

Homes for Islington

London Borough of Islington
September 2008



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Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) 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, arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

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

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council/ALMO;
- 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.

This service was inspected as part of the government's arms length housing management initiative, which encourages councils to set up ALMOs to manage, maintain and improve their housing stock. The government decided that councils pursuing this option can secure additional capital funding if the new arms length body has received at least a 'good' rating from the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate.

An ALMO is a company set up by a local authority to manage and improve all or part of its housing stock. The local authority remains the landlord and tenants remain secure tenants of the authority. An ALMO does not trade for profit, and is managed by a board of directors comprising Council nominees, elected tenants/ leaseholders and independents.

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

- 'ALMO Inspections and the delivery of excellent housing management services' (March 2003); and
- 'Learning from the first housing ALMOs' (May 2003).

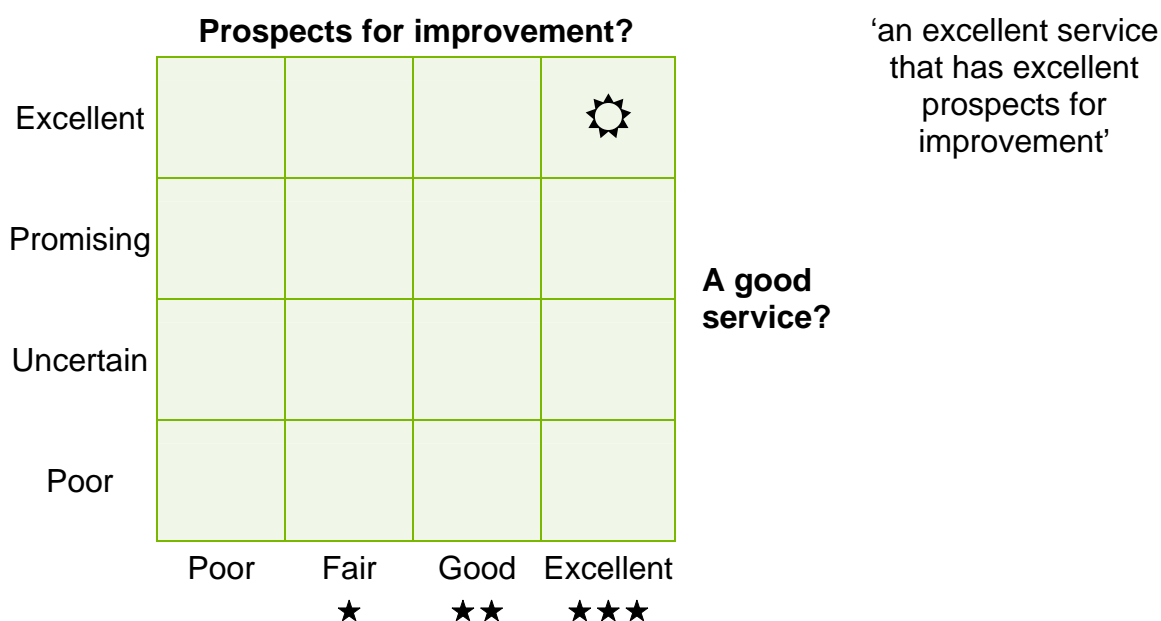
Summary

- 1 Homes for Islington was inspected in 2005 and was rated as a good two-star service with excellent prospects for improvement. This inspection found that the service has continued to improve. Telephones are answered well and information is comprehensive. Strong leadership on diversity leads to services that are tailored to needs with support for vulnerable residents.
- 2 HFI consults residents well on major repairs and satisfaction for this and aids and adaptations is high, repairs are easy to report and void properties are turned around fast. There is a high quality welcome box for new tenants.
- 3 Performance on collecting rents is high while eviction rates are low. HFI is successfully improving satisfaction with participation, and actively seeking and responding to resident feedback. HFI provides a significant level of information and support to new tenants and provides an effective response to ASB with an out-of-hours service increasing residents' sense of safety.
- 4 HFI is improving services to leaseholders, consulting well on major works and offering flexible alternatives for paying major works bills. Service charges are relatively low with good collection rates and Right to Buy is well managed.
- 5 The choice based letting scheme is run well with successful steps to address under occupation. HFI has a robust approach to value for money with structures and a culture that is embedded and drives forward efficiencies. Savings have been made in many parts of the service.
- 6 However the quality of customer care and file keeping is mixed, issues raised by the snagging process for major works are not reliably dealt with, repair monitoring is misleading and the cyclical decorations programme is inflexible. The quality of void properties is not always high and no standards are set for aids and adaptations.
- 7 The monitoring of ASB performance is limited. The satisfaction of leaseholders is low, relations with leaseholder representatives are not good and some leaseholders lack confidence in the accuracy of the charges.
- 8 HFI has successfully improved services and performance resulting in significant increases in satisfaction at the same time as reducing costs. The corporate vision is clear leading to an effective series of plans. Governance is strong, relations with the Council productive and comprehensive performance reports drive improvements. HFI has a well embedded approach to learning. Capacity is enhanced by well managed human resources and information systems along with strong partnerships and a significant amount of inward investment.
- 9 However medium term vision and objectives are under developed, not all performance development reviews are well conducted and communications with caretakers is not always effective.

Scoring the service

10 We have assessed Homes for Islington as providing an ‘excellent’, three-star service that has excellent 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

11 We found the service to be excellent because it has a significant range of strengths as follows.

- The offices are easy to access, telephones are answered well and customers have access to a lot of good quality information on paper and online.
- Strong leadership on diversity has delivered systems of effectively recording the different needs of residents and delivering services tailored to their needs. Vulnerable tenants are well supported.
- Major works are well planned and delivered through effective partnerships resulting in high satisfaction. Residents are well informed and have the opportunity to input into aspects of the programme and work.
- HFI has a well coordinated repairs partnership; repairs are easy to report and the contractor keeps appointments and usually delivers repairs in one visit to a high level of customer satisfaction.

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.

- Void properties are turned around quickly and new tenants are given a high quality welcome box and gas and electric accounts that are secured in advance.
- HFI was up to date with gas servicing for 99.3 per cent of properties at the time of the inspection while providing flexible appointments.
- Performance on collecting rents is high while eviction rates are low. The approach to rent arrears is well thought through, personal and proactive, vulnerable tenants are protected while debt advice options are flexible.
- HFI is successfully improving satisfaction with participation and structures allow resident control within a flexible approach to TMOs. HFI resources resident involvement well and the compact allows local control of significant budgets. HFI actively seeks feedback from residents, responds positively and has begun to work with more marginalised communities.
- Tenancy management services are effective and focused on the prevention of tenancy breaches and provide a significant level of information and support to new tenants. HFI provides a well co-ordinated and effective response to ASB with an out of hours service increasing residents' sense of safety. There is a positive, pro-active approach to partnership working and arrangements for supporting victims of domestic violence.
- HFI provides good quality information to leaseholders and is improving the service. Consultation on major works is good, satisfaction with the works is reasonable and HFI is flexible in helping leaseholders pay. Service charges are relatively low with good collection rates and Right to Buy is well managed.
- The choice based letting scheme is well run allowing fast re-let times while HFI takes successful steps to address under occupation.
- HFI has a robust approach to value for money with structures and a culture that is embedded and drives forward efficiencies. Savings have been made in many parts of the service through reviewing service level agreements and contracts, restructuring and service reviews.

12 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include the following.

- The remaining minor issues following major works are not reliably dealt with and the cyclical decorations programme is inflexible. The monitoring of responsive repairs is not robust; the quality of let properties is not always high and gas servicing was poor over the summer with less than 90 per cent of gas servicing up to date.
- No service standards exist for aids and adaptations.
- Leaseholders are not satisfied with the service, relations with leaseholder representatives are not good and some leaseholders do not have confidence in the accuracy of the charges.
- The process for viewing rented properties is not always easy for applicants, support to vulnerable applicants is often reactive and mutual exchanges are not well promoted. HFI's costs are higher than average according to the most recent benchmarking data.

Scoring the service

13 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because of the following.

- HFI has improved services leading to significant improvements in resident satisfaction and positive trends in most performance indicators while cutting costs.
- The vision and objectives are clear, based on a structured process of prioritisation with resident input leading to an effective series of plans. Governance is strong, relations with the Council productive and comprehensive performance reports backed up by quality monitoring systems drive improvements. HFI evaluates initiatives well, monitors contracted services and risk effectively and has a well embedded approach to learning.
- HFI usually assesses and develops staff well, has strong management skills and carries out human resource management and information system management well. HFI has a robust approach to procurement and attracts significant amount of inward investment.

14 However, there are a few barriers to improvement. These include:

- underdevelopment of medium term vision and lack of early involvement of residents in policy and strategy development. The standard of performance development reviews is not consistent and communications with caretakers can be improved.

Recommendations

15 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 organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

- R1** Improve systems for completing major works and planning cyclical works by:
- implementing procedures to ensure that all unfinished or unsatisfactory works are monitored and reported on;
 - ensuring the contractors perform well on finishing the final touches of major works;
 - considering giving the finishing work to a different contractor where performance is not high in this area; and
 - reviewing the cyclical decoration programme with a view to the requirements of the property rather than a set time table.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- higher satisfaction with major works;
- less items from major works left unfinished;
- greater incentive for contractors to finish 'snagged' works; and
- better value for money on cyclical decorations

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

Recommendation

- R2** Improve the performance on aids and adaptations by:
- agreeing with residents and partners a set of measured service standards; and
 - improving joint working on aids and adaptations so that all parties work together to meet agreed standards and targets.

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.

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- residents will have clearer expectations of the aids and adaptations service;
- satisfaction with the service will increase; and
- the wait for aids and adaptations will reduce.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within nine months.

Recommendation
R3 Improve relationships with leaseholder groups by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• improving the areas of leaseholder dissatisfaction; and• renewing efforts to engage leaseholders.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- satisfaction with the service will increase; and
- the potential for leaseholder involvement in service delivery will be maximised.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

- 16** We would like to thank the staff of Homes for Islington and London Borough of Islington who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 19 November to 30 November 2007

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Context

The locality

- 17** Islington is an inner London borough. It lies to the north of the City of London, west of Hackney, east of Camden and south of Haringey. The borough includes the areas of Finsbury Park, Highbury, Holloway, Barnsbury, Clerkenwell, and Archway Highgate. Islington has extensive transport links to the City, West End and other parts of London. King's Cross and St. Pancras train and tube stations are on the border of Islington providing good rail links to Europe, the north of England, Scotland and other major London stations as well as direct connections to Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton airports.
- 18** Islington has a population of just over 180,000 in a small geographical area, making it one of the most densely populated authorities in the country. The population is young, and the proportion of inhabitants aged over 65 is lower than the London average. Seventy-one per cent of its dwellers are of working age, against a London average of 67 per cent; while 10 per cent are over 65 compared with a London average of 12 per cent.
- 19** Islington is a borough of contrasts. Wealth sits side by side with poverty. It has a high proportion of professionally qualified residents and some of the most expensive private housing in London. Many business sectors are thriving, especially small business, leisure and the arts and media industries. Yet overall, Islington is the sixth most deprived authority³ in England and Wales and three quarters of Islington's residents live in wards ranked among the 10 per cent most socially deprived in the country. Meanwhile, unemployment stands at 6 per cent, which is lower than the London average, but higher than the national average of 5.5 per cent. General health is not good and in housing there's a low level of owner occupation as well as a high level of overcrowding. The government characterises Islington as 'severely deprived.'
- 20** Extensive regeneration is taking place within the borough. Current projects comprise large scale schemes such as work with the London Development Agency and Camden Council on regenerating the King's Cross area. Recently completed projects include the Arsenal stadium, which included social housing and new jobs.

The Council

- 21** The Council has a leader and a cabinet system of governance which ensures that it provides an efficient, transparent and accountable service to its inhabitants. There is an overview committee which scrutinises executive decisions, supports and makes recommendations on the work of the executive, and reviews matters relating to the Council's functions.

³ Index of deprivation 2007, rank of average ranks

Context

- 22 Islington also has three review committees that review and make proposals to the executive on future policy and practice; four area committees made up of local councillors that meet to consider matters of local interest; and a standards committee that takes a proactive role including overseeing the conduct of councillors.
- 23 The Council comprises 48 councillors and has a Liberal Democrat administration. The Liberal Democrats have 24 seats, the Labour Party has 23 and the Green Party has one seat.
- 24 In 2007 the Audit Commission rated the Council as three-star out of four overall and 'improving well' following the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

The service

- 25 On 5 April 2004, Islington set up an arm's length management organisation (ALMO), Homes for Islington (HFI), to undertake the landlord functions of its housing service to the 30,000 tenants and 9,000 leaseholders. The initial management agreement is for ten years, with a break clause after five years and an option to renew for further five-year periods.
- 26 The ALMO is a company, managed by a board made up of seven residents (tenants and leaseholders), five council nominees and five independents. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team, headed by a Chief Executive.
- 27 The functions delegated to HFI are for the council's tenanted, leasehold and some temporary accommodation. These can be summarised as:
 - stock investment and repairs ordering;
 - environmental protection and improvement;
 - rent collection, dealing with arrears and debt counselling;
 - estate management, caretaking and support services under Supporting People;
 - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation;
 - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
 - similar functions for leaseholders; and
 - tenant participation, information and consultation.
- 28 The functions retained by the council include:
 - housing strategy and enabling;
 - homelessness, housing advice and money advice; and
 - administration of the housing register.
- 29 Homes for Islington has responsibility for delivering the programme of improvements and also manages £26.4 million revenue of the Council's funded repairs budget.
- 30 The budget for services for 2007/08 is £28.4 million including delegated budgets but excluding managing agent fees and capital programme.

- 31** The management fee to HFI is £53 million. The stock of 25,464 homes and 165 units of hostel accommodation are managed through five housing offices. There are 25 tenant management organisations, tenant management co-operatives and estate management boards directly managing 3,789 tenant and leasehold properties.
- 32** The Council has also successfully undertaken a number of voluntary transfers of stock to registered social landlords on some estates and there are two Private Finance Initiatives (PFI), one with 4,089 tenanted properties and one with 2,329 leaseholder properties which manage Council-owned properties not on estates.
- 33** We inspected Homes for Islington in November 2004, and published a report in March 2005, assessing the service as a good, two-star service, with excellent prospects for improvement. This enabled the Council to access additional Supported Borrowing of £50.76 million in the three years to April 2007, out of its total bid of £175.8 million. Where relevant we start each section of this report with a summary of what we said in 2004.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

34 Islington Council has a vision of 'One Islington' with an overall objective of 'being regarded as excellent by the people of Islington'. It has set three priority themes which summarise this vision:

- listening to Islington - listening to what local people want, proactively improving services based on what we hear and feeding back to people to find out if we have got it right;
- stronger communities - improving the quality of life of all residents and reducing the gap in life chances between the most and the least deprived; and
- a greener, cleaner and safer borough - improving the quality of Islington's environment by making it a safe and enjoyable place to be for all communities.

35 Of the Council's six key pledges for 2007/08, the one most relevant to this report is to 'help council leaseholders pay their bills for large improvements'.

36 Homes for Islington vision is 'Quality homes for the residents of Islington' and has a mission:

'To continuously improve housing for local residents, through sound investment, the effective management of resources and the relevant involvement of staff, residents and community partners'.

