

Housing Management Services

London Borough of Lambeth

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

Summary

- 1** The London Borough of Lambeth is the largest of the inner-London boroughs and the fifth most densely populated authority in the country. The population of 268,500¹ is forecast to continue to rise over the coming years. The borough has a diverse community, with 38 per cent of the population from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.
- 2** The borough contains extremes of prosperity and deprivation and is ranked as the 23rd most deprived of the 354 English local authorities².
- 3** Lambeth has a young age profile, with 45 per cent of the population aged between 20 and 40 and only 9 per cent aged over 65 compared to 18.5 per cent nationally³.
- 4** The Council comprises 63 councillors. Labour is the largest party with 29 seats, but the Council has been controlled by a joint Liberal Democrat (27 seats) and Conservative (7 seats) administration since May 2002. A leader and executive model governs the business of the Council.
- 5** The Council was assessed as a two-star improving well authority by the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment in December 2005. Housing services were rated as two stars out of a possible four stars for this assessment.
- 6** The Housing Management Inspection covered tenancy and estate management, income management, resident involvement, and meeting the Decent Homes Standard. The housing management service is estimated to cost £29 million for 2005/06.

¹ Office of National Statistics (ONS); mid-year estimates 2003.

² ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2004: Average Ward Score.

³ Census 2001.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed London Borough of Lambeth as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart⁴

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

Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is judged to be fair because it has the following strengths.
- Longer opening hours than most authorities. The housing management service is available for 12 hours a day and six hours at weekends, through a central service centre. Area offices are also open on Saturday mornings.
 - The service received through the service centre and area offices is informative and staff are welcoming and polite.
 - Customers are able to make a complaint easily and receive a reasonable response to the complaint.
 - A set of service standards has been developed in consultation with residents and include fairly challenging and realistic standards and targets.
 - There is a well established process for consulting residents about the service provided – both through formal and structured processes but also increasingly through customer feedback.

⁴ 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.

- Comprehensive policies and practices to promote race equality and structures to combat institutional racism. Staff are well informed about cultural issues.
 - Customers are able to receive information in a format suitable for them. This is well publicised and staff are knowledgeable about obtaining this service, though it is provided on demand rather than proactively.
 - Lambeth is taking a proactive multi-agency approach to tackling anti-social behaviour, which includes some preventative measures. This reflects the council's priority for improving community safety. Serious cases are being managed well.
 - There are measures in place to prevent and tackle unauthorised occupation and squatting of properties.
 - Estates in general are well managed, clean and graffiti free, with dumped rubbish and cars being dealt with effectively.
 - A high proportion of tenants and leaseholders have opportunities for influencing the management and decision making for their homes, and longstanding formal involvement arrangements. For example 20 per cent of residents live in properties managed by a Tenants' Management Organisation.
 - Tenants have access to debt advice through Council funded voluntary sector agencies across the borough that provide independent advice and support for welfare benefits.
- 9 However, there are also the following weaknesses.
- The service is not as prompt as it should be and Lambeth is failing to meet targets for speed of response, and this relates to the telephone service as well as to correspondence and complaints.
 - Awareness of disability issues is lower than ethnicity awareness amongst staff, and for example the council has still not ensured reasonable access for its customers with disabilities - it has not complied with the Disability Discrimination Act, which came into force in October 2004.
 - There is limited information about the needs of its customers, which affects its ability to plan services required and proactively provide a tailored service, which particularly affects its most vulnerable residents.
 - Void re-let performance is not meeting targets set and is still below the average for London authorities. The performance for sheltered housing voids is poor at 72 days, and is well above the target set of 35 days.
 - The lettable standard is as basic standard which is not being consistently applied.
 - Resident involvement opportunities which are less formal and involve a wider range of residents are now being used, but some of these are at an early stage, and relatively under-developed.

8 Housing Management Services | Summary

- Although rent collection performance has improved it is still in the bottom quartile compared with London authorities. The approach to the recovery of rent arrears is not currently robust and consistently complying with procedures across the service, and there is a considerable backlog of rent arrears cases waiting to go to court (850).
- There is also ineffective debt collection for major (S20) works carried out on behalf of leaseholders.
- There is limited analysis of housing management costs or assessment of the value for money of services. Housing management costs are higher than average at £15.12 per week per dwelling, and there is no evidence to show this is the result of providing better services than other authorities.

10 The service is considered to have promising prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.

- There is clear track record of improvement in service resulting from the reframing project, which for example has resulted in longer opening hours and a more consistent service. Increased specialist resources are beginning to help tackle issues like anti-social behaviour and improve leasehold management.
- There are some significant improvements in performance for key indicators, though some of this some from a very low base - for example rent collection, service charge collection and void re-lets have all improved as well as the response times for correspondence and complaints.
- Lambeth Housing Service has recently won a number of awards and has been accredited for by 'Investors in People'.
- Plans are based on residents' as well as government priorities, and there is a clear vision for improving the service which focuses on customer service, meeting the decent homes standard and community safety.
- Plans contain action plans with clear and SMART targets and milestones. Progress against plans is regularly monitored through update reports to management teams.
- Officers and members are working in partnership, with good communications about key decisions. There has recently been strong leadership from members in housing and a clear vision for where the service is going.
- There is a strong corporate focus on performance management – based on a performance framework - and evidence of monitoring performance at all levels.
- Most targets set for the service are realistic but challenging.
- Staff morale across the service is high, in spite of the major changes that have taken place over the past two years.

- Human resource practices fully support the needs of the service through training and development, identified through staff appraisals, and in response to changes in legislation and regulation, including diversity, and customer care.

11 Though there are also some weaknesses.

- Learning from other providers is limited and is not systematically assessed and applied. This includes performance benchmarking, which is not well developed and does not include benchmarking of costs.
- Monitoring arrangements have some weaknesses. This includes the monitoring of TMOs has weaknesses which is not helped by the use of a variety of management agreements.
- IT systems are not as efficient as they should be in a number of areas and this is having an impact on service delivery and performance. A new fully integrated IT system is planned for July 2006;

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs⁵ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the service provided to disabled and vulnerable customers.

- *Ensure plans for complying with Disability Discrimination Act requirements are delivered promptly.*
- *Gather information relating to the needs of vulnerable and disabled tenants so they can be added to the new computer system.*
- *Introduce systems for monitoring speed of responding to requests for aids and adaptations, and use these to follow up where there are delays.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- compliance with legal requirements; and
- improved planning and proactive approach to delivery of services for vulnerable people.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve performance in key areas by:

- *comparing performance, costs and approaches to service delivery in more detail and with a broader range of providers. Use existing arrangements more effectively and explore other options and arrangements for comparison;*
- *giving additional and appropriate support to Tenant Management Organisations, including performance management arrangements; and*
- *enhancing void monitoring arrangements.*

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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- information that will help highlight areas of poor performance;
- alternative options for delivering the service in a more cost effective way; and
- improvements to customer service.

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

<i>Recommendation</i>
<p><i>R3 Provide better value for money in delivery of services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>by re-considering de-pooling of tenants' service charges, and providing tenants with detailed information about benefits to tenants, including additional subsidy to the HRA; and</i> • <i>considering the use of DIY possession, after examining potential costs, and benefits.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- efficiency savings.

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

<i>Recommendation</i>
<p><i>R4 Improve customer service for residents by ensuring:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>telephones are answered promptly;</i> • <i>the time customers are kept waiting for an answer to an enquiry is reduced; and</i> • <i>correspondence and complaints are responded to in target times.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction; and
- a more effective service.

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

Recommendation

R5 Provide clear objectives for resident involvement activities by:

- *reviewing the tenants' involvement compacts and reflecting changes in practice, and including less formal approaches that will include a wider base of residents; and*
- *introduce clearer objectives and terms of reference for forums and events for consulting residents, so residents know what decisions they are able to make.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- more effective resident involvement.

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

Recommendation

R6 Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in this report.

- 13 We would like to thank the staff of London Borough of Lambeth who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 28 November to 7 December 2005.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 14 The London Borough of Lambeth is the largest of the inner-London boroughs. It is the fifth most densely populated authority in the country, with a population of 268,500⁶ which is forecast to continue to rise over the coming years.
- 15 It is part of the south west London sub-region along with Croydon, Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton and Wandsworth.
- 16 The borough has a very diverse community, with 38 per cent from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities – the seventh highest nationally⁷; the largest non-white groups being Black Caribbean (12.1 per cent of the population) and Black African (11.6 per cent). Approximately 132 languages are spoken in the borough, with Yoruba and Portuguese the most common among students after English⁸.
- 17 The borough contains extremes of prosperity and deprivation. The borough is ranked as the 23rd most deprived of the 354 English local authorities⁹, with three wards in the 10 per cent most deprived nationally. Unemployment, as measured by the claimant count, stood at 5.1 per cent in September 2005, above the London average of 3.4 per cent, and the national average of 2.3 per cent¹⁰.
- 18 Lambeth has a young age profile, with 45 per cent of the population aged between 20 and 40 (compared to 28 per cent nationally) and only nine per cent aged over 65 (compared to 18.5 per cent nationally)¹¹.
- 19 Despite this relatively young age profile, Census figures show that the number of Lambeth residents with a long-term limiting illness rose from 12 per cent in 1991 to 14 per cent in 2001, close to the London average of 15 per cent¹².
- 20 Lambeth has a low level of home ownership (36 per cent, compared to 68 per cent nationally) but has levels of social housing (42 per cent) and private rented housing (18 per cent) that are double the national averages¹³.

⁶ Office of National Statistics (ONS); mid-year estimates 2003.

⁷ Census 2001 (ONS).

⁸ Lambeth Pupil Survey, 2003.

⁹ ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2004: Average Ward Score.

¹⁰ Claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), NOMIS, September 2005.

¹¹ Census 2001.

¹² Census 2001.

¹³ Census 2001. Averages shown are for England.

The Council

- 21 The Council comprises 63 councillors. Labour is the largest party with 29 seats, but the Council has been controlled by a joint Liberal Democrat (27 seats) and Conservative (7 seats) administration since May 2002. A leader and executive model governs the business of the Council. There is an overview and scrutiny committee with four cross-cutting sub-committees, including the Housing and Adult Social Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee. There are also five local area committees.
- 22 The Council's net revenue budget for the year 2005/06 is £411 million, compared to £382 million in 2004/05. The adult social services budget in 2005/06 is £122 million, compared to £116 million in 2004/05.
- 23 The Council employs just under 4,000 staff, excluding school staff. There are seven departments within the Council, including a new 'Adults and Community Services' department which includes the Supporting People team.
- 24 The Council was assessed as a 'poor' authority by the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in December 2002 and again in 2003. This score was upgraded to 'weak' in December 2004, and to improving well in 2005.
- 25 The borough's Housing Strategy and its Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan have both been rated as 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for London (GOL).
- 26 The Council and the Local Strategic Partnership ('Lambeth First') have agreed a Community Strategy 2004-2015 with seven themes. These are:
 - creating a cleaner and greener environment;
 - making safer communities;
 - investing in children and young people;
 - better homes and sustainable communities;
 - encouraging enterprise, employment skills and culture;
 - supporting healthy communities; and
 - delivering the strategy for our customers.
- 27 The 'Lambeth Improvement Plan' sets out the Council's plans for the next three years to 2008. It details what the Council will do to deliver its parts of the Community Strategy and the key priorities of the Council. This plan replaces the CPA Recovery Plan.

The service

- 28 The housing management service is one of three divisions within the housing directorate with 760 staff, 128 of whom are property services staff. The 2005-06 budget for housing management services is £29 million excluding repairs and maintenance.

