service.

These activities are still developing but will help improve learning between sections and sharing of information across the organisation.

- 183 Structures are being developed to obtain customer feedback on the effectiveness of existing services and the development of services which can be used to drive service improvements.
- There is a robust approach to managing customer feedback On average a 15 per cent return rate for responsive repair satisfaction slips is being achieved. The information is analysed centrally to identify trends to feed into service improvement reviews and feedback provided to staff and tenants. For example increasing comments about heating failures has resulted in plans for a publicity campaign next autumn to reassure customers about the Council's obligation to provide temporary heating. Effectively using feedback from customers ensures the service is tailored to meet their needs.

- Customers have recently begun to be involved determining priorities, setting standards, developing the compensation scheme for service failure, monitoring performance, mystery shopping and reviewing new initiatives within such as the repairs finder within the repairs service. Improvement have included amendments to the repairs finder resulting in reduced variation orders and plans to make mystery shopping more focused by using performance data to target mystery shopping activity. Three customers have also been nominated by the SIG to attend performance clinics and will begin to do so from February. Customers will be better informed on how the service is performing and be able to make informed challenges.
- A range of focus groups have been established to advise upon specialist issues. However, the Council has not integrated key stakeholder groups effectively into their decision-making structures. The Disability Focus Group whilst advisory in nature is not consulted with consistently or routinely either as a group or individually in areas where they evidently have expertise and experience to offer. For example, they were not involved in decisions about CSC locations or in advising upon Impact Assessments. These groups may feel marginalised and inadequately considered. As a result services for those people whom the groups have specialist knowledge of may suffer.

Improving the effectiveness of customer and stakeholder engagement and feedback will help improve accountability allowing the Council to tailor services to meet the needs of tenants.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 184 There are more barriers than drivers to service improvement. The Council has begun to address leadership weaknesses at all levels, there is commitment to staff training and development and recognition at the political level of the need for change in Housing. However, in the absence of a long-term service development plan, the service faces the risk that its plans are not adequately resourced, or targeted on the right priorities, in order to secure its long-term future. There is no long-term IT strategy and although short-term progress has been made, this is largely reactive.
- 185 The Council's medium-term financial plan is not robust enough to deliver the future aims for the service. There is uncertainty about whether there are sufficient resources to deliver the minimum DHS by 2010 which is wholly dependant on the procurement exercise currently being undertaken and the costs submitted being competitive. There is no contingency plan should the costs come in higher than anticipated and the Council doesn't have the comfort of being able to scale back the scope of the work to reduce costs. Also in the absence of a robust asset management strategy and a medium to long-term service delivery plan that is adequately resourced, it cannot demonstrate that it has the financial capacity to deliver the services aims, priorities and work programmes up to and beyond 2010.

- 186** The Council's new procurement strategy is limited in its use. Although the strategy sets out the Government's agenda for modern procurement, it has a number of weaknesses in that it lacks specific milestones for some actions and also a lack of targets relating to the use of local suppliers, and to initiatives such as training and apprenticeships which would increase capacity within the organisation. There is also little evidence of effective partnerships and the use of procurement consortia to achieve value for money across all services. All contracts are awarded on an traditional basis. This misses the opportunity to lever in additional investment and increase capacity through effective partnerships.
- 187** The capacity of the service to improve its use of IT is uncertain. While housing staff are now able to specify the IT improvements they need and to make greater use of IT, there is an over-reliance on an interim post to drive IT service improvement, with no definite plans to maintain the post beyond its interim period. As a result, the service faces the risk of not being able to maintain its recent improvements in IT use.
- 188** Arrangements to address staffing shortfalls have been short term. The Council has been slow to address the future capacity issues at a senior level and the need to fill vacancies within the service on a permanent basis. The use of interim staff has provided some leadership and addressed some of the issues prevalent within the service and an agreement has been reached to extend the interim staffing arrangements on a part time basis for a further two months. A new permanent Housing Director has now been appointed which should assist the Service to maintain the progress made.
- 189** The current Human Resources (HR) strategies, policies and procedures are outdated, ineffective and not implemented in practice. A council wide review of human resources is planned to be undertaken during 2006 to ensure that they meet the requirements of the organisation in relation to recruitment, retention, training and development over the medium and longer term. Ineffective HR strategies affect an organisation's ability to effectively plan and manage the workforce.
- 190** Sickness absence is a significant problem for the Council. Sickness levels within the Landlord and Building Services are high compared to the Council as a whole. The average days lost per employee is 9.2 days compared to a corporate average of 7.6 days across the Council. New, robust corporate sickness procedures are supported by clear targets to reduce sickness absence over three years but these have yet to impact. High levels of sickness absence affects costs and has a negative impact on service delivery