37 Six themes underlie this vision and mission.

- Exemplary and sustainable homes - supported through sound investment, attention to quality and design for changing needs.
- A place for people - safe, attractive neighbourhoods, where residents may have pride and confidence in where they live.
- Accessibility and affordability - supporting residents' access to health, leisure, recreation, education and training.
- Equality for all - where estates and neighbourhoods are tolerant of difference and where all forms of discrimination are abolished.
- Doing it green - efficient use of natural resources, applying eco-friendly design, recycling waste and improved 'green' space.
- Listening – consulting.

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

Access and customer care

- 38** In 2004, we found that this was an area of strength overall. Services were accessible and user focused, all key published material was written in plain English and with the HFI identity. Residents considered staff were responsive and accountable. Residents were involved in the content of the highly regarded resident newsletters and satisfaction levels have increased by 11 per cent. However service standards needed clear targets and greater resident involvement in developing them. The quality of responses to complaints and performance against target times for stage two complaints required improvement. The standard of temporary accommodation and facilities in reception centres were poor.
- 39** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses. The offices are easy to access, telephones are answered well and customers have access to a lot of good quality information on paper and online, including service standards. An effective compensation policy is in place, access to the internet is increasingly facilitated and complaints are handled reasonably. The quality of customer care is mixed with room for improvement.
- 40** The area offices are easy to access. There are four offices to cover one of the geographically smallest authorities in England. They are well signposted, clean and tidy with a broad range of posters and leaflets on display and a number of accessible interview rooms. The offices are open from 9:00 am to 4:45 pm with the central office open until 7:00 pm on Wednesday and Saturday morning. The quality of the area offices is reasonable with a few of minor deficiencies. Residents can easily obtain a face to face service.
- 41** Staff handle telephone calls well. There is a freephone number available 12 hours a day and on Saturday morning. The same number works out of hours for emergencies. The contact centre answers telephone calls in an average of 13 seconds or 98 per cent within six rings; this compares well against other landlords. Calls are appropriately monitored for quality. In an independent repairs survey, 99 per cent of tenants are satisfied with the speed of call answering and 98 per cent were satisfied with how well staff deal with repair requests. It is a small weakness that HFI does not have statistics on call handling outside of the contact centre. However spot checks are carried out and reports show a strong service. Residents can easily obtain services over the phone.
- 42** HFI has a clear set of appropriately monitored customer promises. Residents were involved in drawing these up and HFI reports on the performance against these promises in the residents' newsletter. The process is recent and HFI has only monitored and reported against some of the service promises. The promises and the reports enable customers to know what to expect and to hold their landlord to account.

How good is the service?

- 43** Customers have access to a comprehensive set of information that is usually well written. HFI produces handbooks, quarterly newsletters and dozens of leaflets. The website is comprehensive and customer focused and a large amount of information is available. As well as all the customer focussed leaflets, the papers of all board and sub-committee and customer panel meetings are available in advance. Customers can pay rent, view their rent statement and order a repair using a diagnostic tool. Translations and large text are available online. Customers have easy access to the information that they need.
- 44** HFI has an effective compensation system for missed appointments. Residents get a £15 voucher (or rent credit) without having to claim it. In six months, 439 residents had been paid £6,585. This is part of larger comprehensive compensation policy. The system compensates residents for inconvenience and provides a powerful performance incentive to drive improvement.
- 45** Complaints are handled well but improvements are recent and the handling can be improved. A review earlier in the year confirmed weaknesses in the system. The policy and procedure were changed and new software has been in place for four months. This is capturing more of what were previously seen as informal complaints. Letters in response to complaints are well written but they usually fail to follow the new policy in some small way. Processes for learning from complaints work well. However the service is not strong because HFI does not ensure that complainants agree that the issues have been addressed in full before closing a complaint.
- 46** HFI is helping customers overcome the disadvantages of limited internet access. The ALMO is installing wireless networks for residents; whole estates now have access. Take up has been significant and feedback good, with over 1,000 different computers accessing the broadband service. HFI has also set up a local digital television channel for the benefit of residents. Those residents who subscribe to satellite or cable television can use it to access similar services as those available on the website for example choice based lettings and ordering a repair. Disadvantaged residents are getting free access to a service that would cost them almost £200 per year.
- 47** The quality of customer service is mixed. Most of the time staff give a good service. The 2007 survey said that three quarters of residents found staff helpful and two thirds found that they were able to deal with their problem. Although this is an improvement on previous years and better than the London average, it is still not a strong service. Residents said staff are better face to face and that the calibre of managers is good, as they are able to resolve issues and deal effectively with criticisms.
- 48** HFI has not invested strongly in training on customer service, but this is now being addressed. Front line staff had high quality training on dealing with potentially aggressive and difficult people. This won an award in the London region from the UK Training Council which covers all industries. The ALMO plans to train all front line staff in customer skills in the next six months.

Diversity

- 49** In 2004, we found that this was an area that still required some development. We found commitment and a robust approach to equalities that was having a positive impact on services for residents. However progress in this area had not been as rapid as other areas; HFI was limited in its ability to address all the needs of its residents as the ongoing update of profiling information was not complete,. HFI needed greater consistency in the collection and use of profiling information and works to ensure public access to community centres was compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- 50** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses. There is strong provision of services to diverse and vulnerable communities. Strong leadership has led to clear and effective plans with a well monitored understanding of different residents needs. Information collected about residents allows services to be tailored to needs and disadvantages faced by residents are overcome allowing them a more equal access to services.
- 51** HFI provides a clear and effective lead on delivering equality and diversity throughout the organisation. This helps to establish a strong culture of successfully addressing equality and diversity issues.
- It has a comprehensive, outcome focused, equality and diversity strategy and action plan that link to other strategies.
 - The Chief Executive chairs the equality and diversity forum that has facilitated staff input into the strategy and action plan and monitors progress.
 - A staff diversity group feeds into the equality and diversity forum.
 - Five equality impact assessments were carried out in 2007 leading to service improvements.
 - The service improvement plan addresses issues of equality and diversity.
 - HFI complies with the CRE Code of Practice for Rented Housing.
 - HFI monitors itself against the Local Government Equality Standard using the I&DeA's equality standard assessment tool, while the Council's internal audit assessed the ALMO as reaching level four against the standard.
 - The board receives an annual report on diversity that assesses achievements for the past year and reviews areas that require work.
 - Two of the contractors' multi-trade operatives work directly from the housing offices fitting smoke alarms for vulnerable tenants.
- 52** HFI is slow at collecting information on some residents' profiles but doing well on others. At the end of 2006 HFI had information on the ethnic origin of 50 per cent of tenants. This only improved to 56 per cent a year later. However HFI has information on the faith of 41 per cent of tenants and the sexuality of 40 per cent of tenants which compares well with other organisations. In the case of faith, information on 14 per cent was collected in five months. The ability to make useful analysis of services by diversity strand and other useful work is affected by the progress at collecting this data.

How good is the service?

- 53** HFI has an effective process for flagging up and responding to the needs and vulnerabilities of tenants. The information is detailed although not fully populated. The data collected has been put on the IT system in a way that complies with data protection and human rights legislation and guidelines. The mapping exercise has identified significant Spanish, Portuguese and Greek communities not previously highlighted. The system on the computer alerts staff to issues and one result is that contractors have knowledge of tenant problems or vulnerabilities before they attend site.
- 54** HFI is productively using the diversity data that it does hold on residents to assess whether there is equal access to services by various diversity strands. There are reports on repairs, anti-social behaviour (ASB) and harassment, complaints, lettings and rent arrears actions. The reports show the proportion of people who have for example had a notice of seeking possession for arrears by ethnicity, language, gender, disability, faith, sexuality and age. The reports are used to identify actions to improve the service.
- 55** HFI has an effective, well-structured and tailored approach to meeting the communication needs of residents in a cost-effective way. As a result residents with language needs are able to get a more equal service. The only weakness is the lack of proactive signposting to English classes. The following positive elements have produced benefits.
- A service review on translation and interpretation has changed service delivery with a greater emphasis on interpretation and explanation.
 - The information gathered from the resident profiling exercise has highlighted six languages in which more residents need translation. All key leaflets have strap lines on translations highlighting what the leaflet is about in the six languages. Key documents are translated into these languages based on information from focus groups of residents who do not speak English.
 - The website has information in the main languages, larger text and browse aloud.
 - Three-way telephone interpretation is available for all communications with residents as is a list of staff who can interpret. British Sign Language interpretation is available by appointment.
 - Where HFI has noted that residents need translation or large text, then the computer prompts staff to send documents like the annual report and letters in the resident's own language without the resident having to ask each time.
- 56** HFI is proactive in helping vulnerable tenants to report repairs in their homes. An annual repair check is carried out for the visually impaired and tenants who are deaf or deafened. And where older residents have not made a repair request or contacted HFI for several months then staff carry out a repair health check visit for them. As a result disadvantages are overcome to deliver a more equal service to these residents.

- 57** HFI is addressing challenges for disabled residents in an open and effective way. The ALMO commissioned Disability Action Islington to coordinate a panel of 12 physically or sensory disabled residents. The panel looks at key areas of work and how they impact on disabled residents as well as assessing how HFI is performing against the Disability Equalities Standard. HFI has been proactive in raising issues with the group such as the entry phone systems and impact on the deaf and deafened community.
- 58** HFI works well with community groups to meet the needs of communities that have not previously had much contact with the ALMO. Staff have held special forums and engaged in outreach work to capture the needs and issues arising from those communities. Engagement has now taken place with the sizeable, but largely unnoticed Chinese community using translators. HFI meets with older members of the Bangladeshi community through a luncheon club and is engaging with the Somali community while aware of the challenges and divisions within it. By opening new communication channels HFI is able to learn of service difficulties for specific communities and is taking steps towards improving services as a result; an example is the use of symbols due to start for choice based lettings literature.
- 59** HFI has a comprehensive approach to training staff on diversity. Last year HFI used an award winning online package tailored to the organisation. Ninety-seven per cent of staff participated and 99 per cent of those passed the test that followed the training. This year the training is part of the induction package for new starters. Diversity issues are better understood and dealt with as a result.
- 60** HFI is ensuring that contractors engage appropriately with the equalities and diversity agenda and that work is available to women and black and minority ethnic (BME) companies and workers:
- the responsive repairs contractor trains its workers in equalities and diversity with residents involved in delivering the training and it is the only construction firm in the country signed up with Stonewall as a diversity champion;
 - HFI acts to ensure that all contractors and suppliers are meeting their duties under the Equality and Human Rights Commission guidelines;
 - all contractors have signed up to the diversity framework and within all contracts there are performance indicators on diversity;
 - The framework contracts are reaching HFI's targets for the proportion of female and BME employees; and
 - HFI allocated about £4.1 million of work to local firms in 2006/07 across several trades and has held a well-attended BME suppliers' conference with the aim of improving access to subcontracts.

How good is the service?

- 61** The weakest aspect under diversity is the fact that 26 out of 38 community centres are not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. However, these are the responsibility of the local authority. HFI with extra funding from the Council has been incrementally bringing these up to the legally required standards with 12 made fully compliant in 2005/06 and 2006/07 and a further 11 in 2007/08. The remaining 15 are estimated to cost £630,000 to bring up to the standard and a £500,000 bid is going to full Council in February 2008. The work is prioritised for the centres that are used most. Disabled residents may not be able to make full use of most of the community centres at present.
- 62** There are areas where progress on diversity issues has been slow:
- work with the sizeable Turkish and Kurdish communities is limited;
 - posters in area offices about the three-way telephone interpretation service and the facilities for the deaf and deafened are not prominent, and may not be noticed; and
 - the disability panel wants HFI to explore how to gather better information on access and communication needs. Delays in doing this means that an opportunity to improve the data collection exercise is being lost.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 63** In 2004, we found that this was an area of strength. There was a clear investment strategy in place, supported by robust stock condition data. HFI had adopted a mixed approach to achieving the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) including a public finance initiative (PFI), and the use of its own resources. It was likely that HFI would achieve the DHS by 2010. However, contract maintenance arrangements for capital schemes were not consistent. On one scheme we saw poor quality of work, and poor site and health and safety arrangements. There was a lack of integration of the replacement of life expired (ROLEC) programme and the cyclical painting programme impacting on cost efficiency. The energy efficiency budget was not being spent on time.
- 64** In this inspection, we found that this continues to be an area where strengths outweighed weaknesses. The works are well planned and delivered through effective partnerships resulting in reasonable satisfaction. Residents are well informed and have the opportunity to input into aspects of the programme and work. However issues raised by the snagging process are not reliably dealt with and the cyclical decorations programme has not maintained all buildings to a high standard.

- 65** HFI has a well-developed approach to delivering a large stock investment programme with a spend of £102 million for 2006/07. It has partnering arrangements with seven framework⁴ contracts based on Egan⁵ principles. Works are being delivered on time and to budget. The programme is well monitored with all works checked rather than a percentage of works. To ensure probity all capital contracts are audited each year under a SLA with the Council's auditors. The DHS programme addresses thermal comfort with input from the Energy Centre and is robust enough to ensure that the standard will be met by 2010.
- 66** Tenant satisfaction with major work is reasonable and improving but below average. In 2006/07, 87 per cent of residents were satisfied with the way HFI delivered the project, 90 per cent were satisfied with the way the contractor undertook the work and 88 per cent expressed overall satisfaction with improvement works. Levels of satisfaction have increased significantly as HFI learns from experience and uses feedback from residents to both address problems and plan improvements.
- 67** Feedback from residents spoken to was mixed. Some residents speak positively of kitchens and bathrooms, while others were not so happy. Some say contractors do not leave their homes clean or that they did not have sufficient notice of when disruptive work like rewiring would begin. HFI have responded for example changing the contractor for rewiring and satisfaction statistics are improving in response to residents' comments.
- 68** HFI has effective information mechanisms in place for major works. A draft of each year's programme goes to the area housing panels in advance. All affected residents are informed of impending works in advance and separate meetings are held for tenants and leaseholders; leaseholders are given estimated costs for different items of the works well in advance of legal requirements. A steering group of residents in each estate looks at the whole process in depth and can influence finer details of the work. An agreed maximum price is set before works start and given to leaseholders. The contract price can go below but not above this price. This is positive practice as it offers peace of mind and the ability to make financial plans. Liaison officers ensure continuous communication through the process of the works. The information creates a greater understanding of the process, reduces misunderstanding and complaints and allows options to be chosen in some cases.
- 69** Residents have effective input into some elements of planned works. £1.5 million a year is being spent on security works since this was prioritised in the 2004 resident survey. Residents have input in the design of security and environmental improvements in the regeneration areas, such as EC1 New Deal⁶ and Tollington. Residents directly bid for and select elements of the capital programme within the £1.5 million budget of the Tenants Compact. In some instances residents have altered the design of the windows through the advanced meetings outlined above. Planned works in these cases better reflect the priorities of the residents.

⁴ Framework contracts are results of bids made in advance of actual contracts and set the price parameter for works that are carried out.

⁵ A report by Egan set out better ways of working with contractors based around partnering.

⁶ The New Deal for Communities is a scheme funded by central government that in Islington has invested millions of pounds in HFI property for security and environmental works

How good is the service?