- 29 A reframing project reviewed the delivery of services and implemented a completely new staffing structure, which was rolled out over the year from April 2004. The structure is now in place and delivered as follows.
- A telephone-based service delivered from within the Lambeth Service Centre.
 - A face-to-face reception service delivered primarily through five area offices, one of which is now a cross-functional Joint Service Centre (delivering health and other council and agency services).
 - The five Area offices also deliver housing management services, through teams specialising in tenancy, rent, nuisance and anti-social behaviour, leasehold management, and resident involvement.
 - Estate-based services delivered by Local Service teams organised into patches of approximately 1,000 properties, delivering caretaking services and managing estate services contracts.
 - Specialist services delivered by central sections within housing services, including resident involvement, home ownership.
- 30 The managed housing stock is currently at 40,000. A large proportion of this (20 per cent) is managed by 15 tenant management organisations (TMOs), and this is monitored and supported by a central section within the housing management division.
- 31 Lambeth has seen the continued growth of right to buy sales, despite reductions in discount. Approximately a quarter of its housing is now in leasehold ownership, and this is estimated to grow to 30 per cent by 2006. The number of leaseholders at 31 March 2005 was 10,500, compared to 6,735 in 2002 and 2,444 in 1991.
- 32 A resident participation and consultation structure is in place which includes a Tenants Council, Leaseholder Council, five area committees for local decisions, 110 Tenants and Residents Associations - with 65 per cent coverage, and a Service Improvement Forum.
- 33 Lambeth Housing stock consists (as of April 2005) of 24,479 purpose-built flats, 4,548 houses and 1,300 sheltered flats.
- 34 A Stock Option Appraisal was approved by the ODPM in March 2005, which identifies a £49 million funding gap. This was based on the findings of a Housing Investment Commission set up in 2002, and which agreed a strategy of 'positive retention'. A mixed economy approach makes use of efficiency savings from the reframing project and also will involve the setting up of a partial ALMO from eight of the TMOs (4,288 properties), a partial stock transfer, the disposal of £27 million of commercial assets and a PFI for part of the borough. The proposed ALMO bid is for £32 million.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 35** Lambeth has key themes in the community strategy that relate to housing services. The housing service has incorporated these into its plans as follows.
- Making safer communities – aiming to reduce anti-social behaviour and domestic violence.
 - Delivering the strategy to customers - improving customer service and access, involving customers, and through partnership working.
 - Creating a cleaner and greener environment - delivering £6 million of estate improvements from the Housing Opportunities Fund (2005-06), and through caretaking and recycling.
 - Creating Better homes and sustainable communities – improving council housing through meeting the government's decent homes standard.
 - Investing in Young People - the Housing Opportunities Fund is being used for play and sports equipment.
- 36** In addition, the housing service has stated these priorities within its Housing Strategy:
- value for money;
 - service enhancement for customers through continuous improvement;
 - investment in homes and regenerating communities;
 - increase in supply of affordable housing; and
 - working across boundaries to deliver joined up services for the communities in Lambeth.
- 37** A major project was carried out during 2004/05, which is known as the reframing project. The objects of the project were:
- improved access to services;
 - a more seamless customer service;
 - local service delivery;
 - improved delivery of specialist services – for example, leasehold management and tackling anti-social behaviour;
 - cultural change - based on a new customer service ethos;
 - to provide a consistent service; and
 - better value for money.

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

Access and customer care

- 38** There are clear strengths which outweigh weaknesses in this service. The service is customer focused and based on a corporate strategy integrated into the objectives of the reframing project. Customers have been consulted well about these changes. Service standards are reasonably challenging and set a framework for delivering the service. There are a range of options to contact Lambeth Housing Service (LHS) and services are available for considerably more than standard office hours. However, there are still delays with the speed of response either when telephoning or writing to LHS, and this varies considerably between offices and teams, making it an inconsistent service. Customers are frequently left waiting while their query is dealt with. The quality of responses to complaints is good, but the speed of dealing with them is again a problem.
- 39** A suite of service standards have been developed by Lambeth Housing Service (LHS) in consultation with residents and which include fairly challenging and realistic standards and targets. Standards set cover customer care, resident involvement, paying rent and estate management. For example, the customer care standard includes responding to telephone messages by the next day, answering telephones within five rings and answering correspondence within ten days. It also covers provision of information in suitable formats and how customers will be treated when they telephone or visit an office. These help to make clear the standard that residents can expect.
- 40** There is now one point of contact for all customers through a telephone service which is available 12 hours a day on weekdays and six hours at weekends. The service centre is now dealing with 70 per cent of all enquiries - between April and November 2005 the service centre received over 150,000 enquiries and 79 per cent of these were dealt with at first contact. There is a Freephone service from area housing offices and sheltered housing schemes; and dedicated lines for leaseholders and for vulnerable tenants. There are also weekly surgeries with housing officers and the local service team managers (though some of these have ceased due to lack of demand). Tenants can also contact the area offices and their housing officer direct if they wish to do so, and are provided with the mobile numbers for local service team managers for estate management issues. There is therefore a range of ways for residents to access the service, making it convenient for customers.
- 41** The housing service is relatively easy to contact, and the service provided is polite and friendly. Recent survey information carried out by the ALG¹⁴ shows that satisfaction by council tenants about the ease of contacting Lambeth by telephone is scoring a little better than average in comparison with other authorities. It is scoring significantly better than other authorities in the quality of the service received – 81 per cent of tenants thinking that staff are friendly and polite, compared to an average of 72 per cent for inner London authorities.

¹⁴ Association of London Government

However, LHS performed a little below average (76 per cent) compared to other local authorities (80 per cent average) in a series of mystery shopping exercises which rated the quality of service both by telephone and in area offices. Our own observations confirmed that staff are helpful and focused on resolving enquiries which will help customers receive a good service.

- 42 However, there is room for improvement in two areas – the time it takes to get through on the telephone to the service centre and the time taken for service centre staff to deal with some enquiries. Telephone response performance for the service centre has varied over the year. Although it exceeded the target (answering 70 per cent of calls in 20 seconds) in October (85 per cent), it only achieved 45 per cent in September, and 67 per cent in August. Performance at area offices is better but variable between offices (38 to 93 per cent for August), though most calls are now to the service centre. However, recent data¹⁵ shows the average waiting time to get through to the service centre is 27 seconds, which is higher than the target time, but on average is not an unacceptable wait for customers.
- 43 Some callers also have to wait for a significant amount of time once they get through to the service centre before their query is resolved. One issue is the lack of integration of the computer system. This makes it slow to navigate around, which is a built-in delay in dealing with enquiries, especially as rent accounts are checked for each call. We also observed staff spend some time trying hard to find the answer for customers but unable to do so, because no one was able to provide information in the relevant section. This can lead to unacceptable delays for customers and several residents spoken to referred to this. LHS is not aware of the impact of these delays, because the available data shows reasonable average times for calls. Also, calls where customers are left waiting are recorded as dealt with at the first point of contact, and as a positive aspect of the service, but this is not capturing the issue of unnecessary length of some calls.
- 44 LHS is working to improve the information available to its service centre staff. The service centre now has specialist teams which deal with specific services - eg repairs and rent queries. This is allowing staff to become more knowledgeable and therefore more likely to be able to deal with calls at the first point of contact. However, this is a very recent development and is still bedding in. Training is also in place, and staff are required to complete core training for all service centre staff. Information about residents is easy to locate, as all documents are scanned, and available to all relevant staff. For example the entire tenancy file is on the system, and so is all correspondence and a record of all contact made by customers. This helps staff to answer customer enquiries and to co-ordinate the delivery of the service from several offices.
- 45 The service centre experiences peaks and troughs in the volume of calls, and although some of the quieter times are used for training and team meetings, there are also times when staff are waiting for calls. Recently staff have started to use these times for additional cold calling or for obtaining customer feedback, though this could be developed further.

¹⁵ Analysis of Housing service centre telephone data for period 10 October to 5 December 2005.

- 46 Area housing offices are well located and convenient for residents and present an attractive environment. Although facilities vary a little between offices, they all provide private interview rooms with IT and telephone access, and queuing systems are in place. The reception service is managed and resourced centrally through the service centre which makes it easier to provide cover for staff absence. Although the service is generally good, with polite, smart and knowledgeable staff, residents mentioned a few incidents where staff have been impolite and unhelpful.
- 47 Local surgeries have been offered for all areas, but some have ceased after consultation with residents because of low demand. However, these sessions have not been supported by the necessary systems and tools that are required to make the surgery effective. Residents cited examples of staff being without IT access and sometimes without telephone contact, which has deterred them using the surgeries again.
- 48 There is a considerable amount of information for residents though some is very detailed and some is now out-of-date. The handbooks for tenants and leaseholders and the compact are being revised with the draft of the new leaseholder handbook approved by Leaseholders' council. There are also a range of other leaflets which provide useful information, as well as performance and contact information displayed on estate noticeboards. There is plenty of information in local offices about housing services though limited information about external services and performance data available in local offices.
- 49 The council's website also provides clear and useful information, which has been 'Crystal Marked' to help ensure it is easy to understand. Electronic services are developing and so far include on-line reporting on repairs and enquiries about rent accounts. Lambeth was the first authority to make use of the government gateway, which is an important part of the government's strategy to allow people to communicate with the government through a single point of entry. Basic information about all council services is provided in ten community languages. However, this has not been updated for some time, and still refers, for example to neighbourhood offices.
- 50 A corporate complaints policy provides a good framework for dealing with complaints that sets standards for the speed of response and arrangements for complaints handling. This is well publicised and provides the basis for a consistent approach across the authority. It includes the principle that complaints do not need to be made only in writing and that the system would be easy to access. Response targets are in line with the sector, and the overall aim is to deal with complaints through all stages within eight weeks. The quality of responses is generally good, and gives a helpful response to the enquiry. Complainants are provided with a customer satisfaction slip which provides an opportunity to comment on complaints handling. However, few of these are returned, and they have not been analysed. LHS is missing the opportunity to learn from its complaints.

- 51** Complaints are not being responded to within the target timescales, though are being acknowledged within the two day target. Performance has steadily improved, and in October, 86 per cent of stage one and 80 per cent of stage 2 complaints were answered on time. Though this is still not meeting the target of 90 per cent, it is a considerable improvement over past performance (it was 68 per cent the year before). There is also considerable variation between sections and areas, making it an inconsistent service. For example, leaseholder complaints have achieved target response times in 100 per cent of cases, and Clapham and Stockwell area office only 58 per cent.
- 52** LHS is also slow to deal with general correspondence. It is failing to meet targets by a significant margin and performance varies considerably between parts of the service. The latest figures for July 2005 show that only 77 per cent of letters are responded to within the standard of ten days, against a target of 90 per cent, although this was a considerable improvement on 55 per cent in April. The best performers (home ownership and TMOs) met the targets, whilst Streatham and Norwood only achieved around 50 per cent within target times. Again, this is not providing a good or consistent service for tenants. There is an in-built delay of one to two days from scanning all incoming mail for the electronic document management system, and urgent correspondence is not given priority in this process. This is being considered for outsourcing to improve speed and cost.
- 53** Resident consultation about the service has been thorough. This has been mainly through the formal resident involvement structures, but also through focus groups and surveys. This has been particularly evident for the reframing exercise when residents were able to exert influence over service provision in a number of ways. This included the opening hours of the service centre and area offices, and the approach to the service centre (for example, the siting of the centre in the borough and not having an automated response system). Service standards were developed with a robust process for ensuring that stakeholders' views were taken into account - consultation with staff and with residents (both residents' groups and focus groups with uninformed residents), and an equality impact assessment. This will help to make the standards workable and based on what customers want from the service.
- 54** LHS is also measuring customer satisfaction, though this is quite recent with regard to some services. It is using sample surveys based on 'Status'¹⁶ methodology every two years for a sample of residents. An additional survey has been carried out since reframing, which was rolled out in line with the opening of area offices. Corporately, Lambeth is asking a proportion of residents for their views of the service and this can be analysed for council tenants' views. It is also part of a mystery shopping syndicate with 14 other authorities. However, although there is information about satisfaction with repairs and estate services, there is limited information about other services; for example, lettings, dealing with complaints and anti-social behaviour. This does not allow more detailed analysis in these service areas.

¹⁶ Status - methodology required by the government for surveys to measure customer satisfaction. It helps to make the results comparable between local authorities.

