

Housing Association Inspection Report

February 2007



Housing Management Services

Gloucestershire Housing Association

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Housing Association 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 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.

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), 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 Association;
- 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.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that Associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its lead regulation staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the housing association's future business prospects.

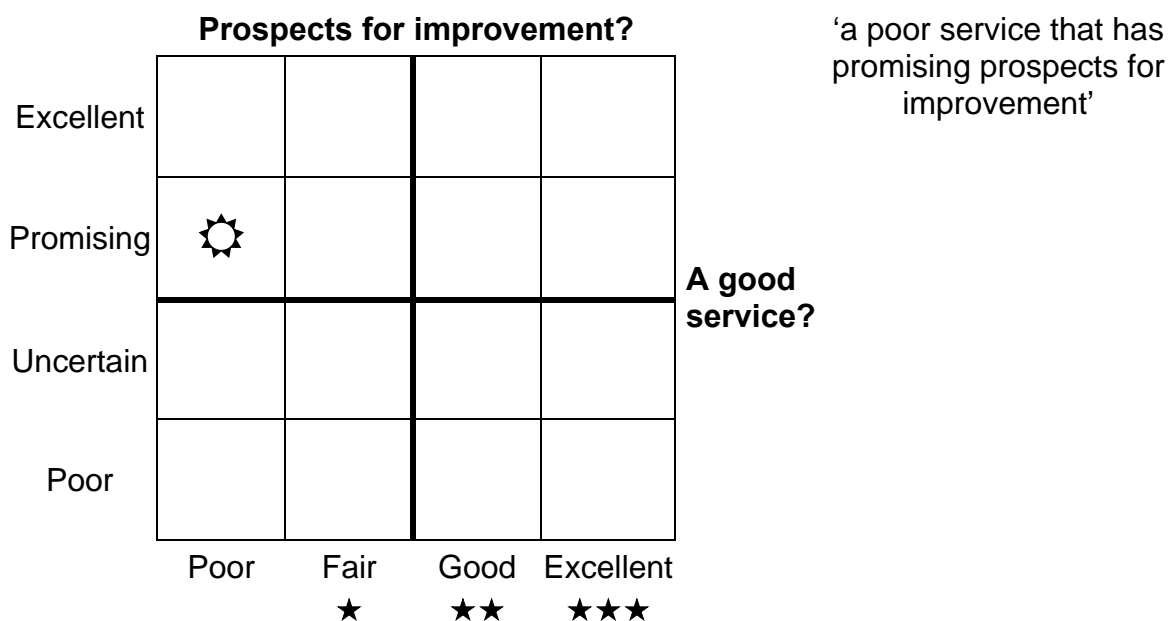
Summary

- 1 Gloucestershire Housing Association (GHA) provides poor services that have 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 Overall satisfaction among tenants is low and customer access can be difficult. Progress on equality and diversity issues and performance on responsive repairs and reletting empty homes is weak. GHA has yet to agree long-term planned maintenance programmes and there is no strategic approach to aids and adaptations. Gas servicing has not been managed effectively and there are some risks in the Association's approach to the management of asbestos. Performance on income collection is mixed and overall, costs are not consistent with the services provided.
- 3 There are some positive elements of service delivery such as a developing approach to resident involvement and some good examples of customer feedback to shape services. The quality of relet properties is good, there are effective 'sign up' and nominations arrangements and there is an effective approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour.
- 4 On balance, there are promising prospects for improvement. GHA has a recent track record of improvement and has invested in a number of 'building blocks' to support further improvements such as improvements in service planning and performance management. Both the Board and the senior management team have recently been strengthened and there is increasingly strong leadership of the Association and a willingness to take 'tough' decisions. The aims of the Association and the need for change have been effectively communicated to staff. GHA demonstrates a high level of self-awareness and the recent organisational restructuring has allowed GHA to focus its resources to address service weaknesses. Management and staff capacity is increasing and importantly GHA has strong financial position.
- 5 However, there are some weaknesses in the Association's future plans and although robust short-term plans are in place, the long-term strategic direction of the Association has not yet been fully developed. There is currently limited capacity to deliver change while also providing adequate day-to-day services. There have been high levels of sickness and recruitment and retention difficulties and there is limited specialist capacity in some key areas such as IT. Effective day-to-day management of performance remains difficult and sustained focus may be difficult because of the diversity of the Association's work.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Gloucestershire Housing Association (GHA) as providing a ‘poor’, no star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 The service is a ‘poor’, no star service because:
- overall satisfaction among tenants is low and resident involvement in shaping and developing services is limited in some areas;
 - customer access can be difficult, opening times are limited to ‘traditional’ office hours rather than at more flexible customer-focused times, performance is weak on answering telephone calls and the website is not being used effectively to improve access to services;
 - progress on equality and diversity issues is slow and there is a lack of comprehensive diversity monitoring information and as yet does not fully comply with the CRE (Commission for Racial Equality) Code of Practice in rented housing;

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

- at the time of the inspection GHA did not have a fair way of allocating its empty homes through its transfer system and had suspended transfers while it developed a new system;
- the Association's arrangements for managing some budgets are weak, for example underspends on the capital and planned programmes in recent years, and too high a percentage of expenditure is on responsive works;
- there is no strategic approach to aids and adaptations and the Association has yet to agree long-term planned maintenance programmes;
- the management of gas servicing is poor and GHA may not be meeting its statutory responsibilities;
- performance in a number of key areas is weak for example responsive repairs and reletting empty homes;
- resident involvement relies on a small number of active tenants who may not be representative of the wider community GHA serves; and
- overall, costs are not consistent with the services provided. Costs are around average but the quality of service that is provided to residents is low in some areas.

8 However, there are some of strengths:

- GHA has shown a commitment to resident involvement. The Association invests considerable resources in community; resident involvement is developing leading to some improved outcomes;
- there are some good examples of customer feedback to shape services for example, staff received additional training to improve customer service following customer feedback;
- the quality of relet properties is good, there are effective 'sign up' and nominations arrangements; and
- GHA provides an effective approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour and welfare benefits advice.

9 On balance, the service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- GHA can demonstrate a recent track record of implementing change and delivering some important improvements for tenants through its Service Improvement Plan;
- there have been investments in a number of 'building blocks' to support improvement such as improvements in service planning and performance management;
- GHA demonstrates a high level of self-awareness and the recent organisational restructuring has allowed GHA to focus its resources to address service weaknesses;
- both the Board and the senior management team have recently been strengthened and there is increasingly strong leadership of the Association and a willingness to take 'tough' decisions;

8 Housing Management Services | Scoring the service

- the aims of the Association and the need for change have been effectively communicated to staff; there is a high level of self-awareness and openness to learning;
- GHA has taken steps to increase both management and staff capacity through training; and
- GHA has strong financial position and has recently made some positive improvements in procurement practice.

10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement:

- there are at the time of inspection there were weaknesses in the Association's future plans and the long-term strategic direction of the Association has not yet been fully developed;
- there has been some slippage in important areas of the Service Improvement Plan;
- there is currently limited capacity to deliver change while also delivering adequate day-to-day services. There have been high levels of sickness and recruitment and retention difficulties and there is limited specialist capacity in some key areas such as IT; and
- sustained focus may be difficult because of the diversity of its work and effective day-to-day management of performance remains difficult.

Recommendations

- 11 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 costs² 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 Association shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members, and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Define a long-term vision and strategy with clear and challenging targets for the Association that:

- *reflects the needs and aspirations of all residents;*
- *ensures that the financial priorities of the Association match the needs and aspirations of its residents; and*
- *informs the key future plans and strategies of the Association and its partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved standards of service delivery; and
- sustained focus on priorities and improved links to partners' priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.

Recommendation

R2 Ensure continuous improvement by:

- *ensuring that the range of actions contained within the Service Improvement Plan are delivered according to the timetable.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved services for customers; and
- ongoing organisational development.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by May 2007.

² 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 cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the access and customer care arrangements by:

- *developing a robust understanding of the needs/requirements of all sections of the local community through effective monitoring systems;*
- *developing a clear understanding of current patterns, volumes and types of customer contact and allocating resources to meet this need;*
- *developing an action plan to ensure that that all information produced is clear, uses plain language and is widely available in appropriate alternative formats;*
- *reviewing the need for and benefits of adopting more customer-focused opening hours;*
- *reviewing the content of the website and the services it offers to residents;*
- *developing a strategic approach to the provision of aids and adaptations; and*
- *continue to embed equality and diversity and a customer-focused culture across the Association, for example, through training, and by setting challenging targets and objectives for improving outcomes for the whole community.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better service provision for customers;
- better 'fit' between the needs of local people and the service provided;
- improved call handling for customers;
- use of more cost effective ways of communicating, consulting and transacting with customers; and
- improved services for residents with disabilities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

Recommendation

R4 Improve the Association's approach to value for money by:

- *developing a comprehensive understanding of how its costs compare;*
- *routinely reviewing service cost alongside service performance;*
- *implementing effective procurement practice across all services;*
- *improving the arrangements for managing planned maintenance budgets and day-to-day performance management; and*
- *regularly testing the service's value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- high levels of understanding and awareness of value for money issues across the organisation;
- improved value for money and achievement of efficiency gains; and
- better outcomes for residents.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2007.

