

ALMO

Inspection

West North West Homes Leeds

January 2009



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Arms 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, arms 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 West North West Homes Leeds (WNWhL) provides a fair, one star service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 WNWhL is a one star organisation because it demonstrates customer focus in a range of services, with action taken to help improve access to services for a diverse group of customers. There is a strong strategic approach to asset management with decent homes achievement on target for March 2011. Tenants have access to debt advice and there is a range of opportunities for residents to participate which have resulted in service improvements. There is a strategic approach to dealing with anti social behaviour through effective partnership working. There are clear efficiency targets, and arrangements in place have resulted in savings including use of construction partnerships.
- 3 There are still, however, a number of weaknesses in the service. There are considerable delays in accessing services via the telephone. Complaints handling is weak. Customer profiling is under developed and services are not strategically developed in line with the customer profile. There are inefficiencies in repairs delivery including a high level of emergency repairs. The ALMO is not fully aware of its gas servicing performance and information on the gas servicing status of individual properties is not easily accessible. Service charges do not reflect the level of services received. There are low levels of tenants actively involved and those involved are not fully representative of the local community. Case management for anti-social behaviour cases is weak within WNWhL and for those cases passed to the council; in addition outcomes for the activity taken cannot be demonstrated. Grounds maintenance is poor quality. There is a lack of robust strategic approach to value for money, and the services provided by Leeds City Council (LCC) have not been fully reviewed or market tested.
- 4 WNWhL has promising prospects for improvement because the change to the new organisation has been managed effectively. There are a number of improvements to services which are important to customers. There is a clear focus on continuous improvement and performance management which is becoming embedded in the culture of the organisation. Plans are in place and action under way to address a number of weaknesses identified within the report.
- 5 There are still, however, some areas of weakness. Performance has not improved in all areas since the last inspection and WNWhL and its predecessors have been slow to tackle significant problems. Slow progress has been made in improving some service areas including gas servicing and leaseholders; and in completing the review of SLAs with the council. There are some weaknesses in relation to performance reporting and performance frameworks are not developed in all service areas.

Scoring the service

6 We have assessed West North West Homes Leeds as providing ‘fair’, one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹

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

Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- an embedded culture of customer focus;
 - accessible local offices and one stop centres with staff who provide quality customer service;
 - a range of ways for customers to provide feedback on services which is being used to influence improvements to service delivery;
 - strong leadership and corporate approach to equality and diversity;
 - action to help improve access to services for a diverse group of customers;
 - robust arrangements for monitoring and improving contractor approach to equalities and diversity;

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.

- a strong strategic approach to asset management with decent homes achievement on target by March 2011;
 - strong customer focus on delivery of the capital and planned programme;
 - customer focused responsive repairs service with high satisfaction levels;
 - a suitable quality lettable standard, and empty properties repaired to the satisfaction of the new tenant;
 - a well publicised aids and adaptations service with quick response times for minor adaptations and an appropriate level of resources to enable major adaptations to be completed in target times;
 - a range of flexible payment options and accurate and timely information on rent accounts;
 - a good range of debt advice resulting in additional income for tenants;
 - a wide range of opportunities to participate and influence at a local level which are widely publicised resulting in service improvement and development;
 - a strategic and joined up approach to dealing with anti social behaviour with WNWhL playing an active part in partnerships and the provision of a range of preventative and diversionary activities;
 - prospective and new tenants are provided with appropriate support throughout the letting process;
 - a systematic approach to estate inspections which involves residents;
 - multi storey blocks are generally clean and well maintained;
 - an accessible letting system with support provided to applicants, offering tenants with significant choice;
 - there are clear efficiency targets set and arrangements in place which have resulted in savings including use of construction partnerships and procurement consortia; and
 - the merger has been used to deliver value for money savings.
- 8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the lack of a systematic approach to service standard monitoring so customers do not know if WNWhL is achieving the standards set;
 - considerable delays in accessing services via the telephone and limited service provision out of hours;
 - complaints handling is weak with target times not achieved;
 - sheltered and communal areas are not all DDA compliant;
 - customer profiling is under developed and services are not strategically developed in line with the customer profile;
 - the approach to domestic violence and hate crime has some weaknesses;
 - a differential service is offered to tenants in relation to heating installation;

Scoring the service

- the optimum balance between planned and responsive repairs has not been achieved and there are no clear plans to address this;
 - inefficiencies in repairs delivery including a high level of emergency repairs;
 - the level of voids and relet times do not meet the targets set increasing loss of income to the organisation;
 - gas servicing performance is not fully known and information on the gas servicing status of individual properties is not easily accessible;
 - rent collection performance is not meeting the targets set;
 - service charges do not reflect the level of services received;
 - low levels of tenants actively involved and those involved are not fully representative of the local community;
 - case management for anti social behaviour cases is weak within WNWhL and for those cases passed to the council to deal with, and outcomes for the activity taken cannot be demonstrated;
 - empty properties are not always cleaned or gardens maintained to the agreed standard;
 - a poor quality grounds maintenance service and a contract which does not deliver value for money;
 - the comparative cost of service provision is mixed and the understanding of cost at a service level is variable;
 - the understanding of how costs compare and the reasons for the WNWhL position is not well developed across the organisation;
 - there is a lack of a robust strategic approach to value for money. Action around improving the organisational understanding of VFM has been undertaken but is not fully embedded within the organisation;
 - the services provided by LCC have not been fully reviewed or market tested; and
 - the agreement with Property Management Services for gas servicing and electrical testing is not delivering value for money.
- 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- WNWhL have managed the change to the new organisation effectively;
 - there are a number of improvements to services which are important to customers;
 - performance has improved in a number of key areas while efficiency savings have been achieved;
 - the objectives of the organisation are clearly understood;
 - there is a clear focus on continuous improvement and performance management with is becoming embedded in the culture of the organisation;
 - the board and LCC actively manage the performance of WNWhL;
 - there is an openness to learn from customers and other organisations;

- WNWhL have plans in place and action under way to address a number of weaknesses identified within this report;
- there is a sound approach to human resource management with staff changes managed well and a strong focus on training and development;
- there are clear plans to improve the diversity of the workforce and to improve local employment levels;
- ICT is invested in to improve capacity and efficiency; and
- financial management, budget setting and risk management arrangements are robust.

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

- performance in relation to voids and customer telephone access continue to decline;
- the previous inspection recommendations have not been fully delivered;
- slow progress in improving some service areas including gas servicing, leaseholders; and in completing the review of SLAs with the council;
- weaknesses in relation to performance reporting with a lack of commentary and some inaccuracies in figures reported;
- performance frameworks are not well developed in all service areas;
- it is not clear how some policies and strategies will be delivered;
- the strategic approach to procurement is weak and there is a reliance on expertise in the council; and
- the ALMO has not challenged the council appropriately in a number of areas.

Recommendations

11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the 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 the approach to gas servicing by:

- reviewing the current approach with consideration of best practice and efficiency;
- ensuring information on tenant vulnerability or access requirements is provided to contractors prior to the initial appointment;
- developing a process to ensure up to date gas servicing information is incorporated into the housing management system;
- locating gas servicing certificates in a way which makes them easily accessible;
- introducing a comprehensive system to monitor customer satisfaction;
- investigating the resources required to enable tenancy enforcement officers to take over no access cases earlier in the process;
- identifying persistent no- access tenants and take proactive steps to improve access rates;
- improving contract monitoring arrangements; and
- developing a regular board report which incorporates progress with no access cases, and outcomes from quality assurance checks.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improvements in the number of properties with a valid gas safety certificate;
- reduced risk for tenants and residents; and
- increased accountability in this area of statutory performance.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Review, with the Council, customers and the other Leeds ALMOs, the weaknesses in city wide policies identified in this report. Particularly:

- its reliance on leasing schemes for central heating replacement;
- pooling of service charges;
- management of leaseholds; and
- the operation of the lettings policy.

These processes should include robust research into customer requirements, consider good practice from elsewhere and involve impact and value for money assessments.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- delivery of services which represent value for money and meet WNWhL customer needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by May 2009.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen performance management arrangements within the organisation including:

- prioritising the development of the local performance frameworks to ensure all key gaps are filled with particular focus on ASB, leaseholders and supported housing;
- establishing systems for the monitoring and reporting of service standard compliance as agreed with customers;
- addressing the issues in the calculation of repairs KPIs;
- implementing systems to check for inaccuracies or anomalies in PI calculation;
- ensuring outcome measures are in place for each service area;
- ensuring that all strategies are accompanied by SMART³ action plans which focus on the key priority areas, and establish a process to monitor strategy delivery; and
- developing systems to formally evaluate and report the successes and outcomes of pilots, plans and strategies.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved officer understanding of performance in their service area;
- improved used of performance information to challenge service delivery; and
- improved accountability to customers and board members.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2009.

³ Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time bound.