Diversity

- 55** LHS shows strengths in its approach to dealing with race issues and providing services to people from black and ethnic minority (BME) communities. Lambeth has taken a particularly robust approach to tackling institutional racism and has been successful in attracting a good representation of BME groups in its workforce. Staff are also very aware of race issues, and contractors have clear guidelines for ensuring cultural sensitivity in delivery of the service. There is also a range of communication formats available to customers. However, LHS has a less developed service for customers with disabilities and there are clear weaknesses in this. For example it has not yet ensured its offices are DDA¹⁷ compliant, and it is unable to monitor the time it takes for tenants to get aids and adaptations. There is a lack of knowledge about the needs of customers that has been systematically gathered and recorded and a lack of monitoring of services, which affects planning and delivery of service to some vulnerable residents.
- 56** There is a well established framework for planning, delivering and monitoring diversity issues, which helps to ensure all customers receive the service they need, though this is more focused on race issues. Lambeth has clear and comprehensive policies on equality, diversity and race, although has only recently developed a disability policy. There are consistent messages issued across the organisation about diversity and a high level of awareness of ethnicity in particular. Management of diversity information is established and there are structures in place that provide constructive challenge from a range of stakeholders The Tulse Hill project, commissioned by the Commission for Racial Equality and the Home Office has resulted in residents forming a Diversity Action Group, with a remit to champion diversity as well as produce new performance indicators for measuring diversity performance. A black and minority ethnic (BME) action plan is in place which is helping to address issues relating to dissatisfaction with the service from BME communities.
- 57** LHS is helping to make its staff aware of diversity issues through its commitment to training in this area. All staff are required to attend basic training in equality and diversity issues. There are also more complex courses, for example on equality impact assessments to help ensure this process works well. Staff are also made aware of issues through staff bulletins and for example findings of equality impact assessments are shared with staff.
- 58** Contractors are required to provide a service that takes into account the diverse needs of customers. This is contained within the contract and is a standing item in contract monitoring meetings. For example, contractors have access to language line and are required to provide shoes coverings for Muslim households. Lambeth are able to supply female operatives if this is required, for example for women's refuges. Contractors are also expected to report back any vulnerability issues to the service centre, so that it can be added to the customer contact system, which will help improve future service.

¹⁷ DDA - Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

- 59** Lambeth takes race issues seriously and has put in place a number of structures to combat institutional racism. A Race Scrutiny Commission was set up to explore issues relating to racism in policing and the council's own workforce. Its report indicates positive progress in setting up a framework and monitoring system, and a desire to be transparent in dealing with race issues. Housing has achieved Level three against the Commission for Racial Equality's guidelines, and is committed to securing 'level four', which will put it ahead of most housing organisations. Diversity impact assessments provide a robust challenge to service delivery and are increasingly applied to strategies and plans to improve the service. These assessments involve a panel with representation from BME and voluntary sector groups, which can make recommendations for change. For example, the housing strategy was amended to include more focus on diversity after the panel had considered it. A Housing Equality Board has been set up though has only met twice. This is a forum to discuss ideas to promote equality of opportunity. This is helping to ensure that the way services are delivered is sensitive to the needs of people from BME backgrounds.
- 60** Staff are more aware of ethnicity than disability issues than and the organisational capacity to engage effectively with this service user group is limited. A series of disability briefings were delivered to staff in November 2005 in order to increase awareness. This is very recent and something that should have already been embedded.
- 61** Services for customers with disabilities are not meeting good practice in meeting legislative requirements for access to the service. Lambeth has been slow to ensure that housing offices comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which requires organisations to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people in the way they provide their services. This should have been completed by October 2004. Lambeth housing service reported on an audit of its area offices in January 2005, and although a plan is in place, work will not be completed till June 2006. Shortfalls include doors that are difficult to open, interview rooms with doors too narrow for wheelchair users, a lack of suitable parking and no loop system for hearing aid users. This is therefore not giving disabled customers good or equal access to services.
- 62** LHS has made good progress in ensuring its staffing profile is representative of the ethnicity of the community it serves. The number of BME staff has increased from 49 per cent to 55 per cent and the number of BME managers has increased from 38 per cent to 51 per cent, which represents a higher proportion than the local population. A PATH18 scheme and a graduate training scheme are in place, with six places available for each, which will help encourage opportunities for BME staff career development. However, not fully complying with Disability discrimination act means they are unable to offer employment to people who use wheelchairs. The progress with gender is also not so apparent, as only 35 per cent of the top 5 per cent of earners are women, compared to a median average of 39 per cent for London authorities.

¹⁸ PATH - Positive Action in Housing - initiative to encourage people from BME background to work in housing, which provides training.

- 63** A range of communication formats is available for customers which is publicised and staff are knowledgeable about obtaining this service. Front line staff have been trained on language and customer care skills, some of which is accredited externally. A translation and communication protocol is in place making clear to staff how to access the service. LHS is routinely making use of Language Line and other translation and interpretation services. A selection of most used leaflets (for example how to contact the service centre order a repair), the handbook and newsletters are available in the most common languages (French, Portuguese, Spanish and Somali) as well as in large print, Braille and audio formats.
- 64** However, LHS has recorded little information about the needs of its customers, which affects its ability to plan services required and proactively provide a tailored service. There is no comprehensive database which captures the vulnerability issues for customers. The computer system has a basic facility for alerting staff to customers with a vulnerability, but this has focused more on protection for staff than providing an enhanced service to customers. The database for this is not fully populated and is inconsistently applied, so is not a useful tool for proactively providing a service tailored to customers' needs. Therefore, staff are not always aware of tenants' vulnerabilities when providing the service and information in a suitable format is not provided automatically but only on demand. There are plans to improve this with the introduction of the new IT system which can hold data on age, disability and communication requirements. However, although there are plans to capture this information from new tenants, plans are less clear to capture data from existing tenants.
- 65** LHS has no monitoring information readily available to check whether aids and adaptations are being supplied within a reasonable timeframe or whether housing support services are able to cope with demand. There is a record of aids and adaptations requested through the service centre, but as it does not record the date the tenant made the request, timescales cannot be monitored and the speed of the service assessed. The housing service is not routinely checking whether the services provided by social services are good enough in this respect for their tenants.
- 66** Resources are in place for supporting vulnerable residents, and reframing has increased these. Home visits are now available on request and are a structured part of a housing officer's work with time specifically allocated for this, which is monitored by managers. There is a direct line in the service centre for vulnerable tenants. Caretakers are part of a vulnerable person liaison scheme, and are undertaking small tasks for these residents, for example replacing light bulbs, moving domestic refuse to bins etc. Referrals can also be made to floating support services funded by Supporting People Grant, known as the SNAP team, which has been found to be an effective approach in a recent Audit Commission inspection. A pilot scheme in the Brixton area is offering additional intensive support to help sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness, through an external agency.

- 67 However, it is not clear if vulnerable residents are receiving the services they need. The inspection found a number of residents were concerned about the service provided to vulnerable residents, which is mainly due to the closure of neighbourhood offices. Although services are available LHS is not fully aware of its tenants needs, as already stated and for example no audit of this has been undertaken.
- 68 Lambeth has demonstrated it is aware of the need to involve a wide range of people in its resident involvement activities, has put in place a number of structures and resources to improve representation and is now demonstrating some success in securing feedback from a range of residents. For example, specialist staff and outreach projects have been set up to engage with Latin and Somali communities in the Stockwell area. Also, the Diversity Action Group has looked at how to engage more effectively with younger people with disabilities and has taken action to raise awareness amongst tenant and resident organisations about their own composition. Involvement groups, forums and the conference are well attended, and attract a fair cross-section of local residents. Tenants and residents' groups are required to provide evidence of monitoring the composition of their groups, which shows that the council is serious about ensuring that such groups are open to all local people.
- 69 Racial harassment is dealt with as part of the anti-social behaviour framework and the process is well embedded. We found staff have a good understanding of how to deal with cases and that trends are discussed at team and area forum level. Individual cases seen demonstrated that Lambeth is responding quickly and offering appropriate support, resources and advice.
- 70 Resources for domestic violence have been available at a corporate level for four years and this is in conjunction with the Lambeth Crime Prevention Trust. However, a policy for domestic violence has only recently been implemented within Housing Services, together with a training programme for front-line staff. Data shows that cases involving domestic violence which have led to applications for homelessness are now being recorded, but this approach is new and dating from July 2005. Cases are recorded and monitored through the anti-social behaviour logging system.

Resident involvement

- 71 There are more strengths than weaknesses in resident involvement, with well established structures and a feedback from less formal methods is being developed. However, the tenant compact is now outdated, has not been reviewed for some time and does not reflect the full range of approaches now taken. LHS has also not properly considered the impact of resident involvement and whether the resources spent are value for money. There is a lack of clarity about the role of resident groups and what decisions can be made by them. Lambeth has nevertheless involved its residents in making its major decisions and there is evidence of the impact they have has on this. Resident involvement is also well resourced and includes promotion of tenant management and a range of resident groups, which are representative and well attended.

- 72 A Tenant Participation Compact is in place, but has not been reviewed since it was introduced in 2000. The emphasis is on participation through properly constituted, elected Tenants and Residents Associations, and the range of opportunities to participate is limited. It also does not specify tenant involvement in determining priorities for capital and revenue spending. The compact does set annual targets for tenant satisfaction with participation arrangements, services, but an annual review of the Tenants Compact is not taking place. The latest ODPM guidance says that compacts should be reviewed at least every three years.
- 73 Formal arrangements for consultation and participation are well resourced and structured. This includes 67 tenants and residents' associations, five area forums, local Joint Service Forum, a Tenants Council, a Leaseholder Council, and leaseholder patch meetings. A high proportion of tenants and leaseholders have opportunities for influencing the management and decision making for their homes. Nearly 60 per cent of residents are either managed by a TMO (20 per cent) or have access to a registered residents' association. Lambeth has more tenant management organisations (TMOs) than any other London authority and as they manage almost one fifth of the total housing stock they are a significant feature. TMOs are well supported locally and new groups are encouraged to develop. A team of four staff in the Resident Involvement Team relate directly to specific TMOs and offer guidance and support where performance issues are identified. This is enabling some residents to have a high degree of input into the decisions about managing their homes.
- 74 Lambeth has actively involved residents in the main decisions for the service at a strategic level. For example the annual debates about rent increases, the reframing project and introduction of a service centre, changes to policies and service delivery. There are examples of residents' views which have been taken into account and this includes the decision to retain as much stock as possible within council control and management; a reduction in the rent increase last year; rejection of proposals to de-pool service charges; and decisions on local priorities for spending within the Housing Opportunities Fund by area forums. The leaseholders' Council has also worked with the council to gain cheaper insurance premiums and a repairs service for leaseholders.
- 75 The formal structures for participation are active and well established. The tenants' conference was well attended and well run in general. It was supported by over 300 residents with a positive attitude and plenty of plain speaking but with limited gathering of tenant views and preferences. The Leaseholder council is also well attended by both residents and officers and members and is covering issues of interest to leaseholders - ASB, cost of works and accuracy of service charges. Tenants' council and groups are also reasonably active and provide arenas for discussion of relevant issues.

- 76 However, resident involvement objectives are not always well focused nor is it clear where the authority lies for certain decisions made. Clear terms of reference are not in place for all resident groups, and some experienced residents are not always clear about the purpose of particular meetings. Although there is a lot of activity and resources dedicated to resident involvement, residents do not think that the council is always listening to them. There is evidence that resident representatives' requests for information sometimes have to be repeated before the information is made available to them.
- 77 Satisfaction with opportunities for involvement was not very high the last time this was tested (45 per cent of residents and 47 per cent of tenants – in 2004), though this was surveyed before reframing. The most recent Lambeth survey shows significant improvement in satisfaction with involving residents when making decisions (62 per cent compared to 55 per cent in 2003) though this is for the council as a whole rather than for housing services.
- 78 Lambeth has demonstrated a commitment to improve satisfaction ratings for BME residents with opportunities for participation. There are 23 specific targets contained within the BME Resident Involvement Action Plan (June 2005) focused on improving this. This represents a significant range of techniques that should result in higher levels of satisfaction and shows the Council's commitment to addressing the issue.
- 79 Opportunities which are less formal and involve a wider range of residents are now being used, but some of these are at an early stage, and relatively under-developed. This includes enabling individual residents to influence the shape and performance of Lambeth's housing services through a number of panels, focus groups and consultation meetings as well as through the more traditional structures for Resident involvement. However, Lambeth is still largely reliant on residents who are committed to the formal structures for participation. For example the Panels set up to focus on finance, repairs etc are made up of residents who are nominated through Area Forums of the Tenant Council, rather than being open to any interested individuals. Progress in involving individuals without requiring them to commit to a group has been quite slow.
- 80 There is limited publicity to attract new tenants into tenants' groups. There is information in the tenants' handbook. However, the sign-up and the follow-up visits are not used as an opportunity to give tenants information about the opportunities for involvement. Also, service standards do not encourage residents to get involved, by including contact details, giving details of expenses that would be covered indication of how much time you would have to give, or an indication of covering expenses or not. The leaflet relies on the reader telephoning their Resident Participation Officer (not named) to attract new active participants. LHS is missing opportunities to publicise and involve more residents.
- 81 Training for residents is well resourced but tend to focus on personal development to improve employment opportunities, rather than building capacity for resident involvement. LB Lambeth works in partnership with Lambeth College to provide an annual programme of training designed for residents, and is providing £30,000 per year resources for this.