Recommendation

R5 Effectively manage risks to the Association, by:

- *ensuring the effective implementation of the gas servicing policy and procedures;*
- *ensuring that information on specific customer needs is consistently shared across the organisation and with contractors for example, for 'potentially violent' persons; and*
- *implementing and monitoring the asbestos policy and action plan to ensure that there are robust systems and procedures to protect staff, contractors and tenants.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a reduction in the risks to customers, contractors, staff and tenants and to the Association.

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

Recommendation

R6 Ensure existing capacity is effectively utilised by:

- *ensuring that improvement priorities are clear and that responsibility for their delivery is delegated to the lowest practicable level;*
- *challenging the range of services currently provided and exploring ways that these could be better delivered for example, through partnership; and*
- *enhancing the Association's focus on HR issues to ensure that all HR policies are effectively implemented and that the HR plays a key role in supporting organisational change.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- enhanced capacity and better value for money; and
- clearer prioritisation and sustained focus.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2007.

Recommendation

R7 Monitor the new responsive repairs contract to ensure it addresses the following:

- *day-to-day budgetary control;*
- *key performance outcomes including the number of jobs completed in target and right first time, the quality of the service and the role of tenants in quality control;*
- *develop a repairs diagnostic tool; and*
- *improved out-of-hours service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an enhanced repairs service for residents; and
- improved value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2007.

Recommendations

R8 Deliver an improved repairs and maintenance service by:

- *reviewing the policy of undertaking 20 per cent stock condition surveys to ensure that it meets the business needs of the Association;*
- *publicise the five-year cyclical maintenance programme;*
- *broadening the responsive repairs satisfaction surveys to ensure that they collect more information on the performance of contractors;*
- *ensuring that the survey form used for voids inspections reflects the lettings standard;*
- *providing all new tenants with a copy of the lettings standard;*
- *publicising the fact that gas servicing can be arranged at the weekends; and*
- *developing a suite of service standards for aids and adaptations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an enhanced service to residents;
- improving the information available to the Association to shape services; and
- improved value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2007.

- 12** We would like to thank the staff of Gloucestershire Housing Association who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 25 September to 29 September 2006

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Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Gloucestershire is a county in south west England. It has two major population centres - the city of Gloucester and the town of Cheltenham. There is a mixed picture in terms of demography, income and the need for services. The proportion of older people in the population is higher than average with 20.2 per cent being over 65 compared to 18.5 per cent nationally. There is a low black and minority ethnic (BME) population in Gloucestershire, currently 5 per cent compared to national average 8.9 per cent (census 2001). However, in Gloucester (where 35 per cent stock is located) 7.5 per cent of residents are from BME communities.
- 14 The national indices of multiple deprivation rank Gloucester 56th worst in the country (out of 336). Unemployment is low in the county at 3 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent in the south west and 5 per cent nationally (Source: annual population survey January 2005 to December 2005). House prices in the county are above the national average - £209,000 compared with the national average of £199,000 (June 2006 figures).

The Association

- 15 Gloucestershire Housing Association (GHA) is the largest traditional RSL operating in Gloucestershire and is a 'traditional' non-charitable housing association with a charitable subsidiary, Gloucestershire Housing Society (GHS). GHS does not hold stock but is engaged in activities that are complementary to the work of GHA.
- 16 GHA was placed under Housing Corporation Supervision in July 2004. GHA agreed a detailed plan with the Housing Corporation to address the identified areas of weakness. The Association completed the actions required within this plan, and in March 2005 the Housing Corporation ended supervision.
- 17 GHA has arranged itself into four directorates – Development and Asset Management (this includes Property Services), Operations (this includes Housing Management, Customer Services, Service Improvement, and Supported Housing), Finance and IT and Central Services. The executive team consists of a Chief Executive, a Director of Operations, Director of Finance and a Director of Development, and Asset Management. The Association employs the equivalent of 88 full-time employees. Currently, the Board has nine members including two residents' representatives.
- 18 GHA is active in developing new homes with 646 due to be provided as part of the 'New Futures' development partnership which is a consortium of housing associations. In addition, in the next three years approximately 160 new homes are to be built for other associations with £20 million grant funding.

- 19 The tenant population is made up of 6 per cent from BME groups and 17 per cent are over 65 years old. It is significant that 37 per cent have someone in their household with a disability or long-term illness and 15 per cent of households with a wheelchair user (from status survey 2005). GHA's housing stock is geographically widespread across 12 local authority areas though primarily in Gloucestershire and surrounding counties.
- 20 The majority of the stock is general needs with one sheltered housing scheme built in 1995 to meet the needs of Asian elders. There are:
- 2,810 owned or leased homes (including bedspaces);
 - 2,137 general needs homes;
 - 233 homes managed for other Registered Social Landlords and companies; and
 - 514 low cost ownership homes.
- 21 GHA has a main office in Gloucester City Centre where the majority of staff are based. There is a smaller estate office which is not permanently staffed, based at Vicarage Court, Brockworth. This office is shared with the local residents association.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22** Service aims have historically not been clear through the business planning process. However, GHA recently agreed a new Business Plan for 2006/07 which include its Vision, Values and Key Objectives. The business plan identifies a series of key commitments:
- providing affordable housing solutions;
 - sustaining communities, and
 - enhancing the quality of life.
- 23** This plan also identifies four 'core values' which form the basis of all GHA's work:
- putting the customer first;
 - striving for excellence;
 - promoting equality and respecting diversity; and
 - being open and accountable in all we do.
- 24** These commitments and values are translated into six 'key objectives':
- effective partnerships (how well we work with others);
 - service development (the range and quality of our services);
 - growth (through development and acquisition);
 - people and technology (human and organisational resources);
 - financial strength and control (ensuring financial viability and achieving value for money); and
 - governance (ensuring the achievement of objectives).

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

Access and customer care

- 25** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. Overall satisfaction among tenants is low and resident involvement in shaping and developing services is limited. Customer access can be difficult particularly at busy times and opening times are limited to 'traditional' office hours rather than at more flexible customer-focused times. GHA is not using its website to improve access to its services. The published customer service standards do not properly inform service users as to the standard of service they can expect and it is not driving improvement. However, customers' feedback is being used to improve services and the main offices offer a good service to residents who visit them.
- 26** There are some weakness in the Association's approach to target setting and defining service standards. The Association has set itself a target to meet its performance targets 80 per cent of the time. The use of percentage targets can be useful in measuring achievement and setting ongoing targets for improvement but can be difficult for individual users to assess whether or not the target has been met.
- 27** The Association is not managing telephone contact effectively. The majority of customers access Association services by telephone but in the period February 2006 to May 2006 37 per cent of all calls to the organisation were unanswered or were recorded by voicemail. In addition, the Association is not monitoring trends or identifying reasons why calls are lost or abandoned. It is also not possible to identify the number of calls that are dealt with first within the customer service centre (CSC). This means that GHA is not managing its calls efficiently. This causes frustration for customers and increases the level of unnecessary contact.
- 28** Opening hours are limited to 'traditional' office hours of 9.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday rather than at more flexible customer-focused times and the out-of-hours service can be difficult to access. The out-of-hours service is not set up to deal with some issues that are important to customers such as routine repairs and anti-social behaviour. When residents contact the 24-hour emergency repairs line which operates before 9.00am after 4.30pm and when the office is not open, they do not always receive an immediate answer. In some instances, they encounter an answer phone with instructions to callers to leave a message. The contractor then rings the resident back when they are free. Not being able to report with repairs will both affect residents who work normal offices hours and cannot call GHA.
- 29** The recorded overall satisfaction among tenants is low. The tenants' satisfaction (STATUS) survey indicated that the overall satisfaction with the service provided by GHA was 74 per cent in 2005. This is below the comparison group average of 80 per cent (2004/05 Housing Corporation data).

- 30** The Association is not making effective use of its website to improve access for customers. The website is not easy to use and does not provide up-to-date service information, for example, on the repairs services. Rents can be paid online via a link to a third party provider but other self-service options are limited, for example, repairs cannot be reported on line. GHA is not making good use of the website in getting information to diverse sectors of the community. There is no information on the website about aids and adaptations service, and a lack of detailed information on translation services or information in other formats. This is a missed opportunity to utilise best practice in the provision of these services, and restricts the ability of all existing and potential service users to access GHA's services.
- 31** GHA is failing to ensure it provides an equality of access to all of its customers. The Association does not have information on different levels of access by and satisfaction among different groups within the local community for example, customers from minority communities. This is of particular importance given the wide dispersal of the Association's housing stock and the diversity found among its residents.
- 32** Resident involvement is not fully developed. GHA has been slow to extend its participation outside of a small number of tenants and there has been a reliance on a relatively small number of committed tenants. GHA has only three fully functioning residents Associations although there are a number of other groups and individuals that it has on a database who the Association contacts from time to time. There is no Tenant Compact or similar agreement in existence. This is not a statutory requirement, but represents a visible commitment by the landlord to provide minimum agreed service standards across all its activities. By relying on a small number of tenants, the Association cannot be sure that it has a representative sample of tenants' views and it loses the vital input that residents can bring in to shaping services.
- 33** GHA has dedicated considerable resources to community investment and resident involvement. The budget for Community development and resident involvement for the year 2005/06 is £151,000; of this, a total of £39,000 is specifically allocated to resident involvement. This resource is important to support effective resident involvement.
- 34** There is evidence that resident involvement has led to improved outcomes. The residents focus group (CORE) are involved in the approval of all new policies and procedures, appropriately trained tenant representatives were involved in the selection of the executive team and in the Vicarage Court scheme work with the residents association has been effective in tackling ASB.