191 Efforts are being made to improve staff morale which has been identified in a staff survey in September 2005 as being low. Examples include:

- the 'extra mile' award is given by tenant mystery shoppers where excellent customer service has been experienced;
- greater inclusion in decision-making including on procurement and neighbourhood management;
- a more positive management style from senior managers, including 'back to the floor' exercises by the Corporate Director and the very supportive and inclusive approach fostered by the Acting Head of Operations and Acting Director of Housing a more visible senior team and better communication; and
- a greater focus on successes and a move away from the historical blame culture.

Improved staff morale can have a positive impact on reducing sickness levels.

192 There is now significant political recognition of the need for change within housing. Members now understand service weaknesses. A cabinet sub-committee of senior, capable and experienced Members has been set up to support the relatively inexperienced portfolio holder and this meets weekly to consider performance and service improvement issues. Housing has been the Members' highest priority for service improvement for over two years but, now that services elsewhere in the Council are generally beginning to demonstrate improving outcomes, Member capacity can be concentrated more fully on housing issues and maintains a focus on improving the service

193 The Council has made concerted efforts to attract women into the workforce although with limited success to date. Managers have held a series of meetings with CITB, Business Link and Hull College, attend career evenings and run sessions in youth clubs, offering practical experience in bricklaying. It takes work experience pupils from every school in the city, programmed across the year and offers experience in all trades, clerical and professional areas.

194 However, building services has not introduced any targeted recruitment or retention policies for women in the workforce, which means it is unlikely to be able to offer services such as same sex appointments in the short or medium-term.

195 The Council has begun to address leadership capacity weaknesses at all levels. A new corporate competency framework, being piloted in housing has assisted in informing future training and development and recruitment needs for managers. The process will be complete down to junior manager level by December 2006. A modular management skills programme has recently begun for junior managers and a leadership coaching programme begins in March for senior managers, with mentoring also planned, although this has yet to be resourced.

- 196 Personal development plans have now been rolled out across the service and all staff will have received their appraisals by the end of the financial year. Training and development requirements are being analysed in order to develop a centralised training and development plan that is relevant in order to achieve corporate objectives. Staff are more aware of their roles and responsibilities.
- 197 There is a commitment to ensuring that operatives are adequately trained and that their professional capacity continues to be developed. For example, six heating engineering apprentices are trained per year, team briefings contain standard agenda items on legislative and building regulations changes, in addition to the provision of specialist training, where necessary. This approach has helped the Council retain qualified and experienced staff and provides some assurance that they are being professionally developed on an ongoing basis.
- 198 Workforce planning on gas servicing is effective. There is a pool of 15 sub-contractors which provides flexibility in workforce planning. This service is run on the basis of 100 per cent appointments and managers can profile when and where they will require labour for every date over the next year with servicing largely carried out during the summer months when there are fewer gas repairs required.
- 199 The Council is making effective use of internal partnerships to enhance capacity in some areas. For example, improved liaison between Building Services and the call centre has resulted in greater involvement in policy and procedural reviews around access to services, a more positive approach to problem solving. This can help improve effectiveness of service delivery.

Summary

- 200 The Council has responded effectively to the previous inspection's recommendations on gas servicing. There are some concrete examples of improvements for customers and they are now able to influence the way the service is delivered.
- 201 Sharing and learning is being encouraged through performance clinics and the housing managers forum. Corporate performance management arrangements have been strengthened to ensure continuous improvement at the service level. Performance within the service has improved. The Council has actively sought out the best advice in service development and there is a robust approach to managing customer feedback.
- 202 The Council has begun to address leadership capacity weaknesses at all levels and there is a commitment to staff training and development.
- 203 However, the Council has been slow to respond to previous inspection findings and the pace of change in some areas has been disappointing. The absence of plans that articulate the longer-term aims and objectives of the service, uncertainty about the longer-term financial implications for taking the service forward, lack of robust support strategies such as IT and human resources, together with interim arrangements at senior management level leads us to conclude that the **prospects for improvement** are **'uncertain'**.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

1 Audit Group Comparators all England

Table 1 Hull Performance Stats

PIs	Base 2004/05	October 2005	November 2005	December 2005	Target 2005/06	Actual 2005/06	Upper threshold	Hull threshold
Percentage of non-decent LA homes	58%				55%	55%	21%	Lower
Percentage change over year of decent homes	9%				1.1%		23.8%	
Percentage for which appointment made and kept	6.6%	39%	41%	50%	86	36.1%	85.6%	Middle
Urgent Repairs in time					Yet to be set		97%	
Average time for non-urgent repairs in days					Yet to be set		11	