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R4** Review with customers the weaknesses in accessibility identified within the report and address them including:
- completing a review of customer service access preferences including opening times, locations and repairs appointment times;
 - improving complaints handling quality and response times;
 - prioritising the collection of customer profile information and ensure systems are in place to maintain the information collected; and
 - ensuring Contact Centre response times and abandonment rates reduce.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved ease of access to services; and
- increased customer satisfaction with service access.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

- R5** Improve performance and service quality in key areas by:
- Improving case management of anti social behaviour cases including the introduction of quality controls and monitoring arrangements to ensure service standards are being met;
 - reviewing the approach to domestic violence, hate crime and harassment to ensure it meets the needs of WNWhL customers;
 - reviewing the approach to current and former tenants arrears to identify further ways to improve collection rates;
 - reviewing the approach to the setting of service charges to ensure customers are involved and these accurately reflect services received;
 - developing a robust letting procedure which gives clear guidance on each stage of the process;
 - developing a procurement strategy which clearly outlines WNWhL's ethos in relation to modern procurement methods, its stance on customer involvement and contains a timetable for future procurement; and
 - prioritising a review of the procurement of non asset management goods and services focusing on the areas of highest spend.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction in key service areas;
- improved outcomes for customers;
- increased income to the organisation; and
- improved performance and value for money in key areas.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

R6 Review, with customer, these recommendations and all the other weaknesses identified in the report:

- consider them in light of good practice from elsewhere;
- carry out impact and value for money assessments on potential solutions;
- develop prioritised action plans to address them; and
- monitor the impact of delivery in terms of outcomes.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- demonstrable delivery of a service which represents VFM and meets customer needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

12 We would like to thank the staff of West North West Homes Leeds who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 1 September to 12 September 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13** Leeds is a metropolitan area in the north of England. Its 55 hectare area covers the city and a number of nearby towns and villages. Although it is a successful economic centre, it has pockets of deprivation and it is the 114th⁴ most deprived of England's 354 council areas, which is an improvement from its 2004 position of 91st. At 3 per cent, unemployment remains above the national average⁵, almost one in ten households is headed by a lone parent and over 68,000 people have a limiting long-term illness.
- 14** Of the city's 322,500 homes, 77 per cent are owner-occupied or privately rented, 18.5 per cent are rented from the council and 4.5 per cent from housing associations. The housing market is polarised, with house price to average earning ratios ranging from 3:1 to 11:1. Demand for social renting is strong, reflecting house price inflation and reduced supply as a result of demolition and the right to buy.
- 15** West North West Homes Leeds (WNWhL) manages the council's housing stock in the north west and west of the city, which represents 36 per cent of the Council's housing stock. Leeds has a large BME population at 10.8 per cent in 2001 (including Irish and other White minority groups) which is higher than the regional average (8.3 per cent) but lower than the average for England and Wales (12.5 per cent). For WNWhL the highest concentration of BME communities are to be found in the Hyde Park and Woodhouse and Wortley wards, particularly in the Little London and Armley neighbourhoods. The Asian community is the largest single minority group in the area. However there are also significant black minority groups within Little London and Hyde Park.
- 16** WNWhL's tenant profile is known for 48.76 per cent of tenants. Sixty six per cent are over 55. Ninety two per cent are white British but with the other significant groupings being white European at 2 per cent, Asian at 1 per cent, black African at 1 per cent and black Caribbean at 1 per cent, and 1 per cent mixed white black Caribbean.
- 17** The Government's Index of Deprivation identifies parts of Armley, Bramley, Wortley and Little London amongst the most deprived in the country. Crime levels are highest in Bramley and Woodhouse Hyde Park areas.

⁴ Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007, measured by 'rank of average rank'

⁵ 2.4 per cent

The Council

- 18 A Liberal Democrat and Conservative alliance governs the council. Of the 99 councillors, Labour has 43 seats, the Liberal Democrats 25, the Conservatives 21, Independents have six, the Green Party three and the British National Party one. The Council has a leader and executive board of eight portfolio holders. Its tenth executive member is the Leader of the Labour Group and a further member of the Labour Group attends in a non-voting capacity.
- 19 The city has a well-established local strategic partnership called Leeds Initiative. It has developed a community strategy, the Vision for Leeds 2004/20, which has three main aims. Two are particularly relevant:
- going up a league as a city - making Leeds an internationally competitive city - the best place in the country to live, work and learn, with a high quality of life for everyone; and
 - narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged people and communities and the rest of the city.

Its strategic plan for 2008-2011 also highlights housing as a key priority under its 'thriving places' theme.

- 20 Under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework, the Audit Commission judged the Council's performance to be four star and improving well in 2007.

The service

- 21 In 2003, the Leeds City Council (LCC) established six Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) to manage its stock of 70,000 properties. In April 2007, following a review and customer ballot⁶ which saw these numbers reduced to three, WNWhL was created by the merger of Leeds West Homes (LW) and Leeds North West Homes (LNW).
- 22 WNWhL has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services under a five year management agreement⁷. WNWhL manages 21,501 rented homes, 727 leasehold properties, 2650 garages, and 45 shops. Fifty-two per cent of properties are houses/bungalows, 27 per cent medium storey flats, low rise flats and maisonettes, 13 per cent high rise flats and 8 per cent sheltered. It receives a management fee of £28.5 million, supported by performance incentives and penalties relating to void rent loss and other key indicators which impact on the Council's performance. It also manages £150 million of the capital programme up to 2011 (£54,104 capital budget in 2008/09).

⁶ 36 per cent turnout, with 53 per cent in favour of the option of three ALMOs rather than one ALMO

⁷ Until 2011/12

Report

23 The functions originally delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:

- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
- rent collection, dealing with arrears and debt counselling;
- consulting and informing tenants and leaseholders on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility, and promoting tenant participation;
- enforcement of tenancy conditions;
- repairs functions for leaseholders;
- managing lettings, voids and under-occupation; and
- estate management, caretaking and housing related support services under the Supporting People programme.

In 2006, WNWhL also took over responsibility for managing aids and adaptations and sheltered housing on the Council's behalf.

24 The functions retained by the Council include:

- overall housing strategy and enabling;
- determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour⁸ and rents;
- managing the Supporting People programme;
- some leaseholder services and Right to Buy administration;
- homelessness, general housing advice; and
- administration of the Housing Register.

25 The ALMO is managed by a board of four customers, four council nominees and four independents. The board has two subcommittees⁹. There are also four area panels which have varied membership including local residents and councillors. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to a senior management team, headed by a chief executive. It employs 367 staff and jointly funds a specialist team providing information technology (IT) support to all three ALMOs.

26 Customer facing services delivered are from eight outlets located throughout neighbourhood areas comprising of three Leeds City Council (LCC) One Stop Shops and five housing offices, and through the Contact Leeds (LCC customer telephone service). Central support services such as IT, Internal Audit, Payroll, Pension Administration and Legal bought in from LCC through SLAs. Some elements of contract management purchased through LCC Property Management Services and City Services Department.

27 The Audit Commission inspected Leeds North West Homes in August 2004 and Leeds West Homes in October 2005, judging both to be providing good, two star services with promising prospects for improvement. Those assessments allowed the Council to receive additional supported borrowing to bring its homes up to the decent homes standard in the two areas.

⁸ in consultation with the ALMO

⁹ Organisational Health Committee and Services and Investment Committee, with the ability to call upon a Remuneration Committee as required.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

28 Leeds City Council's mission is:

'to bring the benefits of a prosperous, vibrant and attractive city to all the people of Leeds'¹⁰.

29 The Council has seven strategic objectives. It wants to make sure that:

- all neighbourhoods are safe, clean, green and well maintained;
- all communities are thriving and harmonious places where people are happy to live;
- children and young people are healthy, safe and successful;
- at each stage of life, people are able to live healthy, fulfilling lives;
- Leeds is a highly competitive, international city;
- staff perform well and are constantly learning and there is effective leadership at all levels; and
- customers receive excellent services which are efficient and effective and meet their needs.

30 WNWhL's vision is:

'to excel in delivering homes and services which are relevant to our customers, meet their aspirations and enhance communities.'

31 The mission and key corporate value is:

'Putting the customer first...'

32 The vision and mission is supported by a number of values. Four strategic objectives and themes are in place which are:

- commitment to customers;
- communities and neighbourhoods;
- providing quality homes; and
- being an effective business which inspires its people to achieve.

¹⁰ Corporate Plan 2005-2008

How good is the service?

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

Access and customer care

- 33** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this service area. There is a corporate commitment to an embedded culture of customer focus. Published service standards are in place, although compliance is not systematically monitored or reported. Local offices and one stop centres are accessible, and staff provide strong customer service. Customer information is accessible and of high quality and there is a range of ways for customers to provide feedback on services and this is acted upon. There are however considerable delays in accessing services by telephone through the Contact Centre. Access to services has not been tailored by customer preferences and out of hours services are limited. While there is a robust process for complaints, complaints handling performance is weak.
- 34** There is a clear corporate commitment to, and an embedded culture of customer focus. WNWhL mission is 'putting the customers first...' which is reinforced through use as a strapline on leaflets, documents etc. This is supported by a range of policies, strategies and action plans which include guidance for staff. These are well communicated through staff briefings, team meetings and training. The board receives an appropriate level of reports about customer focus including an overall scorecard with relevant performance measures. An Access to Services Strategic KLOE board is beginning to ensure actions are taken forward. Published service standards are in place for all services. Customers were involved in the development of the service standards through the customer sounding boards and service improvement groups to ensure they met their expectations. They are clearly publicised in the tenants' handbook and individual service leaflets. This ensures services focus on meeting the needs of customers.
- 35** Front line staff are customer focused. Staff are knowledgeable and deal with enquiries in an efficient and helpful manner across a wide range of services. Confidential issues are treated in a sensitive manner and the needs of the diverse community are catered for. There are examples of individual officers tailoring services to meet the needs of individuals, for example, arranging home visits for customers who expressed a preference to be contacted by this method. This ensures customer can access accurate advice locally and in a way which meets their needs.

- 36** The local offices and one stop centres are accessible and welcoming to customers. All offices have clearly displayed opening hours, out of hours and emergency contact numbers. Private rooms are available and well advertised. Offices are DDA compliant, and include induction loop systems and modifications to enable access to wheelchair users and disabled service users. Offices have free phone telephones enabling customers to access the contact centre and other LCC services directly. Changes have been made in response to customer feedback including changes to seating and provision of a PC to access online services. The targets for seeing customers are not challenging at 90 per cent in 15 minutes with performance of 88 per cent for the one stop shops and 90 per cent for the WNWhL offices between April and June 2008. However this does not appear to have impacted on customer satisfaction. Between April and June 2008 98 per cent of customers were satisfied with services overall one stop shops and 89 per cent at WNWhL own offices. Customers are satisfied with the services received at local offices.
- 37** Customer information is accessible, high quality, informative and influenced by customers. Most documents are written in plain English and are easy to read. There is a good balance of information and pictures, and information is well presented and attractive. A customer editorial panel contributes to the production of the tenants' handbook and newsletters, with tenants on individual service improvement groups influencing the material provided in individual service leaflets. Information is well advertised on notice boards in offices, sheltered schemes and multi storey blocks. Smaller offices have a folder displaying all available leaflets which customers can request from the desk. The WNWhL newsletter, 'The Buzz', provides customers with up to date and relevant information with a focus on involvement and local communities. 83.2 per cent of tenants are satisfied that WNWhL keeps them informed about things that might affect them.¹¹ Customers are aware of the services and activities of WNWhL.
- 38** The website is easy to use and provides customers with access to useful and relevant information. Information is accurate and up to date. Key documents are available to download covering all aspects of the business. There are many links to other external service provider websites within individual service areas enabling customers to access further or independent advice and information if needed. On-line services including reporting repairs, paying rent, checking rent balances and complaints, compliment and feedback reporting which includes the collection of customer profile information. The website extends access to services and improves convenience for customers.
- 39** There is a robust complaints system which aims to encourage feedback from customers. This is a three stage process with the third stage to a panel of tenants chosen from the complaints review panel. The opportunity to complain and comment is well advertised and forms are available in offices and online. Customers can complain in writing, in person, by phone or by email. Positively there is no requirement to complete a standard form, which can deter customers from reporting dissatisfaction. The number of complaints is increasing, from an average of 70 per month in 2007/08 to 93 per month for Q1 2008/09. Customer complaints are generally encouraged and used to improve services.