The programme offers a wide range of courses to help tenants to become skilled and confident. This is positive in terms of community development, but fewer resources are used for encouraging greater capacity for resident involvement. However, there were some courses which related to housing issues and performance management.

Tenancy and estate management

- 82 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area as a whole though some significant weaknesses in the management of voids. Tenancies are generally well managed and this is now more focused since reframing, as tenancy officers have more time to spend on tenancy and estate issues. Unauthorised occupancy and squatting for example are now being robustly handled. In general, new tenants receive a good and supportive service but could benefit from some more information. Lambeth has made significant efforts to tackle anti-social behaviour reflecting the priority this has been given. There is evidence of good case management and action being taken as well as preventative and multi-agency solutions in place. Estates are mostly well managed, clean and graffiti free, though there are some inconsistencies in provision. Voids, however, are still taking longer to re-let than in other authorities and a robust process for identifying reasons for this has not yet rolled out. Lettable standards are basic and new tenants are not given information about these.

Tenancy management

- 83 The reframing project has led to a more specialised service and a clear focus for housing officers dealing with tenancy issues. Officers' time is allocated to specific tasks, for example a proportion of time is required to be spent on home visits, estate inspections and local surgeries. This helps to ensure that priority is given to the issues residents have identified as important – a local service focusing on the quality of estates and providing the main contact for housing management and support services. Staff are knowledgeable on a range of housing management topics, and have access to information on procedures and service standards, which helps them to be clear about the service expected from them.
- 84 There is a lack of clear information about the status and purpose of introductory tenancies. The current tenancy agreement combines both introductory and the secure tenancy agreements; it is very brief and does not explain the difference between the two tenures. It is also not well explained in the tenants' handbook, so this could be confusing for new tenants. There are also no clear monitoring arrangements for introductory tenancies which could result in tenancies automatically becoming secure. This could be making the use of introductory tenancies ineffective in tackling anti-social behaviour.
- 85 Lambeth is providing a supportive service for new tenants which includes a thorough sign up procedure and follow up visits after six weeks. Although recently introduced, these are now effectively monitored and being used to check a range of issues including support needs for vulnerable tenants and rent payments.

LHS has also introduced an innovative approach to providing information for new tenants, which aims to influence tenants' attitudes and promote sustainable tenancies. It provides information about the rights and responsibilities of being a tenant, and some of the services on offer, for example recycling. These began in 2004 with a series of courses for people moving on from temporary and into permanent accommodation. From September 2005 this has been on offer to all new tenants in a shorter more general format. This has been run by an external agency and new tenants are encouraged to attend short evening or daytime sessions and are given a £10 voucher for attendance. The first of these achieved a 40 per cent turn out, and courses are appreciated by those attending, as 96 per cent found the information useful. This is positive practice, as it is helping to ensure that new tenants are aware of their responsibilities and accepted standards of behaviour.

- 86 There are, however, also weaknesses for the service for new tenants. There is limited information about the standard provided for the condition of properties being let and the policy for decorations is not clear for vulnerable residents. We also spoke to new tenants who had experienced delays in receiving their decorations allowance. The service has not been checked by asking new tenants for their views. Though this is proposed to be introduced through the follow up visit, this may not provide a full picture if tenants are required to give housing officers their views.
- 87 There is now a range of measures in place to prevent and tackle unauthorised occupation and squatting of properties. A housing investigations team is in place with a specific remit to investigate housing tenancy and other fraud issues, and in 2004/05 investigated 191 potential cases of unauthorised occupation or tenancy misuse. The team supplies area based staff with monthly lists of tenancies to check. Lambeth is also actively participating in the National Fraud Initiative which will help uncover fraud. A programme of tenancy audits has been put in place and commenced in December 2005, which will involve 10 per cent of tenancies being checked each year. Performance indicators for squatting and unauthorised occupation were introduced from April 2005 and are reported monthly to the management teams. This now adds up to a robust approach being taken to a long standing historical problem, and there is evidence of determined efforts to regain occupancy.

Enforcing tenancy conditions and dealing with anti-social behaviour

- 88 Community safety is one of Lambeth's key priorities in its Community Strategy and tackling anti-social behaviour is similarly given high priority in the Housing Service performance plan. There are clear and comprehensive policies and procedures, which were developed with resident input and published in accordance with the government's requirements. This provides good guidance for staff in tackling issues.

- 89 Residents are provided with clear information about the service provided and who to contact if they experience a problem. Service standards include targets for responding to issues and a commitment to keep complainants informed about the case progress. A leaflet provides additional information on services provided by Housing, other council services like the community safety team and noise control, and the independent mediation service.
- 90 Lambeth is taking a proactive approach by designing out crime on its estates and this is an important part of discussions with local residents on additional work for meeting the Decent Homes Standard. It has also increased resources to deal with anti-social behaviour (ASB) as part of reframing, and there is now a central anti-nuisance team within Housing Services and specialist officers (NASBOs) for each area who deal with the most complex cases and are responsible for logging and monitoring incidents in their area. Additional and specialist resources have enabled a stronger focus on prevention and case management. Around 65 per cent of NASBO time is spent on prevention work.
- 91 The Housing service is working well with other departments and agencies to prevent and tackle problems occurring. For example, a comprehensive Crack House protocol has been in place between LBL and the Metropolitan Police since November 2002. It aims to close down crack houses quickly as well as securing convictions and supporting vulnerable tenants, and has been successful in reducing the incidence of premises being used as Crack Houses (115 have been closed down since 2002). Multi-agency case conferences determine the use of Anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). Officers are in regular contact with the local police and the police also attend the resident forums. This helps tackle local problems by ensuring the full range of resources is being used effectively.
- 92 Appropriate action is being taken to deal with serious cases of nuisance and ASB, and Lambeth is using the full range of remedies available. For example, since 2004 it has initiated 56 ABCs, 2 ASBOs, 6 injunctions, 27 notices seeking possession, and 6 evictions. In the last three years Lambeth has used more than 100 ABCs and 80 per cent of these have been successful in stopping the nuisance. Two Good Neighbour Agreements have been introduced in areas where there was a trend of noise nuisance complaints and these are being promoted elsewhere as a preventative measure. These are reported to have been successful by both residents and officers, though the impact has not been formally measured. Good use is made of mediation both internally and through referral to external professional services including 43 recent referrals to mental health services and 29 referrals to other agencies since reframing.
- 93 It is also making use of a variety of community and youth development measures through external agencies. A community rangers' project in Streatham project involved working with school children and older residents which focused on citizenship, and led to significant improvements in graffiti removal (the subject of a CIH UK Housing Award 2005). In Tulse Hill, a project funded by the ODPM (one of only two in London) is training and paying young people to run focus groups on estates.

In North Lambeth, young people on the Paulet Road Estate have been involved in creating an outdoor leisure space. LBL also has a range of connections with national and local voluntary organisations that work with (mostly young) people. There are therefore a range of diversionary activities facilitated by the council which will help prevent anti-social behaviour occurring.

- 94 The management of individual cases is generally being handled well, with evidence of dealing with the support needs of both complainants and perpetrators of ASB, properly recording incidents and actions, and keeping residents informed. A larger number of cases are now being dealt with post reframing and the average number of cases per month has increased from 75 in 2003/04 to 95 in 2004/05 and to 119 in 2005. One issue, however, is that some cases are closed down by NASBOs without any reference to the complainant or other agencies, and this is not monitored by managers. This is not good customer care, and could result in some issues not being resolved before they are closed.
- 95 ASB cases are being monitored with a clear focus on targets for resident satisfaction and solutions to cases. Procedures are in place to ensure regular monitoring of cases, and this involves keeping the victim and perpetrators informed of progress. Progress is also reported to area panels, which include residents. Panel members told us they are kept well informed about developments, and are able to challenge progress. This approach is helping to ensure that cases are progressed and solutions found for tackling ASB.
- 96 There is, however, currently no evidence that residents are satisfied with the council's approach to tackling ASB. Complainants receive a survey form to feed back their views when cases are closed, but this is recent and results are not available. We found that residents are aware of the increased level of activity to deal with crack houses and other serious ASB issues, but a perception of limited action to deal with lower level nuisance cases. We also heard a few examples of insensitive handling of reporting nuisance and genuine fear of reprisals.

Estate management

- 97 Estates in general are well managed and there is evidence that the increased caretaking resources since reframing have had a positive impact on the local service provided. There are now 72 staff in estate teams responsible for patches of around 1,000 properties, compared to 25 locally based staff before reframing. The estate teams spend 80 per cent of their time out and about on their estates, and have more time to deal with issues that arise including vulnerable residents and ensuring that vandalism and graffiti are dealt with. This is helping to provide the service that residents have indicated is a priority for them.
- 98 Cleaning and grounds maintenance services are generally good and estates are clean and tidy with little evidence of graffiti or vandalism. Residents we spoke to are satisfied with these services and the council's surveys support this with significant improvements in satisfaction expressed for grounds maintenance and dealing with graffiti. Contractor monitoring is now well organised with central control, though with local input and regular contractor meetings.

Clear and useful guidance is now provided to area based staff for monitoring estate services contracts, including action that can be taken and developing good relationships with contractors. Joint working with other providers, for example environmental services, to deliver cleaning and grounds maintenance services are being explored but are not yet in place.

- 99** Communal repairs are generally being dealt with though there are small amounts of disrepair. Estate teams have piloted carrying out minor repairs and this is now being rolled out across all areas, which will provide a responsive and cost effective service. At the time of inspection budget restraints were being imposed due to an overspend of the responsive repairs budget, and repairs that cannot be dealt with by estate teams will be programmed. This is a more cost effective approach but may cause delay to repairs being carried out. One new service is that tenant representatives can now receive texts to inform them that communal repairs have been completed, which residents find useful.
- 100** However, we also found some inconsistencies in the service provided, resulting from interpretation of new policies and although this is being clarified it is still resulting in residents receiving varying levels of service. Some officers will undertake a higher specification of works than others or provide a more preventative approach to problems – for example, in dealing with pest control and external areas treatment. There is, however, more consistency since reframing.
- 101** What residents can expect in terms of services to their estate is well understood and publicised locally and through newsletters. Satisfaction data is now being collected for estate services alongside performance management data that is widely used and published. Notice boards are now present on all estates and include contact information, cleaning times and performance information.
- 102** Regular inspection of estates is contributing to health and safety for residents and helping to ensure equipment is kept in working order. There is a monthly programme of systematic checks by Local Service Team Managers that includes lifts, door security systems, boiler and tank rooms, and more frequent less formal inspections of estates by other estate staff which are generally done daily. There are also monthly estate walkabouts which include tenants' representatives, contractors, caretakers, and there is evidence that issues arising are being dealt with.
- 103** Although dumped rubbish is being dealt with promptly, refuse storage arrangements are currently affecting the appearance of estates and are a potential health issue. Paladin bins are left out as there is no room to store more than one bin, and these are sometimes left full and uncovered. This is unattractive and could attract vermin. There are no clear plans to resolve this problem, though pilots are in place for recycling which would have an impact.
- 104** Lambeth is being proactive in encouraging recycling, for example by attracting funding of £119,000 from DEFRA in partnership with Hammersmith and Fulham Council – the scheme which includes four estates initially is looking at providing financial incentives for recycling that can be used to improve community facilities.