- 70** HFI has a strong approach to risk management and health and safety. HFI has developed a construction site health and safety audit system that enables the grading of constructors performance using health and safety performance indicators. All HFI's constructors are performing above their targets. Health and safety documentation is signed off appropriately and all contractors are members of considerate constructors' scheme. HFI was the first ALMO in the country to achieve the top mark of five stars from the British Safety Council for its Health and Safety Management arrangements. There should be fewer accidents as a result.
- 71** The DHS programme is based on reasonable quality stock information which is well maintained. The last stock condition survey of the whole stock was carried out in 1999 and involved 100 per cent external and 10 per cent internal surveys. Since then in 2004 and 2005 a survey looked at the externals of 62 per cent of the properties and 15 per cent of the internals. This is updated with full surveys undertaken for those properties where DHS work is due. HFI adds this information, along with data from large repairs and voids, onto a live database that integrates with the responsive repairs system and helps with major works planning. One weakness is that HFI was a couple of years late in training staff in the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. This means that plans might not address all aspects of the DHS, although reviews are being done from now on as the work is finished, to check for any outstanding issues. External consultants are due to validate the survey but this has not happened yet. Plans will not be as robust as they could be.
- 72** HFI lacks a complete and co-ordinated asset management strategy based around one clear document. Such a document would outline what challenges HFI face in managing and maintaining the property in terms of condition, demand, and social factors. It would then lay out the subsequent investment goals and related activities for dealing with those challenges. The existing documents address tasks necessary to carry out Decent Homes work until 2010, there are plans for thermal insulation and environmental improvements and action is being taken to improve social sustainability and anti-social behaviour on some estates. A comprehensive asset management strategy is being drafted that will look beyond 2010; it will need amending to pull all the strands together. Until this is produced there is a risk that HFI will not fully understand and appropriately prioritise the requirements for managing and maintaining its assets.
- 73** The cyclical decoration programme is rigid and not yet up to date. The stock has not been well maintained in the past and HFI is faced with a complex task. It has to both catch up on cyclical work and put in place a cyclical programme that is coordinated with the Decent Homes work which is ordered by a different set of priorities. The programme aims to redecorate all properties every seven years. It does not grade properties and surfaces and choose materials according to their exposure to the elements and human activity to ensure maximum quality and value for money in cyclical works. While every property has been programmed up to 2010/11, some of the properties in the programme will have waited over seven years by the time they are decorated. Information for residents on when their property is due for cyclical decorations is limited to the next three and half years. Where standards are not maintained the external fabric of a property is compromised and residents have to put up with a less attractive appearance.

- 74** It can take a long time to finish all the work and the follow up of snagging is not robust. HFI involves residents and records defects in the works well. However many residents reported that works were not then completed and nobody came to check they were completed. Staff say that it is left to the contractor to check at this stage unless the items are significant. This has not been prioritised by the contractor in many instances and residents are left frustrated despite having been promised that this work would be done. Leaseholders have to wait a long time for the peace of mind of the final accounts. Some residents have a particularly negative view of work in part because of the long time it takes contractors to finish and get right remaining bits of work.
- 75** Consultation on materials used for new kitchens and bathroom is limited compared to some other landlords. A team of architects and surveyors researched the materials and then 33 flats were used to show residents kitchens and bathrooms using these materials. The preferences recorded from tenants were used to narrow down the choices offered to tenants to four or five standard finishes for kitchens and bathrooms. There was no tenant input into the original choice of materials and the final option for colours and finishes is limited. This can lead to less of a sense of ownership of a process that for many tenants feels imposed on them.

Responsive repairs

- 76** In 2004, we found that this was an area of strength overall. Strengths that we had previously identified had been sustained and developed further. Performance and satisfaction with responsive repairs continued to improve, and the partnership with their contractor continued to thrive. However, we were concerned about some of the qualitative aspects of the repairs service including getting repairs right first time, the effectiveness of the post-inspection framework and the quality and timeliness of responses to repair complaints.
- 77** In this inspection, we found this to be an area with strengths greater than weaknesses. There is a well coordinated partnership, repairs are easy to report; the contractor keeps appointments and delivers repairs to a high level of customer satisfaction, usually in one visit. Repairs are carried out faster than average. However the reporting of the speed of repairs performance is not clear benchmarking and understanding performance in this area.
- 78** The responsive repairs service is faster than average. The target for non-urgent repairs is seven working days which is a challenging target. In 2006/07 it took HFI eight days on average to complete non-urgent repairs which is faster than average compared to national ALMOs and London boroughs.

The comparative service standard communicated to tenants is a low standard. The handbook says that the aim is to complete non-urgent repairs in 25 working days or five weeks. This is a lower standard than that set by most other social landlords.

How good is the service?

- 79** An element of reporting on repairs is misleading. For some indicators, HFI reports on the performance of the contractors rather than the outcome for tenants. HFI allows contractors extensions of time for specific reasons that have nothing to do with the tenant such as waiting for specialist materials, asbestos found or loss of power. So for example 2006/07 HFI reported 98.6 per cent of urgent repairs done on time, which is in the top 25 per cent of ALMOs nationally. However 1.0 per cent of these repairs had extensions not related to tenants' wishes and needs, so the actual figure was nearer 97.6 per cent moving it from fifth to eleventh place out of 33 ALMOs. This means that the Board is not getting a true picture of performance and comparative figures are misleading.
- 80** Overall performance is better than average but performance against one indicator is weak. The old best value indicator BV72 records the percentage of urgent repairs completed within government time limits. HFI only completed 93.1 per cent within these limits. This is one of the worst performances compared to London boroughs and national ALMOs.
- 81** The contact centre provides an effective service for repairs. Tenant satisfaction is high with 99 per cent satisfied with how quickly the phone is answered and 98 per cent satisfied with how staff deal with repair requests. A resolution team at the contact centre has successfully resolved repair issues with tenants, reducing the number of complaints received.
- 82** Appointments work well. There is reasonable flexibility with three slots a day and an evening appointment available. The phone survey shows that for the main contractor, 94 per cent of tenants were offered an appointment when they phoned. The contractor aims to ring residents two days before to remind the tenant and 61 per cent of tenants say that this was done. Where the contractor misses an appointment, a £15 voucher is paid automatically as compensation and 143 payments were made for responsive repairs in six months. The number of missed appointments is not so clear. The contractor records that only 1 per cent of them are missed while the telephone survey of individual repairs shows that 5 per cent are missed. However, tenants can generally rely on the contractor arriving when promised.
- 83** A high proportion of repairs other than for gas are carried out first time. The contractor monitors itself on this and reports that 92 per cent are completed right first time. This is important as it reduces inconvenience for tenants as well as being more cost effective. Information collected from tenants show that when combining a work on gas (some of which is planned servicing), only 75 per cent are carried out first time. On the whole tenants benefit from less inconvenience due to repairs being completed in one visit.
- 84** Tenant satisfaction with repairs is high and improving although it does not always meet targets. HFI has an independent organisation which telephones tenants who have had a repair completed. Of those who responded in the first six months of the year:
- 81 per cent were satisfied with the way HFI deals with repairs;
 - 87 per cent found the work carried out to their satisfaction;
 - 93 per cent were satisfied with the quality of the repair; and
 - 95 per cent said the appointment was kept.

- 85** HFI delivers repairs through a strong partnership with a single contractor. The contractor shares profits with the council and HFI moved various posts to the contractor resulting in reduced direct and overhead costs for both parties. The data the contractor supplies is checked and found to be reliable. Pre inspections and most of the monitoring are now undertaken by the contractor with HFI carrying out a client audit of 4.4 per cent of all jobs and everything over £1,000. This helps to speed up the service for tenants and has improved the quality of the work.
- 86** HFI is carrying out more planned repairs compared with responsive repairs. In 2006/07, only 45 per cent of combined expenditure was on planned with 55 per cent on responsive repairs. In the first six months of 2007/08 the ratio has improved to 56:44 which is an indicator of better value for money.
- 87** HFI does not have a robust approach to recharging tenants for repairs that are their own responsibility although this is improving. A review was carried out in April 2007 but the new policy has not yet been implemented. However the contact service staff who take the calls work to a well developed scripting system which helps them diagnose repairs and raise orders, with flowcharts that guide staff too. The script has been altered to become more challenging of tenants on recharging issues. Anecdotal evidence from both staff and tenants point to this having an impact which means that tenants understand their obligations better and resources are spent more appropriately. Until the new policy is successfully implemented, HFI will continue to pay for repairs it should not pay for.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 88** In 2004, we found that void turn around time was very positive (25 days at the time of inspection). There was a basic void standard which had been revised with residents and which provided some choice over work. The standard was broadly complied with, although the cleaning of void properties was variable.
- 89** In this inspection, we found strengths are greater than weaknesses. Properties are re-let quickly, there is a high quality welcome box and gas and electric accounts are secured in advance. However although the standard of void properties are reasonable they are not high.
- 90** Void turnaround is fast. HFI has adopted a challenging target of 21 days and achieved 23 days in 2006/07 and 22 days in the first six months of 2007/08. This compares well with the top performers in London.
- 91** HFI provides a high quality and comprehensive welcome box to each new tenant. This includes about 20 useful items including three energy saving light bulbs. Some of these items are there directly as a result of tenant feedback. This starts the relationship with new tenants favourably and helps tenants settle into their new home.

How good is the service?

- 92** A successful incentive scheme has improved the condition of properties vacated by tenants. Payments worth £150 are given to tenants who leave the property to a specified standard; so far 77 people have received this payment. HFI has estimated that the scheme has saved £10,000 in a year after costs. Tenants whose property does not reach this standard can be charged up to £290. In the last 18 months 180 tenants have been recharged; 16 of these have paid in full, 25 are still paying and 100 are being actively pursued. HFI is saving money and helping tenants to understand their responsibilities through these schemes.
- 93** The quality of the finish of void properties is reasonable but not high. They are all clean and have smoke detectors. The quality of finish is variable. Some properties have all the cracks in the walls filled, while others have walls partially stripped of wall paper and partially re-plastered. This leaves a difficult surface to redecorate and does not meet the HFI standard issued to all new tenants that says; 'We will ensure that any surfaces are in a suitable condition to allow you to redecorate'. Some tenants find defective plaster under the remaining wall paper. Thirteen tenants complained about the plastering in void properties in a two-month period. HFI recognises this problem and is considering addressing the issues.
- 94** It is positive that HFI helps some vulnerable new tenants. The ALMO completely redecorates all adapted and mobility properties for the new occupants, which benefited 61 households in 2006/07 and 28 in the first six months of 2007/08. In addition HFI redecorates ten properties a year to let to people with learning difficulties.
- 95** Tenants benefit from a ready connected gas and electricity account set up for them. Through a deal with a supplier, the tenancy won't start until there is a gas and electricity supply sometimes with credit on the key. Tenants always have the option of changing the supplier and this makes for a smoother and less stressful start to the tenancy for the new tenant.
- 96** Arrangements to deal with outstanding issues with the new tenant normally work well but this is not consistent. The voids team have responsibility for all repairs for the first two months of the tenancy. Tenants are asked to fill in a satisfaction form and to highlight any problems as well as being offered a visit. However tenants have said that snags are not always dealt with and staff confirmed this.
- 97** The approach to floor coverings is not clear. The leaflet for tenants moving out suggests they should remove all carpets and floor coverings or face a fine. In fact policy allows good quality carpets to remain and there are examples where this has been done. Some new tenants are likely to have lost the opportunity to benefit from a carpet from the previous tenant due to conflicting information.
- 98** HFI is not keeping to its targets for checking voids. The contractor checks all properties as part of the partnership. HFI has a target to spot check 10 to 20 per cent. However at present 60 per cent are being checked. This is partly a bedding in process as the contractor has only had responsibility for the checking for six months. HFI writes to all new tenants offering a visit and 60 per cent have requested one. This is responsive to tenants' views but not value for money. This is potentially a waste of resources as 60 per cent are being checked twice.

Gas servicing

- 99** In 2004, we found significant improvements both in the level of gas servicing and in the methods used to publicise and deliver the gas servicing programme. However performance on gas servicing in 2003/04, although improved, did not compare well with other authorities.
- 100** In this inspection, we found that strengths that outweigh weaknesses. A strong performance on gas servicing at the time of the inspection and changes in processes are of greater significance than the weak performance during the summer. Appointments are flexible and the legal process of gaining access is efficient. However HFI does not tailor the service for vulnerable tenants in the initial stages.
- 101** Performance in carrying out gas servicing is now strong. Performance at the time of the inspection was good with 99.3 per cent of properties having an up to date certificate for servicing. However performance has been poor during the year with performance dipping below 90 per cent three months in a row and reaching a low of 87 per cent in June. Tenants are now safer due to regular gas servicing.
- 102** Appointments are flexible to meet tenants' convenience. The contractors undertake out of hours and weekend appointments. The contact centre can make appointment bookings for tenants between 5pm and 8pm as well as Saturdays and Sundays. HFI gives tenants £15 compensation for any appointment missed.
- 103** HFI is quick and efficient at dealing with tenants who do not grant access for gas servicing. HFI uses the magistrates court to gain access to properties rather than through the county court. This has led to faster access and total savings of around £850 per case with less officer time preparing for court, in court and responding to court requirements. This has been in operation for the past six months and the combined savings for the 91 cases to date is estimated at over £75,000.
- 104** The gas contractors' record for attending appointments is reasonable. In the first half of 2007/08 the contractor missed 242 appointments which amounts to 1.4 per cent. This makes the process more convenient for tenants
- 105** HFI follows good practice and in some cases innovative positive practice in relation to gas servicing, leading to a more effective service.
- CORGI⁷ carries out a full invasive⁸ check of 1 per cent of all servicing based on a previous CORGI risk analysis.
 - The information that contractors provide on hard to access properties is put to good use by HFI. Some cases are referred to Housing Benefit leading to termination of incorrect Housing Benefit payments while others have led to identification and action against illegal tenancies.
 - HFI checks to see whether access was difficult the previous year, and why, and approaches access with this in mind.

⁷ CORGI is the national watchdog for gas safety in the United Kingdom

⁸ A full invasive check is on site and involves dismantling the system to check the service has been carried out.

How good is the service?

106 HFI fails to tailor the approach to gaining access to the needs and vulnerabilities of tenants. HFI has reliable information on the vulnerability of most of its tenants which it does not use when sending letters and trying to gain access. This means that tenants who do not read English do not have their letters translated proactively as they do for other HFI services. Other vulnerable tenants such as those with learning difficulties or mental health problems, do not have letters sent to relevant support contacts. HFI do not make these checks and take appropriate action until the point of going to court. As a result opportunities to speed up the process are wasted as is the time of officer and operatives while tenants might be unnecessarily confused or alarmed.

Aids and adaptations

- 107** In 2004, we found a high level of satisfaction with the adaptations service and the Council. HFI had taken clear steps to implement the recommendations from our last inspection however there was a lack of targets to measure the time taken to complete an adaptation and the shortfall in the budget meant that the needs of tenants requiring adaptations were not being fully met.
- 108** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Satisfaction is high, works are carried out well within government guidelines and items are recycled. However, there are no service standards and the different organisations and departments involved in delivering the service do not have a joint focus on performance and improvement.
- 109** Tenant satisfaction with aids and adaptations is high. HFI sent surveys to 105 people for work carried out in 2006/07. Of those 50 were returned with 94 per cent satisfied overall with the service provided.
- 110** HFI recycles equipments as appropriate. Existing adapted properties are identifiable and re-let to tenants with the appropriate need. Existing equipment is re-cycled where possible. This achieves increased value for money.
- 111** When DHS works are planned, HFI checks the needs of the tenant to see if they might need aids and adaptations as part of the work. Where appropriate an occupational therapist carries out an assessment to ensure that the right equipment is specified. This both provides a proactive service for the tenant and can save money on having a kitchen or bathroom adapted or replaced if the need only comes to light after the DHS work.
- 112** The budget is spent more efficiently this year. The contractor has reduced costs by 3 per cent. The specification for certain works is lower in part based on tailoring the specification more closely to the needs of the tenant. While some of the saving is through greater efficiency, it is not clear how much is efficiency and how much is simply cost saving.
- 113** Islington Council funds more types of cases than most other councils. The policy is to provide aids and adaptations for those who have only a moderate need; this compares with two thirds of councils where only higher level needs are funded. Tenants with lower levels of need are benefiting from this.