¹¹ WNWhL Status Survey 2008.

How good is the service?

- 40 WNWhL is learning from the complaints received and feeds back to customers. Complaints are analysed by service area and passed to the relevant managers and service improvement groups to consider and take any necessary action. An example is the procedure relating to the closure of communal lounges in sheltered housing schemes. Feedback is provided to tenants on performance and any learning from complaints via the newsletter and in some cases to individuals where it is possible to identify actions that have been taken to prevent similar occurrences, such as the response to issues around decoration vouchers.
- 41 There is a robust reporting mechanism for complaints. The main reporting vehicle is to the complaints review panel, comprising staff, a tenant board member, and 12 tenants who have recently had complaints dealt with. They consider reports on performance, trends in complaints and receive information from service heads as to actions taken to address issues. They will also make recommendations to the relevant service improvement group, who will then monitor actions taken to implement changes. In addition comprehensive bi monthly board reports are presented to the Services and investment sub-committee. It is intended that the number of complaints and those dealt with within target times will be included in the LPI monitoring framework. This helps to ensure the standards for complaints handling are maintained or improved.
- 42 There are a variety of methods in place to obtain customer feedback on services. Tenant inspectors are used to obtain feedback on sheltered schemes, access to services, empty properties and the quality of repairs. There are a range of customer satisfaction surveys across all services including the annual STATUS survey, regular service users surveys for areas such as empty properties and repairs, and one off surveys commissioned by the service improvement groups. Incentives are generally offered for the completion of questionnaires. A detailed and helpful report and interpretation of the results of surveys is provided to managers and SIGs, with suggestions for actions and summaries of comments made by respondents. Surveys are carried out by a variety of means including postal, face to face, web based and telephone surveys. Customer sounding boards enable feedback from customers and these have been used to ascertain customer expectations of services. Resulting action is reported back to customers through the newsletter and the 'You Said, We Did' posters. This leads to improved performance and services for customers which are developed in line with their needs.
- 43 Service standard compliance is not systematically monitored and reported. Monitoring arrangements are in their infancy and the level of monitoring varies across services. There are no arrangements to report compliance back to customers. Customers know the standard of service they can expect, but do not know how well WNWhL is meeting the standards and are not able to challenge service failure.

- 44 Many customers experience delays in accessing services via the Contact Centre. Targets set by WNWhL for the Contact Centre are not met, despite the high level discussions around mechanisms to improve performance. The published target for abandoned calls is less than 6 per cent. In the last year that has only been met in 7 out of 12 months. The target for answering response times is 80 per cent within 20 seconds. While performance has improved from 37 per cent in July 2007 to 47 per cent in July 2008, customers still have to wait too long to have their calls answered. The target for average response times is unchallenging at 60 seconds, and this has not been met for four of the last six month. The average length of time for a customer to wait to have a call answered was 82 seconds in July 2008. Contingency plans are not in place with performance affected by ICT system failure. The level of service customers can expect is not clear with different standards included in the service standard leaflets, internal performance reports and in the SLA with the council. Customer satisfaction overall with the Contact Centre is 87 per cent in June 2008 which has not met the target set of 92 per cent. Customers have difficulty and delays in accessing services via the telephone which is the preferred method of contact for two thirds of customers.
- 45 There is limited access to services outside standard office hours. Some services are available 24 hours, seven days a week through the website. It is positive that the Contact Centre is open more than standard office hours with a full service available between 8am and 6pm. However customers contacting the Contact Centre outside 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday receive a limited service. Out of hours accessible services are emergency repairs and reporting noise nuisance. Customers with other enquiries are asked to call back in working hours or a message can be left asking a member of staff to call the next day. This acts as a barrier to customers accessing services.
- 46 WNWhL has not fully explored office location, preferred method of access, and preferred access times. Some information has been collected on tenant preferences and how they access services, and some action taken in response to this. For example, two thirds of tenants prefer telephone access which has resulted in increased efforts to improve the standard of service delivered by Contact Leeds. Footfall into offices has been explored, but this has not been assessed by time of day and no action has been taken to identify whether customers would prefer alternative opening times. There is no understanding of which customers are not accessing services or the reasons for this. Customers may not be able to access services at a time and manner that suits them.

How good is the service?

- 47 Performance in handling complaints is weak. In 2007/08 only 47 per cent were responded to within the 15 day target time. Between April and June 2008 only 43 per cent of stage one and 13 per cent of stage two complaints were responded to within the 10 day target time, against a target of 95 per cent. Reviews of complaints files highlighted inconsistencies in the quality of complaint responses. Satisfaction monitoring of complaints is in its infancy with low response rates to the survey sent out at case closure. To supplement this, the complaints team carried out a survey of 20 closed cases, of which 80 per cent found it easy to make the complaint, 60 per cent were satisfied with the way the complaint was handled, 60 per cent were satisfied with the timescales, and 66 per cent felt the complaint was handled fairly. Some action has been taken to address poor performance in this area including the proactive chasing of complaints responses by the complaints team, a letter writing skills course and providing weekly updates to managers and heads of service on out of target time cases with plans to improve the quality of responses. Customers experience delays in having their complaints responded to.
- 48 WNWhL does not have a compensation policy. Action has been taken to develop a comprehensive draft policy based on good practice, and this is currently out to consultation to ensure consistency of approach across all service areas. WNWhL provides minimal guidance on compensation in response to complaints. This could result in a lack of consistency in compensation given out.

Diversity

- 49 This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are in balance. There is a strong corporate approach to equalities and diversity, and staff demonstrate an awareness of and consideration for the issues. WNWhL has challenged itself against national standards and actions are taken to help improve access to services for the diverse customer base. Recent arrangements have been developed to support vulnerable customers and actions are in place to monitor and measure contractor compliance in this area. Weaker areas of the service include DDA requirements are not met in sheltered and communal areas. Customer profiling is underdeveloped and services are not strategically developed in line with the customer profile. The approach to domestic violence and hate crime has some weaknesses.
- 50 There is a clear leadership and a strong corporate approach to equalities and diversity. The Chief Executive is the diversity champion for WNWhL and leads the Leeds cross-ALMO equality and diversity group, taking the lead on liaison with the council on diversity issues. Work is guided by the comprehensive Cohesion and Diversity Strategy. WNWhL has surveyed customers regarding their views on diversity, and updated strategies and policies using this information, for example, a specific action regarding disability was added to the strategy. The board has its own diversity champion who takes action as necessary, such as raising the issue of the narrower scope of LCC's approach to domestic violence with the council. A clear statement about equalities and diversity is made in all policies and strategies, and considered in board reports. The organisation has a clear focus on equalities and diversity.

- 51** Appropriate arrangements encourage individual members of staff to consider equalities and diversity within their area. Each service improvement group is required to consider and address diversity issues. Each member of staff has a diversity target in their annual appraisal. A staff champion group for diversity has recently been established. WNWhL has created a 'Grass roots' workbook to act as a test of learning on diversity and to challenge perceptions. Initially there was some reticence by staff to complete the workbook. However 315 staff against an end of year target of 364 have now completed the work book which has led to staff having increased understanding of diversity issues. Staff demonstrate an awareness and consideration of equalities and diversity.
- 52** WNWhL has tested itself against national standards in this area. This includes meeting the requirements of the CRE¹² Code of Practice for Rented Housing. Level three of the National Equality Standard for Local Government has been achieved, and good progress is being made in meeting level four with a formal assessment planned later this year. Arrangements are in place for the completion of equality impact assessments with 20 completed to date. Results are reported to customers and actions fed into the service improvement groups. Working towards these standards helps to improve the services which all customers receive.
- 53** Arrangements are made to improve access to services for service users from diverse backgrounds. Translation and interpretation facilities were available through CITU (Central Interpretation and Translation Unit). Signing is available by appointment but the flexibility of the system means that appointments can be arranged for the next day. Large print and Braille are also available on request. Facilities on the website allow for the font size to be changed and text to be translated. A link is also provided to access the Browsaloud™ feature. Staff tailor the services they provide to individuals to meet their needs by using their preferred contact method where known. Repairs operatives carry language cards to enable access to interpretation facilities. Leaflets and other customer information provide translated and alternative format straplines. However in some cases the translated text is small, and it does not make it clear what the individual leaflet or letter is regarding. Overall this helps to remove potential barriers to accessing services.
- 54** Arrangements are in place to provide support to vulnerable tenants but the service is still in its infancy and outcomes are limited. A vulnerability policy and strategy has been developed. A specialist team is established with a range of mechanisms introduced to improve support. This includes referral arrangements, a protocol with support agencies, and the agreement of monitoring arrangements and outcome/success criteria. WNWhL acts as a referral agency and does not provide long term support itself. At the time of the inspection, the team had received 159 referrals of which 121 support assessments had been completed, with 138 addition referrals pending and 57 with support arrangements agreed and in place. Although due to the infancy of the service there are no agreed and measurable outcomes for those tenants with support arrangements in place. The team is currently providing interim low level support to 64 customers. Tenants have only recently begun to gain access to the tenancy support needed through WNWhL.

¹² Commission for Racial Equality

How good is the service?

