

# Balanced Homes Market

**Islington London Borough Council**

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## Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- 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 Islington London Borough Council is an inner London borough council and the second most densely populated borough in the country. The population is 180,000 of which 25 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities. Home ownership is low at 35 compared with the national average of 70 per cent.
- 2 Islington is ranked as the sixth most deprived area of the 354 English local authorities but also has areas of significant wealth.<sup>1</sup> The area has a youthful profile with only 10 per cent of households containing people over 65 years of age compared with a national average of 19 per cent.
- 3 In May 2006 following local elections the Council comprised 48 councillors with no overall control following a previous Liberal Democrat administration. Liberal Democrats hold 24 seats, Labour 23 and Green Party 1 seat. The Council adopted a leader and executive model of governance in 2002.
- 4 In December 2005 the Council were rated as two stars and improving well through the CPA process. This showed significant improvement from 2001 when the Council was assessed as poor.
- 5 The Council employs 3,073 staff across all services.
- 6 The Private Sector Housing inspection covered:
  - access and customer care;
  - diversity;
  - private sector stock condition and housing need data;
  - strategic approach to private sector housing;
  - impact and effectiveness of approach; and
  - value for money.
- 7 The service is estimated to cost £3,760,361 for 2005/06. There is a budget for all private sector housing grants of £2.9 million which includes £600,000 for disabled facilities grant.

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<sup>1</sup> ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2004. Average ward score

## Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Islington London Borough Council as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>2</sup>**

		Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent				☀		‘a good service that has excellent prospects for improvement’  <b>A good service?</b>
Promising						
Uncertain						
Poor						
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	
			★	★★	★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 9 We judge that the service is a good, two-star service due to the following.
- There is well developed and wide ranging involvement with stakeholders which has informed a series of interconnected strategies and contributed to the high level of satisfaction with public protection services.
  - Services are promoted well through well written leaflets in a variety of formats and information on the website, in community languages, which is easy to navigate.
  - Services are customer focussed and targeted at achieving Council priorities such as through the dedicated Energy Centre.
  - The Council has a well developed approach to equalities and diversity based on good information which has influenced the delivery of services such as specialist housing for deaf people.

<sup>2</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- The aids and adaptations needs of older people and those with disabilities are being met through sufficient funding, care and repair and handyman services and dedicated occupational therapist and surveyor.
  - There are a range of well developed partnerships with landlords, registered social landlords and neighbouring councils which are delivering additional temporary accommodation for homeless people and improvements to private sector housing.
  - Work to improve housing in the private sector is based on good quality information which is regularly updated and supplemented with a rolling programme of street surveys identifying licensable HMO, the extent of non-decent homes occupied by vulnerable people and empty properties.
  - The Council has prepared well for the Housing Act 2004 and provided a good range of information, training and advice for Landlords to help them with the changes and gain support for the Council's approach to housing improvements.
  - Residential Environmental Health Services have taken the lead in a number of sub regional approaches including bringing empty properties back into use and HMO registration.
  - Prevention of homelessness is a key objective and services have been aligned to achieve this including close working between different service areas.
  - There is a good approach to value for money through cost comparisons with a number of benchmarking arrangements which show the services are cost effective.
  - Grant aid is managed well to ensure that grant aid is targeted to achieving the Council's priorities and significant savings have been achieved through choice based lettings on temporary properties as well as expanding choice for service users.
  - Services are based on a well researched and integrated strategic approach which links well with service plans and individual objectives ensuring staff are clear about the services they need to be delivering.
- 10** However, there are weaknesses which need to be addressed.
- There is an inconsistent approach to translation information on leaflets which could disadvantage people with communication difficulties.
  - Service standards do not always cover aspects of most use or importance to service users to enable them to be clear about what service they can expect.
  - Not all information is easily available from reception areas which may discourage those with communication difficulties.
  - Arrangements for external bodies to refer service users needing assistance from the Council on illegal eviction and harassment are not fully effective.
  - Arrangements for informing new tenants going into temporary accommodation about their situation are not fully effective.

## 8 Balanced Homes Market | Summary

- There are no arrangements in place to tackle high rents in temporary accommodation which prevent tenants from seeking work.
- The value for money of the care and repair service level agreement has not been evaluated and it is charging maximum fee levels. This would disadvantage those just outside of grant eligibility.
- Housing advice services approach to preventing homelessness is undermined by difficulties in getting information on housing benefit.
- The fuel poverty strategy is out of date and there are no plans to update it.

11 We have judged that the service has excellent prospects for improvement because of the following.

- The Council has a track record of success in attracting inward investment which has resulted in the improvement of private sector housing in the Finsbury Park area.
- Recommendations from the previous inspection of private sector housing services have been implemented to target times set out in a detailed action plan.
- Weaknesses identified in the 2002 comprehensive performance assessment particularly in respect of performance management including adequate and robust scrutiny have been addressed in the service and systems are working well including the undertaking of staff appraisals.
- The Service has taken a proactive approach in seeking out poor housing conditions and is delivering additional housing, successfully exceeding targets.
- The Service is leading sub regionally through work on empty properties and implementing the Housing Act 2004.
- Learning about good practice is regularly shared externally through the North London Sub Regional Group and internally in public protection and housing services through joint meetings and shared approaches to improving poor housing conditions and increasing numbers of temporary accommodation units.
- Services are submitted to regular benchmarking on costs which shows Islington to be providing value for money in this area.
- The Service has invested heavily in training to improve skills and meeting new needs.
- IT resources are being used to improve services on site and promoting smarter working and more efficient use of office accommodation.
- Shortages in housing benefit assessors due to expensive housing in the local area were resolved with the agreement of the unions by recruiting and running an arms length office in Manchester.

- Improvements in performance on housing benefit payments assist private sector tenants in retaining their accommodation.
  - Partnership working is resulting in the development of new affordable housing in an area with little access to land.
- 12 There are no significant barriers to improvement but the following need to be addressed.
- Tackling the high rents of temporary accommodation to assist those unemployed to return to work where appropriate.
  - Improving performance on homelessness decisions to help service users to make informed decisions.
  - Staff morale among some in the housing advice centre is low, there have been long term staff shortages and gaps in training which may hinder planned service improvements.
  - Not all targets for the service plans action plans are quantified which makes it difficult to judge progress or demonstrate that value for money is being achieved.
  - Staff are not clear which service standards they are working to so are unsure how well they are performing against them and therefore not addressing improvements which may be required.

## Recommendations

- 13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the 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 accessibility of information for service users and potential service users by:*
- ensuring those accommodated in temporary accommodation are visited early enough in their tenancy to ensure they are fully informed and understand their housing situation and future choices;*
  - ensuring that published standards make it clear what the service aims to deliver in consultation with service users;*
  - reviewing the publication of performance information against service standards to enable objective challenge by stakeholders;*
  - ensuring that users can access service information quickly and effectively ie through adequate leaflets and access to the website in addition to face to face contact and over the phone;*
  - ensuring that appropriate agencies have easy access to information on Council services to enable effective advice to be given and referrals to be made; and*
  - ensuring that service users benefiting from the Rent Guarantee and Landlord Insurance schemes are given clear information on their situation and understand the implications in the long term about the choices they make.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to make homeless applicants more informed about their housing choices and reduce concerns about their long term options;
- to make the information on service standards and performance more useful to service users; and
- to improve the accessibility of information.

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<sup>3</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

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

***Recommendation***

*R2 Ensure that all services delivered on behalf of the Council are cost effective by:*

- *reviewing the Care and Repair service level agreement to ensure that the fee levels reflect value for money; and*
- *work with Care and Repair to improve the procurement of works in order to reduce costs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improvement to services for older and disabled people in need of adaptations and repairs to their properties.

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

***Recommendation***

*R3 Improve housing advice services by:*

- *providing easy access to Housing Benefit assessors to resolve housing benefit queries as a part of homelessness applications; and*
- *providing read only access to housing benefit screens with appropriate training for housing advice centre officers.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improvement to services for homeless applicants and reduction in delay to dealing with housing benefit queries.

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

<b><i>Recommendations</i></b>
<i>R4 Report and publicise the key findings of this report to service users, stakeholders, councillors and staff.</i>
<i>R5 Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in this report.</i>

- 14 We would like to thank the staff of Islington London Borough Council, particularly Karen Lucas, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 27 February - 3 March 2006

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 15 Islington is an inner London borough sharing boundaries with five other London boroughs. The population of this small geographic area is 180,000<sup>4</sup> making it the second most densely populated borough in the country. There are 86,595<sup>5</sup> homes in the area of which 35 per cent are owner occupied which is low compared with the national average of over 70 per cent. There is a high level of Council owned homes at 36 per cent, and privately rented at 16 per cent. The remaining 13 per cent are owned by registered social landlords (RSL).
- 16 The area is characterised by a youthful population. Only ten per cent of households contain people over 65 years of age compared with a national average of 19 per cent<sup>6</sup>. Children account for 18 per cent of the population. The black and minority ethnic (BME) community has increased from 19 per cent in 1991, to 25 per cent by mid-2003 census estimates. There are a wide range of diverse communities including established communities of African, Caribbean, Greek, Turkish and Irish people as well as a significant number of refugees.
- 17 Islington is a deprived area and is ranked sixth out of 354 local authorities in England, where one was the most deprived area and 354 the least deprived<sup>7</sup>. In contrast the area has areas of considerable wealth. Unemployment is high at 6 per cent compared to 4.5 per cent average for London, particularly for people with poor educational achievements. Average gross annual salaries vary widely from £50,000 for owner occupiers to £6,300 for council tenants. However, average house prices are high precluding many from home ownership and driving up demand for affordable housing. The average housing price in Islington is £334,000 compared to a national average of £185,000<sup>8</sup>.
- 18 In 2003, 2,952 households were assessed by the Council as in need of housing, with a further 2,320 households projected at that time to come into need annually. An estimated 1,815 new affordable dwellings each year for five years between 2003 and 2008 were needed to meet existing and projected demand.
- 19 The Private Sector Stock Condition Survey of 2003 identified that:
  - 64 per cent of dwellings were built before 1919, 11 per cent were built between 1919 and 1964 and the remaining 25 per cent were built after 1964;
  - 73 per cent of dwellings are flats;

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<sup>4</sup> Office of National Statistics, Mid-Year Estimates, 2003

<sup>5</sup> Office of National Statistics, April 2004

<sup>6</sup> Office of National Statistics, Mid-Year Estimates, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Indices of Deprivation 2004, rank was derived from the average deprivation score of the Lower Super Output Areas in the local authority

<sup>8</sup> Land Registry quarterly statistics April to June 2005

- £54.2 million would be needed to undertaken urgent works; and
- £90.2 million was needed to carry out basic repair work, a total of £144.4 million.