- 35 There are some effective communication tools. GHA has a dedicated newsletter 'Viewpoint' which is distributed four times a year to all residents. GHA also produce a range of leaflets and information that are clear, jargon-free and easy to read. 'Crystal Mark' accreditation has been achieved for some leaflets. GHA can provide information in community languages. Most leaflets contain straplines that inform customers that they can receive information in alternative languages on request. However, there is currently no handbook for leaseholders and there are few leaflets on display and no tenant or resident notice boards. Information on opening hours or useful phone numbers is not displayed on the outside of the building. This means that GHA is missing opportunities to communicate effectively with residents and improve access to its services.
- 36 The Association provides an effective service to customers visiting its main office. The reception area is fully accessible, family friendly, welcoming and is equipped with a range of facilities to meet the needs of a range of customers for example, disabled people and customers with children. There are private interview rooms with phones and internet access. The reception area is well maintained and frontline staff are responsive to the needs of customers visiting the offices and ensured that information was effectively conveyed. Staff provide a highly quality customer-focused service - they are helpful, courteous and wear name badges to assist identification.
- 37 GHA is dealing with complaints in a positive fashion and there is some evidence of using information to shape and improve services. There is a clear complaints policy in place, policies are consistently followed, and files are maintained and up-to-date. The responses were sympathetic and addressed appropriately the issues. However, at the moment speed of response targets are not always being met. All staff have access to the database to track what is happening and the outcomes from complaints are published in the tenants newsletter. The complaints process has led to changes in service delivery in a number of areas including the capping of service charges and a review of the design specification in new homes to improve window safety.

Diversity

- 38 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Progress on equality and diversity issues is slow. GHA has not yet fully embedded systems to ensure that it understands the needs of its residents and is not using the intelligence it has collected strategically to tailor services to meet local needs. The Association as yet does not fully comply with the CRE Code of Practice for Rented Housing. GHA has taken some steps to address these weaknesses for example, by developing an equality and diversity action plan and providing staff and board members equality and diversity training.

- 39 The Association has not yet fully embedded systems to ensure that it understands the needs and requirements of its tenants and leaseholders. There is not yet in place accurate breakdown of the ethnicity, age profiles, health and disabilities and the Association does not yet fully comply with the CRE Code of Practice for Rented Housing. The Association has used the Code of Practice as part of its review work but there remains scope for improvement in the extent to which it has adopted the Code's recommendations on good practice. This means GHA has not yet set itself challenging targets to provide an equality-focused service.
- 40 In addition, although GHA has taken positive steps to ensure that all customer access points are fully accessible to disabled customers it had not yet made a formal assessment of whether all its office accommodation meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.
- 41 The Association does not have systems in place to share information on specific customer needs across the Association. For example, staff do not have the information available to ensure that they are able to effectively meet the support or communication needs of service users. This can also mean that staff are exposed to risks associated with tenants who are potentially violent.
- 42 GHA is failing to measure its performance with respect to the diversity of the community it serves when dealing with anti-social behaviour and harassment. While it does have specific policies and procedures to address racially motivated anti-social behaviour, harassment and domestic violence, the Association does not monitor its performance in respect of these issues. This is of particular significance given the pernicious nature of hate crimes and the need to take prompt and decisive actions.
- 43 Existing arrangements for tenant involvement do not have a focus on diversity issues and there is a lack of effective monitoring. GHA is unsure whether the composition of those involved in consultation and other contact reflects the diversity of its customers. There is an overall lack of involvement monitoring to ensure that the views of all sectors of the community are taken into account.
- 44 GHA is not effectively promoting the availability of documents and services to meet diverse needs. A language identification poster although available for use, was kept behind the reception counter where a potential user would not be able to see it and the 'Viewpoint' magazine is not made available in alternative formats or different languages. This limits the opportunities for people with language and communications difficulties to access the services offered by the Association.
- 45 The Association does not provide a prompt and effective service to older people and people with disabilities. There is not a focus on the provision of aids and adaptations, although new policies and procedures have now been put in place since inspection. This puts vulnerable tenants at risk of injuring themselves at home, and does not ensure that tenants can continue to live independently and safely.

- 46 The decoration allowance scheme does not take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. The provision of painting materials rather than a voucher or grant scheme will tend to impact more on people with disabilities, older people and those on low incomes. While there have been some arrangements in respect of older people these have tended to be ad hoc and are not part of a formal process.
- 47 Diversity training has been provided to almost all GHA's staff and board members. It is included in the induction training that all new staff are required to participate in. This ensures that staff have a common understanding of the requirements of the Association in dealing with diversity.
- 48 There are robust and effective arrangements for the recruitment of people from BME communities. GHA ensures that all job vacancies are sent to a range of local organisations that engage with BME communities. The ethnicity of staff working for GHA reflects community that the Association serves. The last staff survey indicates that 18 per cent staff are from BME communities. The Association also monitors and measures its performance in respect of this area.

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 49 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The Association has yet to develop a detailed long-term programme of major works and the current programme of works is not customer-focused. The Association's arrangements for managing some budgets are weak and the management of asbestos presents risks. However, some improvements are being made for example, the adoption of an asset management strategy.
- 50 The Association has yet to agree long-term planned maintenance programmes. It has used the information from a 25 per cent stock condition survey carried out in 2004 to develop a programme for 2006/07 and has a draft programme for the next five years although this has still to be formally adopted and consulted on with tenants. Further information on stock condition and components from held by the Association has been used to enhance the database. However, a policy commitment to undertake a 20 per cent annual rolling programme of stock condition surveys has not been met and there were no firm plans to deliver this.
- 51 The Association's performance in managing planned maintenance programmes is weak. There is a history of significant underspend in the planned maintenance budget. In 2005/06 there was an underspend of 38 per cent. Much of this underspend had been carried over from the previous year. The main reason for this underspend was a lack of capacity in terms of guidance, staff resources and knowledge to undertake the necessary leaseholder and resident consultation. The under spending of budgets means residents will not receive the full range of repairs and upgrades to their homes.

- 52 The Association's approach to management of asbestos is not fully robust. GHA maintains a limited asbestos management register but this is based on the information held in the Stock Condition Survey together with some local knowledge. Contractors are not provided with sufficient information about the risk of the presence of asbestos. A generic statement is included on the works order and contractors have been provided with a copy of the Association's asbestos register. However, the IT system does not flag up where asbestos is known to be present. There is no general information or advice for customers about asbestos and individual customers are not told if there is asbestos in their home. This represents a potential risk to customers, contractors, staff and tenants and to the Association.
- 53 The Association's planned maintenance programme is not customer-focused and does not recognise the needs of its tenants. Programmed works this year started in September. This leaves less time for completion of the works during the financial year and means that works such as window and boiler replacements will be carried out during the colder months and although there is a five-year painting programme which has been agreed in advance with the partnering contractor this has not been publicised. This means that tenants are not aware of when their properties are next due to be redecorated or will have planned maintenance work undertaken on their homes in the colder months of the year adding to the inconvenience caused by the work.
- 54 GHA has begun to effectively plan its capital improvement programme. The Association has recently adopted an asset management strategy. The Board approved the strategy in March 2006. It is linked to a reinvestment option appraisal model. This allows the Association to take account of management issues such as voids and neighbourhood sustainability as well as the physical condition of the properties. The asset management strategy uses a 30-year capacity model to project costings for meeting the decent homes standard and beyond. This is based on component life cycles. This means that a framework is in place to help in making decisions on developing, maintaining or disposing of stock.
- 55 Tenants are offered a reasonable choice in terms of colours and materials for planned and cyclical maintenance programmes. The recent kitchen replacement programme gave a choice of four styles of kitchen unit and work tops. There were also two choices for tiling and floor covering. Tenants are presented with a choice of six door colours as part of the cyclical redecoration works. There is, however, no formal written commitment setting out service standards in terms of choice in these areas.