- 55** The ALMO is helping contractors improve their approach to diversity. A 'precious metal' award has been set up for contractors. Sixteen out of twenty four contractors have achieved the bronze level. The award is accredited by Liverpool University. The procurement strategy includes consideration of equality and diversity commitments including the use of local labour and a workforce representative of the community and a requirement for all contractors to comply with the relevant equalities legislation. This has improved contractor commitment and performance in this area resulting in diversity training for operatives and the use of the translation cards by operatives.
- 56** Partnership arrangements with the two main responsive repairs contractors are used to benefit the local community. There is a commitment for contractors to support local community events and groups including sponsorship of kit for two junior sports teams, communal planting schemes and funding and facilitating trips for residents such as taking sheltered scheme residents to the Great Yorkshire Show. This helps to support community cohesion and sustainability.
- 57** Access for customers wishing to report hate crime is good. All WNWhL public offices and a range of partner offices, around 70 in total, are hate crime reporting centres. Training has been provided to ensure appropriate responses to domestic violence and hate crime reporting and staff showed an awareness of the sensitivities of these. There has been good partnership working on hate crime with partners of the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). For example the Bramley area was identified as a hotspot for hate crime so the police went out and delivered leaflets, however there has been no systematic monitoring of the impact. This means it is easy to report hate crime and provides flexibility and choice about where to report it.
- 58** Customer profiling is underdeveloped. Arrangements are in place to collect customer profile information covering all six strands of diversity using a range of sources. Front line customer service officers check if information has been provided when tenants call in at a local office. There is a comprehensive leaflet which sets out clearly why the information is collected, how it will be used and data protection considerations. Overall information is only known for 46.1 per cent of tenancies at the end of August, although there are higher levels of information available for some strands depending on the historical information. The quarterly target of 70 per cent collection by the end of September is not likely to be achieved based on current performance (an increase of 4 per cent between July and August 2008). Progress in collection is assessed and monitored by the board. There is a lack of clarity over what level of information relates to the head of household, or where complete household information has been collected. Also customers can only select one disability category making it difficult to identify those with multiple disabilities. WNWhL is not equipped to strategically develop or tailor the services to meet need until a fuller customer profile is known.
- 59** The ALMO does not comply with DDA requirements. All customer access points are DDA complaint with a number fitted with automatic doors, hearing loops etc. However only 30 per cent of sheltered complexes and communal areas are recorded as being DDA compliant. The target is to bring these buildings up to the required standard by the end of 2009, and there is a plan of works in place. This means the ALMO is not complying with the statutory requirements of the DDA and is limited access to some buildings for people with a disability.

60 There are a number of weaknesses in relation to the approach to hate crime, harassment and domestic violence. WNWhL structured its anti-social behaviour (ASB), hate crime and domestic violence approach to suit the arrangements within the council for delivery in these areas rather than in line with their customers' views. Within the ALMO, hate crime and harassment are treated as anti-social behaviour while domestic violence is treated separately. LCCs approach to domestic violence is exclusively focused on man on woman violence. The Council requires the ALMO to support this strategy. However WNWhL recognise the weaknesses of this and have challenged the council approach through development of a broader domestic violence policy that covers gay relationships as well as woman on man violence. While WNWhL is the only Leeds ALMO to do this it does mean that as domestic violence can be reported at a number of access point this means a differential service provision could exist. These act as barriers to WNWhL dealing effectively with reports of hate crime, harassment or domestic violence.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital Improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repairs work

- 61** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The strategic approach to asset management is strong. WNWhL is on target to achieve decent homes by March 2011. Investment plans are influenced at neighbourhood level. There is strong customer focus on delivery of the capital and planned programme. Programmes are in place for cyclical work including painting, electrical testing and servicing, and asbestos management. Weaknesses include a differential service offered to tenants in relation to heating installation.
- 62** The strategic approach to asset management is strong. There is a comprehensive asset management strategy which considers all aspects of the service and is based on housing need and sustainability considerations. This incorporates detail of work in planned for 2008/09, a ten year financial plan, and post 2011 asset management considerations with a focus on maintaining decency at 100 per cent. The strategy was developed with input from the Asset Management Customer Sounding Board and service improvement group. Thirty year projections are used to influence development of the shorter term investment requirements. This will help to ensure homes are maintained in good condition.
- 63** WNWhL has robust stock condition information. A comprehensive asset management system is in place. Detailed stock condition information is known for 52 per cent of properties through a mix of external and internal surveys, with a target to increase this by 10 per cent annually. Surveys from January 2008 incorporate the HHSRS¹³ ratings. In-house resources are available to complete stock condition surveys, health and safety checks and fire risk assessments using PDAs which automatically update the asset management system. Improvement works are used as an opportunity to complete partial surveys to validate existing data. Work has been undertaken in early 2008 to ensure the relevant sample of properties have had accurate information on the system. This provides a sophisticated tool to track programme delivery, and to forecast and develop future investment plans. This allows WNWhL to understand what work is required to its stock and to plan how and when it will be done.

¹³ Housing Health and Safety Rating System

How good is the service?

- 64 WNWhL is on target to deliver decent homes by 31 March 2011. At the end of August 2008, 22.5 per cent of properties were non-decent and is expected to meet the milestone target of 21 per cent by the end of September 2008. Capital receipts and SCA windfall gains are used to deliver enhanced services and improvements beyond decent homes standards with improvements targeted to areas identified by customers. This includes boundary works and improvements to the security and lobby areas of multi storey flats. The standards of properties and estates is improving.
- 65 There is a clear focus on neighbourhood level investment. Positive use is made of the neighbourhood mapping process. Building on data used by LCC to prioritise where investment should be targeted, this has been developed to identify at locality, street and individual property level information about the area. This includes ASB reports, stock profile data, tenancy turnover data, demand information, data from walkabouts and incorporates other multi-agency data. This is being used to map levels of decency and can be used by area panels to allow them to identify issues and target resources. The knowledge of local repairs staff is used to influence the plans. Over the next four years £4 million of additional investment is planned with the majority of resources allocated to area panel budgets to enable local residents to bid for the environmental works in their area. Neighbourhood investments plans are being developed by individual Area Panels and TRAs. Investment at a local level is determined by customer priorities and local area sustainability.
- 66 WNWhL is committed achieving high levels of energy efficiency. At the end of 2007/08 the SAP rating was 67.2¹⁴ placing WNWhL within the best 25 per cent of similar organisations. Work is focusing on those properties with a rating less than 35 (281 properties). Investment plans include the provision of new central heating, renewal of older and inefficient heating, insulation and double glazing to homes. The target for 2008/09 is a SAP rating of 70. Partnerships are in place with British Gas, LCC FuelSavers Team, and West Yorkshire Fire Service to enable access to grants and grant funded heating, insulation and fuel related services. This is supported by an Energy Efficiency, Affordable Warmth and Fuel Poverty strategy. This helps to minimise tenants' fuel costs.
- 67 There is a strong customer focus to delivery of the capital and planned programmes. Detailed programme information is included within the newsletter. Communication with residents occurs throughout the programme including clear information prior to works commencing, monthly site meetings to monitor progress and address any issues arising and the use of customer liaison points and show homes on larger schemes. Provision is made to assist older and vulnerable tenants with provision of additional support such as moving furniture and carpets and access to respite facilities. Diversity issues are addressed, for example showing respect for particular religious festivals and holidays. There is a focus on reducing the time taken to complete capital and planned works. A detailed schedule is developed for each property which is shared with the tenant. Target times to complete properties are 20 to 25 days, however the majority of jobs are completed in 12 to 14 days. This helps to increase customer satisfaction.

¹⁴ Based on the 2005 SAP calculation methodology. This would be 76.3 using the 2001 methodology.

- 68** There is a commitment to increasing customer satisfaction with capital and planned works. A final check is made on the property with the contractor and a representative from Property Management Services to sign off the work as completed prior to it being passed back to the ALMO. For contractors the tenant liaison officer will collect a satisfaction form 28 days after work is completed and follow up any outstanding issues. The delivery of the capital and planned programme by contractors is closely monitored through the West Yorkshire Strategic Alliance. Resident satisfaction remains high for most areas of the service delivered and is above the target set of 90 per cent. For example, overall 95.43 per cent satisfied with prior information, 93.14 per cent with involvement, 97.04 per cent with choice, 92.29 per cent with tidiness, 96.8 per cent with time taken, and 97.14 per cent satisfied overall.
- 69** There is a comprehensive programme of cyclical maintenance activities and annual checks on properties and communal areas. Property Management Services manage this programme on behalf of WNWhL. Different painting programmes operate in the north and north west areas, however plans are in place to move to a standard five year cycle for external and three year cycle for internal and communal areas from 2008/09. Electrical testing is completed on a ten year rolling programme. Appropriate arrangements are in place for electrical and lift servicing which include the need to upgrade facilities. However there are a couple of weaknesses in relation to this. Cyclical works frequency and timings are not communicated to customers. There are no arrangements for the testing of hardwired smoke alarms, or other smoke alarms. Cyclical maintenance helps to reduce the health and safety risk to residents and staff.
- 70** Comprehensive arrangements are in place for the management of asbestos. A robust asbestos policy is in place setting out the responsibilities for the safe management of materials containing asbestos. There is a comprehensive procedure to request and complete asbestos surveys prior to repair work. This is supported by a robust asbestos management system which records details of asbestos on surveyed properties with risk highlighted. This includes detailed information including plans, photographs, reports of action taken and any certificates for the removal or disposal. A flag on the housing management system is automatically generated. Approximately 3,000 asbestos surveys were completed in 2007/08, with a further 1,500 completed between April and August 2008. Clear information is sent to tenants affected by asbestos surveys or removal to explain the process and information about the material is accessible on the website. Asbestos training is provided to surveyors, with awareness training for other housing staff, and a requirement for contractors to deliver training to an agreed standard. This helps to reduce the risk to staff and customers.

How good is the service?