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PIs	Base 2004/05	October 2005	November 2005	December 2005	Target 2005/06	Actual 2005/06	Upper threshold	Hull threshold
Average re-let time in days	56				80	69	27	Lower
CRE code for rented Hsg	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	n/a	
LA homes SAP ratings	59	Measured annually.			60		65%	
Overall Satisfaction with housing service	99%	STATUS survey measured every three years.				99%	92.5%	Upper
Satisfaction with opportunities to participate	77%					77%	77.5%	Middle

CPA December 2005

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed and reality checks undertaken

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - self-assessment;
 - corporate and service documents;
 - policies and procedures;
 - corporate procurement strategy;
 - housing strategy;
 - service reviews;
 - business and service improvement plans;
 - suite of customer literature;
 - cabinet reports;
 - asset management plan;
 - review of stock condition survey; and
 - equality and diversity strategy.
- 2 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups;
 - interviews;
 - observations at different forums;
 - mystery shopping exercises;
 - visits to reception areas in CSCs and area housing offices;
 - file checks;
 - visits to housing schemes including sheltered housing accommodation; and
 - inspections of estates.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Text reminder service

- 1 'Text reminder' is a service offered through the repairs appointments system. During the process of agreeing and arranging appointments with customers, they are advised that if they wish to provide a mobile telephone number, a text message will be sent to remind them of their appointment. The messages are automatically generated by the system and sent to the customer's phone at approximately 10am the day before the appointment is due to be attended, to remind them of the arrangement. The system does not record or store the telephone numbers for any other usage, giving the customer assurances over security. The aim of this service is to help to minimise failed appointments by the use of the available technology. Appointment details are also recorded on Repair Receipts as a further reminder.

Of 14,000 appointments made during the period June 2005 to March 2006, 8 per cent requested text message reminders. Having the text reminder service in operation for appointments has kept the overall appointment failure rate to under 15 per cent.

Appendix 4 – Performance against previous inspection's recommendations

Para	Recommendation	Action
	Aims and objectives	
13	Deliver the improvement plan for gas servicing in the three months to July 2004 and ensure compliance under the Gas in Use Regulations 1998 in respect of both processes and outcomes on gas servicing.	Completed
14	The Council should obtain political approval within three months for a detailed plan to achieve Egan compliance within 18 months to two years and provide us with a written update once this is in place.	Partly completed
15	The Council should deliver the actions outlined in its service improvement plan, reviewing and updating it on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains relevant to staff and customers and continues to contribute to wider corporate recovery.	Completed
16	The Council should deliver its decent homes and stock options appraisal project plans in accordance with timescales and milestones agreed to ensure future investment is based on sound and transparent decision-making about sustainability and will deliver decent homes.	Partly completed
17	The Council should provide us with the minutes of programme board meetings where updates on the repairs and maintenance service improvement plan, decent homes and options appraisal are reported.	Completed
	Access/customer care	
18	The Council should, within three months: carry out improvements to ensure that all officers are compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act; and review procedural guidance issued to staff, including guidelines for the exercise of discretion, to ensure consistency at all customer service points.	Partly completed

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Para	Recommendation	Action
19	<p>The Council should, within 12 months:</p> <p>widely consult customers on the accessibility of office services, the call centre, out-of-hours services, pilot projects, newsletters and the website and ensure these results are fed into improvements planning processes:</p> <p>ensure all offices which are to be retained following review are brought up to an agreed minimum standard in terms of facilities and décor:</p> <p>review arrangements for and deliver staff training to improve customer focus; and</p> <p>review, with customers, the choices available on cyclical and improvement programmes and ensure a consistent policy is implemented to compensate them for damage caused to decorations during all repairs and improvements.</p>	Partly completed
	Equality and diversity	
20	<p>The Council should, within three months: develop customer profiling systems to ensure it can best understand its customer base and manage policy impact on all sections of the community:</p> <p>fully populate its staff database with diversity information so it has a complete picture of its workforce.</p> <p>ensure that commitment to the equality standard is a contractual matter whenever procurement of repairs and related services takes place; and</p> <p>set up systems for monitoring complaints by ethnicity, gender and disability.</p>	Partly completed
21	<p>The Council should, within 12 months:</p> <p>be fully compliant with the CRE code of practice for rented housing; and</p> <p>carry out work to positively encourage the involvement of BME customers and those with disabilities in assessing service quality.</p>	Partly completed
	Resident involvement	
22	<p>The Council should ensure it adequately resources customer involvement activity on a permanent basis and maintains this as a core thread running through its work in improving and developing the housing service.</p>	Completed