- 20 <sup>9</sup>The survey established that unfit housing and houses in multiple occupation (HMO) are not concentrated in particular streets or areas in the borough. There are 8,288 HMO identified at the time of the survey prior to the Housing Act 2004 definition. This is substantially higher at 15 per cent when compared with the national average of five per cent. Ninety-five per cent of them were built before 1919. It also established that the average energy efficiency rating for private sector dwellings was 56, higher when compared with the national average in 2001 of 51 and slightly higher when compared with the London average of 53.
- 21 The survey showed that the private rented sector had the highest repair costs, with private sector vacant dwellings costing three times the borough average for disrepair. The highest disrepair costs are experienced by older single people and black people, in particular by Asian people.

### The Council

- 22 At the time of the inspection the Council comprised 48 councillors, 35 Liberal Democrat, 12 Labour and one independent. In May 2006 following local elections the Council moved to no overall control. Now Liberal Democrats hold 24 seats, Labour 23 and Green Party one seat. The Council adopted a leader and executive model of governance in 2002. Seven Liberal Democrat councillors sit on the executive and one Labour councillor, each with responsibility for an area of council activity.
- 23 The Council's management structure comprises the chief executive, a deputy chief executive and six departmental directors. The services under inspection are delivered through public protection and regeneration department, and the housing, performance and property department. The Council employs approximately 3,035 staff.
- 24 The Council's net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £317 million, increased from £301 million in 2004/05. The Council Tax for Band D is £901.99 for 2005/06 which has been maintained from 2004/05. There is a capital programme for 2005/06 of £172 million; £101 million is for Homes for Islington's decent homes standard (DHS) programme and for the renovation of the Tollington estate. Homes for Islington is an arms length management organisation (ALMO) set up in 2004 to manage and maintain council owned and leasehold housing.
- 25 The Council's main partner is the Islington Strategic partnership which was set up in 2002. Islington was identified as one of central government's 88 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas which qualified it for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. More than £14 million was made available for 2001-2004, followed by a further £12.5 million for 2004-2006.

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<sup>9</sup> Pre the definition of the Housing Act 2004

- 26 In December 2005 the Council were rated as two stars and improving well through the CPA process. This showed significant improvement from 2001 when the Council was assessed as poor. The inspection of the ALMO in March 2005 rated the services as good, two-star services with excellent prospects for improvement. This unlocked central government funding of up to £157.5 million to improve the condition of Council owned properties. A previous inspection of private sector housing in the borough in 2001 resulted in a rating of a fair, one-star service with uncertain prospects for improvement.

### **The service**

- 27 This inspection covered services contributing to the management and maintenance of health and safety, quality and condition of housing in the private sector with a particular emphasis on meeting the public sector agreement (PSA) seven target by 2010<sup>10</sup>. This includes private sector housing, housing advice and the strategic approach to the private sector. We have been guided in the inspection by the housing inspectorate Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) for private Sector Housing, dated July 2004, which covers the following areas:
- access, customer care and service user focus;
  - diversity;
  - private sector stock condition and housing need data;
  - strategic approach to private sector housing;
  - impact and effectiveness of approach; and
  - value for money.
- 28 The service is estimated to cost £3,760,361 for 2005/06. There is a budget for all private sector housing grants of £2.9 million which includes £600,000 for disabled facilities grant.

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<sup>10</sup> By 2010, bring all social housing into a decent condition with most of this improvement taking place in deprived areas, and for vulnerable households in the private sector, including families with children, increase the proportion who live in homes that are in decent condition.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29 The private sector housing strategy was adopted in 2004. It was based on outcomes of the stock condition and housing needs surveys, and the development of the Local Development Framework. There are three main objectives underpinned by a series of priorities and targets directed at expanding access to affordable housing. The key ones are shown below.
- Making the Private sector a viable housing option for all by:
    - appointing of an outreach officer to provide advice and assistance to existing private sector tenants;
    - expansion of Landlords Insurance and Rent Deposit Schemes as an alternative to temporary accommodation;
    - procurement of accommodation in the private sector to be used as temporary accommodation for priority homeless households;
    - establishing close partnership working with partners in North London Sub Region to increase and improve supply of private sector housing; and
    - improving homes' street environment and bring empty properties back into use on Seven Sisters Road.
  - Improve and maintain quality with an emphasis on health and safety by:
    - conducting targeted street surveys and undertaking survey of accommodation above public houses with the Fire Service;
    - implementing the Housing and Health Standard Rating System and new enforcement regime and the London Landlords Accreditation Scheme;
    - providing free and impartial advice to all private sector residents, targeted at fuel poor via advice centre and help lines and continue Warm & Well programme; and
    - carrying out regular inspections of temporary accommodation in the private sector to ensure quality housing.
  - Improving supply of private sector homes by:
    - bringing properties above licensed premises back into use;
    - increasing the total number privately owned empty properties brought back into use through advice or direct intervention with other agencies and identified through regeneration schemes;
    - running regular promotion and marketing campaigns; and
    - updating Islington's empty property database to ensure accurate information is held on numbers and length of time empty.

- 30 There are firm links between the local aims and priorities with national and regional policies. For example, the priorities established in the Community and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy of March 2003 are the improvement of housing stock condition and increasing affordable housing supply by every means in keeping with the national DHS targets by 2010, and the keeping families with children out of bed and breakfast and temporary accommodation.
- 31 The Council's key corporate and community strategies reflect the importance of private sector housing to achieving those aims. The corporate priorities set out in 'One Islington' have clear links and include:
- increasing access to services, as part of the customer focus;
  - procuring affordable housing, as part of the regeneration priority; and
  - preventing homelessness, as part of performance improvement.
- 32 These priorities reflect the concerns of local residents and the areas they wish to see improved. Their priorities are levels of crime, street cleanliness, road and pavement repairs, affordable and decent housing and activities for teenagers.

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

### Access, customer care and user focus

- 33 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Services relating to private sector housing are accessible to residents through a variety of means that have been developed with the involvement of stakeholders. The Council engages well with a wide spectrum of residents, landlords and agencies and has developed their approach over time. Referral arrangements work well internally but this is not comprehensively the case with external agencies to the detriment of service users. Although some good use is being made of information, such as the use of public transport over empty properties, service standards are not well publicised or widely reported.
- 34 There are well developed and wide ranging methods of consulting with and involving stakeholders in private sector services. The Landlord Forum has recently been extended to include private sector tenant representation to increase understanding. The Forum is highly thought of and well attended. It has been used by the Council to improve standards of accommodation, inform landlords about legislative changes and encourage good practice. Tenants, advocacy and advice agencies form the Community Advice Forum. This group improved their knowledge of homelessness through training given by the Council's Housing Advice Centre (HAC).
- 35 The Council used a variety of effective methods to consult about the draft policy on improving privately rented housing, with particular emphasis on meeting the requirements of the Housing Act 2004 such the establishment of HMO licensing and meeting the Housing and Health Standard Rating System (HHSRS).

Methods included questionnaires, focus groups, an open day with workshops and inviting comments on the policy through the Council's website. In addition the Council made use of existing meeting and forums and also used an external consultant. The outcome is demonstrable commitment by many private sector landlords to the improvement of conditions in private rented sector.

- 36 Good use has been made of feedback obtained through consultation processes. Customer service feedback forms are given out to service users. Customer satisfaction is consistently above 90 per cent. Feedback through the long standing Islington Housing Network has resulted in the setting up of the Landlords' Accreditation Scheme, the undertaking of street surveys in targeted wards and focussed work on energy efficiency to reduce fuel poverty for vulnerable households through the Safe and Warm scheme.
- 37 Use has been made of public transport to inform property owners about the empty property scheme. This is part of a North London sub regional approach. It involves using posters on the back of buses with a free phone number to enable owners to get advice on returning empty properties back into use. The benefit of this approach is to disseminate the information more widely than the small geographic area of Islington.
- 38 In respect of other use of information the situation is patchy. The Council produces a range of leaflets which contain useful information, including contact information, and are well written in a clear and accessible style. However, there is not a consistent approach to straplines in community languages, nor to translations on the web site, for example leaflets and information for disabled facilities grants and for empty properties.
- 39 The service has a range of service standards in addition to corporate standards. These have been developed in conjunction with stakeholders, for example the Finsbury Park Partnership. However, the standards do not cover all aspects of the services which would be useful for service users. For example, leaflets relating to private sector grant aid do not cover target times for officer visit to verify works needed and check on applicant's eligibility. Time standards have not been established for responding to enquiries from potential landlords on letting properties through the Council. This means that, in the first instance, service users cannot be clear about what they can expect from the service. In the second that the Council cannot be sure that performance is high at the point of important initial contact which sets the tone for future relationships.
- 40 In addition, the monitoring of standards is not comprehensively published although the information is monitored by the service management team. This makes the service difficult for stakeholders to challenge.

- 41 The Council has restricted information on display at reception points making users heavily reliant on dealing with Contact Islington<sup>11</sup> staff. Staff have access to general information through the web site, frequently asked questions devised by services. The rationale is to ensure that all information given out is the most up to date and encourage people to approach reception staff. A mystery shopper asked for information on rehousing from the HAC. Although a contact number for specialist staff was provided, leaflets available on site were not offered. This can be perceived as a gate keeping approach to information which may discourage potential users, for example, when the reception is busy, and reduces choice for users.
- 42 There is a wide range of access points for people seeking private sector housing services, although at different levels depending on the approach. The offices providing access to private sector housing visitors are dingy and not welcoming. Offices with public access for housing services are a good standard. A survey in early 2005 found that 78 per cent of visitors thought the HAC was either easy or very easy to find. Offices are located on the main street in Islington near to the Town Hall and are well served by public transport although, in common with other London boroughs, car parking is very limited. There is level access into reception areas directly off the main street and the offices are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant.
- 43 The Council demonstrates commitment to energy efficiency through a range of activity. A dedicated Energy Centre operates from the main street offices. The centre offers advice on energy saving through specialist advisers by phone or dropping in to the centre. The Council is delivering a Safe and Warm scheme in partnership with the Greater London Energy Efficiency Network. This enables residents to keep their home warm and comfortable at the same time as reducing fuel bills and greenhouse emissions.
- 44 However, the fuel poverty strategy is out of date and there are no plans in place to review it. This undermines the strategic approach and it is not clear what the Council is intending to achieve from the range of activity currently in place to make affordable warmth available to those on low incomes.
- 45 Staff at all offices were helpful, polite and demonstrated good customer care skills. Although access to specialist officers is limited, 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, this is supplemented by access via phone, email and in person to Contact Islington, between 8.30 am to 6.00 pm. An out-of-hours emergency service is supported by officers from both housing advice and residential environmental health on rota.
- 46 Interactive Islington, the Council's website, contains a good range of information for service users. It is positive and easy to navigate. Information includes empty properties, finding a place to live, HMO and Housing Grants. Further information is available for landlords and agents covering repairs, energy advice and housing rights including harassment and illegal eviction. The Council make it easy to apply for grants with on-line enquiry forms. Generic email addresses are available for officers in Residential Environmental Health, the Housing Advice team and for reporting Empty Properties.