- 71** Differential services are being delivered in installing new central heating. WNWhL and its two predecessor ALMOs have had a policy of not installing free central heating since they were set up. This is because historical under investment in the stock meant LCC could not achieve the decent homes standard within the funding limits set by the government¹⁵ without continuing its 'Heatlease'¹⁶ scheme. This has been in place since 2002. WNWhL's customers who have had central heating installed during that time pay a service charge for ten years from the date of installation. This charge is eligible for benefit so while the scheme may allow some to heat their homes more cheaply than before, this is not necessarily the case for all. Some customers have chosen not to sign up. This means that some customers receive a significantly different level of service than those who had free central heating installed prior to 2002 and whose systems have been upgraded, as necessary, in the intervening period. It also means these properties are in potentially poorer condition.
- 72** There have been inconsistencies in the specifications to which different contractors were working, and the lead in time for resolving this has resulted in delays in a standard improved specification. A standard specification was developed with customer feedback and introduced for schemes commencing from July 2008. Due to the lead in and ordering time schemes commencing prior to that date will still be using different specifications. This results in a differential service to customer depending on the contractor and the type of work being completed.
- 73** There are some weaknesses in relation to asbestos management. A web based system allows access to the asset management system online for contractors and other members of staff. However this system is still in the process of being rolled out which means some internal staff including surveyors and one of the main contractors for planned and responsive works do not have direct access to the information. Information on the housing management system is not automatically transferred to repairs orders. Instead, it relies on the officer recording the repair job to manually copy this information onto the repair order. Only 23.5 per cent of communal surveys are completed covering the majority of multi storey blocks and sheltered schemes. Plans are in place to complete the programme within the next 12 to 18 months. The risk to tenants, residents and staff is not known.

Responsive repairs

- 74** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Tenants find it easy to report a repair and action is taken to reduce no access appointments. There is generally positive performance for the timeliness of repair completion. Tenants are satisfied with the service and there is a range of ways for customers to monitor and assess service quality. Strong partnership arrangements are in place between WNWhL and its contractors. However, there is a high proportion of emergency repairs and a basic appointments system in operation. An accurate assessment of performance cannot be made for some key performance indicators. The optimum balance between planned and responsive repairs has not been achieved and there are no clear plans to address this.

¹⁵ £5,000 per property, plus a subsequent 20 per cent

¹⁶ Now 'Total Heat'

- 75** Tenants find it easy to report a repair. There is range of ways for tenants to access the repairs service. This includes the repairs free phone number including out of hours access for emergencies, local offices, email and the easy to use online repair diagnosis tool. This is supported by a comprehensive repairs handbook. Recent quality checks completed by WNWhL show that between 98 and 100 per cent of tenants felt it was easy to report and 100 per cent felt the staff taking the repair request were polite and courteous.
- 76** Action is taken to reduce the level of no access appointments. The repairs operative will telephone the tenant on the appointed day to inform them of the time they expect to arrive and to check the tenant will be available. However quality checks and ring after surveys indicate this is not happening in all cases and is therefore not embedded. Text reminders are sent the day before where numbers are available. However there is no comprehensive information on no access rates. The impact this has had on access rates cannot be demonstrated.
- 77** There is generally positive performance in the timeliness of repair completion. The average time to complete a non urgent repair was 8.77 days in July 2008 exceeding the quarter two milestone target of 9.5 days and the 2008/09 target of 10.5 days. The percentage of urgent repairs completed within 28 days of 99.36 per cent in July 08 has exceeded the target set of 98 per cent. This places WNWhL within the best 25 per cent of organisations using the latest comparative information available for both indicators. There are some weaker areas of performance. There is a high level of orders outstanding over 12 weeks. At the end of August 2008 there were 1,173 such jobs, although this had declined from 1,542 jobs at the end of quarter one 2008/09. However there are delays in the completion of batched repairs with only 42 per cent of batched repairs passed to the contractor within 30 days of receipt at the end of August 2008 compared to a target of 95 per cent. This means some tenants are experiencing a delay in their repair being completed.
- 78** Tenants are satisfied with the responsive repairs service they receive. Recent surveys demonstrate 97 to 98 per cent satisfaction with the work completed, 98 per cent rating the overall service as good or excellent, with the operative cleaning up between 98 to 100 per cent of cases. The returned repairs order satisfaction slips for April to July 2008 demonstrate satisfaction levels of 96.73 per cent with one contractor (based on 12 per cent response rate) and 94.54 per cent for the other (based on a 14 per cent response rate). The ring after survey results for July 2008 demonstrate satisfaction levels of 94 per cent for one contractor and 99 per cent for the other in relation to workmanship. The repairs service is meeting customer expectations.

How good is the service?

- 79** There is a clear commitment and focus to resolve any service quality or failure issues. Calling cards are left by the operative to enable the contractor to deal directly with any quality issues arising. The repair confirmation letter contains a short satisfaction survey and some tenants receive a telephone call to check their satisfaction with the service. There is a range of ways for customers to be involved in the development and monitoring of the repairs service. This includes tenant inspectors on reality checks of repairs, the monthly customer satisfaction meeting (attended by the ALMO, contractor and tenants) and tenant representation on the service improvement group. Customer satisfaction results, reality checks and repairs order surveys are analysed and discussed. Monthly tool box talks are held by the contractor, and attended by WNWhL to ensure key messages are communicated to operatives. This provides the opportunity for operatives to receive feedback on their performance and ensures action is taken address performance issues.
- 80** Strong partnership working arrangements in place between WNWhL and the two main responsive repairs contractors. This includes co-location of the team with one which has led to improved communication and focus on improving the service. This is supported by operational monthly meetings looking at individual contractor performance and finance, and core group meetings with the two contractors and WNWhL as an opportunity to share common issues and learning. This leads to a more consistent approach and improved performance.
- 81** A basic appointment system is in operation. Only weekday morning or afternoon appointment slots are offered as standard. Evening appointments are available but their availability is not advertised and they are only offered when requested by the tenant for a minor repair. A recent survey of tenants highlighted 74 per cent were not aware of evening appointments. Saturday appointments are not being used. Individual appointment requirements will be noted for operatives to consider, such as avoiding the school run time. This is not in line with the repairs policy which states some evening or Saturday morning appointments are available. The percentage of repairs appointments made and kept at 96.24 per cent in July 2008 does not meet the milestone target set of 96.5 per cent or the 2008/09 target of 98 per cent. Operatives pay tenants £10 compensation for failed appointments. Generally repairs are not carried out at the convenience of the customer.
- 82** The new repairs policy is not comprehensive. The new policy and associated service standards were developed following customer consultation and focus on providing a repair service which is sensitive to individual needs, efficient, responsive, flexible and accountable and fair. The policy is concerned with the completion of jobs right first time. However, this does not incorporate key elements of the service including the level of pre and post-inspections, other quality assurance arrangements for contractors, or targets for the proportion of emergency, urgent and routine jobs. This does not make it clear what can be expected of the service in some key areas.

- 83** The proportion of emergency, urgent and non urgent repairs does not meet recommended guidelines. At the end of 2007/08 the ratio was 19.26 per cent emergency, 29.28 per cent urgent and 51.46 per cent non urgent (excluding batched repairs). A group has been established to monitor the level in more detail and a £25 penalty for tenants reporting non emergencies as emergencies, but this has yet to have a significant impact on performance. Between April 2008 and July 2008 while 29.08 per cent of jobs were emergency and urgent, the proportion of emergencies remains high at 19.41 per cent. This is not an efficient way to deliver the service.
- 84** The targeted level of post-inspections is not being met. Contractors have targets to complete 10 per cent post-inspections. For 2008/09 only 5.68 per cent of jobs have been post-inspected by one contractor and 2.36 per cent by the other. The target of 10 per cent post-inspections by WNWhL is not monitored. This represents a missed opportunity to gather intelligence on the quality of repair completed.
- 85** There is a considerable potential overspend on the responsive repairs service at the time of the inspection. At week 17 of 2008/09 a projected overspend of £1.687 million has been identified on responsive repairs (including voids) relating to a high number of day to day jobs with one contractor, and a high average cost per order for the other contractor. This will have an impact on resources available later in the financial year.
- 86** The optimum balance between planned and responsive repairs is not achieved, and there is a lack of longer term targets to improve this. In 2007/08 the planned:responsive split was 44:56. The asset management strategy includes the target of 55:45 for 2008/09 with an indication of what areas they will focus on for the drive towards increasing planned spend. However, no longer term targets or actions are included. This impacts on value for money of service delivery.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 87** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths than weaknesses. A suitable lettable standard is in place and the budget has been increased to reflect the improvement in standard. There are robust arrangements for the repair of empty properties including consideration of health and safety arrangements. There are comprehensive performance monitoring arrangements with arrangements to test the standard of properties at the time of letting. Empty properties are generally repaired to the satisfaction of new tenants. However the number of empty properties and the length of time to re-let a property are above the targets set. There is a lack of clear guidance on the security or decoration of void properties.
- 88** A suitable quality lettable standard is in place. The standard is produced as a visually attractive, easy to read document which sets out clearly what prospective tenants can expect in relation to the standard and cleanliness of the property, and what health and safety checks will be completed. This includes the telephone numbers for the contractor to enable the tenant to report any defects directly to them for the first four weeks of the tenancy. The tenant is required to sign a declaration confirming receipt of the standard and that their new homes meets the standard. This ensures that tenants and staff understand the standard they can expect from a new property.

How good is the service?

- 89** There are robust arrangements for the repair of empty properties including consideration of health and safety arrangements. This is reflected in the new Empty Homes policy which sets out clear roles and responsibilities, including target timescales for completion of each element of work. However WWhL cannot demonstrate how well these target times are being met. Within two days of termination the contractor is expected to have carried out a health and safety check, a full voids survey and raised the work schedule. Clear procedures are in place for gas and electric checks, and for asbestos surveys. The contractor then has a target time of 20 days to complete work within the property. This helps to ensure consistency of approach across the area.
- 90** There are comprehensive void performance monitoring arrangements. Each week monitoring information is collected from each contractor highlighting the number of voids at each stage. This is supported by weekly supervisory meetings between the contractor and WWhL to look at those in repair and to discuss those properties running late. Empty property review meetings are used to look at long term voids and option appraisal with representatives from the housing office, investment team and lettings officers. Regular reports on performance are presented to the senior management team as this has been identified as a priority area within the organisation. This helps to ensure repairs on empty properties are being completed within the timescales set and highlight areas where action needs to be taken.
- 91** There are a number of arrangements to monitor the standard of ready to let properties. Monthly void reality checks are carried out by tenant inspectors to assess the quality of ready to lets. This includes use of a standard assessment form recording scores for each element, and identified action to address any issues. Supporting guidance is produced with photographs to ensure tenant inspectors understand the standard expected. For one contractor a new tenant satisfaction form is left to be completed at the final check, and a follow up telephone survey four weeks after moving in has recently been introduced to check satisfaction and identify any minor repair requirements. Results are fed back to the monthly performance meetings and action taken to address issues arising. This ensures there is challenge where the empty property standards are not being met.
- 92** Void repairs are generally carried out to the satisfaction of new tenants. The final fix questionnaires available for one contractor show that 94 per cent of new tenants in 2007/08, 98 per cent in July and 90 per cent in August 2008 were satisfied with the overall property. However, the void courtesy calls show that between May and July 2008, 82.7 per cent were completely satisfied with repairs carried out. Void repairs are flagged on the housing management system so any issues with work completed on a void are referred back to the contractor to resolve, and not dealt with as a new repair. This is supported by providing the tenant with direct contacts for the contractor and a four week recall period to resolve any issues arising. This helps to improve the standard of repair for new tenants.