Para	Recommendation	Action
	Strategic approach to business planning	
23	The Council should, within six months: except where other stock options have been agreed with resident groups, prioritise the rehousing of customers still occupying properties scheduled for demolition and proceed with demolition decisions taken; develop with customers the 'Hull standard' and cost its implementation; develop an energy efficiency strategy, linked to the capital programme; and develop with customers a strategy working towards achieving a 60:40 ratio on maintenance expenditure, including systems for batching non-urgent repairs to deliver them on a value for money basis.	Partly completed
24	The Council should, within 12 months, build up a complete picture of its stock condition, including levels of asbestos and energy efficiency ratings and ensure this is updated to take account of ongoing maintenance and improvement works.	Partly completed
	Programmed and cyclical works and gas servicing	
25	The Council should, within three months, put in place a performance management system for its capital programme which uses targets, sanctions and rewards, reports progress to councillors and involves customers in monitoring.	Not completed
26	The Council should, within six months, put together a plan to achieve maintenance cycles in line with industry standard intervals within two years.	Completed
	Responsive repairs	
27	The Council should, within six months: with customers, review ordering and debt collection processes for rechargeable works; set up a system for monitoring repairs done 'right first time' and for reviewing performance in this area with customers, the call centre and the contractor; begin issuing repair receipts to comply with the Right to Repair; and review its budgets and processes for ordering disabled adaptations to ensure that performance is improved.	Partly completed

56 Repairs and Maintenance Re-Inspection Report | Appendix 4 – Performance against previous inspection's recommendations

Para	Recommendation	Action
	Voids	
28	The Council should, within three months, set clear targets for each aspect of the process and global targets.	Completed
29	The Council should, within six months: review, with customers, the system of issuing decorating allowances in the light of other options offering better value for money and customer service; and; review void targets, with customers in the light of demand information, considering the option of prioritising turnaround in areas of high demand.	Partly completed
	Performance management	
30	The Council should, within three months: develop a robust system for collecting, monitoring and managing performance information, including SAP ² ratings. This should bring together issues currently monitored separately and include the following additional items: discontinued BVPIs as local PIs; variation levels; gas servicing levels (and audit results); performance against housing strategy and business plan objectives; and customer satisfaction review the content and format of monthly area performance reports with frontline managers to ensure these meet their needs. They should include: void levels, turnaround times and rent loss against targets; performance against elements of the void process against targets (inspections, pre-and post-tenancy repairs and allocations); numbers of repairs completed in line with service standards; and quality/customer satisfaction with repairs and voids.	Completed
31	The Council should, within six months, set up a system involving customers to uniformly monitor the performance of internal and external contractors.	Partly completed

Para	Recommendation	Action
	Value for money	
32	<p>The Council should, within three months:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> benchmark its Housing Energy Project (HEP) programme costs; review its budgetary management framework to ensure that expenditure is controlled and managed effectively; renegotiate its repairs contract on an interim basis, ensuring that value for money is obtained in the following key areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> specialist works such as asbestos removal; sub-contracted works; use of draw down contracts for one-off replacement of appliances; tendering of larger scale void works where delay costs will not outweigh savings; avoiding excessive uplifts on emergency and urgent works; packaging non-urgent repair works to carry them out as planned maintenance; and obtaining industry standard discounts on void repairs and removing uplifts for void works carried out after tenancy develop a plan for the procurement of repairs and maintenance using Egan-based principles within 18 months to two years; develop a clear strategy with the in-house provider to improve value for money through continuous improvement in the interim period until such time as Egan-based partnering arrangements are in place; and demonstrate that the 2004/05 capital programme has been procured by engaging with the market in an open and transparent way, with an equitable basis for selection and packaging. 	Partly completed
33	<p>The Council should, within six months, review central services recharges and the commissioning costs of procurement and contract management to ensure value for money and reduce overhead costs.</p>	Not completed

58 Repairs and Maintenance Re-Inspection Report | Appendix 4 – Performance against previous inspection's recommendations

Para	Recommendation	Action
	General	
34	The Council should address these recommendations and all the weaknesses highlighted in the body of this report.	Partly completed
35	The Council should report the findings and recommendations of this report immediately to councillors, the Government Monitoring Board, HURAT and independent tenant organisations and incorporate these recommendations into its service improvement plan.	Completed