- 114** HFI responds to needs relatively fast. There are now 118 people waiting for the adaptations that Occupational Therapists say they need. The average wait in 2006/07 was 106 days with the most urgent of 4 categories waiting an average of 77 days and the least urgent waiting an average of 183 days. This compares well to the overall performance of local authorities nationally. HFI does not benchmark performance but is exceeding the CLG indicative targets by around a third.
- 115** However performance is falling short of ambitious targets for time between identifying need and commissioning work. Urgent need should be commissioned within 24 hours while the average for the year to date was 6.8 days. The next most urgent category should be commissioned in 48 hours but the average was 26 days. Overall performance is improving as the Council agreed a budget increase half way through the year.
- 116** HFI and Islington Council budget comparatively more money for aids and adaptations than other ALMO and council partnerships. The Council's budget was £2.6 million in 2006/07 which was three times the budget of neighbouring boroughs but not enough. From January 2007 a waiting list started to grow. The budget was reduced by £100,000 for 2007/08 and the waiting list continued to grow until September when the budget was increased to £2.7 million. This was sufficient to bring the waiting list back down
- 117** Neither HFI nor the council who administer aids and adaptations set service standards to residents for this area of work. The statement about aids and adaptations in the service promise is misleading. It says: 'We will help you get access to aids and adaptations if you need them so that you can live independently in your home'. However this is under a heading 'moving in or moving home', suggesting that it is not available to other tenants. Tenants are not told that they can use the Disabled Facilities Grant which has proscribed timescales. Tenants do not know what services to expect when they need aids and adaptations.
- 118** The partnership between the different departments and organisations delivering the service is not as strong as it could be. They do not set and compare full performance information as experienced by the tenant. Different sections monitor different things and do not share the results or create a collective focus on performance improvement.

Housing income management

- 119** In 2004, we found that this was an area of service that still needed development. The collection of current and former rent was improving and arrears were reducing for reception centre charges. A responsive service was provided with support for residents. However, a strategy was required to tackle the large historic current arrears and performance did not compare well with other London authorities.
- 120** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses.. Performance on collecting rents is high while eviction rates are low. The approach to rent arrears is well thought through, personal and proactive. Vulnerable tenants are supported while debt advice options are flexible. Performance management is effective as are the computer systems. Former tenant arrears collection is reasonable. File keeping and analysis of reasons for debt could be improved.

How good is the service?

- 121** HFI offer tenants a full range of payment methods including direct debit, standing order, telephone 24 hours a day, at the post office or named local stores, or over the internet. HFI is aware of the transaction costs of each payment method and encourages direct debit through a £20 payment when joining the scheme. Four choices of payment date per month makes the direct debit relatively flexible.
- 122** Performance on rent and arrears collection is strong and improving. Rent collected as a proportion of the rent and arrears due (BVPI 66a) rose from 95.8 per cent in 2004/05 to 98.2 per cent in 2006/07 and 98.4 per cent in the first half of 2007/08. This is the second best performance out of 29 London boroughs and just short of top 25 per cent for ALMOs nationally. Current tenant arrears are comparatively high but reducing consistently from 6.3 per cent of the rent roll at March 2005 to 4.4 per cent now. This increases the money available for services and reduces stress for tenants with high arrears.
- 123** The eviction rate is reducing well and tenants are only evicted as a last resort due to successful early intervention. HFI evicted over five times as many tenants for rent arrears two years ago compared with the first half of 2007/08 when 0.14 per cent of tenants were evicted. This compares with the best performance of ALMOs nationally and is a particular achievement in the context of the high performance on rent collection. As a result more tenants keep their homes.
- 124** HFI has a comprehensive approach to arrears management with a clear focus on early intervention and arrears prevention. Staff explain tenancy conditions and the consequences of breaching the tenancy agreement in pre-tenancy interviews. HFI reiterates tenancy conditions at sign up when issuing the tenant with a tenants handbook. A third opportunity exists to identify any initial difficulties or issues at a settling in visit after four weeks. HFI now makes over three times more rent arrears visits to tenants than was the case two years ago. Tenants are less likely to get into rent arrears if they have a clear understanding of their obligations and the consequences of arrears at an early stage.
- 125** HFI operates a thorough and flexible system that ensures effective access to debt advice. The pre-tenancy interviews include an assessment of benefit needs, identifying vulnerabilities or support needs so that appropriate referrals can be made and (since a week before the inspection) income maximisation as well. Housing benefit forms are completed before the tenancy starts and rent accounts are set up promptly. HFI facilitates access to a number of different services, each specialising in different issues so staff can make the most appropriate referral for the tenant's circumstances as follows.
- HFI funds an independent advice service delivered by Islington Law Centre and Islington People's Rights.
 - HFI funds CHAS⁹ for 200 referrals a year for debt counselling for all residents.
 - Staff can access a referral scheme with social services' welfare rights unit which also provides income maximisation services.
 - Housing Support Officers are trained to offer welfare rights and income maximisation advice.

⁹ A debt counselling and money management service

- 126** HFI supports vulnerable tenants with rent arrears well. At the pre-tenancy interview staff identify vulnerabilities or support needs; they can make referrals then or at a later stage to Housing Support Officers who are based in the area offices. Alternatively HFI works with social services and debt advice agencies and staff can arrange appropriate support. Staff use their discretion to override standard letters where necessary. Tenant needs and vulnerabilities are taken appropriately into account when chasing rent arrears.
- 127** HFI has a robust performance management system for rent collection and arrears. Managers use monthly performance information to look at team and individual performance. Teams and individual have arrears targets and an incentive scheme motivates staff to reach their targets. This system helps to drive performance.
- 128** The approach to performance management is well supported by the computer system. The IT system for rent arrears can identify arrears due to housing benefit and can report on arrears by area and level for performance management purposes. It allows all recovery activity to be recorded and provides standard letters as arrears escalate. Officers can override suggested actions and managers monitor cases through weekly updated lists of cases using an integrated reporting system. The system automatically alerts officers if the tenant is vulnerable.
- 129** Joint work with Housing Benefit (HB) is strong. HB staff are co-located in area offices and income recovery staff can refer queries to them as well as view the HB system. A protocol is in place which is monitored through regular liaison meetings. These measures combined with faster processing of applications contribute to a reduction in rent arrears.
- 130** HFI works well with the courts. A court protocol is in place and HFI and the Council transferred two legal staff from the Council to become court officers. This has saved £100,000 as there is only one person in court where rent arrears officers used to attend court up to three times a week, for a half-day each time. The courts have asked HFI to do a presentation, as it regards HFI as an exemplar organisation on this issue. This is cost effective and helps ensure smooth working with the courts.
- 131** The value for money of income management is not clear but is improving. In 2005/06 HFI had the highest cost for income management compared with nine London ALMOs. Since then a number of improvements have improved value for money but no comparison has been made, which is why the present comparative position is not clear. Since then HFI has introduced a number of savings and efficiencies. HFI closed the area housing cash offices and is using municipal pay points, saving £270,000. HFI has gone to court almost half as many times in 2006/07 compared with the previous year and uses court officers, reducing the number of failed cases and adjournments. Reviews of the advice agencies show that they are value for money, saving tenants and HFI more than they cost. Average transaction costs are reducing and set to reduce more.

How good is the service?

- 132** The rent arrears service efficiency review is bringing a number of service improvements and efficiencies. Tenants can now receive text message reminders for appointments and correspondence is now clearer following consultation with residents. The merging of the court team and legal disrepair teams will bring cost efficiencies, while the introduction of online court applications has reduced court costs to £50 from £150 per case. Staff are piloting a new approach to collect and minimise low level arrears.
- 133** HFI collects former tenant rent accounts adequately. The team has a clear target to collect 12 per cent of all arrears and is meeting this target. HFI's performance at collecting FTAs is average when compared with fifteen other London social landlords in a benchmarking club. The staff give welfare advice; most of them have been on advanced courses. Where local, former tenants are referred for the same welfare and benefit advice as tenants and can make housing benefit appointments in the area offices. A successful Christmas campaign made a significant impact on missed payments. HFI has been successful at paying credits back to former tenants addressing a backlog of 12,000 cases with credit worth over £2 million.
- 134** HFI has a weak understanding of reasons for non payment. Staff know the reasons on an individual level and HFI has a demographic and diversity strand break down of arrears and arrears actions. However, a borough wide view of reason for arrears is missing from the arrears strategy. As a result HFI is not able to anticipate and target resources accordingly.

Resident involvement

- 135** In 2004, we found that this was an area of service that still needed development. A resident focused approach had been taken to review tenant participation and progress was being made. Staff were accessible and accountable and additional resources had been targeted to support Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) and IT. The current formal arrangements provided access for residents to improve services and monitor performance. However, until the review of tenant involvement by the resident involvement project group (RIPG) was completed a number of key weaknesses remained. HFI was not measuring the success or impact of all activity.
- 136** In this inspection, we strengths significantly outweighed weaknesses in this area. HFI is successfully improving satisfaction with participation, and structures allow significant influence and HFI is flexible in working with TMOs. HFI resources resident involvement well and the compact allows local control of significant budgets. HFI actively seeks feedback from residents, responds positively and has begun to work with more marginalised communities and increasingly engages residents in the development of ideas and strategies. However, the vision of new resident involvement strategy could be stronger and HFI does not know if resident structures are representative.

- 137** HFI has well developed formal involvement structures which allow residents to have a significant level of influence over decision making. Nine out of 17 board members are residents, including the vice chair. Board meetings are open and there are also four open board forums per year allowing residents to question board members. Two sub-boards, made up of resident associate directors, monitor the performance of housing management services. Consultative panels allow input from the four area housing panels and the panels for leaseholders, partnership for Islington (PFI) and TMO residents. The panels are made up of representatives from over 80 tenant and resident associations (TRAs). The structures allow different perspectives and views to be heard and for decisions to reflect the interests of residents.
- 138** HFI has a flexible approach to resident control which is generally working well. There are 25 TMOs and cooperatives that manage 3,800 properties - over 10 per cent of Council homes. Many of these work differently, and they are able to choose which services they manage and which are provided by HFI. The TMO and co-operatives' review group is part of HFI's formal involvement structures and receives support from HFI in terms of staff time and grants. This gives a lot of choice for TMO residents on collective decision making at a local level and on the level of control wanted by residents.
- 139** Resident involvement is reasonably resourced. The current budget for resident involvement is just over £32,000 in addition to £110,270 for the Federation of Islington Tenants' Associations (FITA). FITA assists in the support and development of local TRAs monitored by a service level agreement. TRAs receive an annual administration grant, childcare and travel expenses and community centres are made available for their use. Dedicated staff set up and work with TRAs and the leaseholders' forum. Staff service consultative panels with a range of relevant papers and information and they also facilitate TRA training, for which there is a budget of £13,690. These resources reflect HFI's commitment to resident involvement and enable residents to develop their capacity to influence and challenge the organisation.
- 140** The tenant participation compact provides residents with direct control over resources for their local area. The revised compact was agreed in 2007 and gives residents control of a combined budget worth £1.5 million. However, resident input was limited to commenting on the draft compact at the consultative panels. The compact gives the area housing panels control of two budgets which can be used for environmental and capital improvements, estate security or youth diversionary projects. The panels have decided on Improvements such as playgrounds, security gates, door entry systems, bollards, sleepers, flower beds and benches. This influence on spending can lead to a greater sense of community and the outcomes are more likely to be successful.
- 141** HFI is improving resident satisfaction with involvement, which is now reasonable. Three quarters of tenants think that HFI is good at keeping them informed which is an improvement and better than the London average. Sixty per cent of tenants are satisfied with opportunities to take part in management and decision making; this is above average for London and a significant improvement on the 38 per cent satisfaction in 2004. HFI's actions to improve involvement have been productive.

How good is the service?

- 142** HFI actively seeks the views and satisfaction ratings of residents across most service areas and the organisation generally responds positively and reports back on the changes made. For example, in response to resident interest HFI set up a resident involvement register in June. Over 640 residents have registered to date, with over 270 invited to express views or participate in discussions in the first five months. Practical changes have been implemented as a result. HFI reports back on its actions via the newsletters which has a 'You Said, We Did' column, although HFI does not always explain why tenant requests are not implemented. Residents can be confident that if they raise reasonable issues with the organisation it will listen and make changes.
- 143** HFI gives residents effective information on major works, involving them at all stages. As explained under capital improvement, HFI does a number of things including holding meetings on estates long before work starts. This creates a greater understanding of the process, reduces misunderstanding and complaints and allows options to be chosen in some cases.
- 144** HFI has engaged positively with marginalised sections of the community, although this work is in its early stages and on limited issues. The engagement has improved services. For example three separate focus groups of Turkish, Somali and British Sign Language speaking residents were convened to review the translation and interpreting service. This led to the introduction of the Big Word, and now all staff and contractors carry a card to explain about Big Word and can access an interpreter at the property. HFI also funds a disability panel of 12 residents which reviews services like repairs to suggest improvements for residents with different impairments. The women's resource centre was consulted on the review of the domestic violence policy. Islington faith forum have been contacted but there are no outcomes from this as yet. The disability panel is the only example where marginalised or vulnerable groups have been involved in developing 'mainstream' services. The 2007 tenants' survey showed that BME tenants were slightly more satisfied with the opportunities for participation in management and decision-making. Marginalised groups have been able to influence services that have particular impact on them but have had limited influence on broader services.
- 145** The resident engagement strategy demonstrates a clear commitment to resident involvement but lacks a strong vision. The strategy was adopted in June 2007 and sets out a framework of involvement structures and participation levels. The vision is to allow every resident to be involved at the level that they want to, suited to their own needs. However this does not convey an ultimate goal for resident involvement or what type of things tenants can be involved in, at what stage and at what depth or how much overall say residents will have. It does not look at how any tensions between tenant and leaseholder interests will be addressed. Resident involvement in the development of the strategy was limited to commenting on drafts at the consultative panels. The strategy will help involve more residents in a way that is flexible to their needs. However, the strategy lacks drive and direction as it does not know where it is going. Residents cannot discuss whether they share the vision or hold the ALMO or their resident representatives to account for delivering the vision.

146 HFI is increasingly going beyond just consulting resident panels on draft strategies and fully involving them in the development of ideas and processes. This is not always the case, involvement in the rent arrears review was mainly limited to commenting on the content of letters. However the following are examples of where residents have been more deeply involved:

- the review of the resident involvement strategy was conducted by a group composed overwhelmingly of residents;
- the original Tenants' Compact was drawn up by a committee of resident representatives and serviced by officers and the compact is reviewed annually by the Area Housing Panels;
- the disability panel is reviewing various services;
- three focus groups helped review the translation and interpreting service;
- a group from the Islington Leaseholders' Federation helped amend various specific items of policy;
- a quality improvement group of residents met six times in a year to review repairs issues but have not met for over six months; the group will not be involved in the imminent review of the repairs policy;
- a residents' estates service improvement group has helped improve standards of estate cleaning;
- ideas from focus groups have fed into new policies such as on complaints and anti-social behaviour; and
- the change in the terms of reference of the Area Housing Panels was initiated by the Panels themselves.