- 93** The level of voids is above the targets set. The level of void lettable properties at May 2008 was 326, with 175 of these empty for over 50 days. The percentage of properties untenanted at August 2008 was 1.67 per cent exceeding the quarter two milestone target of 1.6 per cent and 2008/09 target of 1.25 per cent. Void rent loss at August 2008 is 1.61 per cent which exceeds the quarter two milestone target of 1.5 per cent and 2008/09 target of 1.2 per cent, placing WNWhL as the worst performer when compared to the other Leeds ALMOs. The average re-let time is not meeting the targets set at 34.27 days in August 2008 compared to a quarter two milestone target of 30 days and a 2008/09 year end target of 26.7 days. However it is recognised that this places within the top 25 per cent of performers. There is no incentive for contractors to complete voids quicker than the 20 day target time. This represents a loss of income to the organisation.
- 94** The cleanliness of properties re-let does not meet customer expectations. The new tenant courtesy calls highlight that only 85.56 per cent of tenants surveyed between May and July 2008 felt the property was clean and tidy when moving in, with a figure of 69.4 per cent for July 2008. Reality checks from July 2008 record 33 per cent of properties as being poor in relation to the standard of cleanliness. A number of issues were raised in relation to garden condition from the reality checks. The customer satisfaction forms from the final fix appointment in August 2008 highlighted only 69 per cent of those responding considered the property clean and tidy when they moved in.¹⁷
- 95** There is a lack of clear guidance in place for some aspects of void property management. There is no guidance or policy for staff on securing voids, including the use of shuttering and steel. There is also a lack of guidance on decoration allowances for empty properties. There is no guidance on the ability of the customer to order up to £250 additional works on a void property when viewing at repair stage. This can result in inconsistencies.

Gas servicing

- 96** This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. WNWhL is not fully aware of its current gas servicing performance, and information on the gas servicing status of individual properties is difficult to access. Performance reporting on gas servicing is weak. A proactive approach to tackle no access does not start until a couple of weeks after the CP12 (gas safety certificate) expires. The service is not delivered in an effective way, and does not take account of the needs of vulnerable tenants. Some recent improvements have been made to the service but they have limited impact in the majority of cases.
- 97** WNWhL is not fully aware of its gas servicing performance. WNWhL systems do not record which properties have gas and when gas services are due. WNWhL does not have direct up to date access to the current status of gas servicing as this is held by contractors, which means WNWhL is not always aware of the number of cases with expired CP12s. Performance information from contractors focuses on the percentage of properties serviced. On request WNWhL calculated the percentage of properties with a valid CP12 certificate as 99.75 per cent for one contractor and 98.71 per cent for the other. WNWhL does not have sufficient control over gas servicing arrangements.

¹⁷ These figures relate to one contractor only.

How good is the service?

- 98** Some gas servicing is not carried out on a timely basis. A recent audit highlighted considerable delays in gaining access to an unacceptably large number of properties. For example, 14 properties had their gas servicing carried out over 12 months late, with 97 completed up to six months after expiry of the 2007/08 gas servicing date. At the time of inspection thirty three properties which did not have a valid certificate were being dealt with by WNWhL. Of these, 20 are historical cases from before April 2008. The current arrangements mean there are delays in WNWhL tackling no access cases and delays in servicing appliances which places tenants at risk.
- 99** Performance reporting on gas servicing is weak. The corporate scorecard does not contain a meaningful measure for gas servicing. The Board had not been made aware of the issues surrounding gas performance until May 2008, however the information presented to them makes it difficult for them to draw meaningful conclusions. There is no analysis of the time overdue for those without a valid CP12, or action taken. Other gaps include customer satisfaction information and appointments made and kept. The board is not able to effectively challenge gas servicing performance.
- 100** WHWhL is slow to deal with situations where it cannot gain access to tenant's homes. There are delays in cases being notified to the tenancy enforcement team to enable alternative arrangements for action. Under the new process cases will not be passed back to WNWhL to pursue until after the Section 54 notice, and a third attempt at access has been completed which is normally two to three weeks after the expiry date. There is a lack of procedures for dealing with persistent no-access cases and a lack of information available to WNWhL on persistent no-access offenders. This results in delays gaining access to properties.
- 101** Servicing is not delivered in an effective way. Contractors complete cases some time prior to the CP12 expiry date. On a sample of 2,531 cases 109 were re-serviced within 200 days of the last service and 296 within 200-300 days. Arrangements have now been made for the contractor to reimburse the ALMO. This will put additional pressure on the organisation to maintain performance in future years with an increased proportion of properties requiring servicing at the same time.
- 102** The current approach to gas servicing does not take account of the needs of vulnerable tenants or those with special access requirements. Contractors are not provided with information on individual tenant requirements or information on vulnerabilities. A recent referral to tenancy support has been introduced for no access cases which have been passed to the tenancy enforcement team. However this is not embedded and means that any additional support for tenants is not available until after the gas safety certificate has expired.
- 103** There is a lack of robust customer satisfaction and feedback information. The two contractors use different methods of feedback collection which means comparisons cannot be made. The results from one contractor are not available since May and only reflect a very small proportion of work completed (1.7 per cent to 4.3 per cent of jobs completed). Customer feedback information is not used to challenge contractor performance or develop the service.

- 104** Once expired cases have been passed to the Tenancy Enforcement Team, prompt action is taken. Officers try to gain access by a variety of contact methods including telephone, visit and the use of text messages over a two week period before handing to legal to take action. This has helped to reduce the level of cases passed to legal for an injunction. Recent action was taken to tackle longer term outstanding cases. One hundred and twenty three cases were passed to the Enforcement Team from Legal services. Five action days have been held where there are clusters of outstanding properties. This has been reduced to 20 outstanding, although some of these cases removed as access had been gained but legal services were unaware. Current cases with the team are clearly monitored with action taken, and use made of links to other teams to attempt to gain access. Access is gained quickly when the enforcement team are dealing with cases reducing the need for legal action.
- 105** There is some evidence of customer involvement in the development of the service. Some changes were made to the service including the introduction of appointments following a focus group held with customers in November 2007 on cyclical and planned maintenance. The Tenancy Management Customer Sounding Board has been used to consult customers on the changes to no access pursuant by the tenancy enforcement team with a number of changes taking place, mainly in how gas servicing requirements are communicated to customers. However there is no customer representation on the Service Improvement Group which looks at this service area in more detail. The service has been developed to reflect customer priorities.

Aids and adaptations

- 106** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The service is well publicised, and the procedures for the completion of major and minor adaptations are robust. An appropriate level of resources is available and current performance meets target times. Partnership working with LCC is effective, and customers are involved in the development of the service. However, there are inconsistencies in target times published and a lack of monitoring of the end to end process. Customer satisfaction levels are not currently understood.
- 107** The adaptations service is publicised in a variety of ways. Information on the service is available in the tenants' handbook, in leaflets and on the website. Adaptations team staff brief other teams within WNWhL, and attend meetings with tenant representatives and other interested groups. This helps to increase awareness of the service among tenants and relevant stakeholders.
- 108** Adaptation procedures focus on benefiting the tenant. Appropriate and detailed policies and procedures are in place. Minor adaptations costing under £1,000 do not require an OT assessment and are completed as non urgent responsive repairs. Major adaptations are subject to an OT assessment and appropriately prioritised. Work is carried out by a number of specialist contractors who have received additional customer service training to ensure the needs of this customer group are met. Customers are encouraged to consider re-housing as an alternative to adaptations, and a package of financial and practical assistance provided to facilitate this. Throughout the process applicants receive detailed information about their specific application, and are kept informed of progress with the works. This helps to ensure a speedier service is provided to those tenants identified as being most in need.

How good is the service?

- 109** WNWhL is meeting the targets set for the completion of adaptations. Minor jobs completed within five days on average by July 2008 against a target time of 20 days. High priority major adaptations have a target time of 52 days, with actual performance of 50 days at July 2008. Medium priority major adaptations have a target time of 91 days with actual performance of 84 days at July 2008. Low priority major adaptations have a target time of 47 days with actual performance of 45 days at July 2008. However some tenants are still waiting outside the target times for adaptations, with the current longest wait for a high priority case being 75 days. There is no routine monitoring of these cases to establish the reasons for delays and to deal with barriers promptly. Customers generally receive an effective service.
- 110** There is evidence of a proactive approach to the completion of adaptations. For example, in one sheltered scheme the large number of requests for showers was identified. This resulted in an assessment being completed on all residents to identify the overall level of need within the scheme of approximately 100 units. This resulted in 41 properties having showers installed in a programme of work. This is repeated in the improvement programme. The initial investment programme home visit is used to identify any potential need for an adaptation, and this is followed up by an OT assessment. Any identified adaptations are incorporated into the improvement programme, funded by decent homes funding, with 130 adaptations provided within the programme since April 2007. This represents a more efficient way of approach.
- 111** Partnership working within Leeds is positive. Liaison meetings are held with the LCC OT service, where performance information is shared and workload issues resolved. Backlog information is shared to identify those cases which the WNWhL OT can assist with. Opportunities are taken to network among other providers of adaptations services and the team are able to input into city wide forums, such as the Adaptations Operation Group. This helps to ensure a joined up approach, and quicker turnaround in processing individual cases.
- 112** Customers have influenced service delivery. The standards of service in relation to components and processing of applications were influenced by the customer sounding board, and the service improvement group which includes tenant representation. As a result the specification has improved, such as using larger tiles consistent with the wider planned programme, and using a different type of bath seat. This ensures customer needs are met while generating cost savings.
- 113** There is a suitable budget for the completion of major and minor adaptations. This totals £3 million for major adaptations, and £87,000 for minor works, based on demand and spend last year. As there is no backlog with only 115 adaptations in progress and a further 84 pending at July 2008 this is proving adequate. The employment of an in-house OT provides a positive resource to the small dedicated team. This enables WNWhL to identify work within the improvement programme, carry out speedy assessments for people being discharged from hospital, promote the service, carry out joint visits with surveyors to assess the suitability of properties for the required works, and assess the suitability of adapted properties that are offered to applicants requiring such accommodation. This has helped to reduce waiting times for applications and ensure tenants' needs are met more appropriately.