- 105 Abandoned vehicles are being dealt with promptly and parking arrangements have been improved and are working effectively. A parking contract is in place to deal with clamping and removal of unauthorised and abandoned vehicles. Permits are issued in-house which saved £70,000 in set up costs. An audit of all garages, parking areas and other small sites has been undertaken to determine the best use to make of these. Local discussions are underway and it is estimated that these and other sites could generate £30m for investment in meeting the Decent Homes Standard.

Voids

- 106 Void re-let performance is not meeting targets set and is still below the average for London authorities. Average turnaround time of short routine lets has recently improved from 39.2 days for 2004/05 to 33.4 days for April to October 2005. Although this is still short of the target of 30 days it indicates an overall improvement.
- 107 Performance for sheltered housing voids is poor at 72 days, which is well above the (unrealistic) target set of 35 days. Lambeth has stated that the issue is low demand, but it is not clear whether this is any more of an issue for Lambeth than for other London authorities. The future of sheltered housing is being reviewed by a Sheltered Housing Commission in summer 2006, which will be based on a survey of sheltered housing carried out last February. This will include looking at the remodelling of schemes, providing extra care and whether to outsource this type of housing. Although this is positive, this is an issue that has already been tackled by other housing providers.
- 108 LHS is working to improve performance. A voids pilot in the Brixton and North Lambeth area was implemented in April 2005 with the objective of reducing void works costs and improving void turnaround times. It is now proposed to roll out the approach to other areas. The pilot has proved successful in decreasing the re-let time to 25 days for that area at July 2005, and improving the quality of repairs works. The pilot has also significantly reduced the cost of voids works from an average of £3686 per void in 2004-05 to £2,003 per void after the pilot.
- 109 Although overall voids performance is regularly monitored there are weaknesses in approach that could be affecting performance. There are no targets for the individual parts of the void process, or measurement of the various stages which would help identify any bottlenecks. Properties are not being inspected in the period between tenants giving notice and vacating. Also tenants who are moving out are not offered any incentive to leave the property in a good condition or to return the keys. There is now a voids board which is looking at voids performance, and has introduced consistent policies and procedures. However, this is recent (from July 2005) and is only held monthly which is not frequent enough to focus on performance improvement.

- 110** There are also aspects that might be masking weak performance. For example, it is policy to charge four week's rent to the outgoing tenant if the correct notice period is not given. This will make the void period being measured shorter but will increase the level of former tenants' arrears. Also, only 24 hours is allowed to accept an offer of a property. This can shorten the re-let time. However, this is focusing on the one element of the process that can mean poor customer service.
- 111** The standard for the condition of properties when they are let (the lettable standard) is not being consistently applied. The standard has been recently revised to a lower standard and some aspects are not sufficiently detailed or clear – for example for decorations and gardening works – and we have observed officers interpreting this differently. New tenants are therefore experiencing different standards of their new home and some are dissatisfied with this.
- 112** We found properties are let in an acceptable but not good condition. Lambeth are not yet asking new tenants what they think about the standard provided, which will not help to improve aspects of this service. New tenants we spoke to have not rated this highly, and have given the property condition an average score of four out of a possible ten. The main issues reported to us have been the standard of cleanliness and minor repairs not being resolved promptly after moving in.
- 113** There is a lack of clear information about the cost of voids and how this compares with other organisations. The average repairs cost of a void is currently £3200, which is high and reflects an element of works to meet decent homes standard. There is an inconsistent approach between voids officers on works carried out and so this will vary between areas. However, the costs of managing voids are not measured, and there are no figures available for the amount of recharges for voids. Minor repairs are carried out post-occupation for voids and it is not clear if the cost of these is included in void costs, or come from responsive repairs budgets. If it is the latter, then the cost of voids works would be higher than stated.

Income management

- 114** Performance in this area is weak in comparison with other authorities, which is partly the legacy of historic poor performance and limited and inconsistent action to recover debts. More recently action has been taken which will help to improve performance and some of this is proactive. Legal action against tenants has been hampered by long delays in obtaining court dates due to a requirement to check the housing benefit position and there is still a large backlog of such cases. Leaseholder charges were not actively pursued before reframing which is still causing problems though LHS is working to change this culture. IT systems are out of date and do not provide much automation or integration with other systems, which is taking up more staff time than it should and affecting proactive management of arrears. Customer service elements are, however, stronger and offer convenient methods to pay rent and charges and provide information to residents.

Rent accounting and arrears management - tenancies

- 115** Both tenants and leaseholders are provided with a range of options to pay rent and service charges, which is both convenient for residents and will contribute to income collection. Residents can make payments at a cash office in central Brixton if they wish, but also can pay by rent payment card, standing order and debit or credit card. Introduction of payment by direct debit has been slow, but is being introduced next year as a council-wide facility, which will contribute to efficiency of income collection.
- 116** Tenants receive good information about how to pay rent and what to do if arrears occur, through the website and tenants' handbook. Tenants receive quarterly rent statements and can receive additional statements on request and through the website. There is also a team within the service centre which is specialising in rent payment advice, although this is very new (October 2005). New tenants are receiving additional advice through the training scheme and a systematic approach to sign up and follow-up visits six weeks after the tenant has moved in. All these processes have a particular focus on preventing arrears building up and ensuring tenants know how to pay rent. New tenants we contacted said that rents were handled well, and there was sufficient clear information on how to make payments. We also found that tenants welcomed the thank you letters sent to good payers. These are all factors that contribute to improved customer care and income collection.
- 117** LHS has consulted tenants about a variety of issues relating to income management. For example, the Tenants' Council and area forums were consulted about the rent increase for 2005/06. There have also been focus groups held with a representative sample of tenants in arrears.
- 118** Lambeth is complying with government requirements for rent restructuring, which will ensure that by 2012 rents are based on factors such as the value of the property and are similar to other social housing providers. It has not, however, made any progress with separating service charges from its rents, following rejection by tenant representatives. All service costs are pooled and shared equally by tenants whether or not they receive services such as cleaning and lift servicing. Although this is discretionary for the local authority, it does not allow for the fair allocation of costs or for tenants to see if costs are reasonable. It also means that Lambeth may be receiving less housing subsidy than it could if it de-pooled its service charges, as government rules for subsidy are benefiting councils who do this.
- 119** The administration of rent accounting has some weaknesses, however. There is currently over £200,000 in the suspense account, and a backlog in identifying these payments. Some payments are old and date back several years. An IT enhancement will help rent officers to see the payments and although this is planned this is not in place. This will affect the accuracy of arrears owed by tenants. Temporary rent cards which should take 48 hours to be sent to tenants are currently taking over two weeks. This can cause arrears to build up at an early stage.

- 120** Although rent collection performance has improved it is still in the bottom quartile compared with London authorities. It was 88.7 per cent for 2004/05 (the second worst performance for England and Wales) and 90.1 per cent for 2005/06 to date. Current and former arrears are also at a high level in comparison with other authorities. Historically, Lambeth has not focused sufficiently on arrears management, which leaves a legacy of high arrears cases – at September 2005 there were over 2,400 tenants owing more than £1500 in rent and nine cases where arrears exceed £10,000. The total current rent arrears were £11.682 million.
- 121** There is now an improved focus on improving rent collection, with a number of initiatives undertaken. Much of this is fairly recent, and whilst positive and showing some signs of success, it is too early to judge the extent of this. Changes in approach include specialist teams in the area offices, a 'hit squad' based centrally to tackle the higher level arrears and low performing patches, and also input from the service centre through cold calling for low level arrears and by reminding all tenants who call what there arrears are. Tenants are now denied certain services if no clear repayment agreement has been made and kept to (for example, non-urgent repairs and parking permits). A staff incentive scheme which has recently been introduced is helping to motivate staff to keep arrears down. Collection rates are compared on a patch basis and prize money is available monthly for the best individuals and the best team. A rent campaign during the summer of 2005 focused on mailouts to specific groups of tenants in arrears and the effect was measured comparing arrears at the time to mailout to two weeks later. This showed tangible increases in collection in all but one case. Results are now being used to focus efforts for the Christmas campaign.
- 122** There has not been a formal assessment of the success of all these initiatives. Figures for the Brixton area show a reduction in arrears of £32,370 for cases exceeding £4000, which have been the focus of the 'Hit Squad' over this period. Similarly there has been a reduction of arrears through identifying 'hot spots' in certain patches and focusing on these arrears, though it is less easy to see a correlation between effort and improved arrears.
- 123** In general, the approach to the recovery of rent arrears has not been robust and consistently complying with procedures across the service, although improvements in this are apparent. Weaknesses are greater in some area offices than others, and include not keeping to procedures round the service of Notices Seeking Possession, poor record keeping of action taken and monitoring of action by team leaders. For example, in several cases seen notices seeking possession were not served until arrears were over £1000 and in some at four weeks which is the current procedure. The record keeping for some cases is sporadic and it is difficult to follow through the action taken. This will make it difficult to monitor and ensure that the correct action has been taken to reduce arrears.

- 124 The current IT system is outdated and is inefficient compared to more recently developed systems. For example it does not automatically flag where action should be taken or provide exception reports, which would save considerable staff time and allow them to focus on dealing with cases that need attention. A new system is planned for the summer of 2006. Meanwhile this is hindering recent initiatives to improve performance.
- 125 One cause of high arrears is poor performance by the Housing Benefits service in Lambeth. This has improved recently and has contributed to improved rent collection. The average time taken to process new claims improved from 103 days in April 2004 to 54 days in April 2005, and although improvement has tailed off it is still in a positive direction and average of 53.9 in September 2005. However, there is still room for improvement in this as 27 per cent of claims take more than 50 days to process, and the time taken to make a decision about a change in circumstances is three times as long as the expected standard of 27 days. There is no service level agreement between the Housing service and Housing Benefit service which would help LHS to be clear about the service standard. One is being developed, but is not yet in place.
- 126 Another factor is long delays in taking legal action. There is a considerable backlog of rent arrears cases waiting to go to court and in November 2005 these totalled 850. It is estimated it will take nine months to clear this backlog, and efforts are being made to get additional hearing dates. The reason for the backlog was the insistence of Lambeth County Court in 1999 that all cases being heard must have a 'pre-court check' to ensure that there was no Housing Benefit due to the defendant. This came from a poor track record in this respect. This has slowed down legal action significantly, creating the backlog and adding an average additional 11 weeks (and considerably longer in some cases), to the process. Lambeth has now challenged this requirement, which was removed in October 2005. However, the requirement could have been challenged at an earlier time if Housing Benefit performance had been more reliable. Clearly, until the backlog is dealt with, the delays are likely to impact on arrears.
- 127 Lambeth is not currently using DIY possession for its rent arrears cases, which is now common in housing organisations, although housing officers are attending court anyway and there have been issues with the quality of the internally provided legal service. This is now being considered as it has been identified as an area which will save significant legal costs.
- 128 Lambeth is, however, making progress in its administration and preparation for court cases. There is evidence to show a higher percentage of rent arrears cases are resulting in possession orders being granted. This was 48 per cent of cases in the first seven months of 2005/06 compared to 31 per cent in 2004/05.
- 129 Lambeth is providing good arrangements for debt advice for its tenants. The Council funds a number of voluntary sector agencies across the borough that provide independent advice and support in relation to welfare benefits and debt, including some that run early evening sessions. Tenants are also referred to the National Debt Helpline. Housing benefit advice is available at some but not all area offices, but it is intended that this is rolled out across the area offices.

Tenants will also shortly have access to the Lambeth credit union from January 2006 which will provide loans at reasonable rates, based on an assessment of need.

- 130** Housing services has worked together with the Housing Benefit service to increase take up of housing benefit. This increased from 53 per cent of tenants in March 2004 to 63 per cent of tenants in August 2005. This should have a positive impact on arrears and collection rates, by providing tenants on low income additional resources to pay their rent.