147 HFI has not yet fully evaluated the outcomes and value from the resources committed to resident involvement. The formal involvement has only been partially evaluated and the informal structures are too new to evaluate. HFI did carry out a review of the tenants' compact, the area housing panel's terms of reference and consulted on funding options for resident participation in 2007. However HFI has given significant funding to FITA without an adequate service level agreement (SLA) for three years. A new SLA has now been agreed, but it is too recent to assess the value that FITA is providing in return for £110,000. An HFI survey of TRAs found that almost a third were unclear about applying for the administration grant and only 37 per cent applied for the grant in 2005/06. There has been no systematic assessment of resident training needs or priorities. Training requests are met on a first come first served basis and not against any agreed plan. Although 81 per cent of TRAs were satisfied that they were being informed of training courses and 78 per cent felt that all of their training needs were being catered for, only 16 per cent actually attended courses. HFI is resourcing resident involvement well but incomplete evaluations of this mean that opportunities for improving outcomes and developing residents' potential might have been missed.

How good is the service?

- 148** HFI has not determined if the involvement structures are representative of the local community. HFI has only recently begun to collect diversity information about representatives involved in the formal involvement structures. Under the SLA, FITA is now responsible for collecting this data but progress is slow and comprehensive data is not available. By broadening out opportunities for involvement and focussing on particular communities HFI has started to address under representation. However the approach is not as structured as it could be due to lack of information. Unrepresentative structures can result in particular needs and views being excluded.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 149** In 2004, we found that this was an area of considerable strength. HFI provided a customer focused and effective tenancy management service. There was, however, a need to assess outcomes of some activity to identify what worked and to get feedback from the victims of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and harassment.
- 150** In this inspection, we found that this continues to be an area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Tenancy management services are effectively focused on prevention of tenancy breaches and provide a significant level of information and support to new tenants. Support arrangements for vulnerable tenants are generally good. HFI has responded well to residents' feedback and provides a well co-ordinated and effective response to ASB with an out-of-hours service increasing residents' sense of safety. There is a positive, pro-active approach to partnership working and arrangements for supporting victims of domestic violence. However some aspects of the service can be improved, such as the monitoring of ASB performance.
- 151** Tenancy management services are comprehensive with a strong focus on prevention. HFI carries out pre-tenancy interviews to explain tenancy conditions to new tenants using a DVD and a high quality welcome pack. These can be provided in other formats and languages. Staff conduct a benefits health check and can refer tenants to a furniture scheme. At sign up tenancy staff again go over tenancy conditions and check for any vulnerability. A settling in visit four weeks after the start of the tenancy includes the caretaker and aims to resolve any issues and arrange any extra support required. The service ensures tenants have a smooth transition in to their new home.
- 152** HFI supports vulnerable tenants well. Staff visit disabled, elderly and other vulnerable residents at their home, and they can refer tenants to agencies such as Age Concern or to HFI Housing Support Officers (HSOs). HSOs provide practical support with claiming benefits and can signpost or make referrals to other more specialist advice services for floating support. Tenants can refer themselves and their relatives can refer them too. HSOs have generated £32,606 in the first six months of 2007/08 in grants and benefits for vulnerable tenants. The support arrangements increase the likelihood of vulnerable residents being able to sustain their homes.

- 153** HFI identifies and responds effectively to breaches of tenancy conditions and abandoned properties. A dedicated housing investigation team carries out targeted tenancy audits on 10 per cent of the stock per annum. They deal with illegal occupants and recover about 100 properties per year, and an evaluation has shown this to be cost effective. These arrangements ensure that the stock is being properly utilised and rental income maximised.
- 154** HFI has responded well to poor satisfaction levels in dealing with ASB. An analysis showed low satisfaction, so HFI introduced a number of measures to address the problems that tenants identified. Staff now discuss with tenants what their expectations are and the possible responses; action plans are agreed and signed and the tenant is given a copy of the plan. Open and closed cases are now being surveyed for satisfaction and 93 per cent of those surveyed were satisfied with the action plan and the number of contacts made. Satisfaction with the information provided has also increased, and overall satisfaction with the response to ASB has improved by 10 per cent since July 2007. HFI is responsive to feedback and tenants are receiving a higher quality of service.
- 155** HFI provides a well co-ordinated and effective response to ASB. Although the impact of some of the more recent initiatives has yet to be evaluated, residents can be confident that there will be an appropriate response and support when they report ASB.
- Staff have received high quality, accredited training by another ALMO.
 - HFI is using a wide range remedies such as mediation, injunctions, dog wardens, professional witnesses, noise monitoring machines, out of hours patrols, third party reporting, ABCs, ASBOs and suspended possession orders.
 - Successful action has been taken based on evidence provided by professional witnesses and support is arranged for resident witnesses with the magistrate courts' witness service.
 - Successes with legal action are promoted on the website, newsletters and in local papers.
 - Two good quality neighbourhood agreements have been agreed and more are being developed.
 - CCTV on nine estates can alert the out of hours team to ASB as it is happening.
 - Estates staff are recording anti-social behaviour where there is no identified perpetrator; these reports are logged in to file for the block to enable targeting of resources.
- 156** An out of hours ASB response team provides a valuable additional resource to tackle ASB. The team responds to calls to the ASB hotline from its base in the police station which allows for close working and sharing of intelligence. The team officers act as witnesses in any legal action and attend two youth clubs per month to develop links with local youths. Officers carry information with them and refer young people to diversionary activities such as the Arsenal Positive Futures projects. Satisfaction with the service is reasonable at 59 per cent. A recent survey of callers to the hotline found that 68 per cent feel safer knowing the team are patrolling. The team provides valuable evidence and re-assurance to many residents.

How good is the service?

- 157** HFI has a positive, pro-active approach to partnership working. Staff work closely with a range of agencies such as the police, local authority social services, other social landlords and Victim Support and it has signed up to the Respect Standard. Multi-agency panels allow for all services to identify 'hot spot' areas and agree a co-ordinated approach to tackling them. Third party reporting for hate crimes was set up between the agencies. HFI has developed diversionary projects with Arsenal football club, the fire service and the council's ASB team. Staff can refer young perpetrators to the various partnership projects such the fire brigades life training programme; 38 young people have been referred to the project to date with 60 per cent completing the course. Partnership working and joint projects help prevent young people from becoming involved in ASB.
- 158** HFI is effective at arranging support for victims of domestic violence. The housing services manager monitors all cases of domestic violence and staff liaise with agencies such as Women's Aid and Victim Support to organise assistance. This includes the creation of safe rooms and the strengthening of doors and windows. All staff have had domestic violence and interviewing skills training. Victims of domestic violence can have confidence that their landlord will respond well and that they will receive the support necessary to make informed choices about their housing situation.
- 159** ASB file management is of a reasonable standard. HFI keeps separate files for ASB issues which are in order and letters are clearly written. All files have an initial record report although most do not record the day and time of the reported incident. Perpetrators are usually written to on the same day as a complaint is received. However in one case viewed the victim had alleged racial harassment, but there was no record on the file of the fact that it was being managed under racial harassment procedures. Good file management helps to ensure that all issues are fully addressed and that any legal action taken has more chance of success.
- 160** The standard of ordinary tenant files is variable. None of the randomly selected files had any type of summary form at the front of the file. The files were not organised into sections so ASB and other documents were mixed in with rent arrears letters. Letters to tenants were missing including letters confirming repayment arrangements which the court protocol requires. Not all files were in chronological order making navigation through the file and case history difficult. HFI recognises that there is an issue to address on this and has started a process of document image processing, so that files can become electronic in the future. Without well managed files, mistakes can be made and resources wasted.
- 161** HFI does not monitor ASB performance adequately. The computer system cannot report on outstanding actions or closed cases, so these have to be manually checked and counted from a spreadsheet on a monthly basis. Currently only the number of new and closed cases and number of each type of action are being monitored. HFI is not tracking performance in meeting the service standards such as responding within five working days to reports of ASB, or 24 hours for urgent cases. These timescales are only discussed on a case by case basis. The incidence of ASB in areas where the out of hours team have patrolled is also not being monitored so HFI cannot demonstrate the impact of the service. As officers do not know their team or individual performance, they cannot adequately identify areas for improvement.

Estate management

- 162** In 2004, we found that overall this was an improving area of the service but with some development still required. HFI had maintained a good service and built on this by enhancing the role of caretakers; providing greater support to TMOs; piloting immediate bulk refuse removal and further improving parking arrangements. Our reality checks showed that the estates met a high standard of cleanliness. However, the standard on some estates managed by Hyde Northside did not all meet the same standard; there was need for investment to improve some communal paved areas and lighting. The refuse collection service did not meet local needs and there was inadequate feedback on communal repairs and improvements.
- 163** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses. The condition of estates and grounds maintenance is generally good. Bulk refuse is collected within 24 hours and estate parking and abandoned vehicles are well managed. There is extensive performance monitoring of the estate services against agreed standards but there are inconsistent levels of caretaker services for leaseholders and tenants. Although residents have some input to estates services this is limited as estate inspections are not adequately publicised and estate SLAs are not in place in all areas. Service charges are still pooled which limits the scope of the SLA negotiations.
- 164** The condition of estates and grounds maintenance is generally good. Grass and shrubbery is well kept and inspectors saw very little graffiti, litter or vandalism. Bulk refuse is collected within 24 hours and is monitored daily. HFI uses the resources of the probationary service by involving young offenders in clearing up estates. Communal areas, including stairs and landings are generally clean and play areas are well-maintained. Resident satisfaction with cleanliness of communal areas was 76 per cent in the 2007 satisfaction survey. Residents generally enjoy a clean and well managed living environment.
- 165** There is a well organised system for managing estate parking and abandoned vehicles. The system for parking permits works well and disabled residents with blue badges are given priority for spaces. Permits are used as an incentive for rent payment as holders have to maintain a clear rent account to keep the permit. Parking is patrolled by contractors who will also remove abandoned vehicles and those blocking emergency access. The system ensures that estates are clear of abandoned vehicles and residents get the maximum benefit of available parking spaces.
- 166** HFI extensively monitors the estate services against agreed standards. Estates are checked fortnightly, with more thorough checks carried out with residents monthly. Staff use a photographic guide to standards which was developed with tenants and caretakers. Each team receives a monthly performance report highlighting areas where performance falls below 80 per cent. This allows targeted responses to be made to make better use of resources and for performance to be more effectively managed.
- 167** Estate inspections are not adequately publicised to all tenants. There are no schedules of inspection dates and times displayed on notice boards or in estate bulletins. Only TRAs are invited to attend. HFI is missing an opportunity to engage residents in caring for their estates.

How good is the service?

- 168** HFI does not deal with overgrown gardens adequately. A few gardens have plants growing out of them, into neighbouring gardens and in one case up two stories of the building. This is a nuisance for those with neighbouring gardens, is not attractive for other residents and can cause damage to buildings.
- 169** There is an inconsistency between the level of caretaker services for leaseholders and tenants. Caretakers do not carry out introductory visits to new leaseholders or sub tenants to explain about arrangements for rubbish, lumber removal and caretaker services. This means that leaseholders are paying for a service that is not fully explained to them which could undermine efforts to reduce problems such as rubbish dumping and neighbour disputes.
- 170** Resident input to determining estate service levels and priorities is limited. The residents' estates service improvement group has succeeded in making improvements such as ensuring there are operatives using mechanised road sweepers to cover caretakers' leave. Some estates have service level agreements (SLAs) which are monitored via the relevant TRA and more SLAs are being developed. However, as service elements within the rent charge are not fully unpooled, residents of each block or estate cannot decide on the level of service or charge they would like to have when negotiating the SLA. There is nothing within the SLA which stipulates what happens if the agreement is not adhered to. Some residents have some choice between different service priorities but they cannot decide the overall service level or charge for their estate and would not know how to challenge breaches of the SLA.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 171** In 2004, we found that this was an area that required further development. The positive aspects of the service remained and improvements had been made such as the introduction of a newsletter; customer commitments; a pilot disputes process, improved collection rates and satisfaction levels. However performance on RTB applications had improved but was still poor and performance in the collection of major work charges was low. Debt and welfare advice was under-utilised and there was no agreement with the council to offer further assistance to leaseholders. Leaseholders remained unhappy with major work consultation and performance in responding to leasehold complaints did not meet the target.
- 172** In this inspection, we found strengths outweighed weaknesses. HFI provides plenty of good quality information and is continually making improvements to the service. Consultation on major works is good, satisfaction with the works is reasonable and HFI is flexible in helping leaseholders pay. Service charges are relatively low with good collection rates and Right to Buy is well managed. However satisfaction with the service is low, relations with leaseholder representatives are not good and some leaseholders do not have confidence in the accuracy of the charges.

Management of home ownership housing

- 173** HFI supplies leaseholders with a comprehensive range of information. This includes a number of useful and relevant guides, a comprehensive handbook for leaseholders, a service promise for leaseholders and a home owners' newsletter which now comes out four times a year. Performance against the service promise for leaseholders is reported in the newsletter. Some leaseholders would like more information on what the management fee is spent on and how the costs compare; HFI provides sufficient breakdown on what the fee is spent on but not how the costs compare. Overall Leaseholders are well served with information.
- 174** Processes for engaging leaseholders have improved and are succeeding to engage more leaseholders with a positive impact on the service.
- A successful leaseholder fair attracted 250 leaseholders to exchange information; 92 per cent of attendees rated it as good or satisfactory.
 - The recent resident involvement register has signed up 242 leaseholders and this has been put to use for one focus group and one phone consultation with plans in place for more use in the near future.
- 175** HFI has successfully introduced a number of improvements to the services for leaseholders including:
- HFI's gas servicing contractors offer gas servicing to leaseholders for £48 which is very good value and less than HFI pays for the service.
 - When tenants have their kitchens, bathrooms, boilers or rewiring renewed in their block, the leaseholders can purchase any of these directly from the contractor. This includes fitting and they benefit from the significant economies of scale. A leaseholder would pay £1,500 for a boiler renewal.
 - Leaseholders are offered free valuations for buying the freehold of their property.
 - Building insurance was reduced by 40 per cent in three years.
- 176** HFI has worked with the Islington Leaseholders' Forum to improve the service and improvements that are a result of this consultation include the following.
- The process for varying leases to carry out alterations has been streamlined. Fees have reduced from £700 to £450. In some cases it has been agreed that no deed of variation is required, so there are no fees. This benefits 70 leaseholders a year.
 - Leaseholders are now allowed to install satellite dishes and have access to scaffolding during works.
 - The office opening hours are extended for two weeks after the annual service charge bill goes out. The extended hours are 8:00am to 7:00pm.

How good is the service?

- 177** An important weakness is that HFI has failed to develop a good working relationship with the Islington Leaseholder Forum. The Forum leadership has a negative attitude to HFI. It focuses on poor aspects of the service and campaigns on them in the press. By not recognising anything good that HFI does, it sours relations and makes effective working difficult. This limits its influence and leads to HFI being less tolerant of it. HFI has had some success by working with sub groups of the Forum as shown above. This poor relationship is preventing HFI from harnessing the full potential of leaseholders to help improve the service.
- 178** Leaseholders do not consistently get the same level of service as tenants. New leaseholders and sub tenants did not receive introductory visits to explain about arrangements for rubbish, lumber removal and caretaker services. So not all leaseholders are aware of the services they are paying for.
- 179** Overall leaseholder satisfaction with the service is low but improving. The latest survey was in 2006 and 36 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied. Services have improved since the last survey but there is no reliable measure of the impact on leaseholders' views. A small survey at the recent leaseholders fair showed that 59 per cent found the service good or satisfactory. Our leaseholders' focus group said that the home ownership staff are always polite when dealing with them face to face. However this was not always the case over the phone. They also reported a problem resolving some issues in which many departments were involved as they were passed from person to person. The 2006 survey showed that only half of leaseholders felt that staff could resolve their enquiry successfully.