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<sup>11</sup> Contact Islington is a one-stop shop providing front line services for council services including housing and residential environmental health services

- 47 However, service standards are not evident on the website which reduces the transparency to service users of what the services can provide. For example, statutorily the Council has six months in which to determine a disabled facilities grant (DFG) from the time of receiving the completed application. This is the minimum standard, and Councils should seek ways to improve actual performance to enable service users to make fully informed choices.
- 48 Private sector housing services are delivered through two departments and the arrangements are working effectively. For example the Tenancy Relations Officer is situated within the HAC, but works closely with residential environmental health officers in dealing with poor housing conditions. There are robust referral arrangements in place ensuring that people receive the service they need. Officers across the two departments are customer focussed and they are working towards delivering the private sector strategy, supported by joint planning and training.
- 49 Referral arrangements with external bodies are not fully effective, presumably due to a lack of knowledge about the services the Council offers. For example, a tenant of an HMO was very pleased with the advice, help and support received from the residential environmental health and tenancy relations officers over appalling housing conditions and difficulties with the owner. However, the residents of the HMO had gone without water and electricity for ten days due to a failure of both the Citizen's Advice Bureaux and the police to refer them for help from the Council in the first place.
- 50 The Council do not have robust arrangements in place to ensure people they refer to other agencies for accommodation have been properly informed. For example, a tenant with hearing difficulties and physical disabilities had lived in accommodation for a month. He did not know how to report repairs that needed doing, why he was being given groceries, who his contact housing officer was and why the accommodation was only temporary. He was unclear about what his future options were. Service users we spoke to in the focus group were also unclear about their future housing options after accessing temporary accommodation.
- 51 A Council wide complaints system is in place allowing people to raise concerns about the services they receive. The three stage procedure is well publicised through clearly written information available at all public access points and on the web site. Complaints can be made by e-mail, by phone, in person or in writing. This ensures good access. Out of 20 complaints received during 2005/06 three were dealt with out of target time but only one was not resolved on the initial complaint and went to stage 2. There are no reports of maladministration for either department issued in relation to complaints made to the Local Ombudsman recently.

## Diversity

- 52** This is an area of considerable strength for the Council who demonstrate firm commitment to the diverse communities in their area based on good information on the makeup of communities. Their approach is underpinned by an integrated strategic approach which links with the corporate approach. Good progress has been made in consulting with a range of diverse groups and staff are encouraged to welcome diversity through their own representation within the Council. Good working arrangements with partners have been developed over time delivering good quality homes and accessible services for users from different backgrounds.
- 53** The Council has a well developed approach to equalities and diversity. A policy statement, Dignity for All - promoting equality and valuing diversity, has been in place since 2003 and an equality impact assessment was undertaken on the private sector strategy in June 2004. The corporate Race Equality Scheme was revised in January 2004 and there is a Housing Equality and Diversity Strategy in development. The housing service has been self-assessed at level 3 of the Equalities Standard. There is a departmental action plan to take the services to Level 4 in 2006/07. Progress is monitored bi-monthly against the action plan and there are quarterly reports on service delivery and impact on staff to the management team.
- 54** There has been broad consultation on the Equality and Diversity Strategy with stakeholders. For example, a service users group has been established to allow 16 to 18 year olds to air their views on accommodation. BME groups have representation through the Community Advice Forum established in 1999. The forum is chaired by a manager from HAC who facilitates a good flow through of information. This has led to a detailed understanding by the Council of key issues, concerns and needs of target groups.
- 55** Internally, the Council has made progress in further developing its knowledge of cultural needs. There are a range of staff groups reflecting the issues of women, disabled people and those who are LGBT<sup>12</sup>. There is a black workers forum and a Director chairs the Equality forum demonstrating a high level of commitment by the Council.
- 56** The involvement of stakeholders has influenced the departmental action plan. Examples include the provision of specialist housing for deaf people and the development and introduction of a harassment procedure for private and RSL tenants, owner occupiers and people in temporary accommodation. Targets include the development of partnership working. There are clear links to national regional and local priorities, together with other strategic corporate plans. This demonstrates the strong commitment to identifying and meeting the diverse needs of the area.

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<sup>12</sup> LGBT - Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Trans-gender

- 57 Working with partners to deliver services is strong in private sector housing. The Council has been very effective in developing good working relationships with private sector landlords and RSL in order to improve the standard of accommodation and management, and make good quality homes available for a range of people on low incomes and who are vulnerable. Work has also been focussed on those experiencing harassment and domestic violence. The Council hosts a multi-agency domestic violence forum led by a Director. An example of the positive outcomes from this group is the Homeshelter scheme that enables victims of domestic violence to remain safely in their own accommodation following security improvements. The Council are making the best use of resources available to them to assist targeted groups.
- 58 The Council has comprehensive information relating to the ethnicity of residents. The background of service users is monitored in relation to homelessness and housing applications, and private sector housing services. Diversity details are recorded at the point of contact and logged onto an IT system. A monthly log of all harassment incidents is kept and details of action taken are monitored. This allows cases to be tracked to assess whether discriminatory treatment has occurred as well as trends in take up of services.
- 59 Good use is made of a range of statistical information to inform services. A borough wide housing needs survey has been undertaken including the needs for disabled residents. A breakdown of factors affecting communities is drawn from the indices of deprivation at super output area level<sup>13</sup>, census data, Home Office crime statistics and health statistics from the Department of Health. An example of the outcome of this approach is the expansion of the translation and interpreting service to recognise the emergence of eastern European communities and encouraging take up of services.
- 60 The Council has made services accessible to different groups. Service information is provided in a good range of formats and community languages. There are translated pages available on the web site for seven languages; officers make use of access to professional interpreters and translators who offer face to face services and via the telephone. The Council also has an in-house sign language interpreting team. All reception areas are DDA compliant to assist those with physical disabilities, and minicom is available at most public access points for those with hearing difficulties, with the exception of 159 Upper Street. The Council has responded positively to changes in the population makeup, for example, by advertising in local Turkish newspapers for private sector properties because many landlords come from that cultural background.
- 61 Leaflets should contain a recognisable translation symbol; this means that the information can be translated into any language on request. However, the approach is not consistent, for example grant leaflets do not have the community straplines or information on obtaining a translation.

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<sup>13</sup> Lower level super output area - an area with a "minimum population of 1000; mean 1500. Built from groups of OAs (typically 4 to 6) and constrained by the boundaries of the Standard Table (ST) wards used for 2001 Census outputs

- 62 Information is marketed to make it accessible to vulnerable groups. Leaflets, videos and cassettes outlining the Houseproud scheme aimed at older owner occupiers and leaseholders, are available from partners, the Home Improvement Trust. Other information is made available through Council run stalls at events for older people and BME groups.
- 63 The Council has taken a proactive approach in seeking out poor conditions and substandard housing through street surveys. By undertaking the surveys and rooting out poor conditions themselves, the Council is seeking to positively reduce the need for residents to know and understand what services the Council can deliver in order for them to access services. Work with the primary care trust (PCT) is planned for this year to give sign-posting training on private sector housing services to front line health staff. This approach will contribute to the improvement of accessibility to services for vulnerable people.

### **Private sector stock condition and need data**

- 64 This is an area of strength for the Council who maintain databases effectively and make good use of the information on which to base their strategic approach. In addition they are strengthening their approach through the sub-regional work they are leading on or contributing to in order to rigorously tackle poor and sub-standard condition. In addition affordable housing is being made available to those who need it.
- 65 The Council has a good understanding of the makeup and condition of the private sector dwellings in the borough. The outcome of the survey provides a good basis for the strategic approach the Council has taken. The private sector house condition survey was undertaken in 2003. This included a breakdown and analysis of disrepair and unfitness across dwelling types and tenure. The costs of the disrepair were assessed (See Context: Locality). A sample of 2 per cent of dwellings was fully inspected, including 47 empty properties. The fitness standard applied was that set out in Section 604 of the Housing Act 1985. The survey also includes an assessment of the impact of the decent homes standard and Housing Health and Safety Rating System.
- 66 The survey estimated that there are 5,029 households containing someone with a special need. This represents 9.5 per cent of all private sector households. The estimated costs of carrying out all the required adaptations would cost in the region of £16 million. The indication is that 31 per cent of private sector properties fail the decent home standard, mostly on the basis of thermal comfort. Over represented in these dwellings are single pensioners in owner-occupied homes, and people with special needs in rented accommodation. The total costs of works to remedy are estimated to be £51 million, £14.7 million for vulnerable households only.

- 67 A rigorous approach is taken to keeping information updated. All planning application consultations regarding proposed changes of use of private housing are received by environmental health. Property information is held electronically and is updated daily with stock condition information from the following sources:
- street surveys - undertaken routinely by programme to identify HMO and establish the extent of non-decent homes occupied by vulnerable people;
  - HMO interventions and data on properties made fit;
  - condition following renovation grants, disabled facilities grants and private landlord energy efficiency award scheme grants; and
  - following processing of grants by other partners, such as Care and Repair.
- 68 This approach is supplemented by further work at the sub-regional level. A Building Research Establishment mapping exercise has been commissioned by the North London Sub Region. This is assisting in locating vulnerable households in the private sector living in non decent housing as an aid to achieving central government's target of 70 per cent of vulnerable households in the private sector living in decent housing by 2010. However, it is not clear to what extent progress has been made against this target.<sup>14</sup>
- 69 The Council is taking a proactive approach to ensure that HMO do not escape licensing. Data collection is being changed for 2006/07 in order to follow up with visits to ensure that where occupancy levels are reduced to avoid licensing, numbers are not subsequently increased which would make them liable to registration.
- 70 The quality of information on empty properties is robust and the Council is making good use of existing sources of information. Data is drawn from council tax, housing benefit, electoral register, complaints, and previous house condition surveys. There is proactive follow up activity to make contact with owners to promote bringing back properties into use. Empty property records are kept updated as indicated above and through Eyes for Islington<sup>15</sup> reports from residents in the borough.
- 71 The Council is taking further steps to improve their approach to empty properties through their lead on a sub-regional survey. The survey will improve the accuracy of data held by the other boroughs in the sub-region to the same level as Islington's. This will enable sub-regional comparisons, and the development of a common strategy to tackle empty properties in a consistent way, dealing with the worst properties first.
- 72 Details of housing association property are held on a separate database which enables the Council to identify issues in this sector, but it is not clear how this information is kept updated. This could be a weak element in the Council's otherwise robust information.

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<sup>14</sup> From the Comprehensive Spending Review of 2005 - Public Sector Agreement 7

<sup>15</sup> Eyes for Islington - group of volunteers to be the 'eyes and ears' of the borough, reporting problems for the Council to tackle

- 73 A housing needs survey was undertaken by an external body in 2002. This demonstrated a high demand for housing for all tenures. It showed that special needs households are more likely to be living in the social rented sector and in total 11,410 households contain a physically disabled person. An estimated shortfall of 1,815 affordable homes per year for five years was established. The majority needed to be social rented accommodation as there was low demand, three per cent, for shared ownership as this was not affordable by the majority of those in need.