- 114** Adapted properties are allocated appropriately. WNWhL has information regarding adaptations on its property management system, and any further adaptations will be recorded at the pre-termination visit. Details of any adaptations are included on the online allocations system, which includes the ability to search for adapted properties only. In the lettings process an OT assessment is carried out to ensure the adaptation meets the need of the applicant. Adapted homes are advertised twice through Leeds Home, and then through the medical re-housing team. Adaptations are removed from empty properties as a last resort which represents a more efficient service.
- 115** The length of time taken to complete adaptations is not fully understood by the ALMO. There is a reliance on provision of information from the LCC OT service. WNWhL does not use this information to monitor the end to end process. Information received from LCC was found to be inaccurate during the inspection, but this had not been identified prior to this time. No use is made of the benchmarking information available with the other two Leeds ALMOs. As a result misleading information about customer experience is produced. Lengthy waiting times can go unnoticed and performance can go unchallenged.
- 116** Information about the length of time taken to complete adaptations from request to completion is not used to drive improvement. Different target times are published in different places. The adaptations leaflet has out of date target information as these have been revised since printing, and the service standard leaflet specifies they will be completed in set timescales, but does not specify what these are. Only the website contains up to date target time information. This means the majority of customers will now know the level of service they can expect.
- 117** There are some inconsistencies in the reporting of customer satisfaction information. Satisfaction with minor adaptations is part of the overall responsive repairs survey and therefore cannot be identified. The two main contractors for major adaptations carry out their own surveys. This shows satisfaction levels of 90 per cent for 2007/08. However there is no current consistent measurement of satisfaction carried out by WNWhL. There is a lack of comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction and whether the needs of tenants are being met.

Housing Income Management

- 118** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a wide range of flexible payment options, and accurate and timely information sent to customers about rent accounts. Quality control measures for arrears cases are robust. There is a good range of debt advice available resulting in additional income for tenants. However, rent collection performance does not meet the targets set. Service charges do not reflect the level of services received. There is limited customer involvement in rent setting and no incentives for tenants to maintain a clear rent account.
- 119** There is a wide range of flexible payment options. This includes direct debit, Girocard, standing order, salary deduction for council employees, 24 hour telephone debit and credit card payments, internet and direct payments through the credit union. Payment options are clearly communicated in the tenants' handbook, rent service standard leaflet and on the website. This helps to make it easier for tenants to pay rent and other debts, increasing income collection.

How good is the service?

- 120** Accurate and timely information is available to tenants about their rent accounts. Quarterly rent statements are sent to tenants. Additional rent statements are available on request. Rent account balance and recent payments can be viewed online. This helps to provide tenants with greater control on their accounts.
- 121** Action has been taken to increase access to the service. There is currently a pilot in the Kirkstall and Little London areas to work later on Tuesday evenings. This involves phoning people in arrears to increase the level of contact with tenants who may not be available during the day. This has only recently been introduced so there is limited impact to date on rent collection levels. However the pilot is being closely monitored to assess its effectiveness. This will help to increase the contact with those customers who are hard to reach.
- 122** Quality control measures for arrears cases are robust. A random 10 per cent sample check of arrears cases under £1,000 is carried out by team leaders with an additional 10 per cent of cases over £1,000 carried out by the section head. This is done monthly with positive and negative comments fed back to staff on their performance.
- 123** There is a good range of debt advice available to tenants. WNWhL funds the CAB to provide an advice service for tenants with multiple debts who have received a Notice of Seeking Possession (NOSP) for rent arrears. Recently staff have targeted tenants who may be eligible for discretionary benefit payments. Staff monitor and record benefit take up on a monthly basis which averages around £30,000 per month. WNWhL is committed to financial inclusion and has supported this through the provision of 'Now Let's Talk Money'¹⁸ training for staff. Successful links are in place with a credit union and tenants have access to a low cost home insurance policy. This helps tenants to manage their finances, and ensures receipt of relevant benefits.
- 124** There is a range of initiatives to improve benefits advice. A team of benefit advisers work with residents to try and increase the take-up of benefits. Benefit advisers arrange surgeries, book appointments and carry out visits. Local performance information show that the benefit advisers average over £30,000 of new benefits each month from with each claim averaging around the £150 per month level. The ALMO is also funding a multiple debt adviser with the CAB for a one year period under a SLA to target NOSP cases. This assists in helping people reduce their overall debt and could increase the level of rent collection.
- 125** Rent statements are not automatically sent in the preferred format or language of the tenant. WNWhL has access to diversity data for 46 per cent of its customers, however this is not provided to the LCC who send out the rent increase letters and statements for WNWhL. The letters do contain a strapline to enable the tenant to request an alternative format. WNWhL with its partners is not maximising the opportunities to deliver a customer focused service.

¹⁸ A government-funded awareness campaign, run by the Financial Inclusion Taskforce, which aims to reassure financially excluded people in the UK that there is a way out of the spiral of debt and deprivation.

- 126** Rent collection performance is not meeting the targets set. Performance for rent collection at July 2008 was 96.24 per cent which has not met the milestone quarter two target of 96.91 per cent or the year end target of 97 per cent. Current and former tenant collection rates did not meet the target set for 2007/08 which resulted in a financial penalty applied by LCC. This reduces income to the organisation and money available for service improvement.
- 127** There is no resident involvement in the rent setting process. The Council leads on the rent setting process and the two factors affecting this are the government's rent restructuring and the Council policy for rent setting. The ALMO is made aware of the rent to be set for the following financial year around April. This means the ALMO and its residents are not involved in the rent setting process. This impacts on tenant ability to assess value for money of the services they receive.
- 128** Service charges do not reflect the level of services received. Service charges are not yet de-pooled and the level of service charges raised does not reflect the cost of providing those services. Customers are not clear if they have a service charge element to their rent, and if so what this covers. This means the ALMO cannot demonstrate that it is delivering value for money to its tenants and leaseholders, and makes it hard for residents to take a view on value for money.
- 129** WNWhL do not fully know what customers think of the rent collection service. Satisfaction monitoring of the rent collection service is under-developed. In July 2008 WNWhL completed a rent collection improvement survey which obtained a response rate of 21.24 per cent (5 per cent of all tenants). This highlighted high tenant satisfaction with the rent collection service with 92.51 per cent stating they were satisfied or very satisfied. There are plans to use the survey results to develop the service with the Income Management Customer Sounding Board but this had not resulted in changes at the time of inspection due to the timing of the survey. An ongoing method of obtaining customer satisfaction and feedback would aid the ongoing development of the service.
- 130** There are no incentives to encourage clear rent accounts, or to encourage tenants to use more cost effective methods of payment. The take-up of direct debit has been slow, with the proportion of tenants paying by direct debit only increasing by 0.5 per cent over the last nine months, with take up at 16.5 per cent in January 2008 rising to 17 per cent by September 2008. By not introducing incentives earlier, WNWhL have not maximised the value for money of their rent collection.

How good is the service?

Resident Involvement

- 131** This is an area with positive outcomes and where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Action has been taken to embed resident involvement within the organisation. There is a wide range of opportunities for involvement, including opportunities to influence at a local area level. These are widely publicised, resulting in service changes and improvements. Appropriate resources are available including financial, practical and training support. Value for money assessments of resident involvement activities have been carried out. There is evidence of resident involvement having a real impact on changing services. However, there are low levels of tenants actively involved, and those involved are not fully representative of the local community. The training needs of residents have not been identified, and training provided has not been assessed to ensure it is delivering the desired outcomes.
- 132** There is an effective framework for resident involvement. A comprehensive Customer Involvement Policy and Strategy sets out the key aims and actions, and includes the structure of involvement opportunities based on four levels of influence. Although the formal policy is recent, many elements are already delivering results, with a SMART action plan to take the service forward. WNWhL has been awarded the TPAS¹⁹ Quality Mark which identifies a number of areas of good practice and contributes to the action plan. This ensures a joined-up approach to resident involvement. While tenant compacts relating to sheltered housing and tenants with disabilities are in place a general tenant compact is currently under development.
- 133** Resident involvement is increasingly embedded within the organisation. The central resident involvement team provides training, awareness raising and an advice service. The standard one-to-one work review form has a prompt for resident involvement. A resident involvement team member attends all service improvement group meetings to ensure resident involvement is considered, and all service plans have a resident involvement section. The board has a customer involvement champion, and every board report contains a section on resident consultation. One of the board subcommittees is given an update on the area panels. Staff in a range of service areas are able to give examples of how their work contains elements of resident involvement and staff understand the importance of resident involvement. This ensures that residents' views are heard and listened to across most service areas.
- 134** The opportunities for involvement and participation are well publicised. These are included in leaflets, the tenants' handbook and on the website. The information provided gives an indication of the time commitment that will be involved and whether there is a requirement to attend meetings. This enables tenants to express an interest in the areas they are interested in. Expressions of interest can also be made via the website. The 'Buzz', the WNWhL newsletter, highlights the opportunities which exist, and provides an update on resident involvement meetings and events. The website includes links to individual TARA websites. This helps to ensure residents are aware of the opportunities available and the impact they are having, with some increased levels in take-up.