Responsive repairs

- 56** This is an area of weaknesses, where there are few significant strengths. The overall management of responsive repairs is weak. The systems and procedures that ensure services are effective are not in place and where performance and customer satisfaction information is collected it lacks sufficient detail to enable effective service development. Performance in undertaking repairs on time is weak and the approach to pre and post-inspections does not target resources effectively. The arrangements for providing responsive repair services to tenants outside of normal office hours are weak.
- 57** Performance in undertaking repairs on time is weak. GHA's record of completing repairs within target is poor. In 2005/06 only 87.3 per cent of emergencies, 90.7 per cent of urgent and 95.8 per cent of routine repairs were completed within target times. The Association believe that there has been some improvement since the commencement of the new partnering contract in July 2006 and this is demonstrated in unaudited figures for August 2006. This is a key area of performance that will directly affect the customer experience of residents.
- 58** GHA lacks effective controls and performance management systems for controlling work ordered. There is no formal reporting of the proportion of jobs ordered in the emergencies and urgent categories. In July 2006 between 35 per cent and 40 per cent of jobs were ordered as emergencies or urgent repairs, although it was not possible to give us accurate information. Although there is not a specific uplift for the different categories, this does not make for the most efficient use of resources and given the partnering contract involves cost sharing it does have a financial impact on the Association. The new partnering contract introduced in September 2006 should help address these weaknesses.
- 59** Systems and procedures are not in place to ensure an effective responsive repairs service. Administrative, training and IT arrangements mean that responsive repairs can only be raised as tasks (jobs) with contractors by a limited number of CSC staff. This impacts on the effectiveness of the team during periods of leave and sickness absence. Staff in the CSC do not have any form of diagnostic tool to help them easily identify the repairs required and cannot always easily get timely advice from colleagues in the property services section. This can result in misdiagnosis of repairs requests and consequently frustration for customers because of delays in completing work.
- 60** The Association is proactively seeking out feedback from customers about its service but it is missing opportunities to maximise its value. The repairs satisfaction surveys collect only very basic details. The questionnaire does not ask about service issues such as the tidiness of the work or the courtesy of the operative. However, the current level of satisfaction with the repairs service indicates that 91.3 per cent of customers were satisfied with the contractor (June 2005 to May 2006) and 94.6 per cent satisfied with GHA's handling of the repair. The Association is failing to use the information it is collecting to best effect to shape its services around its customers.

- 61 The Association is not targeting its resources effectively through its pre and post-repairs inspections. There are neither targets nor performance monitoring arrangements for managing the number of repairs jobs where a pre-inspection is carried out. This means that there is a possibility that pre-inspections may be being carried out unnecessarily. There is no performance monitoring of post-inspection of responsive repairs. Although there is a target to post-inspect 10 per cent of works and all works over £500, there is no mechanism for measuring whether this is being achieved. Although there is a line for this within the monthly board performance reports this is currently blank. This may create a situation in which there is ineffective control over the quality of the work undertaken by contractors and are important in demonstrating value for money to tenants.
- 62 It is unclear what role the Estate Maintenance Officer (formerly known as Handyperson) plays following the introduction of the partnering contract. Currently, the post that provides low level repairs service (which is not being delivered, as the post holder is currently not at work). Without a clear strategy for this post, it cannot be demonstrated that this post is delivering value for money.
- 63 The Association has not taken steps to extend service opening hours to more flexible customer-focused times such as evenings and weekends. This limits access to a full responsive repairs service that could inconvenience some customers who are not at home during the day. However, residents receive written confirmation of when routine responsive repairs are to be carried out. It also means that some customers may use the out-of-hours service inappropriately.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 64 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Performance in reletting empty homes is weak. The quality of relet properties is good but the link between works undertaken and the published lettable standard is inconsistent. Procedures for ordering works are inefficient although the introduction of a new partnering contract offers the potential for improvement. This arrangement is at a very early stage and as yet benefits have not been realised and some systems are not working effectively.
- 65 Performance in reletting empty homes is weak. Void turnaround times have improved but still do not meet the Association's own target or best practice figures. In 2005/06, the average relet time was 56 days, but despite the introduction of a new partnering contract in September 2006, performance was 43 days, which does not meet the Association's own target of 25 days and is weak when compared to GHA's peers. This means that the Association is not minimising rent loss or making the best use of the housing stock.
- 66 The void survey form completed by the maintenance officers does not directly correspond to the voids lettings standard. This means that there is a likelihood that when works are ordered they do not completely reflect the void standard and that resources are not being focused on meeting the Association's objectives. In addition, it means it is difficult for residents to be sure of the standards they can expect in their new homes.

- 67 The decoration scheme for void properties is not customer-focused. GHA offers an allowance of paint to assist tenants to decorate their new homes. The range of colours available is limited and no allowance is made for the purchase of other materials such as brushes or filler. The scheme is at the discretion of the officers involved in the scheme and it is not transparent how the allowances are allocated to new tenants. As a result, new tenants will have a negative impression of their new landlord; and the property may further deteriorate during this tenancy and result in higher costs repairs later on when the home is relet.
- 68 Procedures for ordering works are inefficient. Voids works are charged using inefficient costing mechanisms. Although the Association is moving to a partnering arrangement that uses a cost plus approach this was not fully embedded at the time of inspection. This is increasing the costs associated with the void repair process.
- 69 The quality of void properties is generally good. Properties visited during the inspection were of a good quality and tenants that we spoke to as part of the inspection also reported that their new homes were in reasonable condition when they moved in.
- 70 There is a clear and detailed relet standard. For example, the standard provides details of the minimum acceptable requirements for the numbers of kitchen units and electric sockets. The standard was developed with input from residents with members of the tenants' forum visiting void properties to help inform the final standard. However, this standard is not given to residents and it is not clear that it forms the basis of the works ordered by staff. This undermines the value of this document.
- 71 Work to voids properties has been streamlined through the introduction of the new partnering contract that started in September 2006. A single contractor is now responsible for ensuring all work including electrical and gas safety testing takes place. Part of this work is subcontracted. This contract is designed to deliver a more effective voids repair service and which will repair empty homes more quickly and to a consistently high standard.

Gas servicing

- 72 This is an area of weakness for the Association. Performance on servicing gas appliances within statutory deadlines is weak - this represents a significant health and safety risk both to the Association and its residents. However, positively gas maintenance records are well managed and satisfaction with gas servicing is high.
- 73 Performance on servicing gas appliances within statutory deadlines is weak. As at 6th September 2006, only 96.2 per cent of properties had a valid safety certificate. This represents a significant health and safety risk to the Association and its tenants and may be a statutory breach of the Association's responsibilities.

- 74 GHA is failing to effectively gain access to properties to carry out gas servicing. For example, as at the 6 September 2006 there were 10 properties where the servicing was overdue by more than 180 days, 19 properties were overdue a service by more than 90 days. This is a significant health and safety risk both to the Association and to the residents.
- 75 The Association does not carry out random quality assurance of gas servicing work. However, a contractor has just been appointed to do a 10 per cent survey of works. This means that the Association cannot be sure that the gas servicing contractor is delivering a high quality service.
- 76 The contractor is required to undertake a service of smoke detectors when carrying out gas servicing. This is positive as it ensures that detectors are maintained, that residents are not unduly inconvenienced by multiple contractor visits and that value for money is achieved.
- 77 Gas maintenance records are well managed. A file is kept of the previous two certificates. Once received from the contractor these are logged on the IT system and promptly placed on the files. A random file check of six properties found that all had a valid certificate. However, systems do not yet allow for shared use of IT systems which would cut down on dual recording of servicing information. This allows for the accurate tracking of service information.
- 78 An appointment system exists for carrying out gas servicing. The contractor writes to all tenants giving a date for the servicing. If this date is not suitable, tenants are asked to contact the contractor to arrange a more suitable time. In exceptional circumstances, the contractor will work at the weekend but this is not publicised. This may make it difficult for residents who work normal office hours and increase the number of homes where GHA is not able to service gas appliances.
- 79 Satisfaction with gas servicing is high. Contractor's satisfaction surveys indicate that 97 per cent of respondents are satisfied. No respondents said they were dissatisfied. However, the Association's own satisfaction surveys indicate lower levels of satisfaction. In July 2006, satisfaction was recorded at 89 per cent. Tenants at a focus group told us that arrangements for gas servicing were well handled. They were notified in advance of the work being carried out and offered the opportunity to make an alternative appointment.

Aids and adaptations

- 80 This is an area of significant weakness for the Association. There is no strategic approach to aids and adaptations. GHA does not understand the needs of disabled people living in its homes, as a result it has not developed a processes for allocating and revising budgets for disabled adaptations. The arrangements for managing the aids and adaptation budget are weak with no effective performance management in place. There are no service standards in place and the Association does not provide any information on how residents can access these funds.