### **The strategic approach to private sector housing**

- 74 This is an area of strength for the Council with few weaknesses. The strategic approach is detailed and integrated with strategies setting out clearly how the Council aims to meet its challenging objectives. It is based on good evidence from stock condition and housing needs surveys and the involvement of stakeholders, although the Council has not included its expectations for the use of sustainable materials, and the Fuel Poverty strategy is out of date. The Council responds well to national and regional priorities and changes in legislation and is well practised in working in partnership. At the corporate level the work being undertaken in the private sector is not recognised in the Community and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy which could undermine appreciation for the contribution to achieving corporate objectives.
- 75 The Council has a good and comprehensive strategic approach to private sector housing which has been in place for a number of years and drives service delivery.
- 76 The Private Sector Housing Strategy 2004-2007 is one of five strategies<sup>16</sup> which cover inter-related aspects of the Council's overall approach to housing in the borough. It is the second such strategy and work is already underway to review it in 2006. The priorities for dealing with poor conditions in the private sector and making more homes available are shared priorities across the strategies. They are supported at the corporate level through the One Islington approach through the work on community cohesion which requires the improvement of housing and environment in the private sector.
- 77 The Private Sector Housing Strategy is comprehensive and draws on good quality information about housing conditions, supply, needs and the estimated costs from the 2003 stock condition survey. It was drawn together from the Council's work with a range of partners such as Islington Housing Network, Community Advice Forum and Islington Landlords and Tenants forum. The objective covering improving and maintaining the quality of housing in the private sector come from discussions with the Islington Housing Network on assisting vulnerable people.

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<sup>16</sup> Five strategies are: Private Sector Housing, Housing, Prevention of Homeless, Private Sector Renewal and Empty Property Strategies.

- 78 The Council is clear about how it intends to develop private sector housing through a range of initiatives aimed at achieving three objectives (See: What the Service aims to achieve). National and regional influences together with legislative changes are set out as the context to the strategy. An example of this is the highlighting of licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO), the introduction of the Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) at an early stage, and the contribution to the London Housing Strategy and the Housing Plan. The strategy is supported by a detailed action plan which is monitored on a six weekly basis by officers drawn from the range of contributing services.
- 79 However, although the approach to energy efficiency in respect of affordable warmth is included, the Council has missed the opportunity to set out its expectations of the private sector on the use of sustainable materials, particularly where it is making grants available to refurbish and improve properties.
- 80 In addition, although there is demonstrable high level support for the work of private sector housing services, it is not explicit in the Community and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy which was updated in 2003; the only issue to be reflected in the action plan is in relation to temporary accommodation. This could mean that the considerable contribution made by private sector housing is not monitored at the strategic level or fully recognised for future planning.
- 81 The Empty Property Strategy 2003-2006 is well written and shows a good level of understanding of the impact of empty homes on people in housing need, the environment and costs to the authority of dealing with homelessness. There are seven objectives which link into the need to reduce the level of council owned empty properties, and achieving the private sector DHS objectives by 2010, a national target.
- 82 Challenging targets within the strategy have been set. These include making 15 units of residential accommodation from commercial premises by 2006, and introducing a compulsory leasing scheme. The Council are also involved in a range of projects to deal with current, long term, pre 1919 empty properties. These include private finance initiative (PFI) schemes and others which will result in the refurbishment and increase in the number of homes for rent. Schemes also deal with squatted, abandoned or illegally occupied dwellings together with the re-designation and refurbishment of surplus sheltered housing and social services dwellings to provide temporary housing for homeless people. The Council are tackling the problems through a range of approaches in order to increase the supply of affordable housing as well as improving health and safety conditions and preserving housing for future generations.
- 83 The Council have a well developed and embedded approach to the involvement of stakeholders in the development of their strategies. The work undertaken on the Private Sector Renewal Strategy is typical and includes consulting with previous service users, including groups for BME Communities; posting the draft strategy on the Council's website; holding open days, often jointly with partners such as the London Borough of Camden; discussions with the Landlords and Tenants Focus Group, and internal with appropriate services. Good use is made of existing consultation frameworks, such as the Community Advice Forum.

This leads to a high level of ownership across stakeholders to meeting the identified priorities. It has also resulted in the development of the positive relationships which ultimately improve the maximisation of available resources.

- 84** Additional resources have been made available by the Council to support the consultative approach. A Landlord Advisor is in place who works closely with internal and external partners and stakeholders. This is the main point of contact for private sector landlords and agents for the provision of advice and guidance on landlord management issues.
- 85** The Council has responded positively and actively in relation to the implementation of the Housing Act 2004, most provisions of which came into effect from April 2006. A budget of £200,000 for set up costs over 2005/06 and 2006/07 was agreed by the Council. A lead officer was seconded to work on the planning and implementation of the Act since March 2005. A draft policy on HMO licensing was widely consulted upon and approved in November 2005. Targeted training plans were delivered for staff in advance of April 2006 in addition to those provided free by the former ODMP. The Council also facilitated training and updates for landlords through the Landlords and Tenants Forum. Officers use this regular and well attended meeting to consult and this is supported by other events undertaken by consultants to obtain an objective view. This has put the Council in a strong position to ensure that service users directly benefit from increased numbers of better quality accommodation and higher standards of housing management for the future.
- 86** The Council has taken a positive approach to enforcement by targeting financial assistance. The development of the Private Sector Renewal Strategy was timely and enabled the implementation of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002. Grants to assist landlords, particularly with HMO, to bring properties up to a safe and decent standard have been used by the Council over many years. The rationale of the approach was to keep as many units of accommodation available to rent as possible to alleviate the problems of homeless people by supporting landlords financially to repair and improve their properties.
- 87** This approach is supported by a range of activity to encourage the repair of properties rather than demolition and reconstruction. The capital budget for grants totalled nearly £2 million for 2005/06. Activity includes the following.
- Strong and long-standing working relationships with many landlords in the borough supported by the work of the Landlords and Tenants forum with a sub group for detailed consultation. The forum is also used for dissemination of information and this is effective because it is held on a quarterly basis and is very well attended.
  - The Council works with landlords through grant aid in order to obtain nomination rights which are then used to accommodate homeless people.
  - Publishing clear and well-written information on grant aid and loans on line and distributed through the Council's public access points.

- Membership of the London Landlords' Accreditation Scheme from July 2004. The scheme acknowledges and encourages good landlords, provides a code of guidance on tenancy law, disrepair and other aspects of property and tenancy management. The scheme requires landlords to undergo a one-day training course and accreditation is a requirement for providing temporary accommodation, receiving grants and HMO licences.
- Operating a policy of refusing planning permission for the conversion of HMO into self contained flats which reduces the overall numbers available for rent. The Council has been supported by the Secretary of State in two recent cases that went to appeal.

- 88 The Council has taken a considered approach that using grant funding for demolition and reconstruction is unjustified due to the high property values in the area; even dilapidated property is worth investment by the private sector.
- 89 Good partnership working is demonstrated in a number of ways for the improved delivery of services in a cost effective way. Finsbury Park is a single regeneration budget (SRB) area crossing the boundaries of Haringey and Hackney. Islington lead the private sector housing group which includes representatives from each of the councils, home improvement agencies and the Finsbury Park Partnership. The home improvement agency is a partnership with a registered social landlord, supplemented by a handy-person service and hospital discharge scheme funded through Supporting People grant. Outcomes from the schemes are 87 homes improved through SRB, and 316 handy person jobs undertaken between 2003/04 up to December 2005.
- 90 Considerable joint working takes place through the North London Sub Region, consisting of six London boroughs especially bringing empty properties back into use. This is supported by a jointly funded co-ordinator.
- 91 Partners are universally positive about their relationships with the council saying that they were very co-operative, accessible with a 'can do' attitude. Meetings are held regularly of the forum and are well attended. Partners felt that the council positively encouraged working relationships and utilised that resource well exceeding set performance targets such as in the SRB area.
- 92 The Council demonstrates a commitment to meeting the Home Energy Conservation Act target of reducing energy consumption by 30 per cent from the baseline figure. There has been a fuel poverty strategy in place since 1986, last updated in 2000. The Council has established the Energy Efficiency Advice Centre (EEAC), part of a national network supported by the Energy Saving Trust, on the main street in Islington. Advice and assistance is provided in a wide range of ways including face to face in the advice centre, talks at pensioners' luncheon clubs, health-related charities and BME associations, advice surgeries at local Neighbourhood Offices, a 'Grants Check' service for all schemes currently available and free-phone telephone helpline.
- 93 In addition the Council has undertaken a range of capital schemes on council owned property and funded Safe and Warm grants in the private sector. Funding has increased year on year from 2003/04 together with numbers of grants approved and completed as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Safe and Warm grants between 2003/04 and December 2005/06**

	<b>No. of grants approved and completed</b>	<b>Spend at year end £'000</b>	<b>Budget for year £'000</b>
2003/04	110	186	250
2004/05	187	302	302
Nine months to December 2005/06	96	250	350

*Source: LB Islington Private Sector Housing Grants monitoring sheets*

- 94 There is no current plan to update the Council's fuel poverty strategy which is now over five years old. It does not take into account the latest stock condition and housing needs surveys or changes in the legislation. This is a weak element in the Council's strategic approach, shows a lack of clarity on what the Council is aiming to achieve in this area, and how the activities undertaken contribute to objectives.

### **Impact and effectiveness of approach**

- 95 This is an area of strength for the Council. Services are proactive and benefit from good performance management, working with landlords and investment in training for both officers and landlords for the benefit of service users. The Council is taking a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to managing demand for affordable housing through the use of targeted grant aid, support, rent guarantees and landlords insurance scheme, bringing empty homes back into use, procuring good quality temporary accommodation and providing housing advice services focussed on prevention of homelessness. Weaknesses have been highlighted in the effectiveness of dealing with homelessness enquires, high rent levels in temporary accommodation, high level of fees paid to the Care and Repair scheme and the effectiveness of the equity release scheme in supporting the Council's approach.

### **Enforcement action**

- 96 Residential Environmental Health Services (REHS) are providing good services and proactively tackling poor housing conditions in the private sector. Relationships with a range of landlords are good and have been developed over many years. This has been given additional impetus by the high level of preparation by the Council for the implementation of the Housing Act 2004. Landlords and officers are well prepared for the HMO licensing and Housing, Health and Safety Rating System. The Council is leading sub regionally in both areas and has taken a strong approach to Landlord accreditation to demonstrate commitment to good standards in both condition and management.