Service and management charge calculation and collection - leaseholders

- 131** Charges to leaseholders for services and major works are a little over average in comparison with other London authorities. The average Lambeth charge is just over the median average for the 22 London boroughs submitting data to the Association of London Government (ALG) – at £680 for service charges and £2848 for major repairs in 2004/05. However, it is not clear whether the management charge (of £60 plus 10 per cent of services provided) covers the cost of managing the service for leaseholders.
- 132** Leaseholders receive a reasonable amount and quality of information about the charges and how they are calculated. They now receive a breakdown of the repair costs for the block and estate where they live. This has been introduced with the 2004/05 certified accounts sent in September 2005, and helps leaseholders identify incorrectly allocated costs. Some minor amendments would make the statements clearer; for example, the proportion of estate costs payable by the leaseholder, the basis of calculation for insurance and management costs, and eliminating some jargon. In general, however, leaseholders can see how their costs are calculated.
- 133** The accuracy of service charge estimates has improved considerably but there is still room for improvement. The variance between estimated and actual bills was £126,303 in 2004/05, whereas it was £206,402 in 2003/04. It is not clear if this is good performance in comparison with other providers as Lambeth has not looked at this. Randomly selected service charge accounts show that the main areas where estimates differ significantly from actual costs are repairs and cleaning costs.
- 134** Although IT to assist the calculation of service charges has been improved, it is still not as good as it should be, and is dependent on spreadsheets rather than an integrated system. For example, an error made in one part of the spreadsheet can affect the service charge calculation. Although checks are made to the formulae this is done manually. Similarly the records of property ownership are updated manually which will mean it is prone to human error. This will be resolved by the new computer system planned for July 2006.
- 135** The accuracy of service charges is also affected by a number of repairs that have been incorrectly charged to leaseholders, and this is a common cause for complaint. The leasehold management team is aware of the issues, however, and is checking 17,000 repairs to ensure that statements are correct.

- 136** Performance for service charge collection was average for London authorities at 85 per cent (compared to the ALG benchmarking group median average of 84.5 per cent) and this has improved to 89 per cent for the current year to date. This is a long way from meeting the target which increased from 100 per cent to 104.8 per cent in April. Nevertheless it is a significant improvement over the last two years (56 per cent in 2002/03) and reflects a greater priority placed on leasehold management and income collection, and a proactive approach being taken. This includes active campaigns to publicise to leaseholders that the council will take action to recover monies owed. A history of inaction has meant that some leaseholders do not believe action will be taken and the council is working to change this perception. It is also using telephone calls and e-mail to follow through more formal contact. Similarly to tenants, parking permits are no longer given to those who owe the council money.
- 137** The current IT system is inadequate as a tool to manage leaseholder arrears. However, a recently developed spreadsheet is able to collect information from the main computer system and categorise cases so that action can be concentrated on specific issues, like late payments for low level arrears. This is saving a considerable amount of staff time and is enabling them to tackle disputed payments for major repairs. The planned computer system will improve this further.
- 138** The council has not effectively collected debts from leaseholders from major repairs and improvements done on their behalf. Since 2001, £3.7 million has been invoiced (under section 20 procedures), but under £170,000 has been received. There is currently £3,388,072 outstanding and although the amount collected has increased each year, this still leaves an unacceptable shortfall, and well below Lambeth's target of collecting 80 per cent of this debt. Although £1,611,315 of debt is being actively pursued, it is estimated that a further £173,000 may be irrecoverable. Around £860,000 is being actively disputed by leaseholders and this is currently being worked through to resolve this. Section 20 consultation is split between two departments, which makes it vulnerable to error. Action to tackle this is underway, including the setting up of teams designated to invoice and collect the debt, and a reconciliation exercise to make sure the figures are accurate.

Meeting the Decent Homes Standard

- 139** LHS is working towards meeting the Government's decent Homes Standard within the required timescales, though there are some doubts as to whether all elements of its plans will run to schedule. Its plans include a mixed economy approach which is helping to spread the risk, and there are contingencies in place which will help the council achieved the improvements it intends. However, it is difficult to be sure that the planned ALMO will be operational next April as planned and some issues with the accuracy of stock information data. The council is also only aiming to meet the minimum standards. However, it has involved residents well in developing the options appraisal and plans to improve its housing.

- 140** Lambeth is currently ahead of most boroughs in London in meeting the decent homes standard. In March 2005, 66 per cent of its homes were assessed as meeting the standard required, which this puts Lambeth in the top 25 per cent. The median average for London authorities is 49 per cent.
- 141** Lambeth's options appraisal for decent homes has been approved as 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for London (GOL), and was one of the first authorities to be in this position. An independent report on the financial aspects of the option appraisal was commissioned by GOL found that some areas had been over provided for whilst other assumptions were too optimistic. However, these were marginal and overall the options appraisal was found to be robust.
- 142** The quality of consultation carried out on the question of the future of council housing in Lambeth was high. A strategic debate took place with the Tenants Council and neighbourhood standards were discussed locally through 17 Neighbourhood Forums. Public meetings were well attended and more than 100 people attended the final public meeting. Newsletters and regular summaries of the debate were circulated to all residents. The Housing Investment Commission (HIC), which looked at and decided on all proposals for the future of Lambeth's housing, produced a report written by tenants with support from the Commission's independent Chairperson. All of the consultation was managed through the HIC with an emphasis on residents leading the project. This should ensure that the approach being taken reflects the views of residents and will contribute to the effectiveness of the work.
- 143** The consultation on housing options was therefore comprehensive and resident representatives were very influential in the council's decision to retain as much of its housing as possible. The HIC concluded that the council should adopt a policy of positive retention of their council housing, but using a 'mixed economy' approach to secure the necessary investment, and meet the funding gap. This includes a partial stock transfer of six estates, the setting up an arms length management organisation (ALMO) for half (eight) of the tenant management organisation (TMOs), use of PFI for part of the borough, disposal of commercial properties and various strategies to make efficiency savings.
- 144** Some progress has been made so far towards implementing these plans to improve Lambeth's housing. A significant proportion of homes have been improved to meet standards during 2004/05 – 5188, which exceeded the forecast by 400 by making use of a pump priming grant from the government. The stock transfer applies to six estates, one of which has been transferred, three are in the process of transferring and in the final two, tenants have been balloted and are in favour of transfer.
- 145** However some aspects of the plan are moving more slowly. There have not yet been any sales of commercial properties. The PFI scheme's outline business case has been approved by the ODPM, but has been delayed by about six months in response to an ODPM request to provide additional proof of stakeholder support. This has now been achieved and the scheme is now awaiting formal approval which is scheduled for March 2006.

- 146 There is some doubt as to whether the ALMO will be able to be operational by the planned date of April 2006. The development of the ALMO is at an early stage and the task of reaching agreement between eight existing TMOs over how they will work together is substantial and complex. There is little time available before then and as at January 2006; the section 27 application¹⁹ has not been submitted. The inspection planned for June is being rescheduled for September.
- 147 Lambeth has identified and assessed the risks of all elements of their plan for DHS failing. This was necessary due to the complex nature of the approach and external consultants were used to comprehensively examine this. Plans are in place to tackle the most likely risks being realised, and assumptions made in the Housing Options Appraisal are prudent. The risk of failure is spread by adopting a mixed economy approach. For example stock transfer is only proposed on estates where Lambeth are confident it can secure residents' support, and the largest estate for stock transfer ballot is less than 1600 properties. There are also some contingencies built in, for example the sale of sheltered housing would save £20 million on capital works as well as providing a capital receipt. Therefore if any one element fails, the council is still expected to achieve the decent homes standard for its housing by 2010.
- 148 There are mixed views as to the accuracy of the stock condition information currently held by Lambeth which could affect the ALMO bid. The housing options appraisal has been based on stock condition information obtained through independent surveys of an adequate though not high proportion of the stock. The stock condition survey includes a 100 per cent external survey with 11 per cent internal survey which has been extrapolated to the rest of the stock based on an accepted cloning methodology, and for example includes 25 per cent of street properties. However, during the inspection, references were made to issues with accuracy of the information held. Plans to improve accuracy of the stock condition database include validation of data for the intended ALMO properties. In addition, all housing will be surveyed in the year before it is programmed for capital works. This will help to improve accuracy of data held.
- 149 Lambeth's Housing Options Appraisal aims only to meet the minimum standards required by the government. There is no intention to provide a higher standard, for example more frequent replace of kitchens and bathrooms. However, there are additional resources available for environmental and security improvements through a Housing Opportunities Fund. This will be decided for each area based on local circumstances and in consultation with residents.
- 150 Tenants have not been offered any choices of colours or finishes for kitchen and bathroom replacement programmes. This is a weakness and not in line with other housing providers. Although some choice is now planned as part of the DHS capital programme, it is not clear how much choice will be given.

¹⁹ Section 27 application - an application the council must make to the government and which must be approved by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister before an Arms Length Management Organisation can be set up. It refers to S.27 of the Housing Act 1985.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 151** This is an area that is beginning to be developed but still has considerably more weaknesses than strengths. Costs of the service are high compared to other authorities. LHS has little detailed comparative data and has not benchmarked its costs for elements of the service with other providers, which makes it difficult to identify specific elements which are costing too much. LHS made significant efficiency savings last year which are contributing to investment in the housing stock and the efficiencies made do not detract from the service provided. A corporate framework is now keeping a tighter control over budgets, but limited work so far has been done on assessment of value for money of specific services.

How do costs compare?

- 152** Lambeth's housing management costs are higher than average at £15.12 per week per dwelling, and only slightly higher than the bottom 25 per cent of authorities (where costs are £15.51 and above)²⁰. This compares to £10.20 and below per week for the 25 per cent authorities with the lowest costs. Lambeth has stated that they have higher than average costs because of their context. However, there has been no analysis of this to assess if costs are still too high or are in fact reasonable.
- 153** There is no detailed cost information that demonstrates that Lambeth understands the costs of particular services in comparison to other providers and for each part of the service, and which it can use as a basis for improving value for money. For example the costs of tackling ASB or collecting rent. Although Lambeth understands its overall housing management costs and these can be attributed in detail to various budget and expenditure headings, the budget has not been disaggregated by function and by area. This would enable internal and external comparison of costs by specific service.

How is value for money managed?

- 154** Housing has been a major contributor to corporate efficiency savings. Corporately Lambeth aims to deliver 2.5 per cent of efficiency savings mainly through improved use of IT, new ways of working and renegotiating contracts. For 2004/5 £5.539 million of out the total of £11.224 million efficiency savings were due to housing activities - £3.765 million of housing savings were due to reframing and the remaining £1.774m to homelessness costs. Savings for 2005/06 are expected to be £2.669 million out of a total for the council of £8.499 million.
- 155** The reframing exercise was a major achievement that has already made significant savings for reinvestment in the housing stock. Gains will continue to be made as these are revenue savings and have been allocated to works required to meet DHS. LHS has tested resident satisfaction before and after reframing to measure the quality of the service and mechanisms are in place to continue testing this.

²⁰ Data from Service Assessment Framework - Technical Guide to CPA 2005 for single tier and county councils.

As satisfaction has improved, reframing does appear to be value for money. The savings from reframing did not result in less front-line staff, which could have led to deterioration in service. Instead, savings were mainly generated by improved economies of scale by centralising some functions (like procurement and contract management) and also taking back in-house some outsourced housing management services.

- 156 Value for money has been a corporate priority since 2002, and financial planning has improved from the introduction in 2003 of a medium term financial strategy. A 'Star Chamber' operates to provide constructive challenge and a focus on reducing costs during budget setting, and this is applied corporately as well as in each directorate. Templates are used to help focus on efficiencies and performance. This is a robust and challenging approach, and does appear to have driven down costs.
- 157 Although there is a corporate strategy for achieving value for money, there is not a housing one, though work to develop this has been commissioned and has commenced. The objective is to provide a more consistent approach to achieving value for money across housing services.
- 158 There is some scope for achieving improved value for money for some corporate services, and which have not been fully explored by housing services. This includes charges for IT, legal and human resources services. There are examples of the recent discovery of being overcharged for corporate and external services. This includes an over payment of business rates of £250,000 for housing office space; a repayment of corporate IT charges of £400,000 (the charge is based on the number of network connections and housing had an oversupply of these); and water charges reduced by £100,000 through negotiation of a new contract with Thames water. It is positive that his savings have now been identified and the service will benefit from this. However, it also indicates that previous performance arrangements were not robust in identifying cost savings. There are few service level agreements in place for corporate services, which would help ensure LHS is receiving the service they need and are paying for.
- 159 There has been a review of procurement corporately in Lambeth with a new procurement strategy and commissioning manual in place for staff guidance. This uses set criteria for procurement decisions and has procurement responsibilities across the organisation. Lambeth Housing services is moving towards adopting modern procurement methods but is not benefiting from them yet. For example it is working on the responsive repairs partnering contract with a view to implementing in 2007, when the current contract ends. It is also looking at jointly procuring its cleaning and grounds maintenance services with environmental services.
- 160 There has been slow progress in considering the de-pooling of service charges for tenants. Tenants were consulted in September 2003 and were provided with information about the benefits of de-pooling and the issues that can arise. It was proposed that de-pooling was implemented for 2006/07 but this has not been progressed, except for the costs of concierges and other security costs.