- 81 The Association has not developed a clear process for allocating and revising budgets for disabled adaptations on an annual basis. There is an annual budget of £20,000 set aside for major adaptations for tenanted properties. However, it is not clear how this amount was determined and whether it is linked to need. GHA cannot be sure that it is meeting need effectively or spending its resources wisely.
- 82 The Association's arrangements for managing the aids and adaptation budget are weak. There is a lack of overall performance reporting on the whole contract and the individual performance cannot be properly determined. As a result, it is not possible to identify or address under-performance.
- 83 There is a lack of published information about the aids and adaptations. There is no service standards produced indicating what tenants can expect from the aids and adaptations service. There is also a lack of clarity in the published information about the role of the Local Authority and its mandatory requirement to provide disabled facilities grants and what this means for tenants. Consequently, it is not clear to tenants: what service they can expect, where the overall responsibility for poor performance lies and what statutory rights they may have.

Income management

- 84 In this area, strengths and weaknesses are balanced. Performance on income collection is mixed; for example, the percentage of rent collection is good while service charge collection is poor. It has an emphasis on debt prevention and early intervention in arrears and employs a specialist welfare rights officer to work with residents and train colleagues on benefits issues. This approach is undermined by a lack of focus on low level arrears and an ineffective ICT system. However, customer service information is generally of a good standard, there are mechanisms to maximise income and prevent arrears payment methods are flexible, new tenants are encouraged to establish positive payment patterns and GHA takes a financial inclusion approach which maximises the uptake of benefits to reduce debt.
- 85 Performance against targets is variable. Published Housing Corporation data shows GHA achieved top 25 per cent rent collection performance in 2004/05. However, the total amount of arrears from current tenants is in the lowest performing quarter of peer organisations.

Percentage of rent arrears from current tenants as proportion of gross rent debit:

- 2003/04: 5.61 per cent, 2004/05: 5.22 per cent, 2005/06: 5.05 per cent

Percentage of rent collected:

- 2003/04: 100.5 per cent, 2004/05: 99.8 per cent, 2005/06: 101.8 per cent

- 86 The IT system does not support the effective collection of rent arrears. The current IT system does not allow managers to efficiently monitor whether housing staff are following appropriate rent collection policies and procedures and it does not prompt staff to take recovery action. The Association can not be certain staff are acting promptly or in accordance with its procedures.

- 87 The Association is not minimising rent loss by taking prompt action to minimise rent arrears. GHA does not prioritise the collection of low level rent arrears. The computer system and current offices procedures do not prioritise the collection of low level arrears (less than £250). This means that preventative work is not undertaken at the start of the tenancy or at an early stage when arrears are identified and can be tackled more effectively.
- 88 The Association does not actively promote cost-effective methods of rent collection. There have been no incentives to encourage the uptake of cost effective methods of rent collection such as direct debit, although there has been a limited promotion. This is increasing the transaction costs to the Association.
- 89 GHA has not minimised loss of income from former tenants. The Association has not prioritised the collection of former tenancy arrears and is only now formalising procedures for the collection and monitoring of former tenancy arrears. As a result, the income that could be spent on addressing the Association's priorities is not being effectively collected.
- 90 There has only been limited consultation with tenants on service standards, and as a result, the rent collection service is not being shaped by customer involvement. There has been no regular use of questionnaires and customer feedback is not used to consistently monitor or improve services. There has been limited consultation with tenants and leaseholders about setting service charges to cover services to communal areas. As a result, income collection arrangements may not be being maximised.
- 91 Management of leaseholder services has been neglected. There has been a lack of clear publicity to explain to the Association's 41 right to buy leaseholders what are the respective responsibilities are for GHA and leaseholders. A leaseholders' handbook has recently been drafted although this has not yet been published. This makes it difficult for the Association to recover service charge and major works costs even where it may be entitled to do so as there is a lack of clarity about what charges leaseholders should be paying.
- 92 Administration of service charges is poor, although performance is improving. GHA only collected 67 per cent of the service charge income due in 2005/06, which represented a shortfall of approx. £215,000. Tenants expressed concern that they did not understand how service charge levels had been set. Tenants receive annual notification of service charges but are not provided with an opportunity to discuss levels of service and they told us that they did not understand how charges had been calculated. Performance on service charges will limit the Association's resources available to deliver its services to residents and increase their dissatisfaction.
- 93 There are some effective mechanisms to minimise arrears and maximise income. GHA has developed a financial inclusion plan which aims to improve the effectiveness of income collection it adopts a range of actions including; improving the effectiveness of the income collection procedures and assists residents to access benefits and obtain welfare advice. This helps tenants to maximise their income and keep their arrears to a minimum.

- 94 There is good use of welfare benefit advice services to manage debt and offer resident-focused services. GHA employs a specialist welfare rights officer to deliver advice services to tenants. Other staff receive specialist training from this member of staff. GHA is also ensuring that residents receive appropriate welfare advice at the stage of court action. The Association is referring tenants to the CAB for housing advice. These services help tenants avoid arrears and access benefits that they are entitled to and ensure that residents facing enforcement action have access to independent legal advice.
- 95 Rent arrears letters are clear and user friendly. They clearly outline the amount owed and action that the tenant can take to clear or reduce the arrears. Letters dealing with higher levels of arrears outline the consequences of persistent non-payment. Letters also include clear signposting to independent advice such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Clear and user friendly letters help to ensure that customers understand the position with their rent account, the potential consequences of not paying the rent and where they can seek help.
- 96 GHA has taken a proactive approach to establishing positive payment arrangements with new tenants. Rent staff sign up new tenants and at that time assistance is given with housing benefit with priority to explain the importance of maintaining a clear rent account. Where arrangements with local authorities make it possible staff verify housing benefit. This streamlines this aspect of the process. A follow-up visit by rent staff takes place within two weeks. This prompt action assists tenants in avoiding rent arrears by tackling debt problems by minimising loss of income.
- 97 Residents are offered a good range of payment methods. Residents are able to use a range of payment methods to pay their rent and charges these include direct debit, standing order, Internet, direct payment in sheltered housing and by debit card over the phone.

Tenancy and estate management

- 98 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Association has used a wide range of measures to address anti-social behaviour (ASB), there is effective partnership working with other agencies, there has been some use of diversionary activities and support is signposted for vulnerable customers to help them sustain their tenancies. However, monitoring arrangements are weak which means GHA cannot demonstrate that it is consistently delivering these standards. There are no service standards in place for estate management services and ground maintenance is not provided to a consistently high standard. There is no regular programme of estate visits or walkabouts in place. However, vulnerable tenants are effectively signposted to support services and tenancy agreements are of high standard.

Anti-social behaviour

- 99** The Association has an effective range of policies and procedures to address different types of anti-social behaviour that are consistently followed. GHA has introduced an anti-social behaviour framework in May 2006 with the assistance of residents. The Association follows its procedures and files are kept up-to-date. Good quality responses are given to residents. This has established a clear framework for addressing the different types of harassment and nuisance.
- 100** GHA uses an effective range of remedies to tackle anti-social behaviour. The Association uses a wide range of tools to address anti-social behaviour including antisocial social behaviour orders, acceptable behaviour contracts, external mediation, evictions and injunctions. There have also a range of community-based diversionary activities undertaken with partners to provide positive activities for young people. GHA employs a specialist officer who is able to deal with serious and persistent cases of anti-social behaviour on referral from Housing Officers. Having a wide range of solutions ensures the Association can tailor its response to the nature of the problem being tackled.
- 101** GHA has formed effective local partnerships with other agencies to tackle anti-social behaviour. The Association works with the police youth offending team of the probation service and Councils to tackle anti-social behaviour in a co-ordinated fashion. Anti-social behaviour is frequently a complex issue to tackle and by working in partnership joined up solutions can be delivered that have a greater impact on the problem than any one organisation alone.
- 102** The Association is failing to effectively manage performance on anti-social behaviour. GHA does not formally monitor its performance in respect of responding to anti-social behaviour and is hampered by IT that is cumbersome to operate. Because of this GHA cannot set appropriate targets in respect of this area of its activity and ensure that it offers a quality service to its residents.
- 103** The Association is failing to maximise the effectiveness of its anti-social behaviour enforcement activities by publicising outcomes and staff training. GHA has not widely advertised the outcomes of its ASB activities and some frontline staff such as those working in the CSC have not been trained to deal with complaints at first contact. This limits capacity and the effectiveness of the process and means that the Association is not getting full value from its enforcement activities. In addition, GHA does not provide an effective out-of-hours response to anti-social behaviour. This means that customers can be left to experience anti-social behaviour without adequate support or response from the Association.

Tenancy and estate management

- 104** The Association is not working effectively with its tenants to manage its estate grounds and other communal areas. GHA does not have a programme of estate walkabouts with residents. Tenants are not aware of when GHA staff are to visit their estates. There are no fixed dates when Association staff visit particular estates. This makes it difficult for tenants to meet their housing officers. Although there have been some informal estate walkabouts conducted these are not publicised in advance. In addition, grounds maintenance specifications are not tailored to each estate. There is a single grounds maintenance contract which has a standard level of service for each estate. This means there is no scope for residents to influence the level of service according to local circumstances and preferences.
- 105** The standards of grounds maintenance on estates are inconsistent. Contracts are in place for all developments but the service standards are neither sufficiently explicit in the contract nor are they regularly published to residents. This has led to complaints by residents both about the scope and about quality of works. GHA has acknowledged this problem and is in the process of conducting a review with residents. Poor standards of grounds maintenance will impact on the quality of life experienced by people living on estates and will promote dissatisfaction if residents do not think that they are getting value for money from their service charges.
- 106** Support is offered to vulnerable customers to help them sustain their tenancies. Staff are able to refer vulnerable customers to a floating support scheme to provide advice and assistance to vulnerable customers, including young people, to help them sustain their tenancies. Having effective support arrangements in place helps to sustain communities and reduce the turnover of tenancies.
- 107** The quality of tenancy agreements is good. Tenancy agreements were subject to review a comprehensive review in 2005 and have been amended to meet the Plain English Crystal Mark. This provides tenants with a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities in respect of their home.