Leaseholder stock condition and asset management

- 180** HFI consults and informs well on major works. The Council is legally required to provide information to the leaseholder over a month before starting work. HFI gives three to six months more than this with information on the plans and cost estimates. Leaseholders are given letters, a booklet guide to major works and invited to meetings. This is mainly about exchanging information and giving leaseholders an opportunity to query the costs. It offers the leaseholders the opportunity to shop around for a better deal for windows while still leaving time to take part in the HFI scheme. The specification is changed in response to leaseholder views about minor decorative issues and sometimes around more significant issues like the type of windows.
- 181** Leaseholder satisfaction with major works is reasonable. In the 2006/07 survey 68 per cent were satisfied with the way HFI undertook the work and 70 per cent were satisfied with the way the contractor undertook the work. Satisfaction has not increased in the past three years. The leaseholders who are not satisfied have a number of criticisms to make about the work in terms of the cost and quality as well as the consultation and in some cases the necessity of the work.

- 182** HFI has improved on what was already a flexible package for paying major works charges. This is particularly useful for those with large bills. Repayment periods for leaseholders with bills of £10,000 to £15,000 have been extended to a maximum of seven years and for leaseholders with bills over £20,000 to a maximum of ten years. Those over 60 or on invalidity benefit can convert the bill into a charge on the property, to be paid back when the property is sold. The fee for putting a charge on the property has reduced from £400 to £200. The interest added to the charge each year is relatively low at the base rate plus 0.5 per cent. There is a 2.5 per cent discount for those paying up front. This all helps leaseholders keep to their obligations when they find it difficult.
- 183** The collection of payment for major works is improving. Last year the target was to collect £4.2 million, this year the target is £6.3 million and it is being exceeded.
- 184** The condition of properties is often not good. For many years the Council failed to maintain properties adequately. HFI is successfully catching up on this back log of work. However the existence of the back log means that more work is required leading to higher bills for the leaseholders.
- 185** Leaseholders do not benefit from a clear long term stock investment plan in their property. Such a plan would help leaseholders save for future costs, make properties easier to sell and help leaseholders understand the wider context and costs around major works.

Annual Service charges

- 186** Average leaseholder service charges compare well against other London authorities for 2005/06. HFI charges were £523 per year on average. This made it the seventh cheapest out of 19. It was £170 more expensive than the cheapest and £610 cheaper than the most expensive. HFI has successfully reduced some costs like insurance which dropped by 50 per cent in two years.
- 187** Service charge costs are increasing faster than inflation and leaseholders are not clear why or what benefit they are getting in return. Assuming that caretaking costs do not reduce, present estimates are that the 2007/08 bill will be 14.5 per cent higher than three years ago. The costs would have been 10 per cent higher still if insurance costs had not reduced. While there has been some increase in resources for activities like lumber removal and the out of hours ASB service, this has not been communicated to leaseholders as a cost increase for better services. Leaseholders resent these increases and this is causing dissatisfaction in the absence of a clear breakdown of external cost increases and benefits to leaseholders.
- 188** Service charges are presented to leaseholders in a way that is relatively clear and broken down into relevant headings. If leaseholders want more information they can get a break down of each heading and they can ask for copies of invoices.
- 189** HFI has introduced a positive new system for 2007/08 whereby all estates with leaseholder associations are sent all the repair bills monthly that they will be charged for. This enables queries to be looked at for errors while they are recent.

How good is the service?

- 190** HFI is good at collecting annual service charges. In the past collection was poor and large debts built up, but in the past four years HFI has collected a total of £2.6 million of arrears. This is an average of 12.6 per cent more than the annual charge each year.
- 191** HFI funds the use of CHAS, a debt counselling and money management service for leaseholders and tenants. The agreement with CHAS allows up to 200 referrals each year as well as providing a general advice line. This is a valuable service for leaseholders that is well rated by those who use it.
- 192** Methods of collection are improving but are not yet optimal. HFI has improved the use of direct debit which is now being used by 44 per cent of leaseholders although leaseholders are not offered the £20 incentive available to tenants for using direct debit. Research shows that direct debit is the most effective collection method and that on average councils collect 60 per cent of council tax by direct debit, so HFI is below this average¹⁰. HFI makes good use of the telephone and text messaging.
- 193** Some leaseholders do not have confidence in the accuracy of charges. The survey at the leaseholders' fair showed that when asked to rate the accuracy of annual service charge bills 50 per cent rated them unsatisfactory or poor. Each year HFI makes adjustments where errors are found in response to leaseholder enquiries or checking exercises. The number of adjustments made has reduced from 528 in 2005/06 to 226 in 2006/07 and as a proportion of some 87,000 items charged, the errors are not high. Perception remains important and without a reasonable level of confidence in accurate accounting methods, leaseholders overall trust in HFI will be compromised.

Right to Buy

- 194** Performance for meeting the statutory timescales for issuing the RTB 2 notices has been satisfactory since April 2007. Since April 2007 HFI has issued 445, all within the statutory four weeks and with an average time that meets HFI's own target of two weeks. In 2006/07, 38 out of 483, or 8 per cent, failed to meet the statutory deadline. The 2006/07 performance was below average for London boroughs.
- 195** Satisfaction with the Right to Buy service is relatively high but not improving. HFI's satisfaction survey shows 88 per cent satisfaction in 2006 and 83 per cent in 2007. HFI have not benchmarked this satisfaction, which means that staff do not know whether it is good or not.
- 196** The new guide to the Right to Buy, available since September, is useful. It covers all the main areas and information that would be of interest to a potential buyer. It can be improved. The text is not all written in plain English with some long sentences and simple things said in a complicated manner. For example there is a whole page of complicated detail on calculating the discount and no simple sentence saying that under current rules every one will always get the same £16,000 discount.

¹⁰ From "Improving income collection: efficient collection of council tax, housing rent and other income by direct debit" by the Audit Commission 2006.

- 197** HFI is successfully improving publicity to tenants about the Right to Buy. In a small survey, 43 per cent of tenants were not aware of the Right to Buy service compared to 67 per cent the year before.
- 198** HFI refers RTB applicants to others services where necessary. Where tenants have difficulty affording the purchase of their home, HFI will refer them to other low cost home ownership schemes. Where applicants have uncertainties about their finances they are referred to the Citizens' Advice Bureau.
- 199** The Right to Buy service is flexible in meeting the needs of diverse applicants. HFI provides translation and interpretation and visits older people at home if they want. A form is available for applicants to sign to say that a representative can speak for them.
- 200** There are some weaknesses in the service:
- less than two out of three applicants find staff knowledgeable;
 - less than three out of four find that enquiries are resolved successfully;
 - HFI does not carry out a diversity analysis of the Right to Buy service. Despite having the monitoring information available HFI has never looked at the figures; and
 - HFI does not monitoring of accuracy of major work cost predictions given to purchasers.

Allocations and lettings

- 201** In 2004, we found that overall this was an area of considerable strength. HFI provided access to the council's allocation service and had developed its own transfer scheme linked to this. They were achieving high performance for re-letting empty properties. HFI Direct staff dealt with allocation enquiries and performance was positive. There was a comprehensive sign up pack. New tenants were visited at four weeks to help sustain tenancies and ensure tenants were aware of services and how to access them. HFI was proactively dealing with under occupation, there was joint working with council staff dealing with allocations and complaints about allocations were handled effectively.
- 202** In this inspection, strengths were significantly greater than weaknesses. We found a well run choice based letting scheme, fast re-let times, and successful steps to address under occupation and dual households¹¹. Viewing properties can be difficult and although support is given to vulnerable applicants it is more reactive than proactive. Mutual exchanges can be better promoted and enquiries are not dealt with in a flexible way.

¹¹ Where two households are living as one but wish to live separately, particularly where tenants have children and their grandchildren living with them.

How good is the service?

- 203** The council runs a successful choice based letting scheme and has a well run partnership with HFI on allocations and transfers. The choice based lettings scheme works smoothly and is easy for most applicants to access. This increases the sustainability of communities as people are choosing where they live rather than being passively allocated. HFI signed a protocol with the Council in 2005 that helps produce a seamless service between the two organisations for the benefit of housing applicants.
- 204** HFI is good at re-letting properties quickly. In 2006/07 properties were empty for an average of 23 days and in the first half of 2007/08 for an average of 22 days. This is the second best performance out of 29 London boroughs. This increases rental income, productivity and reduces waiting time for people wanting to move.
- 205** HFI is taking successful measures to address under-occupation including significant incentives to move to a smaller home. This helps free up larger properties and address overcrowding and the high demand for large properties.
- As a standard each person who moves will get £500 per room released. Since April 2007, tenants with four or more bedrooms moving to a one or two bedroom home, can benefit from up to £10,000 per home in incentives. This can pay for redecoration, carpets, curtains, white goods and a service of packing and moving possessions in addition to the standard cash incentive above.
 - Many under-occupiers are old and vulnerable. These tenants are supported all the way through the process if this is needed.
 - The under-occupation scheme is well advertised directly and indirectly. Housing Benefit know who many of the under-occupiers are and while they cannot tell HFI, they do give them the HFI leaflet on under-occupation explaining the incentives.
 - HFI promotes a special mutual exchange scheme just for under-occupiers. All relevant under-occupiers have their details advertised alongside the choice based lettings properties. HFI handle arrangements in a similar way to normal lettings, checking the applicants and arranging viewings.
 - In a comparison with six London councils Islington moved 11 per cent more households than average in 2006/07 and 70 per cent more than average in 2005/06. In 2006/07 HFI moved 114 under-occupiers and 72 in the first half of 2007/08.
- 206** HFI runs a successful scheme to help the adult children of tenants move to their own homes. The new generation scheme helped 159 households in 2006/07. This is particularly useful where the tenant has grandchildren living at home. It gives the new family their own home near their previous household for mutual support.
- 207** Applicants are given appropriate information about their relative priority for a move. They are given a break down of their own points and they can find out how many points were needed to get each property that was let the previous fortnight. HFI has Information since April 2007 on all the points needed for all lettings and uses this to inform tenants which types of properties are easier to move to. This helps applicants bid more appropriately for properties they are more likely to get.

- 208** HFI reviews the transfer list regularly. Cases with enough points to bid get reviewed annually by category and some cases are reviewed as a response to contact. This ensures that when offers are made, they are on the basis of up to date information and time and resources are not wasted.
- 209** HFI is meeting government expectations by participating in the continuous recording system (CORE) used to gather information on each new letting. HFI started participation in November.
- 210** HFI has introduced improved procedures for lettings in a number of areas. Where priority is claimed for harassment or ASB, this is followed up more quickly. Home visits have been introduced for cases that need welfare points. A new information leaflet on medical information has reduced complaints about medical points.
- 211** The process of viewing properties can be unsatisfactory. Six applicants for each property are offered the chance to view it at the same time. This can work smoothly but often does not. The property is usually in the process of under going voids works which makes it harder to assess what it will be like. Applicants are not given a list of the work due to be carried out. This is an important decision in people's lives and many bring friends and family. As a result the place can be quite crowded and chaotic making it difficult to move around, ask appropriate questions or make a clear assessment.
- 212** HFI's success at enhancing the service for vulnerable applicants is mixed. If older or more vulnerable applicants ask, they can turn up earlier and see the property without the rush of other people around. Extra help is also available when letting mobility and wheelchair homes. However unless they are under-occupiers, the service is only available on request. Many applicants might not realise how busy a viewing will be, therefore will not ask.
- 213** HFI cannot be sure that all applicants who need help with bidding are getting it. Many are getting support through social workers or housing support officers. HFI look at bidding patterns and contact people who not bidding regularly. However the staff who do this are restricted to giving advice on bidding over the phone which will not be enough for some applicants. There is no list of which applicants find the bidding process difficult and who their helping contact is.
- 214** HFI is not promoting mutual exchanges as well as it could do. A payment of £4,000 is made for tenants to be able to participate in a national computerised exchange scheme and HFI advertises the Islington exchanges in the area offices. HFI does not promote exchanges in the tenants' newsletter and the information on the website is hard to find unless it involves under-occupation. There are only 500 people on the mutual exchange list while there are almost 6,000 tenants with priority status for a move and many more who want a move but do not have the priority to bid. However HFI has plans to launch a new internal mutual exchange scheme in the New Year that it will promote and administer. More tenants wanting a move could have exchanged if HFI had promoted mutual exchanges better.

How good is the service?

- 215** Performance on providing information to those wanting a move is mixed. The Council has a comprehensive guide to housing that covers all options and situations. HFI run a special phone line at the contact centre with staff trained to address housing issues. However this is only open from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm not the 12 hours a day service for all other HFI enquiries. Callers are not advised on calling that they will have to wait for one and a half minutes listening to re-housing advice before waiting for an agent to answer the phone. Over one in five callers abandon their call while waiting. There is no opportunity for face to face advice. Most applicants will be well served with information but some will not be.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 216** In 2004, we found that this is an area that still required some development. The council in consultation with HFI was building in reductions in budgets to respond to efficiencies required following the Gershon¹² report. HFI had carried out a range of VFM assessments including key service level agreements and had made cost efficiencies in the repair and maintenance service contracts and supply arrangements. However, the prime focus has been improved service delivery and not VFM. Consequently there was no clear strategy to address VFM throughout the organisation and opportunities for savings from the repair joint venture agreement (JVA) had not been taken forward. Some improvements had yet to yield cost efficiencies.
- 217** In this inspection, we found more strengths than weaknesses in value for money. HFI has a robust approach with structures and a culture that is embedded and drives forward efficiencies. Savings have been made in many parts of the service through reviewing service level agreements and contracts, restructuring and service reviews. However HFI's costs have been higher than average in the recent past and it is not yet established whether recent effective value for money initiatives have closed that gap.

How do costs compare?

- 218** HFI's costs were comparatively high two years ago. No recent analysis of costs is available; the last one was done using 2005/06 data and compared ALMOs nationally and with nine other London ALMOs. Since then HFI has made some significant efficiency savings, although other ALMOs will have too, so the figures are not reflective of the present situation. The figures show costs are high against national and London ALMOs. The London figures reveal the following.
- When overheads are excluded HFI has the highest costs per property in the group at £573 per property which exceeds the median cost by over 50 per cent.
 - The number of properties managed per employee was the second lowest at 56 - half that of the best.
 - HFI had the joint largest costs per property for arrears management at over £80, although this is reflected in improving performance.
 - HFI had the second highest cost of direct staff in tenancy and estate management.
 - HFI has the highest office costs per property in the group paying twice the median level, although this included the cost of acquiring new offices.

¹² The Gershon report was commissioned by the government to improve efficiencies in public services.

219 HFI has an innovative approach to unit cost monitoring that is being piloted by a benchmarking service with a view to becoming part of the national product for the ALMO benchmarking group. The new approach will measure costs for specific activities like gas servicing and managing ASB. Data collection is due to start in December with a view to a report being ready by the end of February.

How is value for money managed?

220 HFI has a robust approach to value for money. The approach ensures a clear structure, regular actions and an embedded value for money culture.