- 97** Services have been improved over time through evaluation of outcomes and taking action. For example, REHS started a voluntary HMO registration scheme in 1998. Evaluation of the scheme showed that it was labour intensive, expensive and that mainly co-operative and involved landlords were applying so the scheme was discontinued in 2001. The process of enforcement has been improved by stopping sending landlords informal schedules and moving directly to the service of 'minded to notices'; this reduces the time taken to get improvements done to HMO. In addition, officers' time is now properly targeted on requests for assistance where formal action can be taken by a tightening up of complaints procedures.
- 98** Performance information over the last five years shows the Council has been active in tackling poor housing conditions. Enforcement action has been undertaken consistently resulting in an average 57 HMO per year from 2001/02 to 2005/06 improved and an average of 137 unfit dwellings made fit over the same period. In each year Council's own targets were exceeded demonstrating good performance against overall objectives (for full figures please refer to Appendix 1 - Performance Indicators).
- 99** Works in default have been undertaken by the Council an indication that it is making full use of available powers. At one time these works were undertaken by a consortium on behalf of a number of neighbouring councils. This has since been dropped as it was found not to be cost effective for the small number of works undertaken. Currently works are undertaken by contractors working for the Council on other maintenance work. It is not clear how many such works have been undertaken in the last year or the value as the performance is not reported.
- 100** The work of REHS is governed by clear standards which are regularly monitored by senior officers. Standards are supported by written policies and procedures which give clear guidance to officers so that they are clear about what is expected of them.
- 101** The Council has used grant aid to good effect to achieve real improvements in the condition of HMO. This is reflected in the investment over time. The reduction in HMO spend reflects the need for officers to have a manageable workloads, that as work progresses more difficult HMO would require more intensive work and the numbers of HMO were likely to decrease overall as more properties are made fit.

**Table 3 HMO Grants from 2003/04 to December 2005/06**

The budget for 2004/05 has been reduced twice from the original £450,000

	<b>No of grants approved and completed</b>	<b>Spend £'000</b>	<b>Budget £'000</b>
2003/04	60	465	580
2004/05	33	257	257
Up to December 2005/06	28	156	350

*Source: London Borough of Islington Private Sector Housing Grants monitoring*

**102** The issue of under spending available grant resources is discussed in 'How well does the service manage performance' under Judgement 2.

**103** Good use has been made of the freedoms available to the Council under the Regulatory Reform Order. In addition to using financial incentives to motivate owners to improve their properties which benefit the residents, the Council has also adopted good practice in the following ways.

- Linking grant aid to landlords with accreditation supported by training.
- Where assistance is given for renovation of an owner-occupied or empty property the decent homes standard must be met on completion of works.
- Decent home standard assessments will be carried out on all homes where Safe and Warm Grants are to be given and action taken when feasible to bring the homes occupied by vulnerable people to the DHS.
- The Council has taken up membership of the Houseproud scheme, a cross authority equity release scheme run by an independent agent to assist owner occupiers to improve their properties. This is linked to the care and repair agent who provides the home improvement agency and handy person scheme for older people and those with disabilities. However, there is a lack of information on the effectiveness of this scheme as outcomes are not reported.

### **Empty homes**

**104** The Council has adopted a proactive approach to dealing with empty properties across public and private sectors. Databases are regularly updated (see Private sector stock condition and housing need data) and owners are contacted annually to encourage them to bring back properties into use by giving advice on the range of options, such as leasing scheme managed by a registered social landlord. The empty property scheme is promoted through publicity campaigns, such as using London buses, and progress is reported to the Landlord and Tenants' forum.

- 105 The Council offer to help owners to contact developers with the aim of purchasing and improving the property. Where negotiated options fail the Council will make a compulsory purchase order. There is one long term void where the Council is currently taking this approach, and another underway.
- 106 The Council has exceeded their own targets as the following table shows although the target is not challenging as it has been retained at the same level for 2005/06 despite significantly exceeding it in 2004/05.

**Table 4 Empty properties returned to use 2004/05 and to December 2005 and use of grants from 2003/04**

Year	Target	Outturn	Grants approved and completed	Outturn spend £'000	Original Budgets £'000
2003/04	-	-	8	246	350
2004/05	125	163	17	702*	702
To December 2005	125	108	14	322	850

\* This includes £300,000 sub regional funding

Source: London Borough of Islington

- 107 The issue of under spending available grant resources is discussed in 'How well does the service manage performance' under Judgement 2.
- 108 A sub regional co-ordinator is employed to target empty properties by Islington on behalf of the North London Sub Region. This resource manages the region's 2005/06 empty property programme supported by a joint budget of £3.5 million across six boroughs over a two-year period.
- 109 The Council makes good use of existing information, such as council tax records, to identify and follow up on empty properties. This is supplemented by visits through the street surveys and reporting by the public through free-phone hotline, by email and on line.

#### **Aids and adaptations**

- 110 The Council has consistently supported disabled and older people remaining in the community through its approach to aids and adaptations. Satisfaction with the works is good with the care and repair agency consistently achieving the target of 90 per cent of service users being satisfied or very satisfied with services.

- 111** The grant allocation for mandatory disabled facilities grants (DFG) is £600,000. The budget is monitored monthly by a departmental capital budget monitoring group. This is a reactive area of work as there is no waiting list and the Council are able to respond to the need expressed through applications during the year. The lack of waiting list may reflect the young age profile in the borough. There are no target timescales in place to measure performance between the approach by service user and completion of application. This adds considerable waiting time experienced by the user until works are undertaken.
- 112** In order to reduce the overall waiting time for DFG the Council fund a dedicated occupational therapist (OT) and surveyor. This has improved the service for users by reducing the time waiting for assessment for grant as any cases which would result in an application for grant are immediately referred to the dedicated OT. In 2001 the wait for an OT assessment was a year only after this could a DFG be progressed. This is now undertaken within days for the first assessment.
- 113** The specialist DFG OT has delivered a number of benefits for the Council and for service users in the following ways.
- The DFG OT is able to manage a high level of cases due to the expertise developed in this area. This is currently about 106 and compares favourably to generic OT who, with varied caseloads, the Council state manage about 40 cases at a time.
  - There is good working relationships both with the dedicated surveyor and care and repair agency and many visits are undertaken jointly to reduce the waiting time for works and present a co-ordinated approach for the service users.
  - Response times for joint visits are good as the DFG OT has no other priorities.
- 114** The Council are supporting older and disabled people in repairing and adapting their homes through a care and repair scheme run by an RSL agent for both Islington and Camden councils. This scheme is governed by a service level agreement with challenging annual targets. The scheme is supplemented by a Handyperson service. Performance is monitored on a quarterly basis. Key performance targets were exceeded, for example, in 2004/05 major works over £1,000 took an average of 22 weeks against a target of 45 weeks, and the time taken between grant approval to works on site for 2004/05 averaged three weeks against a target of eight weeks.
- 115** The agency also runs a Home from Hospital scheme which it calculates over a nine month period from April to December 2005 saved the health service £243,264 and assisted 35 patients. Although much of the activity involves cleaning and reorganising furniture etc, five patients benefited from repairs or heating works. As standard each patient received a visit from the handyperson service that will provide free advice on home safety, accident prevention, plus the supply and installation of smoke alarms and low energy light bulbs.

- 116** The Council is encouraging owner occupiers to make use of equity release schemes to help fund repairs, improvements or adaptations to bring them in line with the HHSRS and Decent Homes Standard. The Houseproud Scheme was launched in February 2004 to make available loans and grants for people on low incomes secured on the equity of the property. In addition, a Council grant of up to £20,000 is available to those on the scheme. However, it is not clear whether this approach has been effective and what the take up has been. The care and repair agency were unable to make use of this approach during 2004/05.

### **Homelessness prevention**

- 117** The Council has a good understanding of the main causes of homelessness within the borough, the nature and aspirations of the client group, and an understanding of gaps in provision. Making additional affordable housing available is a key activity of the housing service and more homes have been completed year on year for rent, shared ownership and Homebuy; housing completions number 273 in 2003/04, 309 in 2004/05 and 411 in 2005/06 up to December 2005.
- 118** New schemes are being reviewed and expanded in order to increase the range of housing options for homeless people and those in housing need. Examples include; piloting the provision of accommodation for 16/17 year olds with private landlords and undertaking a feasibility study of the future of all reception centre stock and using HMO accommodation as a possible alternative.
- 119** The Council is delivering a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to managing housing demand through the prevention of homelessness. There are close working relationships between housing advice officers, residential environmental health officer and the partnership officers who are responsible for procuring temporary accommodation. Potential homelessness is tackled at an early stage by a specialist negotiator based in the Housing Advice Centre (HAC) who aims to prevent homelessness through a negotiated approach with landlords. More difficult cases, where illegal eviction or harassment is involved, are referred within HAC to a tenancy relations officer who uses enforcement to help prevent homelessness. Service user satisfaction with the service is high and is proving effective in dealing with poorly behaving landlords. Two high profile cases have secured convictions against agencies for harassing tenants since 2004. This demonstrates to unscrupulous landlords that the Council is committed to taking firm action to help tenants retain their homes.
- 120** The Housing Advice Centre provides good quality advice and assistance. Good use is made of the Rent Guarantee and the Landlord Insurance Scheme to help people secure accommodation in the private sector. The annual target figure of 48 was exceeded with 63 applicants assisted. The Council raised the target for 2005/06 to a challenging figure of 138 and 103 applicants had been assisted by December 2005 making the achievement of the target likely.

- 121 There was some criticism of the schemes in that residents were concerned about the lack of security of tenure. There was a lack of understanding among those we spoke to about their situation, although the Council are clearly giving a high level of assistance and access into good quality accommodation for those who have no statutory right to social housing. The Council is also providing more choice, through a choice based lettings scheme for temporary housing, and making good use of private sector housing to provide housing of a good standard for those in need.
- 122 The Council has established an effective partnership to help victims of domestic violence remain in their own homes. The Homeshelter scheme won the 2005 Chartered Institute of Housing Excellence in providing homelessness service award and helps by providing security arrangements in the person's own home. The scheme is led by the Council in partnership with the police, contracts and a voluntary organisation, Domestic Violence Matters.
- 123 Performance in this area is regularly monitored on a monthly basis and bi-monthly meetings are held between HAC and partnership officers on properties procured for homeless applicants to strengthen working arrangements and address any performance issues.
- 124 However, performance on providing formal decisions on homelessness has been weak. The Council has failed to achieve its own target, decision within 33 days, for the last two years. Eighty-one per cent was achieved in 2003/04 against a target of 86 per cent, but only 73 per cent was achieved in 2004/05 and the target had been dropped down to 80 per cent. This means that homeless and vulnerable people were not being informed within a reasonable time about the outcome of their homeless application making it difficult for them to make informed decisions about their options.
- 125 Housing Advice Centre officers do not have a dedicated phone line or email access for housing benefit enquiries. They also do not have access to housing benefit read only screen although rent problems are frequently at the root of homeless applications and requests for housing advice. This creates additional stress for staff who are unable to resolve issues at first contact. This situation delays dealing with homelessness enquiries and undermines the Council's approach to preventing homelessness.