Allocations and lettings

- 108** This is an area where there are a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There are effective arrangements for tenants to sign up for their new homes and nominations arrangements with local authorities work well. The Association is also taking positive steps to promote resident participation for new tenants. However, in some areas such as visiting new residents, GHA is not following its own procedures and at the time of the inspection, it did not have a fair way of allocating its empty homes through its transfer system and had suspended transfers while it developed a new system.

- 109** The Association is taking positive steps to promote resident participation. Resident involvement leaflets are sent out with the sign up packs and housing officers are required to promote resident involvement with new tenants when they conduct a new tenant visit. By positively promoting opportunities GHA is ensuring that residents are given the opportunity to become involved in resident involvement activities of the Association.
- 110** GHA has taken a positive approach to setting up an effective relationship with residents who move into newly built homes. On new build schemes, meetings take place with new residents that introduce the tenants to their new homes and landlord. As a result of this process, an agreement called a Mutual Aid Compact is drawn up this summarises the rights and responsibilities of tenants living on new estates. A Mutual Aid Compact helps to develop a sense of community and helps residents understand their rights and responsibilities.
- 111** The relationship with local authorities is generally good and nominations arrangements work well. Most nominations received for void properties are appropriate and sensitive to the needs of the community. Where it is appropriate GHA uses local lettings agreements with the agreement of the relevant local authority. The effective allocation of the Association's homes depends on productive relationships with partner local authorities.
- 112** There are effective arrangements for tenants to sign up for their new homes. The process of customers report that the processes of allocation and signing up for their new homes are well handled. Staff undertook a comprehensive and detailed procedure that gave customers a range of detailed service information and signposted them to relevant support and welfare benefit services. Comprehensive procedures at the start of a tenancy ensure customers can get the greatest range of benefits from their new homes.
- 113** At the time of the inspection, GHA did not have a fair way of allocating its empty homes through its transfer system and had suspended transfers while it developed a new system. There is currently no effective transfer system in place to allocate properties if it is not part of a nomination agreement with local authorities. The transfer process has been suspended while the new allocation system is implemented. Historically, transfer applicants were selected by housing staff using their personal knowledge of residents' circumstances and their relative priority to others on the register for rehousing. GHA has recently adopted a new transfer policy that allocates housing according to need. By failing to have a fully effective allocations process in place GHA cannot be sure it is allocating its homes fairly according to need.
- 114** The Association does not regularly visit new tenants in accordance with its policies and procedures. GHA's procedure indicates that a visit is required after four weeks by housing management staff to but this does not take place with any regularity. Settling visits are an opportunity to address issues of concern to residents and ensure new tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 115 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Overall costs are not consistent with the services provided. Costs are around average but the quality of service that is provided to residents is low in some areas. The Association has not developed a comprehensive understanding of how its costs compare and its approach to procurement is underdeveloped. Positively, it has recently approved a comprehensive value for money strategy and has improved the costs effectiveness of its financial arrangements.

Table 1 Value for money

Comparative figures against 16 organisations

Indicator	GHA's cost	Median	GHA's ranking (out of 16)
Core housing management cost per property (CPP)	£548	£555	8
Housing management pay cost per property (CPP)	£249	£266	8
Properties per employee (PPE). Direct housing management staff only	97	102	12

Source: House mark 2005/06 figures

Table 2 Operating cost indicators

Costs	GHA	South West average	National average
	2004/05	2004/05	2004/05
Weekly operating cost per GN unit	£38.85	£48.43	£51.29
Weekly investment per GN unit	£23.72	£31.74	£35.51

Source: Housing Corporation performance indicators

- 116 Overall, costs are not consistent with the services provided. The Association's costs are broadly close to the average for organisations in its benchmarking club and its weekly operating costs are lower than the south west region and national averages in the Housing Corporation performance indicators. However, the quality of services provided to residents is low in some areas.

- 117 In some important areas, GHA is not ensuring that it is targeting its limited resources on its strategic priorities and the needs and aspirations of its residents. For example, the Private Sector Leasing service made a direct loss of £8,908 for the period 1 April 2006 to 31 May 2006 and has running costs of £85,850 (budget 2005/06). To date no strategic review of this expenditure has been undertaken to consider whether it is meeting the Association's priorities or whether the resources could be better directed towards another purpose, for example, increasing the resources allocated to aids and adaptations. Without a comprehensive review of spending GHA cannot be sure that it is meeting its strategic priorities and the needs and aspirations of its residents.
- 118 GHA has not maximised its income from income other than rent. The Association has not prioritised the collection of former tenancy arrears and is only now formalising procedures for the collection and monitoring of former tenancy arrears. Management of recharges is ineffective. In 2005/06 a total of £15,050 of recharges were raised of which only 19 per cent was collected. There is no set procedure for managing recovery processes. This presents a risk that recharges are not applied equitably and income is lost.
- 119 GHA's current approach to procurement is underdeveloped. Procurement of major works is carried out on a traditional tendering basis. There is no use of procurement partnerships or consortiums to maximise potential for efficiencies. For example, kitchen replacement work has been procured on the basis of scheme-specific competitive tendering. This means that the benefits of a partnering approach such as improved value for money and more customer-focused service are not being realised.
- 120 GHA has not embedded value for money across the Association. For example, a traditional approach is taken to paying for work in voids properties. Works are costed on the basis of the NHF schedule of rates there are no discounts for void works and the use of solicitors to pursue injunctions in respect of ASB has not been evaluated despite this costing £12,008 in 2005/06. As a result, the Association is missing the opportunity to make savings across all areas of its activities.
- 121 The value for money strategy is comprehensive and reflects its corporate aims effectively. It identifies broad outcomes, such as IT development, performance management, changes in working practices, production of a procurement strategy and to review use of benchmarking data and consortia, which have been cascaded into operational plan targets. It sets out aims to involve stakeholders and train staff, alongside a range of monitoring and evaluation methods to embed the approach.
- 122 The Association is minimising loss of the benefits of its welfare advice service. The Association is delivering financial savings in excess of the cost of the delivering the service. Offering financial savings to GHA and direct benefits to residents a mutually beneficial partnership.

- 123** GHA has improved the costs effectiveness of its financial arrangements. GHA has an effective treasury management system and the Association has recently successfully refinanced its loan portfolio. The effective management of financial resources will ensure that the organisations is able to fund new development and the running of the business.
- 124** There are a number of examples where GHA has improved value for money in its activities. The Association has procured its corporate supplies using robust methods. GHA has joined 'procurement for housing' and their quotations are used to benchmark the quotations that the Association has received. For example, this process has led to improved quotations for mobile phones when the contract was relet.

Summary

- 125** GHA provides a poor service. Overall satisfaction among tenants is low and customer access can be difficult. Progress on equality and diversity issues and performance on responsive repairs and reletting empty homes is weak. The Association's arrangements for managing some budgets are weak, there is no strategic approach to aids and adaptations and there is insufficient information on the condition of their housing stock to effectively plan major repairs. There are risks in the Association's approach to the management of asbestos and gas servicing presents risks. Performance on income collection is mixed and at the time of the inspection GHA did not have a fair way of allocating its empty homes through its transfer system and had suspended transfers while it developed a new system. Overall, costs are not consistent with the services provided. Costs are around average but the quality of service that is provided to residents is low in some areas.
- 126** There are some positive elements of service delivery such as a developing approach to resident involvement and some good examples of customer feedback to shape services. The quality of relet properties is good, there are effective 'sign up' and nominations arrangements and there is an effective approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 127** There is a balance of drivers and barriers to improvement. GHA can demonstrate a recent track record of implementing change and delivering some important improvements for tenants through its Service Improvement Plan. There have been investments in a number of 'building blocks' to support improvement although there has been some slippage in important areas, The general direction of travel on key performance indicators is positive albeit from a low baseline. GHA does not have an effective track record in improving value for money. However, there have been some positive recent improvements to deliver better value for money through its repairs and maintenance work but the overall approach to procurement remains underdeveloped.
- 128** The general direction of travel for key performance indicators is positive albeit from a low baseline in many cases and with a dip in the year 2004/05 in some areas. Progress has been slow in many areas such as rent arrears where performance remains in the lowest quarter of performance when compared to its regional peers.
- Rent arrears performance:
 - 2003/04: 5.61 per cent, 2004/05: 5.22 per cent, 2005/06: 5.05 per cent
 - Percentage of rent collected:
 - 2003/04: 100.5 per cent, 2004/05: 99.8 per cent, 2005/06: 101.8 per cent
 - Voids average cost:
 - 2003/04: £1,706, 2004/05: £1,387, 2005/06: £935
 - Emergency repairs completed in target:
 - 2003/04: 98 per cent, 2004/05: 85.6 per cent, 2005/06: 90.9 per cent
- 129** GHA can demonstrate that a recent track record of delivering complex improvement plans and implementing change. GHA was placed under Housing Corporation Supervision in July 2004. GHA successfully completed the actions agreed in the supervision action plan delivering this programme according to the timescales set out by the Housing Corporation. The Housing Corporation ended supervision in March 2005.
- 130** GHA has a positive track record of responding to external challenge. GHA commissioned a mock housing inspection in November 2005. This report highlighted a number of significant weaknesses within the Association. As a result, the Service Improvement Plan was created which has served for a template for improving the organisation.