- An overarching efficiency strategy has been in place for two years. It has 18 objectives all taken straight from the excellent descriptors of the Audit Commission's key line of enquiry on value for money. Most of these objectives have been achieved.
- A comprehensive procurement strategy lays out principles as well as detailed rules and procedures for procurement.
- The Chief Executive chairs an efficiency and procurement working group which includes Board directors. The group's remit is to direct the implementation of the efficiency strategy and to ensure its value for money objectives are realised.
- HFI subjects all of its services to service efficiency reviews with a five-year programme. Areas that proved relatively more expensive through benchmarking like income recovery were brought forward for review.

221 HFI has challenging targets for efficiency and performance against them has been good. The Annual Efficiency Statement for 2006/07 set a target to make efficiency gains of £1.7 million. At the end of the year a total of £1.5 million of efficiencies was achieved which represents 3 per cent of the £50 million management fee.

222 HFI is increasing the value for money of the service contracts with the Council. The contracts are monitored at quarterly meetings and renegotiated annually, providing substantial efficiency gains. HFI tests the service level agreements against the four Cs of challenge, compare, consult and compete. The contracts are withdrawn, prices reduced or services improved at no extra cost if they do not provide value for money, for example:

- residents paying rent or service charges by cash no longer pay at municipal offices but now use post offices and shops saving £50,000 per year;
- the caretaker out of hours service was withdrawn due to lack of use saving £20,000 per year; and
- many of the legal services functions will cease or be taken in-house with a cashable saving of £615,000 and a non-cashable saving of £88,000.

223 HFI has made a significant number of savings in both contracts and improved ways of working as shown in the table below. This includes those paid for out of the management fee and contacts managed for the Council by HFI.

How good is the service?

Table 1 **Examples of annual efficiency savings**

Area housing office closure and restructuring (with some loss of service)	£940,000
Reviewing the gas servicing contracts	£750,000
Lower legal repair bills with less compensation paid	£632,000
Non-cashable efficiencies in the routine repairs contract	£623,000
Reducing legal bill and bringing the council service in house	£615,000
Closing area housing cash offices and stopping the use of municipal pay points	£270,000
Procurement of new insurance	£100,000
Changes in human resources process including web based staff advertising	£80,000.
Procurement of new mobile phone contract	£70,000

- 224** HFI made significant savings in the capital programme. This is a much larger budget of over £100 million a year giving more scope, particularly as some costs in this sector have not been keeping pace with inflation. On this basis HFI achieved a saving of £3.2 million against the index. The capital management fees have reduced from 14.5 to 11 per cent representing a saving of £1.4 million. The mechanical and engineering contracts were reviewed saving £580,000. The framework contracts were appropriately tendered on quality as well as price.
- 225** HFI monitors rent and service charge transaction costs and is bringing costs down. Average transaction costs reduced by 3 per cent over the past year to 3.9 pence. On top of this, new contracts will reduce post office costs by 21 per cent which, along with the reduction in the use of the post office and the promotion of direct debit, will reduce costs further.
- 226** Repairs ratios are positive but deteriorating. Urgent and emergency repairs were only 13 per cent of repairs in 2006/07 but have doubled to 23 per cent of repairs for the first half of 2007/08. This is within the 30 per cent guidelines set out by the Audit Commission. This is cost effective as non urgent repairs can be planned more efficiently.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 227** In 2004, we found that demonstrable evidence of service improvements that positively impacted on residents and that there had been a concerted improvement in all services. Additionally, all the key weaknesses identified in our previous report, as well as those identified internally, had been addressed. There were systems in place to capture learning and many examples of positive practice from other organisations used to improve services. However, some improvements had not had the desired impact and it was too early to judge the benefits of more recent changes.
- 228** In this inspection, we found a strong track record of improvement. HFI has successfully delivered a number of improvement plans and changes in structures. Performance indicators and indications of resident satisfaction are showing almost universal improvement. This is achieved while costs are reducing resulting in an overall improvement in value for money.
- 229** HFI has an ambitious set of plans that it continues to implement successfully to the benefit of residents. It has made many changes since becoming an ALMO in April 2004 that have resulted in improved performance and greater satisfaction. The Council has the view that HFI always does what it says it will do and HFI has many examples of making changes in response to residents' views. Examples of successfully implemented plans and changes include:
- the service efficiency reviews have led to improvements and savings;
 - the restructuring of home ownership services worked well with improving performance and services offered;
 - closing two out of four area offices was challenging but was achieved relatively smoothly resulting in significant cost savings;
 - the training of caretakers and increased mechanisation has improved the environment of estates;
 - the introduction of the ASB response team provides residents with a service in the evenings which is valued by residents;
 - the partnerships with the police, fire service and other agencies works well and is improving services for residents;
 - the contract on responsive repairs has led to across the board improvement in performance indicators in particular getting repairs done first time; and
 - consultation and satisfaction with major repairs continues to improve.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 230** HFI has a strong record of implementing changes, derived from inspections, voluntary improvement work and service reviews. Appendix two lists the 22 sub recommendations from the last ALMO inspection by the Audit Commission, all but two of which have been completed. The two that have not been completed are listed below and both reflect cost restraints. HFI produced an action plan of over 65 items from the voluntary improvement inspection and has delivered well on this in ten months.
- HFI has only secured funding to make 25 out of 38 community centres meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. If Council funding continues at the present rate, the work will be finished in 2008/09.
 - The window cleaning needs of residents are not entirely met. HFI does not clean communal windows above the fifth floor.
- 231** HFI has improved in a number of ways that residents have recognised. This is most apparent from the tenant surveys as shown below. However HFI lacks up to date information on key areas that need addressing like leaseholder satisfaction.

Table 2 Improvement in tenant ratings of HFI service

	2004	2006	2007	Increase in three years
Keeping residents informed	63%	75%	77%	14%
Satisfaction with the caretaking service	62%	68%	76%	14%
Satisfaction with overall landlord service	52%	64%	68%	16%
Satisfaction with repairs and maintenance	48%	65%	65%	17%
Satisfaction with opportunities to participate in decision making	38%	54%	60%	22%
Knowledge of staff	43%	64%	67%	24%
Ease of use of HFI direct (rated as good)	43%	? ¹³	69%	26%
Overall service by the local offices (rated as good)	43%	?	71%	28%
Overall satisfaction with major works ¹⁴	64%	84%	84%	20%

- 232** The satisfaction surveys show improvements over many measures. The number of exceptions are small. In two areas satisfaction is lower than a year ago: leaseholder satisfaction with major works and satisfaction with the Right to Buy service.
- 233** Key performance indicators show consistent improvement. Satisfaction ratings as shown above have risen significantly. The performance indicator table in the appendix shows that 80 per cent of the indicators are improving, with 10 per cent going down and 10 per cent staying the same.

¹³ This question and one below were not asked in 2006

¹⁴ Major works satisfaction is measured over a whole year and the 2003/04 figure is from before the ALMO existed. These figures are just for tenants,

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

234 HFI has improved the value for money of the services it provides over time. However costs are reducing from a comparatively high level. The section on value for money above lists a number of efficiencies and cost reductions achieved over the past three years. As a result the service is now delivered with lower management charges and a higher performance.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 235** In 2004, we found that HFI had robust short and long term plans. Plans were formulated from the outcomes of best value reviews, resident and staff feedback, from core objectives and business needs. However there were too many short term plans and they were not all aligned effectively. This was recognised and was being addressed by HFI in the 2005/06 planning process.
- 236** In this inspection, we found that HFI had a number of well developed drivers for improvement with few barriers. The short term vision and objectives are clear based on structured process of prioritisation with resident input leading to an effective series of plans. Governance is strong, relations with the Council productive and comprehensive performance reports backed up by quality monitoring systems drive improvements. HFI monitors contracted services well and has a well embedded approach to learning. However medium and long term vision and objectives are under developed and residents are not involved in reviewing policies and strategies.
- 237** HFI has a clear short term vision, objectives and priorities that lead to effective plans. The business plan 2007-2012 sets out a clear short term vision, mission and objectives with measurable outcomes. These objectives form the basis of a detailed action plan for each department that is monitored and is delivering relevant improvements. This provides a clear basis from which all actions and plans can follow and refer to.
- 238** HFI's long term vision and agenda is under developed. A new vision has been drafted and the board and executive broadly agree that community development will follow beyond the shorter term priorities of delivering excellent housing services. However these long term objectives including the future of the ALMO have not been clarified or formally agreed, nor is there an asset management strategy. There is a danger, expressed by partners, that HFI might fail to lead on setting the agenda for its own future unless it successfully promotes its own view.
- 239** The system for prioritisation is transparent with effective resident input. The results from the residents' survey are combined with priorities from partners the Council's Local Area Agreement and staff views. At the residents' conference, participants are given keypad response systems that allowed them to express preferences individually and see the collective results instantly. This helps refine the priorities. The results go to a Board awayday when the priorities are drafted for the business plan. A broad input and clear and open system of setting priorities allows all parties to buy in to the aims, objectives and plans.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 240** HFI has good governance. The Board has commitment, enthusiasm and drive. Board members have a wide spread of skills diverse opinions but work well together and produce ideas for taking the service forward. HFI benefits from good working relations and respect between the Board and the executive and the Council. A thorough and professional assessment and development of Board members improves performance of individual members. An external trainer works with the Board identifying necessary changes in behaviour and creating a consensus on what the culture of the Board should be like. Papers are well written and board members read them and ask pertinent questions and challenge where necessary. Papers are sent back if they are not good enough or not agreed with. Strong board leadership improves prospects for improvement.
- 241** The Council has a constructive and productive relationship with HFI. There are a series of structured meetings at different levels plus informal contact through telephone calls. Issues that arise are dealt with effectively and there are no particular points of friction. HFI is linked well into the Council's wider structures. The Chief Executive sits on the Islington strategic partnership board and two out of three of the partnership groups that address the Council's three strategic aims. The Council has a strong influence, partly due to strong relationships and shared values but does not interfere in the running of the service.
- 242** Improvement planning is effective, flexible, challenging and addresses key weaknesses. HFI is able to identify the main areas that require improvement and has a planning system that delivers the changes required. Managers take a disciplined approach including recording evidence that over 50 individual improvements have been tasked and delivered. The system is responsive to input from residents through suggestions from surveys and focus groups and from complaints. HFI records and publishes a regular number of improvements resulting from customer demands.
- 243** HFI has a comprehensive system of performance reports. Departments get detailed series of performance indicators while the Board only receives the key indicators. The reports are used to drive improvements as poor performance leads to a greater focus of attention and where necessary more in depth explanations and reports. Staff and team targets have realistic but challenging targets linked to the performance reports and key business objectives.
- 244** HFI carries out effective quality monitoring. The performance and development team agree a programme of spot checks each quarter with heads and directors who deliver services. This is particularly valuable to check whether new policies have been well implemented. For example a recent check on the new security policy to ensure that confidential information is not given out over the phone showed that the policy had not yet bedded in. Areas of particular importance to residents, like estate cleaning and caretaking, are monitored regularly. About a dozen specific service delivery areas are checked each quarter. These quality checks inform directors about performance, motivate teams to perform, highlight areas where more focus is required and drive up performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 245** Despite overall strong performance assessment, some areas are not monitored as effectively as others. While the telephone performance of the contact centre is fully monitored, elsewhere is only spot checked, which is useful but does not give accurate performance trends. There is scope for linking up the effective estate quality assessments with the work of the out of hours service to assess the impact of the latter. Despite a ticketing system, waiting times at area offices is never monitored, nor is success at dealing with enquires first time.
- 246** HFI carries out regular and effective evaluation of initiatives. In 2007, HFI evaluated the professional witness scheme, the New Tenant Liaison Officer role, the Independent Advice Project, noise recording equipment and nine other recent initiatives. Where ideas are not delivering the anticipated gains, they are discontinued, such as with prize draws for clear rent accounts. This approach ensures that new ways of working are properly implemented and lessons learnt and improvements made where necessary, so improving services.
- 247** HFI monitors Partners for Improvement (PFI) well. The Council has given HFI responsibility for monitoring these Private Finance Initiatives, which manage and carry out major works on a fifth of the Council's housing stock. The first PFI did not perform well to begin with leading to a public apology by the Council; HFI played a role in helping it improve. The performance of the PFI is now good with all the main targets met and innovative working. All but two relevant indicators are in the upper quartile. The PFIs go beyond the requirements of the contract to help meet the aims of the Council. For example by signing up to the Respect agenda and to the Council's commitment to reduce carbon emissions. HFI's ability to monitor and foster strong relationships provides a benefit to Council tenants and leaseholders.
- 248** Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs)'s work well under HFI. A total of 23 TMOs, Tenant Management Co-operatives and Estate Management Boards manage 3,800 properties between them. This is an unusually complex structure and HFI allows them a menu of options for which aspects of the service they will each manage. Resident satisfaction for TMOs is higher than for the rest of HFI. They have different monitoring arrangements, so the eight co-ops have recently agreed to provide 18 performance indicators each month. HFI holds quarterly monitoring meetings with each organisation and reviews all the services provided as well as the governance and finance arrangements. The TMOs are subject to the quality monitoring system for areas like estate cleanliness. Some of the organisations struggle to provide monitoring information and HFI offers some assistance. HFI rates each TMO with a diamond rating similar to the Audit Commission's star rating for different aspects of their responsibilities. HFI takes them back into management if information or performance is not adequate. HFI's systems ensure probity and service standards are maintained.
- 249** HFI has a thorough approach to risk management. The audit committee has control of the risk register. Each element of the risk register has a committee leading on it that is responsible overseeing the management of those risks. The audit committee calls the chair or vice chair of the committees to attend the audit committee to discuss and validate the management of particular risks.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

250 HFI has a systematic and well embedded approach to learning. The service improvement group evaluates and responds to ideas and lessons learnt from the staff suggestion scheme as well as complaints and comments from residents. There is a structured system of positive practice investigations that looks at the work of dozens of different organisations to improve practices. A good example of learning from others is the ASB training course taken from Sheffield Homes.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

251 In our previous inspection, we found that HFI had overcome the barriers to drive improvement and built on existing strengths. We found there was clear leadership from the board and senior staff and challenge to performance. We also found clear prioritisation and risk management. HFI was building capacity to meet business needs in terms of human resources and financial capacity, and it was also using partnerships to help deliver key services to improve capacity.

252 In this inspection, we found a well structured approach to performance development, strong management skills and effective training. HFI provides effective leadership for human resources and computer systems, works well with partners with a robust approach to procurement and attracts significant amount of inward investment. However not all performance development reviews are well conducted and communications with caretakers are not always effective.

253 HFI has a well structured competency approach to assessing and developing staff. Staff had input and the approach is amended in response to analysis and feedback. In their performance and development reviews (PDRs), staff are set objectives and targets based on the HFI objectives. All objectives are SMART¹⁵ and agreed with staff; 97 per cent of those staff who can receive PDRs had them this year. A leadership programme for section heads is accredited with the Institute of Leadership and Management and managers from the Council value this as Council managers have joined it.

254 The quality of the performance development review (PDR) process is mixed. It is positive that HFI does a spot check on one in seven PDRs. However this assessment showed that some were not carried out well. We found that some staff are not clear what their targets are and others, particularly more junior staff see it as a formality, a box ticking exercise. Not all staff have regular one to one meetings. Some just have their PDR meetings every six months and team meetings.

255 The organisation has the necessary management skills. HFI has been proactive in bringing procedures up to date and managers are generally approachable. Residents express confidence in the ability of more senior managers to resolve issues of poor service when it is brought to their attention. The unions value the ability to have good open debate without conflict. HFI takes action to deal with staff who are not delivering adequate services of whom there are ten at present. A system of monitoring ensures that these staff get the appropriate support and training. A formal process of capability assessment is carried out and last year two staff lost their jobs through this route. These skills and systems will help the organisation improve.