Tenants were initially not in favour of this proposal though it is not clear if this is still the case or the reason for this. Lambeth is losing out on potential savings through government incentives for housing subsidy to encourage local authorities to de-pool their service charges. Currently the allocation of service costs is not equitable and tenants are not aware of the costs of services or able to assess the value for money of services they receive.

- 161** There has not been an analysis of the charges leaseholders are paying to see whether this covers a reasonable proportion of the cost of overheads. A Leasehold Valuation Tribunal in 2004 found that the charge was reasonable for the leaseholder, but it is not clear whether the current approach covers a large enough proportion of costs. If it is not, this will mean that tenants are subsidising leaseholders. The costs of Leaseholder service charges have been analysed and compared to other providers, and have been found to be average. Lambeth benchmarks with other London landlords on Home Ownership and has found that there is scope for charging for dealing with solicitor enquiries around sales.
- 162** LHS is beginning to assess and explore ways of achieving improved value for money for specific services, though this is not yet well developed. For example, it is now looking at the cost of legal services for rent arrears cases and is assessing the in-house cleaning costs, but detailed information is not available on either of these. There is a voids pilot which is targeting the reduction of costs, though no information provided on how costs have reduced. The voids pilot has looked at reducing void costs but not at the satisfaction of tenants with the quality of the voids standard, so an overall assessment of value for money cannot currently be made. LHS has also initiated a number of projects to look at whether specific charges are value for money. This includes looking at CCTV and garage charges paid by tenants to see if these charges are reasonable. Although positive these initiatives are at an early stage and not yet producing efficiency savings.

Summary

- 163** Overall, the service has been assessed as being fair. Although there are a number of strengths there are also some significant weaknesses. Considerable improvements to the service are evident but and some elements of this are fairly or very recent.
- 164** Particular strengths include the quality of customer service, the condition of and management of estates and the strategic involvement of residents in making the recent changes. The service is now available for 12 hours a day and at weekends and area offices provide a reception service that is always covered by a central team. Another strength is the approach to race issues and the efforts made to combat institutional racism. Community safety has been given a high priority and this is being delivered through specialist resources and monitoring of individual cases.

- 165** However, weaknesses are also evident. Income collection compares poorly with other councils and action to tackle this has been fairly recent. The customer service is not delivered as quickly as it could be, with average response times for the telephone, correspondence and complaints being slow. There has been less focus on disability than race - the service is not complying with legislative requirements and is not ensuring that aids and adaptations are carried out promptly. Void management is rather weak as performance for the turn around period is not meeting targets and the condition of void properties is also quite basic. Value for money is beginning to be assessed but is at an early stage - there is little information about comparative costs on which to base an assessment.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 166** LHS has demonstrated some significant improvement for its housing management service. This applies to all aspects of the service and reflects the changes made by the reframing project which has redirected resources to areas of the service that residents were dissatisfied with. However, some aspects are still at an early stage and not delivering the improvements that might have been expected by now. The full impact of changes is yet to be delivered. Performance for most indicators has improved and some significantly, and there is also a positive record of progressing plans and managing changes.
- 167** Corporately, the Council has demonstrated some improvement, from a low base. The Council was assessed as a 'poor' authority by the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment in December 2002 and again in 2003; as 'weak' in December 2004; and 'performing well' in 2005.
- 168** The reframing project was ambitious and has changed the shape of the housing management service and its organisational structure. It was in line with corporate objectives to improve customer contact through a central service centre. The project was well managed, completed on time, and maintained reasonable staff morale during the process. The cost of the project ran a little over budget (£39,000 out of a budget of £2.54 million), which is small given the scale of the project. Lessons learnt at early stages of the project were used to deliver the next stages.
- 169** The project sought to both improve customer service and deliver services more efficiently. It has achieved both these objectives, though improvements are from a low base and it is at a relatively early stage to judge the extent of its success. Resources are now concentrated on providing specialist resources, which have provided a stronger and more focused service particularly in these areas - leasehold management, income management, void management and tackling anti-social behaviour.
- 170** It has produced some tangible improvements in the service for residents. The most significant change is longer opening hours for both the telephone service and face to face contact at area offices. Residents can also go to any of the area offices to receive a service. There are also more resources for specialist services which have impacted, for example, on the service for leaseholders, who now receive clearer information about service charges and more accurate estimates (the variance between estimated and actual charges improved by £80,000). Also there has been a 60 per cent increase in the number of anti-social behaviour cases recorded this year compared to last, which reflects increased activity.

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- 171 Prior to Reframing the number of nuisance complaints recorded was between 800 and 1,000 per year. In the first six months since Reframing (January – June 2005), 832 reports have been recorded, which is a 60 per cent + increase,
- 172 Resident satisfaction has been measured during the process and there are now indications that satisfaction levels have either been maintained or have significantly improved. Examples of this are shown in the table below. Estate services have benefited from more local resources - 72 caretaking staff compared to 25 before reframing level - and from central monitoring. Residents told us that they had noticed the difference.

Table 2 Satisfaction ratings

Table header	2004	2005
Overall tenant satisfaction with landlord services	57%	60%
Overall satisfaction of all residents	54%	54%
Graffiti removal	33%	54%
Grounds maintenance	58%	63%
Estate cleaning	58%	57%

Source: Resident satisfaction surveys carried out by ORC International in 2004 and 2005

- 173 The service is now more consistent than it was. Before reframing the service varied between neighbourhood offices, but now there is one standard for each aspect of the service that was developed in consultation with residents. This is being systematically checked by a central team. However, this is not fully embedded and we did still find some consistencies in the service.
- 174 Some improvements to the service have been introduced very recently or have been slow to improve. For example, there has been slow progress in improving the service for disabled customers and introducing customer service standards. The service centre has been in place for some time but has been slow to improve the speed at which calls are answered and dealt with. Specialist teams within the centre are likely to improve this but were only put in place from October 2005. Customer feedback systems are still being developed and so information for all services is not yet available. Although specialist resources are starting to make making a difference in dealing with rent arrears and anti-social behaviour, this too is at an early stage with a limited impact so far.
- 175 Also, some residents, especially older, vulnerable tenants feel a sense of loss for their neighbourhood office closing. This has been mitigated by the increased local resources, including scheduled home visits, and a direct line to the service centre for vulnerable residents. Although recent, there are now more resources dedicated to identifying new tenants with support needs and providing support (for example, a floating support team and a training course for new tenants).

- 176 However, LHS has not considered or formally assessed the impact of its vulnerable residents from the changes to the service. Therefore it cannot be sure that these tenants are benefiting from the changes.
- 177 There are some significant improvements in performance for key indicators, though some of this is from a very low base. Historically there has been poor management of both rent and service charge arrears, and this is still impacting on current collection levels. Improvements made are shown in table three below. Rent arrears collection and voids turnaround have improved significantly from 2001/02 to 2002/03, though this levelled out over the next three years before improving again this year. Initiatives to improve performance in both these services are now in place and are producing results, but LHS has been slow to introduce these measures and earlier action would have improved performance further. This also applies to collection of leaseholder service charges, which have seen the steepest improvement of 30 per cent in three years. Other performance that has improved includes response times for dealing with complaints, correspondence and telephone calls- though improvements in these areas are recent.

Table 3 Improvements in performance

KPIs	2001/02	2002/02	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06 to October
Rent collection	85.5%	88%	87.8	88.7%	90.1%
Current rent arrears			£13.43m	£12.05m	£11.37m
Former tenant arrears			£9.04m	£8.91m	£9.29m
Leaseholder service charge collection		55.9%	64.7%	85.0%	89.3%
Void re-let times (days)	46	39	38	39	33

Source: LB Lambeth performance information

- 178 TMO performance is mixed but improving. For example one TMO is achieving void turnover of nine days representing high performance whilst another is performing below the council average of 33 days. Around half the TMOs are performing better than the council average and the remainder are performance below average. However, there is no one TMO that is poor in all respects and where performance is weak it tends to be in one area, suggesting that with more support and sharing of good practice this could be remedied.

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- 179 LHS has made fair progress in implementing its plans. The majority of actions within the service improvement plan have been delivered within timescales, and this also applies to the recommendations of the Audit Commission inspection of Housing Repairs and Maintenance carried out in 2002 (based on documentary evidence). However, it is not clear if recommendations were carried out within the stated timescales. Some internal audit recommendations however have not been implemented promptly. There are also areas in which Lambeth Housing services has not progressed as much as it intended. This includes reducing debt, monitoring of TMOs, broadening the base for community participation and increasing the number of transfers for tenants.
- 180 LHS has recently won a number of awards and been successful in quality assurance accreditation. The Lambeth Service Centre won the Best Improvement in Performance category at the European Call Centre Awards; the Association for Public Service Excellence recognised Lambeth's Housing Management Service as the best among all local authorities; and it was winner for the Chartered Institute of Housing 'Excellence in Delivering Efficiency' award for the Housing Reframing Project. The housing service has now achieved Investors in People Accreditation and the report describes the progress made in transforming the service since 2001 in 'commitment, leadership, management, and learning and development'. These achievements have required formal assessment by recognised bodies and demonstrate the distance LHS has travelled in the last three years.
- 181 There have been some improvements in achieving value for money, though again this is from a low base. The efficiency savings from the reframing project are positive and being used to improve the service and to invest in housing improvements. However, there is still some way to go as the costs of the service are still relatively high and performance is either low or average when compared to other authorities.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 182 Overall LHS is managing performance well and has more strengths than weaknesses in this respect. Corporate frameworks are robust and now well embedded and are being applied in the housing service. Plans are clear and based on national and local priorities, are SMART and include targets and milestones. Plans are well co-ordinated and apply 'golden thread' principles, so that corporate objectives are carried out at service level. Members are working well with each other and with officers to provide clear priorities and leadership. Targets are mainly challenging and realistic and monitoring systems are effective. The main weakness lies with benchmarking and comparison of data and processes which is not well developed. Some monitoring could be more detailed and the performance monitoring of TMOs could also be improved.

- 183** Housing plans have been developed with reference to national government and local corporate priorities, and there is a clear vision for improving the service. The key priorities for the council are addressed in the housing services plan which presents a co-ordinated approach. Housing plans have been developed in consultation with key stakeholders, which will help to ensure plans are relevant to those receiving the service. A strong corporate lead on ensuring plans are robust is now embedded. The service improvement plan for the housing management service provides the basis for a more consistent approach to service improvement and delivery.
- 184** Plans address almost all of the weaknesses found during the inspection. For example, plans for the near future include improving access for people with disabilities; new IT systems; profiling of customers; more empowerment and choice for customers; joint working with other agencies and departments and improved value for money through procurement and partnering. Plans are therefore likely to help drive service improvement.
- 185** Plans, including the service improvement plan contain action plans with clear and SMART targets and milestones. Progress against plans is regularly monitored through update reports to management teams, which helps to ensure that plans are acted upon.
- 186** Officers and members are working in partnership, with good communications about key decisions. There has been strong leadership from members in housing and a clear vision for where the service is going. The governing party is working with the opposition members and there is agreement about the direction of travel. This is particularly important in a situation where the balance of power could change at the next election in May.
- 187** Improvement to the housing management service has been assisted by corporate funding for specific projects, where performance is weak and identified as an area that will contribute to corporate objectives. Such projects have benefited from a strong project management framework which helps to ensure that there are clear objectives and that the projects are delivered on time. This applied to reframing and is also applying to the complaints project, collecting debt for major works from leaseholders and IT implementation. Another element is that Area Managers are given portfolio responsibility for aspects of the service and are sponsors for these projects. This appears to be working well and, for example, there is evidence that pilot schemes are progressed and the results acted on and rolled out to other parts of the service.
- 188** The targets set for the service are realistic but challenging. Targets are based on trends for the last three years, together with performance of other authorities nationally and locally. Managers are consulted to ensure that targets are achievable but set centrally to ensure that are challenging. However, there are also some weaknesses. Targets for key performance indicators are not adapted for local performance which means that individuals or teams are not sufficiently challenged. There is no comparison with other sectors, for example housing associations. Rent arrears are also not used as a performance indicator which prevents comparison for other authorities on this measure.