131 GHA has a recent track record of delivering some important improvements for tenants through its Service Improvement Plan. A Service Improvement Plan was developed in November 2005 and is supporting the organisation's improvement. The majority of the targets in the Service Improvement Plan have been delivered on time. There are a significant number of areas where the Service Improvement Plan has delivered a range of improvements, which directly benefit customers. These include:

- the improvements to the reception area;
- improved the resident involvement programme;
- creation of an allocations policy;
- developed strategic planning framework that sets out the organisation's approach to business planning; and
- reviewed and develop anti-social behaviour framework, policy and procedures.

132 GHA has also made investments in a number of 'building blocks' to support improvement for customers, including:

- the creation of an asset management, equality and diversity and IT strategies;
- the introduction of direct debits for rent payments and automatic uploading of housing benefit onto IT systems;
- delivering a range of customer-focused improvements as part of its 'Customer First' initiative;
- establishment of an equality and diversity working group led by the Chief Executive and a board 'champion';
- the creation of the performance management framework; and
- organisational restructuring in newly formed directorates.

However, GHA has not made the progress it had hoped in some important areas including:

- the development of tenant profile database;
- implementing an appointment system for responsive repairs;
- development of leaseholders handbooks; and
- embedding equality and diversity.

133 New policies and procedures are not yet fully embedded. A suite of policies and procedures are being produced and some are in place, although their adoption by the Board is relatively recent (since March 2006), for example, Asbestos Policy, Void Property Repairs and Maintenance Policy. It is important for these policies and procedures to be in place, but it is too early to be able to assess how effective they will be in improving service delivery.

- 134 HA does not have an effective track record of improving value for money services to residents. The Association does not have a comprehensive understanding of how its costs compare and does not routinely review service cost alongside service performance. However, there have been some positive steps to deliver better value for money through its repairs and maintenance work. For example, there has been some improvement in the management of major works and there have also been some positive recent improvements in procurement practice through new partnering contracts. However, the overall approach to improving value for money remains underdeveloped.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 135 Strengths broadly outweigh weaknesses in this area. Both the Board and the senior management team have recently been strengthened and there is increasingly strong leadership of the Association and a willingness to take 'tough' decisions. The aims of the Association and the need for change have been effectively communicated to staff; there is a high level of self-awareness and openness to learning. There has been investment in both the service planning process and performance management framework, although effective day-to-day management of performance remains difficult. There are weaknesses in the Association's future plans - some important areas of weakness have not been addressed and the long-term strategic direction of the Association has not yet been fully developed.
- 136 There is increasingly strong leadership of the Association and there is a willingness to take 'tough' decisions. Both the Board and the senior management team have been strengthened and they are working effectively to improve the Association. Relations between the Board and officers are positive and there is a clear commitment to work together for a common purpose. GHA has shown a willingness to take 'tough' decisions for example, transferring the management of its care home to another organisation. This will involve transferring staff and potentially the ownership of the building.
- 137 There is a high level of self-awareness about the strengths and areas for improvement and the Association demonstrates openness to learning. For example, GHA has twinned with a high performing housing association to help improve how it operates. The Association also responded positively to the external challenge posed by its mock inspection. In addition, the Board has learned from others. There is a 'buddy' system for board members' that has supported capacity building, particularly considering that most members have been new to the board during the last two years. This arrangement has helped Board members to challenge more effectively.

- 138** The aims and objectives of the Association and the need for change have been effectively communicated to staff. Decisions are cascaded down from the Board through a monthly system of briefs and staff meetings. Staff have annual appraisals with their line manager and are positive about the support provided by their manager for example, through regular 'one-to-one' meetings. A staff conference reinforced staff's understanding of how their work supports the Association's aims and objectives. Staff are enthusiastic about their own work and the potential for role development. Most staff recognise the need for change and feel that it is being well led.
- 139** GHA has improved its performance management framework, which clearly links between the high-level organisational plans and departmental and individual staff plans. Tasks in the Service Improvement Plan are discussed at the regular 'one-to-one' meetings and the Board received monthly updates on progress.
- 140** There is a developing culture of performance management within GHA. The Board tenants and staff have a clear vision for the organisation to provide high quality services to its residents. Performance information is being shared across the Association senior management, the tenants' federation and the Board. The performance information uses a traffic light system to highlight whether targets are being met and shows performance trends. While this process has only been recently introduced, it is beginning to open the performance of the Association to challenge.
- 141** Budget management has been strengthened. The Association prepares monthly management accounts. Areas of overspends are identified early and actions taken to resolve issues that are highlighted. An example of this has been addressing early overspends in the repairs and maintenance contract. This is enabling GHA to keep better control of its spending.
- 142** GHA has been positive in ensuring that it communicates with its customers about its performance. Residents have been provided with key performance indicator information in the annual report and in the resident's newsletter. One resident group has asked for and is provided with monthly key performance indicator information. The Association is also proactive at seeking out feedback from customers about its service through customer satisfaction surveys although it is missing opportunities to maximise its value.

- 143** The Association's service planning process is developing and is beginning to address some of the significant weaknesses identified in the earlier part of this report. The Association has developed an overarching SMART³ Service Improvement Plan (SIP) that has been broken down into SMART departmental, team and individual plans. This plan is monitored by the Board on a monthly basis with detailed reports on areas of slippage. The SIP and the policy documents that are associated with have plans to address many of the key weaknesses that are identified in the earlier part of this report within the financial year 2005/06. These include:
- start review of customer literature to improve its standard and utilisation;
 - start customer profile initiative - questionnaire distribution;
 - develop Customer Service Strategy;
 - effectively implement ASB IT systems;
 - deliver Service Reviews of Customer Services;
 - undertake 20 per cent stock condition survey;
 - develop and implement Aids and Adaptations Policy;
 - develop and implement Asbestos Policy;
 - develop Recharges Policy;
 - publish five-year planned maintenance programme; and
 - review Grounds Maintenance specification.
- 144** The Association has put in place arrangements to manage its significant business risks. The Association has a risk framework that evaluates and quantifies business and other risks. A risk panel, made up of board members and senior staff, analyses a range of factors, including legal, performance and customer feedback issues to inform a comprehensive risk management framework. With the most significant risks receiving more detailed analysis and commentary of action taken which is regularly reported to the panel. However, the plan does not identify some significant risks highlighted during inspection. For example, the failures to comply with gas safety regulations.
- 145** The Association has adopted a partnering policy and associated procedures. The policy has recently been supplemented by a procurement strategy adopted in July 2006. The new maintenance contract includes incentives to introduce efficiencies. The contract provides for the benefits from cost savings to be shared between the Association and the contractor with the Association receiving 70 per cent of any benefits.

³ Specific, measured, achievable, resourced and time-bound.

- 146** Key future plans fail to define the long-term strategic framework for the development of the Association. GHA's business plan 2006 does not provide a clear long-term framework for the Association but focuses on short and medium-term objectives. This approach reflected the considerable issues faced by the organisation and the need to focus on addressing the concerns raised by the mock housing inspection. This 'incremental' approach is often an appropriate way to manage significant organisational change. The Board recognises the need to focus on strategic planning and plans to meet in November 2006 to set the strategic agenda over the coming five years including key strategic issues such as the future of the charitable arm of the organisation, competing strategic priorities and staffing structures. The absence of a long-term strategic framework for the Association increases the risk of resources not being focused on key and the organisation and its partners are not working collectively towards a common purpose.
- 147** Effective day-to-day management of performance is difficult. Managers, staff and decision makers do not have access to high quality and timely performance information. Performance reports are produced manually by a central team and regularly take up to three weeks to produce. Managers cannot interrogate information on a geographical basis. This hampers the Association's ability to take targeted action to resolve performance problems. With such a geographically widespread tenant base this analysis would be of benefit to residents and Board members.
- 148** The use of learning to drive improvement is not embedded throughout the Association. For example, some parts of the Association do not show awareness of national best practice or of how other organisations tackle problems similar to those experienced by GHA. There was also limited awareness of how performance compared with other organisations.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 149** This is an area where there is a balance between strengths and weaknesses. GHA has strong financial position. GHA has taken steps to increase both management and staff capacity through training. The recent organisational restructuring has allowed GHA to focus its resources to address service weaknesses. The Association has also recently made some positive improvements in procurement practice. However, the Association has limited capacity to deliver change while also delivering adequate day-to-day services. Sustained focus may be difficult because of the diversity of its work; there is limited specialist capacity in some key areas such as IT, and there have been high levels of sickness and recruitment and retention difficulties.
- 150** GHA has strong financial position and is leveraging in external funding to support its work. The Association has a well-developed 30-year financial plan and has recently successfully refinanced to fund its development plans. GHA is on target to meet the Government's rent restructuring targets. Budget setting processes enable the Association's finances to be effectively controlled. GHA is also proactively seeking out external funding to support its own work for example, on energy efficiency works.