### **Temporary accommodation**

- 126 The Council has taken a proactive approach to managing the needs of homeless people in a borough which has little land for the development of new affordable housing. There are two dedicated officers within the Council responsible for procuring temporary accommodation for the Rent Guarantee and Landlord Insurance schemes. In addition, new contracts for licensed and leased accommodation have been tendered for in the last two years. These have been awarded to providers who provide high quality accommodation and high standards of service provision against agreed procurement targets including type and location of properties. In total, since 2003 1,443 temporary accommodation units have been secured including 54 bed and breakfast units (not for families).

- 127 By successfully procuring temporary accommodation the Council were able to meet central government's target for ending the use of hostel accommodation for homeless families one year early. This helps to minimise the impact of homelessness on families.
- 128 The Council closely monitor conditions against contractual obligations and problems in temporary accommodation to ensure high standards for service users. Planned visits take place on a regular basis covered by a formal procedure. Checklists are completed recording property standards, repairs and any health and safety issues. Any concerns are reported to residential environmental health which can result in the cancellation of accommodation. Suitability of accommodation is also checked in relation to client's physical and mental vulnerability. A dedicated officer, ODPM<sup>17</sup> funded, assists people in temporary accommodation to access social housing through the choice based lettings scheme, Home Connections.
- 129 The concept of choice based lettings has been extended to temporary accommodation to enable peoples' needs to be better met. The scheme has also been successful in reducing void turnaround and reducing costs to the Council (see detail in Value for Money).
- 130 The approach has also brought benefits as a result of multi-agency working with housing associations and other providers. Information is shared with the North London Sub Group about prices, landlords and tenants, using the Setting the Standard system, and sharing information about temporary accommodation placements, through the NOTIFY<sup>18</sup>, London boroughs temporary accommodation information web based system run by the Greater London Association Housing and Homelessness Unit.
- 131 However, the Council is facing long term difficulties with residents in temporary accommodation who are trapped by high rent levels. We spoke to residents whose rent levels of approximately £245 per week covered by housing benefit. All single parents, they were very concerned about how they would meet obligations to make themselves available for work, but then not be able to pay the rent. The Council are aware of the issue but have yet to develop an approach to assist them. This is a significant problem for people on low incomes in inner London boroughs.

## Planning

- 132 To support the increase housing for those on low incomes, section 106 strategies<sup>19</sup> have been developed for the four Islington areas to reflect affordable housing need as well as environmental improvements, retail improvements, and transport infrastructure.

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<sup>17</sup> ODPM Office of the Deputy Prime Minister now the Department for Communities and Local Government

<sup>18</sup> A web based information system about all households currently in temporary accommodation and those that have left temporary accommodation recently. The system then compares households' current addresses with those on the system the previous week. Where it finds that a change has occurred, NOTIFY amends a household's information accordingly. It also sends a weekly email alert to the relevant agencies. This tells them how many homeless households have recently moved into, within and out of their borough. They can then access the notifications website and find out more about these households

<sup>19</sup> Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990

- 133** The local development framework sets a target of 25 per cent of new housing development, on sites of 15 or more units, should be for social rented housing and 10 per cent for intermediate rented. The policy supports quality HMO development, conversions providing larger number of smaller units and encouraging mixed housing types.
- 134** Information is shared to good effect between planning services and residential environmental health services. Change of use applications are jointly assessed for the potential of providing affordable housing, and the Council takes a co-ordinated approach to prevent HMO being redeveloped into single units with the result that overall units of potential affordable housing would be lost.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 135** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council has a robust approach to achieving value for money across private sector housing services and regularly compare themselves with high performing councils. Performance has improved year on year with the exception of decisions on homelessness, a local indicator. Grant aid is well managed and targeted at the Council's priorities and there has been considerable success in leveraging in external funding extending and improving service delivery particularly in energy efficiency and providing security in vulnerable people's homes. The Council is not able to show value for money in respect of the high rents of temporary accommodation and evaluation of the care and repair scheme in relation to fees.

## How do costs compare?

- 136** The Council are providing costs effective public protection and licensing services. Service costs are benchmarked through a range of different groups linked to the North London Sub Regional group, ALG and GLA<sup>20</sup>. A benchmarking exercise in 2003/04 compared the provision of environmental health services with CIPFA<sup>21</sup> family of similar boroughs showed overall favourable comparison with nine other councils.
- Islington as a small but densely populated inner London Borough has the highest number of HMO and more than the average number of unfit dwellings, so the demand factors are especially high.
  - Eighteen per cent of time is spent on housing standards and the employee costs for this work amounted to £597,000. This is just below average for Inner London. The unit cost for housing activity, including grants and statutory notices, is £535 which is well below the average of £632.
- 137** The Council has taken part in a benchmarking exercise with Westminster City Council on planning activities undertaken and cost basis. This has demonstrated that Islington are carrying out more activities per staff member and have significantly lower staffing costs per unit.

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<sup>20</sup>

ALG - Association of London Government GLA - Greater London Authority

<sup>21</sup>

CIPFA Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy

- 138** Performance on numbers of improved dwellings has improved in percentage terms year on year since 2000/01 with a total of 645 dwellings improved up to 2004/05. Compared with other London boroughs in 2004/05 on bringing empty properties back into use Islington's performance is in the mid 50 per cent with 163 properties where top performance ranges between 301 and 834 properties brought back into use.
- 139** The Council are making effective use of temporary accommodation which is resulting in reducing costs as shown in the following table. The Council has been able to achieve this despite the closure of three large hostels in 2005 and loss of 155 units of accommodation. This is due to the expansion of numbers of temporary accommodation homes. The move from hostels with shared facilities to self contained accommodation in the private sector has also resulted in improved conditions for service users.

**Table 5 Costs of temporary accommodation between 2003 and 2006**

	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>2005/06</b>
General Fund TA budget	£1,665,500	£1,556,430	£1,303,100
Average no. of households in TA	1,421	1,524	1,501
Unit cost	£1,172	£1,021	£868

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

### **How is value for money managed?**

- 140** The Council are managing grant aid effectively and targeting spend on priorities. Grant spend is monitored on a monthly basis. Spend is profiled and outturn is adjusted against profile. As there are no waiting lists for grants this means that the service is adequately resourced and residents do not have to wait for lengthy periods in order to receive grant assistance. This is particularly important for applicants for disabled facilities grants in order to remain independent in their own homes.
- 141** Other examples of how the council have managed their grant resources to best advantage are as follows.
- Increasing individual amount of monies for HMO grants to provide an additional incentive and reflect market conditions.

- PLEASE<sup>22</sup> grant aid was separated out from HMO grants in 2005/06 to highlight their availability. This has increased take up from 1 in 2003/04 of £1,467, none in 2004/05 to 12 completions valued at £60,623 and 20 approvals in 2005/06. This is targeting resources to meet energy efficiency objectives.
  - Empty Property Grants policy is adjusted to meet priorities. Currently the largest grants are paid for two bed flats as these are in the highest demand.
  - Removal of grant condition which requires a landlord to have owned an HMO for a specific length of time to encourage retention or sale to another landlord.
  - Diversion of funds for Safe and Warm grants from £302,000 in 2004/05 to £450,000 in 2005/06 to meet demand and a Council priority to improve housing conditions by providing energy efficiency and security measures in homes occupied by older and vulnerable people.
- 142** There has been success in leveraging in external funds to support private sector housing activity. Neighbourhood Renewal funding has been used to fund the street survey in order to identify non-decent homes, licensable HMO and empty properties. The funding was also used for the Safe and Warm scheme contributing to achieving the decent homes standard in the private sector.
- 143** Significant funding was obtained through the successful single regeneration budget bid which enabled the Council to establish the Safe and Warm scheme in Finsbury Park. The outcome in 2004/05 was 49 dwellings improved in the area and 144 homes with upgraded security. This was undertaken in partnership with Haringey and Hackney councils.
- 144** Arrangements for the implementation of changes under the Housing Act 2004 for HMO licensing have been put in place successfully. While set up costs have been met by the Council, fees have been set at the level intended to recover the cost of ongoing service delivery. These were determined following consultation through the Landlords and Tenants' forum.
- 145** The Council is working on a regional basis through the London private Sector Housing Partnership with nine other London boroughs and universities to enable joint provision of publications, information and training for landlords. Pooled resources have been used to fund an empty properties co-ordinator for the sub region, a cost effective way of providing this resource.
- 146** The Council is committed to delivering efficiency savings year on year. The Service contributes towards this in a number of ways. Ongoing savings have been made through the implementation of choice based lettings in temporary accommodation. There have been a total of 350 properties let since January 2005. This has resulted in savings in two ways. Penalty charges are payable by the Council if nominations are not made within ten days of receipt of notification of vacancy. Between January 2004 and December 2004, 79 properties were let but £52,170 in penalty charges were incurred (equivalent to £660.37 per let).

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XX need explanation of PLEASE

This fell to £33,204 from January 2005 to December 2005 when 250 properties were let at costs of £132 per let. In addition, there were 35 cases sent to the appeals officer in 2004 and none in 2005. Overall savings have been calculated as £89,760 per annum.

- 147 The Council has taken a prudent approach to the procurement of temporary accommodation. Contracts have been negotiated with temporary accommodation providers on the basis of 60 per cent cost and 40 per cent quality with prices fixed for three years. This gives reasonable certainty to the providers that the accommodation is worth investing in, some stability for the Council to be able to meet their statutory duties and good quality for service users as the provision is governed by contract and Council officers visit to ensure standards are being maintained.
- 148 The Council has commissioned a care and repairs service to assist older and disabled people. The fee level for aids and adaptations work is charged at 15 per cent. Although this maximises income for the RSL as the managing agent, this could disadvantage those not eligible for disabled facilities grant but on lower incomes. The cost effectiveness of the service has not been recently evaluated although the service has undertaken work on 56 DFG during 2004/05 but did not complete any work funded by equity release loans. In addition to the high fee level, the service is allocating work each time on a tendered basis from a select list of contractors. There are no plans for the Council to discuss the development of modern procurement methods with the care and repair service which might deliver faster turnaround times for work and improved negotiated rates.

## Summary

- 149 Overall, the Service has been assessed as being good. Services are customer focussed to people from the range of diverse backgrounds with well developed and wide ranging involvement with stakeholders. This has informed a series of interconnected strategies and contributed to the high level of satisfaction with public protection services. Services are well promoted, deliver value for money and there is a good website. Grant aid is well funded and targeted at priorities and the Council works well with a range of partners which are delivering additional temporary accommodation for homeless people and improvements to private sector housing. Work to improve housing in the private sector is based on good quality information which is regularly updated and the Service has prepared well for the Housing Act 2004. Prevention of homelessness is a key objective and services have been aligned to achieve this including close working between different service areas.
- 150 However, there are weaknesses which need to be addressed. These include ensuring information is easily available at public access points and is consistent in respect of translation information and service standards. New tenants are not always well informed and are concerned at the high levels of rents in temporary accommodation. Referral arrangements for enforcement action with external bodies, such as the citizens' advice bureaux, are not fully effective.