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- 189** Corporately, there is a strong focus on ensuring that all departments are following a consistent approach for performance management, which includes the same format for performance information and audits to ensure that the performance appraisal system is being universally applied. The performance management framework is now embedded both at corporate and housing service levels. This includes a monthly housing performance monitoring report which is scrutinised both by members and senior managers. Further performance information is available to operational managers on a weekly basis.
- 190** Residents are involved in formal structures for monitoring performance and service delivery and have the capacity to challenge the council. For example tenant representatives at the Service improvement Forum were comfortable in raising issues not originally on the agenda, and staff responded positively to them. However, the structures are not always offered the opportunity for effective influence. Residents are also involved in monitoring estate contracts by attending contractor meetings and participating in estate walkabouts.
- 191** Monitoring arrangements at a local level are mostly effective and contributing to performance improvement. We found a consistent approach being taken to monitoring team and individual performance, and almost all staff receiving regular appraisals of their performance, one to one meetings and team meetings which cover communication and performance issues. Activity in the service centre is continually monitored and assessed using call centre software. This enables regular checks on the quality of the service through the data produced and also through team leaders spot checking staff handling of enquiries.
- 192** There are, however, some weaknesses in the monitoring of tenant management organisations (TMOs). Lambeth is not using the same management agreement for all TMOs which can make monitoring more difficult. It is not using the new modular management agreement, which is recognised as good practice, though is negotiating with some TMOs about this. There are also some gaps in the data collected which reflects the capacity of some TMOs and the need for additional support for this. Some TMOs are struggling with staff management and there is no robust plan to tackle the issue. They also have limited financial information which does not make clear the level of resources available to residents receiving services from TMOs. A toolkit which is nearly ready will help in the process, as will the training provided for TMOs.
- 193** A programme of audits is now in place which will help ensure that procedures are being complied with across the service. However, this is a recent development, with the first audits taking place in November 2005, so that at the time of the inspection this had not yet contributed to service or performance improvement. Some audits had taken place under the old structure, though not in such a systematic way. The housing service is now progressing towards achieving ISO 9001: 2000, and is planning to be accredited by June 2006. This again will help ensure there are good procedures in place.

- 194** The approach to monitoring contractors and ensuring they comply with contract conditions has improved, although this is fairly recent. A central team in the housing management service is responsible for holding regular meetings with all contractors and this is a planned and structured process. The team is also supporting staff in the area offices and in the TMOs to provide a more consistent and robust approach.
- 195** Learning from other providers is limited and is not systematically assessed and applied. LHS tends to compare itself with London authorities rather than authorities outside of London or with housing associations. There are also some recent examples of attending good practice forums. A number of staff are in contact with people from other authorities but this tends to rely on personal contacts. Performance benchmarking is limited and does not include benchmarking of costs. Lambeth is using Housemark to improve its performance by attending good practice events. However, it is not making the most of the facilities to benchmark data as this has not been submitted to House Mark to allow comparison of performance and costs.
- 196** The council is however learning from customer feedback and from its internal processes and experiences, though again some of this is recent and limited. Internal benchmarking and a formal meetings structure between peers is contributing to performance improvement, as it is allowing officers to share ideas and information. For example rent team leaders meetings have led to the consideration of using DIY possession meets contributing information and ideas are shared. There are a number of cross departmental groups which involve senior managers with the objective of promoting joint working. Learning will be enhanced once plans to use complaints and customer feedback are used systematically to improve the service.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 197** LHS now has the appropriate resources in place to deliver the service and has well established systems for developing staff. It has also managed to attract some experienced staff from outside the council during the reframing process, and has managed to maintain good morale among most staff. Staff are generally well informed which will help with the delivery of the service. Areas of weakness include the current IT system which is not contributing to performance in several areas, and controls for awarding contracts.
- 198** Staff morale across the service is high with clarity of purpose and effective team working. This was not universal but applied to the majority of staff and was striking because of the level of enthusiasm and the fact that major changes had been implemented quite recently. Sickness absence levels did not increase during reframing and current levels are average for London authorities. This will assist LHS as it rolls out the remainder of its plans for the service.

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- 199** IT systems are not as efficient as they should be in a number of areas and this is having an impact on service delivery and performance. A new fully integrated IT system is planned for July 2006. This will significantly improve the delivery of the service and performance management capacity. It will also enable reduction of staff numbers in the LSC, which will contribute to increased inefficiencies. Some new systems were introduced with the launch of the service centre in 2004, which have had a significant impact on delivery of the service. This includes:
- call centre software, which enables resource planning, and detailed monitoring of the service centre activity and customer service;
 - a customer relationship management system, which enables all staff to access records of all contact made, and facilitates arranging appointments. It also allows service requests to be monitored, which helps ensure these are followed through; and
 - an electronic document management system, which together with all housing files being scanned (and all new records and correspondence), means that all relevant staff can access the full records of each customer regardless of where they are based.
- 200** These systems were necessary for efficient working of the service centre, but also help staff working in area and other offices. In addition, two pilots are operating for mobile technology systems, which are helping to deliver estates services. By next summer LHS will have an up to date suite of IT tools, designed around the needs of the housing management service. Interim arrangements to IT systems have been made to assist with performance improvement in a number of areas. Although this has helped, LHS's capacity for improvement will be limited until the new system is in place.
- 201** Staff are generally knowledgeable and provided with information to help them carry out their work. Managers receive good quality briefings which keep them up to date on policy and legislative changes relating to housing management issues. These are linked to procedures on the council's intranet, which are available to all staff.
- 202** Human resource practices fully support the needs of the service through training and development, which is identified through staff appraisals, and in response to changes in legislation and regulation. Courses provided are relevant and include diversity, and customer care. Staff are satisfied with opportunities for career development and we found many examples of staff being supported. Lambeth achieved Investors in People accreditation in 2003 for Housing Services and overall for 2004. The report highlights the commitment to training and development of staff and that training is focussed on meeting the priorities of the council. There is also a thorough induction process, training and development for middle managers, PATH and graduate schemes. This will help with the retention of staff and improve service delivery.

- 203** There has been a recent improvement in internal controls and financial management, but this is not consistent across the authority. An issue for external auditors is the major fraud in a housing improvement contract which has led to an estimated loss of £2.9 million. Though the council has generally adequate arrangements in place to promote probity and propriety in the conduct of its business, it still has some way to go in embedding an anti-fraud and corruption culture within the organisation. The annual internal audit report for last year also points to a number of improvements that need to be made. In general these relate to the need for improved records of decisions made and improved contract and performance monitoring in TMOs.
- 204** Although budgets are regularly monitored, the spending on responsive repairs has not been well controlled recently. The service centre has enabled easier repairs reporting and this has generated increased demand for repairs. A £1.5 million overspend is now forecast for this year. This is being tackled by improved monitoring of individual staff expenditure in the service centre, by ensuring stricter adherence to repairs which are tenant's responsibility and packaging routine communal repairs.
- 205** Lambeth has a Procurement Strategy implemented in February 2005 that is supported by a Commissioning Manual. These provide a clear statement of the Council's approach to procurement and the procedures that staff must follow in order to secure best value, efficiency and consistent management of procurement. Modern approaches to procurement are not, however, in place, though they are planned and being developed.
- 206** LHS has made some progress in attracting inward investment. It has explored the options for improving its housing stock and has carried out the initial work for establishing a partial ALMO which will, if successful, attract additional government funding totalling £31.5 million. There are also a number of examples to gaining external funding, particularly to deal with community development and community safety issues – for example £50 million through the Clapham New Deal for Communities, £100,000 was secured from the ODPM as part of a public service agreement to deal with crack houses, and various youth projects.
- 207** However, there have been also been issues with Lambeth accounting for the properties it owns and keeping track of property changes. This has affected the calculation of the property valuation and consequently the housing subsidy and rent setting calculations.

Summary

- 208** Overall, the service has promising prospects for improvement.
- 209** LHS has demonstrated a good record of improvement, which although coming from a low base in some respects has shown significant improvements in delivering services for customers, for key performance indicators and in progressing its plans. Some of the changes made are, however, quite recent and some things have been slow to changes. This applies to income and voids management, and complaints, which are in the middle of planned changes.

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- 210** Plans are based on clear priorities which link into government requirements and local issues. Plans are robust and well executed and form a good framework for improvement. Performance management is also based on sound framework and there is evidence of regular monitoring at all levels. This has been given clear leadership by members and officers. Benchmarking and comparison with others is a key area of improvement, and there has been limited systematic learning from other organisations.
- 211** LHS also has the capacity to improve. It has put appropriate resources in place and has provided good training and development opportunities for its staff. Staff morale has remained high in spite of the level of change. The IT systems are not up to date enough but the planned new system is likely to resolve this and is due for implementation within six months. Other areas that need improvement are financial management and progressing internal audit recommendations.

Appendix 1 - Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - the Council's self-assessment for the inspection;
 - community strategy;
 - performance plan - 2005/06;
 - SP strategy 2005/10;
 - Lambeth customer service strategy;
 - housing reframing - closure report;
 - review of customer contact centre;
 - satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping reports;
 - equality and diversity strategies and action plan;
 - tenants compact;
 - consultation and involvement framework;
 - tenants and leaseholder handbooks and newsletters;
 - IIP assessment report 2003;
 - tenancy agreements;
 - a wide range of policy and procedures, including those covering complaints, racial harassment, tenancy management; rents, and anti-social behaviour;
 - Crack House Protocol, Acceptable Behaviour Agreement, Good Neighbour Agreements
 - service standards;
 - ALMO application;
 - HQN health check;
 - housing scrutiny papers;
 - benchmarking data;
 - monthly performance reports; and
 - Internal audit reports.

Appendix 2 - Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - interviews and focus groups with staff at all levels of the service;
 - meetings with the Executive member for housing and the Opposition Spokesperson for Housing;
 - focus group with managers in the Tenant Management organisations;
 - spot checks of housing estates in all of the five areas, with estates chosen by the team;
 - attendance at a Service Improvement Group meeting - group includes residents and Council members;
 - focus group with a selection of involved residents - from a range of resident groups
 - two focus groups for residents, one held in the north and one in the south of the borough;
 - visits to all five area housing offices and the cash office in Brixton;
 - visit to the Lambeth Service Centre;
 - telephone surveys of residents - new tenants and recent service users; and
 - telephone interviews with the chairs of the Tenants' Council and the leaseholders' Council.

Appendix 3 - Positive practice

- 1 *'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)*

Training scheme for new tenants

Lambeth Housing Service has introduced an innovative approach to providing information for new tenants, which aims to influence tenants' attitudes and promote sustainable tenancies. It provides information about the rights and responsibilities of being a tenant, and some of the services on offer, for example recycling. These began in 2004 with a series of courses for people moving on from temporary and into permanent accommodation. From September 2005 this has been on offer to all new tenants in a shorter more general format. This is facilitated by an external agency and new tenants are encouraged to attend short evening or daytime sessions with a £10 voucher for attendance. The first of these achieved a 40 per cent turn out, and courses are appreciated by those attending, as 96 per cent found the information useful.

Incentive scheme for income management staff

A staff incentive scheme which has recently been introduced is helping to motivate staff to keep arrears down. Collection rates are compared on a patch basis and prize money is available monthly for the best individuals and the best team.