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- 151** GHA has taken steps to increase both management and staff capacity. A management programme has been developed for the Association's 22 senior staff particularly targeting middle managers who have a key role in supporting change. There has also been an investment in training its staff. GHA has set a target to provide an average of five days training per year for each member of staff. Individuals have been sponsored through relevant professional training such as accountancy and housing qualifications. Frontline housing staff have all recently undergone specific training after assessment. Training subjects include diversity, allocations, voids and anti-social behaviour.
- 152** The Association is making positive steps to enhance its capacity through closer working with its tenants and other partners. Tenants working with GHA have reported that the relationship with organisation has improved over the last year and they are beginning to put in place the frameworks that will allow improved resident involvement in the future. The Association has been instrumental in developing neighbourhood strategies as part of community development work in regeneration areas. It has also taken a leading role in wider regional regeneration work such as establishing the south west 'In business for Neighbourhoods group'.
- 153** The Association has arranged itself to ensure that it is focusing its resources to address service weaknesses. The organisational restructuring which took place in 2005 to create new directorates moved responsibility for stock investment into Development Department from the Operations Department to enable a more integrated approach to asset management to be developed by the newly recruited Director. GHA has also invested in a new post of leasehold manager. It is envisaged that this post will provide the expertise necessary to develop the service and to carry out service charge consultation.
- 154** The Association has made some positive improvements in procurement practice. There are positive relations with maintenance contractors that have led to developments in terms of partnering arrangements. Both parties are actively discussing further developments to improved services such as the potential of sharing clerk of work resources and making better use of shared IT facilities.
- 155** A long-term partnering contract is in place for cyclical painting. The contract has been in place for over five years and was renewed in early 2006. The partnership involves sharing an office between the Association and the contractor. Work quality and value for money is assessed by external consultants. The programme does not currently cover gutter clearing and replacement although there are plans to widen the arrangements to include this. This long-term arrangement is designed to deliver improvements over time. The Association has limited capacity to deliver change while also delivering adequate day-to-day services. GHA currently has a challenging level of work associated with service improvement including undertaking service reviews and strategy development while also delivering adequate day-to-day services. GHA also has limited experience or skills in key areas such as procurement and IT. There have already been failures to meet targets that the Association has set for itself such as meeting the target for completing 20 per cent stock condition surveys per year.

- 156** Capacity has been reduced by high levels of sickness and recruitment and retention difficulties. Staff averaged 11 days per year sick leave in the year 2005/06 and there was a 25 per cent staff turnover. GHA has also been slow to fill some key posts, for example Head of Property and Head of IT. Positively the organisation does have a range of policies and procedures in place to address these issues including access to consultancy services to deal with complex human resource management. In addition, the Association plans to carry out salary benchmarking and job evaluations to ensure that it remains a competitive employer in a particularly dynamic job market.
- 157** The range of activities that the Association is involved in and the complex nature of its stock mean that sustaining focus is difficult. The range of activities include providing housing and management services to two smaller local housing associations and a number of management companies providing services to leaseholders. It also has stock in Milton Keynes, which is managed by another Housing Association. Managing this level of diversity makes it difficult to sustain focus on the things that matter and represent particular challenges to the managerial capacity of the Association.
- 158** GHA's investment in IT does not support service improvement and the organisation currently has limited specialist capacity. IT does not support effective day-to-day management by providing managers and decision makers with access to high quality and timely performance information although the new IT strategy should help address some of these weaknesses. In addition, GHA has failed to invest appropriately in 'self-service' options through its website. This is the most cost effective way of communicating, consulting and transacting with residents.
- 159** There are some areas where IT is not being used to gather and manage information efficiently. Neither housing officers nor maintenance officers are provided with portable computers, which would enable them to work remotely. Although maintenance officers have handheld personal digital assistants, housing officers currently do not. This equipment could facilitate the holding of regular surgeries in areas that are a considerable distance from Gloucester.

Summary

- 160** On balance, prospects for improvement are promising. GHA has a recent track record of improvement and has invested in a number of 'building blocks' to support further improvements such as improvements in service planning and performance management. Both the Board and the senior management team have recently been strengthened and there is increasingly strong leadership of the Association and a willingness to take 'tough' decisions. The aims of the Association and the need for change have been effectively communicated to staff. GHA demonstrates a high level of self-awareness and the recent organisational restructuring has allowed GHA to focus its resources to address service weaknesses. Management and staff capacity is increasing and importantly GHA has strong financial position.

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- 161 However, there are some weaknesses in the Association's future plans and although robust short-term plans are in place, the long-term strategic direction of the Association has not yet been fully developed. There is currently limited capacity to deliver change while also providing adequate day-to-day services. There have been high levels of sickness and recruitment and retention difficulties and there is limited specialist capacity in some key areas such as IT. Effective day-to-day management of performance remains difficult and sustained focus may be difficult because of the diversity of the Association's work.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2004/05 comparison group mean	2004/05 comparison group median*	2004/05 quartile position in comparison group*
General needs rent						
Average GN weekly gross rent	£63.33	£64.33	£66.03	£63.24	£62.31	3
Vacant dwellings and lettings						
GN re-let time	28 days	24 days	54 days	34 days	30 days	4
Vacant and available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	-	0.8%	0.6%	0.6%	4
Vacant and not available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	-	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	3
GN lettings to BME tenants	-	-	4.1%	2.4%	-	-
Stock condition						
Average SAP rating	57	82	71	64	63	1
Failing decent homes standard	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	18.0%	22.0%	1
Repairs performance						
Emergency repairs completed in target	98.1%	98.0%	85.6%	95.3%	96.0%	4

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Performance indicator	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2004/05 comparison group mean	2004/05 comparison group median*	2004/05 quartile position in comparison group*
Urgent repairs completed in target	92.3%	96.0%	74.2%	89.9%	90.4%	4
Routine repairs completed in target	86.9%	95.0%	75.0%	89.1%	91.8%	4
Appointments made that were kept	-	-	-	95.8%	-	-
Service to tenants						
Tenant satisfaction overall	-	-	75%	80%	82%	4
Tenant satisfaction with participation	-	-	74%	65%	66%	1
General needs financial performance						
Weekly Operating Cost per GN unit	£36.45	£35.22	£38.85	£49.92	£49.17	1
GN Operating Cost as a percentage of Turnover	59.3%	54.3%	59.8%	78.8%	81.1%	1
Weekly investment per GN unit	£22.93	£20.94	£23.72	£32.76	-	-
Rent Collected for GN	100.5%	99.8%	101.8%	99.0%	99.4%	1
Rent Arrears at year-end for GN	8.8%	8.3%	-	-	-	-
Rent lost due to GN Voids	2.0%	1.6%	1.5%	1.2%	1.2%	4
Current tenant rent arrears at year-end for GN	-	-	6.3%	3.6%	3.3%	4

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site, and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - the Association's self-assessment of its services;
 - Corporate Plan 2006/07;
 - equality and diversity statement and policy;
 - further strategies, policies, procedures and guidance related to services inspected;
 - operational and service-related improvement plans;
 - performance management reports and data, including Housing Corporation performance indicators;
 - board of management and committee reports and minutes of meetings;
 - human resources policies and staff survey data;
 - customer involvement meeting minutes and feedback documents; and
 - information for customers, including the tenants' handbook, repairs handbook, customer service standards, leaflets, surveys and newsletters.

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:
 - interviews with a range of people involved with the service, including frontline staff and service managers, team leaders, heads of service, departmental directors, the chief executive and members of the board of management;
 - tenant focus groups and telephone surveys, including those actively involved in tenant involvement activity;
 - attendance at resident involvement and operations committee meetings;
 - visits to a range of the Association's properties, including empty (void) properties, sheltered housing and schemes where property and environmental improvements had been undertaken or were planned;
 - observation of the customer services centre, reception service and scheduled interviews with customers and scheme inspections;
 - attendance at the launch of a neighbourhood agreement;
 - mystery shopping of the service;
 - visiting the Association's website (www.gloscha.co.uk); and
 - inspection of a random sample of recent case files, relating to anti-social behaviour cases, rent arrears recovery and customer complaints.