Housing advice services approach to preventing homelessness is undermined by difficulties in getting information on housing benefit. The fuel poverty strategy is out of date and there are no plans to update it.

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

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

- 151 This is an area of strength for the Council. Corporately the weaknesses in capacity, developing leadership and strengthening performance have been tackled and this is evident in the delivery arrangements for private sector housing. The Service is acknowledged as being proactive by neighbouring authorities not least due to the approach taken to seeking out poor housing conditions and basing the approach on good quality information. Large scale activity in a cross authority SRB bid demonstrates good partnership working, and the target for getting families out of bed and breakfast was exceeded by one year through the efficient and procurement of good quality temporary accommodation. The weakness in the Council's approach is elements of performance on homelessness decisions that undermines the services to homeless applicants.
- 152 The Service is accessible through a range of public access points, a good standard and navigable website and a wide range of printed information. Staff, particularly in public protection and tenancy relations, show a very positive approach to what the Council is trying to achieve, are well informed and highly thought of by service users. Some low morale is evident in the Housing Advice Centre together with weak performance.
- 153 The Council have tackled a range of weaknesses identified in the 2002 CPA including improving capacity, developing leadership and strengthening performance management including adequate and robust scrutiny. Improvements include the following.
- The attraction of funding from the ODPM to improve performance management in particular driving up staff appraisals from 43 per cent to 90 per cent. Poor performance is being addressed and gaps in knowledge and expertise are being addressed through development plans and easy access to targeted training.
  - The Council hold Investors in People accreditation and the public protection services hold the charter mark award.
  - Sorting 200 actions into five priority areas steered by the officer/member Way ahead Group. This has been undertaken through challenge days with key staff, joint board away days, and focus groups with citizen panel members.
- 154 The Council has not only dealt with the recommendations of the inspection report of 2000 on private sector housing, but have dealt with the changing environment. This includes the arrangements put in place to implement the Housing Act 2004 and actions to address weaknesses identified in housing advice and homelessness.

- 155** Neighbouring councils acknowledge that work on empty properties in Islington was considerably ahead of other councils in the sub region. It was an advantage for the group for the Council to take the lead which led to a successful bid of £3.5 million over two financial years to return empty properties back into occupation. One hundred and sixty-three empty properties were brought back into use in Islington during 2004/05 against a target of 125.
- 156** The Council has taken a proactive approach to service improvement in seeking out poor housing and basing their activities on strong information. It has adopted the Enforcement Concordat and this is published together with how Islington will operate it. Working with the Fire Service they surveyed and risk assessed HMO above 2,500 licensed premises in the borough. They then agreed on which service would be the most appropriate for enforcement action and this resulted in a programme of health and safety improvements. This work was achieved within existing budget through improved performance allowing new areas of work to be undertaken.
- 157** A consultant was employed to undertake the process for the HMO licensing with the emphasis on checking by the admin support staff rather than EHO as a more cost efficient approach. They have been through the process in great detail with the possible responses and support staff underwent training in preparation for the 6 April implementation of the new scheme.
- 158** The service has made a change to process on the service of an enforcement notice landlords are asked to apply for an application and the officers take the time to go through it with them. This has proved more effective than the previous approach which was to send it with the grant.
- 159** In conjunction with Haringey and Hackney Councils through Finsbury Park SRB Islington has delivered improvements to 49 private sector properties and improved security in a further 144 properties exceeding the targets of 40 and 75 respectively.
- 160** The Council has shown commitment to developing and supporting the relationship with private sector landlords. This has been demonstrated through the appointment of a Landlord Advisor, and the successful preparation for the implementation of the Housing Act 2004 with the involvement of landlords.
- 161** The Council were able to meet central government's target to stop using bed and breakfast accommodation for families one year early through the successful procurement of temporary accommodation and accessing good quality rented accommodation in the private sector.
- 162** The Service is making effective use of its own and external resources. There are no waiting lists and applications for grant aid are being met on an annual basis. Funding is vired between budgets to target the current priority with the exception of disabled facilities grants. Examples include the encouragement of greater action on energy efficiency and bringing smaller units of accommodation back into use.

#### 44 Balanced Homes Market | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 163 The approach to value for money is embedded in the activities of the Service. The implementation of choice based lettings for temporary accommodation had a target of increasing resident choice. The approach has resulted in reduced turnaround time and rent loss to the RSL. It has also reduced penalty charges to the Council. A scheme to fast track return home from hospital has resulted in nearly £250,000 worth of savings for health service partners and reduced the potential penalties for the Council for delayed discharge.
- 164 The exception is the care and repair service level agreement where top rate fees are charged and there has been no recent evaluation of the service to determine whether these fees are justified as it reduces funding available for works and impacts on those just outside the eligibility for grant.
- 165 Performance has improved across all public protection areas of service. The Council can demonstrate year on year improvement in services through a range of performance indicators such as overall satisfaction with services and bringing empty properties back into use in the borough. The Service also has a range of local indicators that are used to manage performance and challenge any areas that are not making progress.
- 166 The exception is homelessness. Performance is weak against targets (see Homelessness prevention) and even though the target has been revised downwards for 2005/06. The impact is to undermine the Council's overall approach to preventing homelessness by making it difficult for homeless applicants to make informed decisions about their housing options.

#### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 167 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. A strong strategic approach is supported by a robust performance management system including a proactive approach to appraisals. The Service has delivered well against action plans and external review although target setting needs strengthening. Staff are not clear about how they perform against service targets and there is some low morale in the housing advice centre. The Service is well supported by councillors and senior managers, and learning from others, such as through benchmarking, is used to improve services. The Service has developed good practice in respect of empty properties which others are learning from.
- 168 The Council has developed a strong strategic approach over the various aspects of private sector housing (see section on the strategic approach to private sector housing for the detail). The objectives and targets are brought together in service plans with dedicated action plans and linked to each member of staff's appraisal interview. The whole process is well linked together which help staff to understanding how they contribute to the delivery of overall objectives for the Service.

- 169** The Council has in place a rigorous performance management system supported by half yearly appraisals and targeted training. Performance is closely linked to the service plan objectives which are based on departmental performance plans. These plans incorporate the action plans of the relevant strategy, such as the Private Sector Housing Strategy. There is regular monitoring of individual officer's progress against targets, and where performance does not meet requirements individual action plans are created and discussed on a weekly basis. Managers undertake annual accompanied and verification visits to monitor the quality of officers work and identify training needs. The outcome is a focus on improving quality and the delivery of service objectives by tackling areas of weak performance.
- 170** The management framework ensures that poor performance can be challenged at the political and managerial level. There is strong support by elected members for improving performance management framework and there is significant opportunity for challenge and scrutiny of performance eg one hundred key performance indicators and discussion with directors on a regular basis on the exceptions to good performance backed up by a newly implemented electronic performance management system.
- 171** The various sections of the service in housing and public protection have monthly management team meeting to review performance against the service targets set out in the annual service plan. Out of these discussions targets are reviewed for the forthcoming service plan. Performance against standards are published to staff for to improve motivation.
- 172** There are no performance information (PI) appropriate to the service in the Hot 100 PI which are reviewed by councillors but they do look at new areas. Reports have been made to councillors on the preparation for the implementation of the Housing Act 2004. This will be followed up with an end of year and six month reports after implementation; a proactive approach which will be included in the performance management group.
- 173** The Service has responded well to external review. The residential environmental health best value improvement plan was established to respond to the recommendations of the Audit Commission's report of 2000. With the exception of four areas, all improvements were implemented to target time and those missed were delayed only by one or two months. The performance plan for 2005/06 was reviewed on the half year which showed good progress against most target areas with some achieved. Where there was delay this was identified with remedial action to be taken to ensure the target time was not missed. The performance plan for 2006/07 will include a value for money section and will be costed and there will be objectives will be set for efficiency savings.
- 174** There are action plans covering each of the three objectives but not all targets are quantified so it is difficult to judge how much progress has been made over time or set out a measure of effectiveness for example, conduct street surveys - target date ongoing; improve the energy efficiency of vulnerable households - target date march 2005 to spend all budget. Others are quantified for example number of properties to be made fit each year.

**46** Balanced Homes Market | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 175** It is not clear to what service standards public protection are working to. Staff say they work to BVPI and corporate standards but not clear about service standards. Staff are aware that there is an external mystery shopping on a monthly basis to check on telephone answering but it is not clear what feedback is given to indicate whether targets are being met or what improvements may be needed.
- 176** There is a feeling among housing advice centre (HAC) staff that new initiatives are imposed, that learning has not been developed from within. We were told that it is the senior officers who meet with other officers from other authorities and come back with new ideas which they want to implement with little consultation. The front line officers would like to meet with other officers to share good practices, mutual secondments, shadowing other related areas of work for example but there is little opportunity for this.
- 177** At the time of the inspection the Council had retained commitment to 'One Islington' vision which has been in place since 2002 and is linked to the four corporate priorities of customer focus, performance improvement, regeneration and sustainability. It is also linked to the Community and neighbourhood Renewal strategy which was developed by the LSP and includes housing as a priority for the poorest communities.
- 178** The Service has good support at the senior level in the organisation. A lead councillor has been identified at cabinet level who is regularly updated on service issues by the senior managers from public protection and residential environmental health.
- 179** Progress on moving the Council to higher levels of the Equalities standard are monitored by a corporate equality action group. The group meets monthly to assess progress against plans across the Council as well as sharing any developments in good practice.
- 180** Good practice and information are regularly shared with the other London boroughs in the North London Sub Regional Group. An example is the empty property officers' group and the London Empty Properties Officers Forum which is chaired by the Empty Homes Agency. Information to aid learning includes options for owners, ways to identify and report empty properties, grant policies and unit costs. The partnership service has joined a rent income excellence network and is going to commission a consultant to review their services and see how they could improve.
- 181** Good use of benchmarking against beacon councils has been undertaken and positive practice has been incorporated for example, the customer survey form focuses on the beginning of the process which gives better returns; the good links with the university which the Council want to follow up on, such as using publicity to encourage students to identify potential HMO that might need licensing. The outcomes are of direct benefit to service users in improvements to services and higher numbers of rented properties being made available.