¹⁵ Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Time bound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 256** HFI trains staff well. Staff receive comprehensive training accessible for both internal and external courses. The training programme on diversity is innovative and was in the top five shortlisted for a cross industry award in a national personnel magazine. This package has been sold to the council. The course on dealing with difficult customers won a national training award. Health and safety training is well managed and HFI was the first ALMO to be awarded five stars by the British Safety Council in 2006. HFI run a positive action support programme (PASP). This gives staff who are not in management practical help and experience to develop their skills to enable them to get a management job. Staff training on customer care has not been adequate but this has been recognised with a course organised for the next few months. The training provided has improved staff morale and made them better able to do their jobs.
- 257** Human resources are well managed. Rates of sickness are better than the London borough average running between eight and eight and a half days for the past two years. The use of agency staff has decreased significantly over the past year but is still relatively high at ten per cent. Staff turnover is 9.6 per cent per year; which is better than local government averages. HFI is the first ALMO in the country to receive the new revamped 'profile' Investors In People accreditation. This is indicative of an organisation that does better than those that get the ordinary IIP accreditation. Relations with unions are positive and constructive. Strong management of human resources helps staff and the organisation reach its full potential.
- 258** HFI has a robust and well managed set of computer systems that has been regularly updated. HFI consistently improves its computer systems, with positive outcomes; for example, architect plans can now be viewed on PCs rather than searching for originals or microfiche. The maintenance system is regularly updated with data on residents allowing staff to know about relevant vulnerabilities. A planned maintenance module is now being used; it stores information about component replacement and provides information to the responsive repairs module to prevent unnecessary repairs being ordered. Better quality Information on diversity and vulnerability is now available for leaseholders. The right to buy system is now part of the main housing management software which reduces manual entering of data. A new payroll database allows staff to change their own data and book holidays and receive payslips online saving time and resources. These changes allow the organisation to work more efficiently.
- 259** HFI has plans that will lead to the improved systems. A system has been built and is being tested to allow estate staff to record issues directly on to hand held computers as they go around estates. Document image processing (DIP) is being piloted in one office. A working group is looking at customer relationship management software with a view to adopting a new system in a year or so. These changes will improve the efficiency and capacity of HFI.
- 260** There are some small weaknesses in the computer system. Repairs ordering and management is done on different software from the rest of housing management. The communication between the two systems is adequate but could be better and it can take hours of work to get performance statistics out of the repairs system. The repairs system and the software to help contact centre staff deal with queries both have glitches that make serving customers more difficult for some staff. The ASB system does not allow effective monitoring of ASB performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 261** HFI has a robust, modern procurement strategy and applies best practice, working with partners to achieve improved value for money in priority areas. Partnership working is strong with shared monitoring and responsibilities with the repairs contractor and established framework contracts for major repairs. New procurement is reducing costs significantly in areas like mobile phones and gas servicing.
- 262** HFI is successful at attracting external funding. This increases the capacity of the organisation to improve services. A few examples of this funding include:
- contractors have contributed £82,000 towards various projects like playgrounds, parking bays and fun days;
 - sports funding from Arsenal football club, and the Home Office adds up to £130,000 each year;
 - the New Deal for Communities is spending over £4 million on HFI estates;
 - the Government Office for London spent £13 million on one estate; and
 - the Community Chest is spending £100,000 on estates and estate events.
- 263** HFI works well with partners. Tenants directly benefit from work with most of the 20 or so partners that HFI works with. One example is through closer working with the fire brigade, leading to the provision of information on call outs in or near HFI estates. Through this work, HFI has been able to identify and address alarms going off unnecessarily at night, disturbing residents and improve the working of lifts.
- 264** Not all front line staff and managers have the skills and aptitudes necessary to deliver a high quality service. Many residents said that the quality of the service depended on who you see and some staff agreed. Some managers do not understand the inputs necessary to have good customer care. One office often opens at the last minute in the mornings, leaving staff in the rain before work and expecting them to come in, sit down and provide a high quality service within minutes.
- 265** Management communication and performance management of caretaking staff is not always effective. There are 187 caretakers and HFI carries out regular inspection of their work, provides briefings, a newsletter and annual events such as the caretakers' conference. HFI has modified its computer training approach for caretakers to focus on brushing up on broader skills including literacy. This has been piloted on 12 caretakers and will be rolled out for the rest. However PDRs have not worked well so far for caretakers and have needed to be adapted for them. Despite the efforts made on communication, caretakers felt that the quality of communication was not good and they do not all fully understand their roles and responsibilities in respect to minor repairs in communal areas or ASB reporting.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 3 Islington performance 2004/05 to 2006/07

Performance Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Year to date (September)	Better or worse	2006/07 Group top 25% ¹⁶	2006/07 Position in Group ¹⁷
Access and customer care							
Tenant satisfaction overall (BV074a)	52%	N/A	64%	68%	↑	74.0%	Q4
% abandoned calls	2.8%	2.2%	3.0%	1.8%	↑	-	-
Calls to call centre answered in six rings	87%	91%	89%	98%	↑	-	-
Average time to answer calls	9.95	9.54	13	13	↓	-	-
Complaints replied to on time (ten days)	89%	92%	97%	90%	→	-	-
Diversity							
Tenant satisfaction BME only	52%	N/A	60%	63%	↓ ¹⁸	-	-
Level of LG Equalities Standard (BV002a)	2	2	N/A	3	↑	-	-
Stock investment and repairs							
Satisfaction with major works	81%	88%	88%	N/A	↑	-	-
% homes not meeting DHS	58.4%	55.4%	50.2%	N/A	↑	25.9%	Q4

¹⁶ The benchmarking group is London local authorities, the numbers vary according to the indicator

¹⁷ Q1 = best 25 per cent, Q2 = second best 25 per cent, Q3 = second worst 25 per cent, Q4 = worst 25 per cent

¹⁸ The indicator has gone down as the relative satisfaction compared to all tenants is getting worse

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Year to date (September)	Better or worse	2006/07 Group top 25% ¹⁶	2006/07 Position in Group ¹⁷
Average SAP rating (BV063)	61	63	63	N/A	↑	70	Q4
Satisfaction with repairs (status)	48%	N/A	65%	65%	↑	-	-
Satisfaction with repairs (on going surveys)	N/A	N/A	73%	81%	↑	-	-
Emergency repairs completed on time ¹⁹	94.4%	98.7%	98.7%	97.1%	→	-	-
Urgent repairs completed on time ²⁰	96.7%	98.4%	98.6%	99.3%	↑	97.9%	Q1
% of urgent repairs within govt. limits (BV72)	95.1%	98.7%	93.1%	95.1%	→	98.9%	Q3
Avg days taken for non-urgent repairs (BV73)	10.0	8.0	8.0	6.1	↑	7.2	Q2
% appointments made and kept (BV185)	97.1%	98.9%	99.0%	99.3%	↑	98.1%	Q1
% of stock with current CP12 (HFI only)	99.2%	99.8%	99.4%	97.2%	↓	-	-
Income Management							
proportion of rent collected (BV066a)	95.8%	97.8%	98.2%	98.4%	↑	97.4%	Q1
Tenants with more than seven week arrears (BV66b)	6.3%	10.0%	9.0%	8.9%	↑	6.8%	Q3
Proportion of rent collected (no arrears brought forward)	99.8%	99.7%	99.6%	99.2%	N/A	100.0%	Q2
Current rent arrears %	6.3%	4.9%	4.6%	4.4%	↑	-	-
Current rent arrears average	£243	£209	£202	£202	↑	-	-

¹⁹ The figures are exaggerated by around 0.7 per cent due to the allowance of extensions for contracts

²⁰ The figures are exaggerated by between 1.7 and 4.1 per cent as above

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Year to date (September)	Better or worse	2006/07 Group top 25% ¹⁶	2006/07 Position in Group ¹⁷
Former tenant arrears collected %	7.5%	10.1%	11.2%	6.0%*	↑	-	-
% of tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.7%	0.6%	0.2%	0.1%	↑	0.2%	Q2
Resident involvement							
Satisfaction with opportunities to participate (BV075a)	38%	54%	N/A	60%	↑	66.1%	Q4
% tenants who live on estates covered by TRAs (HFI only)	N/A	N/A	N/A	45%	N/A	-	-
Tenancy and estate management							
% of tenancies audited in year	N/A	10.3%	10.8%	6.6%*	↑	-	-
Abandoned vehicles	228	137	N/A	68*	N/A	-	-
ABCs	42	92	54	20*	N/A	-	-
ASBOs	5	4	5	1*	N/A	-	-
Evictions	21	7	8	4*	N/A	-	-
Allocations and lettings							
Dwellings vacant and available to let	0.4%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%	→	-	-
Average relet time	22	26	23	22	↑	27.0	Q1
Leasehold management							
Leaseholder satisfaction	33%	33%	36%	N/A	↑	-	-

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Year to date (September)	Better or worse	2006/07 Group top 25% ¹⁶	2006/07 Position in Group ¹⁷
Service charges collected as % of charges due - including arrears from previous years	47%	87%	87%	91%	↑	-	-
Service charges collected as % of annual charge due	117%	110%	105%	64%*	N/A	-	-
Average service charge debt	£120	£80	£120	44*	↑	-	-
Right to Buy							
RTB completions	600	258	128	51*	N/A	-	-
Time from receipt of RTB1 to issue RTB2 (weeks)	9.1	2.9	2.2	1.5	↑	-	-
RTB2s issued within timescale	33%	86%	92%	100%	↑	-	-
Time from RTB2 to when offer is sent (weeks)	39.8	13.7	1.4	0.9	↑	-	-
Value for Money							
Balance of planned to responsive maintenance	63%	41%	47%	53%	→	-	-
% of repairs which are urgent or emergency	N/A	36%	13%	23%	→	15.8%	Q3
% of variation orders	7.10%	6.50%	N/A	8.30%	↓	-	-
% tenants paying by direct debit	0%	7.70%	N/A	9.50%	↑	-	-
% leaseholders paying by direct debit	0%	2.00%	N/A	20%	↑	-	-
The number of working days/shifts lost due to sickness absence (BV 012)	9.4	8	8.3	1.3*	↑	-	-

*These are half year figures and need to be doubled to compare with the annual ones.

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Table 4 Recommendations from 2005 inspection

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Improve the accessibility of service to the diverse range of residents in the community	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure consistent monitoring of diversity information across HFI and the tenant management organisations (TMOs) and respond to issues arising from monitoring service delivery (six months). 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include diversity information in estate agreements and use all opportunities to collect diversity information where it is not held (three months). 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the council and residents secure funding for community centres to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (12 months). 	Some funding obtained but 11 out of 24 still not compliant
R2 Improve access and customer care arrangements	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide clear targets for all customer commitments (CCs) at the next planned review with residents. 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit and improve the quality of responses to complaints and ensure performance meets targets for replying to all complaints (three months). 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capture informal feedback to inform improvements and introduce targeted surveys of victims of ASB and harassment to understand the effectiveness of actions taken and use this to ensure the service meets their needs (three months). 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with the council to resource improvements to reception centres and improve security (12 months). 	Done
R3 Improve the repair and maintenance service	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take action to ensure all properties that have not had a gas service for over 12 months are serviced as a matter of priority (three months). 	Partially done June 2007 13% failure November 2007 0.7% failure

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve residents in the development of capital schemes, their timing and design (12 months). 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put in place a mechanism to check that repairs are carried out right first time and that targets for this are set and met (six months). 	Done
R4 Improve housing income management - work with the council to develop a strategy to deal with historic current arrears using positive practise from good performing organisations (three months).	Done
R5 Improve tenancy and estate management services by ensuring consistency in estate care services and that window cleaning and refuse collection arrangements, meet the needs of residents (six months).	Partially done Window cleaning not done above fifth floor
R6 Improve allocations and the letting service - work with the council to implement the draft service level agreement with the council's allocation service (three months).	Done
R7 Improve leasehold management and Right to Buy (RTB) services	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve performance in processing RTB applications in line with government targets (six months). 	Done by November 2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve consultation with all residents, including leaseholders, on major works on a scheme by scheme basis (six months). 	Done
R8 Work with the council to:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> implement a clear strategy to improve performance in the collection of major work costs (six months); and 	Done
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide a comprehensive, well publicised package of financial advice and support to leaseholders, including access to independent financial advice and options for those in hardship to pay for major work costs (six months). 	Done
R9 Work with TMOs to analyse and scrutinise their costs and charges for leaseholders (12 months).	Done
R10 Improve resident involvement - ensure residents are provided with cost information when consulting on changes to service and that resources are available to implement the chosen option (three months).	Done
R11 Develop a value for money strategy to ensure cost efficiency is given greater priority and a consistent approach is taken (six months).	Done

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R12 Ensure the quality of responses to complaints meets HFI standard and targets for responding to complaints are met (three months).	Quality done 95% of complaints answered in 10 days apart from March, August and September 2007
R13 Ensure that opportunities for conflict of interest within the governance arrangements are minimised (six months).	Done

Source: AC inspection report 2005

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:
 - file checks for rent arrears and anti-social behaviour;
 - assessment of the complaints system and handling of individual complaints;
 - four resident focus groups;
 - estate visits;
 - inspection of voids;
 - observing viewings of empty properties;
 - demonstrations of IT systems; and
 - observing reception services and telephone answering.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Allowing residents to prioritise at a conference

- 1 HFI successfully uses modern technology to improve resident involvement. At the residents’ conference, participants were given keypad response systems that allowed them to express preferences individually and see the collective results instantly. This was entertaining and informative and helped HFI make decisions for the Business Plan.

Efficiencies from working smarter at court

- 2 HFI and the Council transferred two legal staff from the Council to become court officers. This has saved £100,000 as there is only one person in court where Rent Arrears Officers used to attend court up to three times a week, for a half-day each time. The courts have asked HFI to do a presentation, as it regards HFI as an exemplar organisation on this issue.

Free wireless broadband internet access and local digital television

- 3 HFI is helping customers overcome the disadvantages of limited internet access. The ALMO is installing wireless networks for residents; whole estates now have access. Take up has been significant and feedback good, with over 1,000 different computers accessing the service. HFI has also set up a local digital television channel for the benefit of residents. Those residents who subscribe to satellite or cable television can use it to access similar services as those available on the website for example choice based lettings and ordering a repair. Disadvantaged residents are getting free access to a service that would cost them almost £200 per year.

Agreed maximum price for major works for leaseholders

- 4 HFI offers leaseholders an element of peace of mind by giving them an agreed maximum price for major works before the works start. An agreed maximum price is common part of a contract with partners; however it is unusual to share this with leaseholders. Leaseholders know that they will benefit from any efficiencies gained but they can start budgeting or paying for a set amount knowing that the price will never exceed that amount. This reduces uncertainty and worry.

Effective arrangements for gas servicing

- 5 HFI is innovative in its approach to gas servicing leading to a more effective service:
- HFI uses the magistrate's court to gain access to properties rather than through the county court. This has led to faster access and total savings of around £850 per case with less officer time preparing for court, in court and responding to court requirements. This has been in operation for the past six months and the combined savings for the 91 cases to date is estimated at over £75,000.
 - The information that contractors provide on hard to access properties is put to good use by HFI. Some cases are referred to Housing Benefit leading to termination of incorrect Housing Benefit payments while others have led to identification and action against illegal tenancies.
 - HFI checks to see whether access was difficult the previous year, and why, and approaches access with this in mind.

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