- 182 Principal EHO officers are involved in sub regional working, such as London Landlords Day, delivering training for BME landlords and tenants, for RSL about HMO licensing and rating services and promote their services at a range of meetings, conferences and talks; sit on the national steering group of the national HMO network responding to government policy and become involved in lobbying.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 183 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council has invested heavily in training to meet new needs and develop existing skills. Successful bids have been made for inward investment and e-government targets are being fulfilled at an early stage. Sufficient resources are available to support grant aid and the Council has prepared with for new legislation. IT resources are being used to improve services on site, using handhelds for example, and the Council are developing smarter working. Reception centres for homeless people are being reviewed to eliminate shared facilities and improve conditions. Partnership working is producing good results. There are weaknesses around the Housing Advice Centre in that morale is low and there are has been staff shortages for some time. There are gaps in training and the overall approach to preventing homelessness is undermined. Targets for some staff through the appraisal service are weak.
- 184 The Council has focussed on improving the standard and quality of officers' skills through a programme of targeted training. Housing Aid Officers have weekly half day training sessions when the centre is closed. Recently sessions have covered benefit fraud awareness, referrals to supported accommodation and liaison with Environmental Health, Supporting People and the Homeshelter scheme. REHS officers have received training on topics such as fire safety, the decent homes standard, carrying out works in default, tenancy relations and asbestos awareness.
- 185 There are a range of training courses available for officers which are set out in a two-year training plan from 2004-2006 covering appropriate elements for the work of private sector housing. Training on HHSRS, for example, has been provided both in house and by external trainers in good time for the implementation of the new legislation.
- 186 The focus of training has promoted the need for joint working in order to meet common objectives. This has resulted in close working relationships between housing aid and residential environmental health officers so that service users have easy access to the help they need. There is a strong link through the Tenancy Relations Officer who is located within the housing advice team, but works very closely with enforcement officers to help people remain in their homes while conditions are being improved.

**48** Balanced Homes Market | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 187** The Council has been successful in co-ordinating an extension of its grant from the London Housing Board for sub-regional work on empty properties for the next two years. The total amount is £3.375 million, of which £2.25 million is for core funding and the remainder for additional projects that promote innovation. The projects include the provision of financial advice to owners of empty properties to undertake repair works with the provision of competitive loans from specialist lenders; enforcement activity across the sub-region focussing on the worst properties, including enforced sales where a debt is outstanding to a local authority in the sub region.
- 188** There are a number of e-government targets which are being fulfilled in public protection eg ability to download all forms on line which they can do. HMO registration will be available on line 2006/07 but the Council were ready to go at the time of the inspection. There will be an online register, online applications with unique tracking. Public protection overall have contributed considerably to the recent changes on the corporate website and have been able to influence the look of it to make it more user friendly.
- 189** £50,000 has been obtained from Council funds for the development of smarter working and the Service is using this to purchase handheld IT units. A number of different ones have been trialled and they are working well in other divisions. In addition, the Council is using a consultant to review the use of office space with staff to make better use of the space. Directors and assistant directors no longer have their own individual offices but share a management suite with private interview areas.
- 190** The Greater London Energy Efficiency Network runs the Safe and Warm Scheme on behalf of the Council. The scheme has been awarded Neighbourhood Renewal Fund funding, (£15,000 in 2002/03 and £20,000 in 2003/04 and £10,000 Building Safer Communities Funding in 2004/05) to help operate the service. Grants are funded by the Council for energy efficiency and security measures to owner occupiers and private tenants who are over 60, disabled or on income related benefits or tax credits.
- 191** Examples of good resource planning are the review of the use of reception centres in order to deliver a reduction in shared facilities. This has resulted in a disposal strategy which will lead to resources being used to reinvest in the remaining reception centres to improve facilities. The Council has made good use of housing association and the council's own leasing schemes. This has contributed to an end of bed and breakfast accommodation for families together with the expansion of temporary accommodation.
- 192** The council have made a positive approach in recruiting additional HB processing staff who tend to be trained up in Islington and then move on due to the high cost of housing, or come back in at a higher rate as agency staff because they are better paid. Islington now employ 12 HB staff in an office in Manchester processing HB claims, who are on Islington rates and this was successfully negotiated with unions. In addition, all TA staff have had a background in dealing with homeless people and reception centres so are empathetic to their needs.

- 193** The Council have prepared well for the implementation of HMO licensing. The Council has made additional funding of £50,000 in 2005/06 and £150,000 for 2006/07 for the implementation of the Housing Act 2004. Temporary staff are being employed to deal with an estimated 1,200 applications for HMO licences, publicity is planned, street surveys and desktop work to identify HMO are underway.
- 194** Morale among the housing advisors we spoke to was low due to, in the main, what they see as a lack of appreciation for the complexity of the work they do, cramped office space and issues over the interview rooms, and being over stretched due to shortage of staffing sometimes for months. It is not clear to what extent HAC staff are trained to make the risk assessments on homelessness cases to establish vulnerability and special needs.
- 195** Staff told us that regular team meetings do not take place in HAC and the Wednesday time slot is rarely used for meetings and training. The staff said they felt isolated from other related areas of work, mostly did not receive feedback on the cases they had dealt with and referred on, and did not get feedback on performance and the statistical information they provided.
- 196** Communication between HAC officers and EHO is good but does not work so well with family homelessness caseworker and there are no meetings to share information or work on a joint approach to prevention. It is not clear that workloads are reviewed to cater for shortages in one section to ensure that cases are determined within the target times.
- 197** Although the appraisal system is working well across all full time staff we did not find a consistent approach to target setting, particularly in housing advice. Often the targets were designed for personal development and were not directly linked to delivering action plans of the appropriate strategies.
- 198** A range of proactive activity is being undertaken to recruit and retain suitable staff in the public protection services such as undertaking talks with the local job centre to make them aware of what the council requirements are.
- 199** Recruitment and retention of staff has been highlighted as a risk for the Council due to the national shortage of suitably qualified officers for housing advice, survey and enforcement work. This is being tackled through a range of initiatives including the following.
- The Positive Action Staff Placement trainee and mentoring scheme aimed at women, employees with disabilities and those from BME communities who are under represented at management level. This has been successfully accessed by staff from the Housing Aid Centre.
  - The Housing, Performance and Property department hosts two placements for graduate trainees at Westminster University undertaking a two-year part-time Master of Arts in Housing with practical placements.

**50** Balanced Homes Market | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

**200** The Council has responded well to changes in need for services. The outcome of new central government guidance, Fair Access to Care Services, was a substantial pressure to radically reduce waiting times for assessment for care services. The Council increased resources from the private sector to bring a backlog of assessments up to date and introduced a new IT monitoring system to control future assessments. This produced a surge of cases for disabled facilities grant which was dealt with by the dedicated occupational therapist and since the beginning of 2006 there has been no cases awaiting attention.

**201** The Council has built up firm partnership working arrangements with other appropriate agencies and bodies, for example, English Partnerships, the London Mayor, with responsibility for the A1 road, to develop projects along the A1 route which will lead to regeneration of the area involving the private sector. The strong partnership working which the Council has developed over the years has resulted in both the Council learning from others, and providing an example of good practice for others. Examples include the following.

- The work the Service has undertaken with Haringey council on the Reform Order policies to achieve a consistent approach across the sub region.
- Discussions have taken place with the police over identification of houses that have fallen into dereliction which might identify the resident to be vulnerable. Both services encourage residents to improve the outside to reduce criminal attention. Officers have also advised on the walkway running by the mosque relating to opening up wasteland to public use to reduce incidence of vandalism following neglect.
- Working with the fire service to draw up a joint approach on fitting fire alarms in HMO in line with the new definition and other issues relating to fire alarms such as referrals to the fire brigade for free fire safety checks and fitting of smoke alarms.
- Islington have led on the HMO licensing and on publicity at the sub regional level. Haringey officers have benefited from training provided by Islington.
- A successful SRB board in Finsbury Park, in respect of grant spend and attracting in additional private sector funding drawn in, have attracted a further £20,000 grant.
- The Council is leading on inviting new partners from Age Concern and PCT and from two other councils to be involved in longer term funding for schemes such as the handyperson scheme.
- The Council is partner to a bid for £7 million for the sub region to target at DHS works in the private sector.
- The capital budget has been increased in 2005/06 through £4.9 million from Transport for London plus additional government grants.

- 202** Partnerships and close working with private sector bodies will result in new affordable housing and has encouraged the Government Office for London (GOL) to allocate up to £3 million to make City Road Basin development happen. Further benefits for housing are expected Arundel Square where GOL have helped to overcome the rail authority objections to development.

## Summary

- 203** We have assessed the Service as having excellent prospects for improvement for the following reasons.

The Council has a track record of success in attracting inward investment which has resulted in the improvement of private sector housing in the Finsbury Park area. There has been a good response to external assessment with recommendations from the previous inspection being implemented to target times and weaknesses to performance management robustly addressed. The Service has taken a proactive approach in seeking out poor housing conditions and is delivering additional housing, successfully exceeding targets set by the Council and central government. The Service is leading sub regionally through work on empty properties and has prepared well for implementing the Housing Act 2004. The Service is a learning one that shows a good track record of improvement and shares knowledge internally and externally. Comparison work shows the Service to be value for money and savings have been achieved in choice based lettings and procurement of temporary accommodation. The Service has invested heavily in training and IT resources to prepare services for the future together with good resource planning in related areas such as housing benefit assessment. Partnership working is a particular strengths in all areas delivering new housing, improved housing for rent and temporary accommodation.

However, there are weaknesses which need to be addressed including action to improve morale in housing advice together with an improvement in performance on homelessness decisions. Targets in all areas need to be quantified in order to set measures of effectiveness and staff need to be clear about all the targets and standards they are working to and trying to deliver including service standards. The value for money of the care and repair service level agreement has not been evaluated to ensure there is no disadvantage those just outside of disabled facilities grant eligibility.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 6 BVPI trend from 2003/04 to 2005/06**

<b>BVPI 62</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No. of dwellings improved</b>
2000/01	3.2	117
2001/02	2.75	84
2002/03	3.2	131
2003/04	3.3	116
2004/05	4.45	197

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

**Table 7 Housing Act 1985 Minded to Notices served**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>To February 2006</b>
Nos.	102	139	195	153	162

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

**Table 8 Housing Act 1985 Final Notices served**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>To February 2006</b>
Nos.	44	50	32	60	73

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

**Table 9 Environmental Control Notices served**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>To February 2006</b>
Nos.	11	30	69	51	48

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

**Table 10 HMO improved**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2000/01</b>	<b>2001/02</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>To January 2006</b>
Nos. (Target)	37	55 (50)	68 (55)	63 (60)	64 (60)	53 (50)

*Source: London Borough of Islington*

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - strategies - Private Sector Renewal, Empty Property, Prevention of Homelessness, Housing, Private Sector Housing and Community and Neighbourhood Renewal;
  - Landlords and Tenants' Forum minutes;
  - Impact quality assessments;
  - Race Equality Scheme;
  - Temporary Accommodation Procurement Strategy; and
  - outcomes from benchmarking exercises.

## Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - focus group with partners;
  - three focus groups with direct service staff;
  - visits to reception areas;
  - visits to see HMO Health and Safety work, HMO where enforcement action was being taken and where DFG was undertaken;
  - visits to temporary accommodation;
  - observation of Landlords and Tenants meeting;
  - observation of Housing Network event;
  - landlords' telephone survey; and
  - testing the website.