¹⁹ Tenant Participation Advisory Service

- 135** There is a wide range of options for customer participation. These vary from involvement in the formal governance arrangements as board members or involvement in one of the 44 tenants' and residents' associations, to less intensive, informal involvement in occasional focus groups or annual conferences which seek one-off feedback on service. Other involvement opportunities include tenant representatives on area panels to discuss environmental improvements and other local issues and involvement in service themed service improvement groups and customer sounding boards. An editorial panel is established to influence the content of leaflets and the WNWhL newsletter. This provides customers with reasonable opportunity to be involved in a way and level that suits them in the design and management of services.
- 136** Residents have the opportunity to influence service delivery at a local level. Four area panels comprising a tenant board director, tenant representatives and a ward councillor provide a focus for activities in the area. A budget of £100,000 is controlled by the panels for the promotion of resident involvement activities, and a further £650,000 available to be allocated for bids for customer led initiatives within the area. Tenants have been involved in developing the criteria and bidding process. WNWhL has promoted awareness of the process to ensure that all tenants and groups are aware of their ability to access the funds, and staff provide support to groups to identify costs and submit a bid. Where it has not been possible to establish formal tenants' structures, WNWhL has instigated a scheme of area representatives (nine to date) so individuals who are interested can represent a street or small area without the need for the setting up of a formal group. This helps to ensure local services are being monitored and developed to meet the local community's specific needs.
- 137** The overall satisfaction with the approach to resident involvement is positive. Satisfaction with opportunities to participate is 73.6 per cent overall²⁰. For non BME tenants this is 74.1 per cent which is within the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations and 66.8 per cent for BME residents which is above average for comparable organisations.
- 138** Financial resources available to support resident involvement are appropriate. These consist of staff resources totalling £188,500, a budget of £75,000 and an Area Panel tenant initiative budget of £100,000. This provides sufficient resources to provide a range of opportunities to become engaged in the management of their homes.
- 139** Support and training is offered to active tenants and TARAs. There are a number of documents which set out the expectations for different roles available, for example, for the chair and the treasurer. Training is provided by WNWhL or through signposting to the Leeds Tenant Federation or other local providers such as local libraries. Involved tenants are positive about the support they receive. Recent health checks have been carried out on TRAs which included consideration of diversity issues, and practical support is provided, for example the provision of IT support, and distribution of mailshots. Starter and annual grants are available to support groups. This means tenants and associations have access to support and funds to develop and maintain their level of activity.

²⁰ STATUS survey January 2008

How good is the service?

- 140** WNWhL has begun to analyse and understand the most cost effective mechanisms for involvement. An initial survey indicated that 87 per cent of involved tenants felt their involvement in activities made a difference to the services provided, or led to other benefits for the community, and 82 per cent were also happy with the levels of support offered to enable them to take part. Involved residents could identify specific improvements that have taken place as a result of their involvement. WNWhL is now correlating these results to the involvement mechanisms used. Value for money assessments are carried out for every involvement activity with scores given to evaluate the impact. This will be a useful mechanism to direct future resources to those areas with greatest impact.
- 141** WNWhL can demonstrate positive outcomes resulting directly from effective resident involvement in most service areas. These include intensive resident involvement in the individual service improvement groups. For example the complaints service improvement groups includes customers recruited on the basis that they recently have been through the complaints process and this has resulted in recommendations for further analysis. Other examples include responding to customer feedback to introduce appointments for gas servicing. Customer sounding board members supported the development of the new service standards. This ensures customers are able to influence changes to the way services are delivered.
- 142** The outcomes of resident involvement are communicated to customers. Customers are kept informed about how their suggestions have improved services. A variety of mechanisms are used to do this including short 'You said, we did' articles in newsletters. Posters are placed in sheltered schemes about issues specific to them. Publicity is given to successful outcomes and achievements for resident involvement in newsletters and other local media. Notes are taken at meetings and sent those who attend and those who give apologies. This helps to ensure that customers are aware of the impact their input is having on services.
- 143** There is a low level of participation in involvement opportunities despite the range of options available, and those involved are not fully representative of the local community. Only 351 customers (1.67 per cent of tenancies) are regularly involved in formal consultation and involvement opportunities. Uninvolved tenants did not have an awareness of the opportunities for involvement. Younger people are under-represented although gender and disability are broadly representative. No overall targets have been set for TARAs to ensure membership reflects the local community they represent. Active tenant members and staff are involved in fun days to engage with non active tenants with a view to enlisting them into future opportunities. Initial efforts have been made to understand the lower levels of involvement among BME communities. An exercise has been held where staff with language skills contacted tenants from the BME community. This resulted in 20 BME tenants signing up for the home consultation scheme and two joining sounding boards. Visits to mosques have generated interest to form focus groups. WNWhL cannot yet demonstrate that the views obtained from active residents reflect those of the wider community.

144 WNWhL cannot be sure that it is making best use of the training opportunities for residents. Where individuals identify a need this is responded to appropriately. However needs are not systematically assessed to ensure training offered meets those requirements, and there is no analysis to identify gaps in provision. Satisfaction with individual courses is measured but this does not include an assessment of the benefits and outcomes of training provided. The organisation cannot demonstrate training opportunities are improving the capacity of tenants and residents to have real impact in improving services.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy Management

- 145** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. It is generally easy to report anti-social behaviour (ASB). A range of policies, strategies and procedures ensure a joined up approach. WNWhL is taking a full and active part in multi-agency partnerships at a strategic and operational level. There is a range of preventative and diversionary activities. Victims and perpetrators are signposted to appropriate support. However individual case management and performance management is not effective and the monitoring and management of cases passed to the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU) is weak. The mediation service is not providing value for money and tenancy audits are not carried out in a systematic way.
- 146** A comprehensive range of policies, strategies and procedures support the approach to ASB including community safety, ASB, and child safeguarding. These are supported by ASB procedures which are comprehensive, covering low and high level ASB and using a three stage process, with low level ASB dealt with at the local level, escalated to the central Tenancy Enforcement Team and then to the LCC ASBU unit. Protocols and service level agreements are in place to support this. The procedures have recently been re-launched with all relevant staff to ensure that they are aware of them as reference documents. WNWhL actively promotes the government's Respect Standard and has carried out a compliance assessment. Issues identified in this have been incorporated into the service improvement plan. This helps to ensure a joined up and strategic approach to tackling ASB.
- 147** WNWhL is taking a full and active part in multi-agency partnerships at both strategic and operational level to combat ASB. WNWhL has effective partnerships with council departments, statutory and other agencies, to tackle ASB and nuisance. Examples are MARAC²¹; STOP HATE UK²²; West Yorkshire Police, LAMPs²³ and CASAC²⁴, the Area Management Teams and Mediation Leeds. Protocols allow information to be shared with the Police and other partners. Partners are positive about WNWhL contribution, citing their leadership of initiatives in localities to address neighbourhood issues, for example the rough sleepers' initiative and multi-agency tenancy sweeps in Little London. Local ASB panels provide the opportunity to share intelligence and agree actions to be taken in individual cases. Tenants and residents benefit from a combined approach to issues in the area.

²¹ Multi agency risk assessment conference

²² Stop Hate UK is a unique, independent charity that works with individuals and communities to challenge all forms of Hate Crime, encourage increased reporting of Hate Crime and provide support for people affected by Hate Crime

²³ Local Area Management Plans for the West Leeds District Partnership

²⁴ Community Action and Support Against crime

How good is the service?

- 148** A variety of preventative and diversionary measures are in place with staff playing a proactive role in their promotion. Examples include citizenship work within schools, environmental works undertaken with area panel funding, support for recreational facilities and support to junior sports clubs. The 'Dreamscheme' initiative encourages young people to get involved in improving their environment and rewards them for carrying out work. For example, a wildlife garden was set up in Bramley, and in Armley young people have been involved in tidying up areas and painting. This type of initiative will assist in engaging young people with their communities and help instil a sense of pride in the area which will help improve the quality of the estates.
- 149** It is generally easy for people to report ASB, harassment and hate crime. WNWhL offices are designated hate crime reporting centres and it is effectively contributing to dealing with hate crime in the area. However, tenants cannot easily access the ASB service outside normal office hours. The emergency number can be used for nuisance complaints however this only takes messages to be actioned the next working day. This prevents tenants having access to advice and support to deal with incidents of ASB and harassment, if they do not want to involve the Police.
- 150** Victims and perpetrators of ASB are signposted to appropriate support. Staff can refer victims and perpetrators to the tenancy support scheme which refers them on to support agencies, although this mechanism is in its infancy. Other support offered through partnership agencies includes target hardening initiatives, access to victim support and the family intervention project, although no information is available on the numbers benefiting from these arrangements. This helps to encourage individuals to come forward to report ASB and perpetrators are supported to help them change their behaviour.
- 151** Individual case management is not effective. There are some gaps in the documentation, action plans are not agreed with victims, victims are not always kept informed of actions and files looked at by the inspection team revealed delays in escalating actions to the next stage. The summary sheet is not always completed and there is no evidence of managers reviewing cases. Timely action is not always taken. In one case we looked at, an initial noise complaint was received in September 2007. The first stage in the formal procedures, the issue of a caution was not made until September 2008. WNWhL cannot be sure that tenants are having cases responded to promptly and effectively.
- 152** Monitoring, management and feedback of cases with the LCC ASBU unit has recently been identified as an issue and efforts have been made to improve this. WNWhL does not receive adequate monthly summary or performance data from ASBU. The information provided does not indicate current activity, only the action achieved when the case is concluded. This has identified open cases where tenants have moved, lack of information on progress fed back to the local office to enable queries on progress to be dealt with and inconsistent reports on actions taken, and a lack of summary or performance data. Once a case has been passed to the ASBU, tenants are required to contact them directly for further information rather than enquire at the local office. WNWhL cannot be sure tenants are receiving a good service once actions are escalated to this stage.

- 153** WNWhL cannot be sure that all tenants receive a consistent and timely service. Case management arrangements are not comprehensive. Summaries of activity are reliant on the use of spreadsheets which are not kept up to date and are not used. Analysis on site demonstrated little reliance can be placed on these figures of live cases. There are inconsistencies between the information on the tenancy enforcement spreadsheets and information reported on hate crime. A new case management system is being introduced. This lack of information means that WNWhL does not know the scale and levels of ASB or if they are performing to their service standards and response time scales. WNWhL cannot identify outcomes from the joint preventative work they take part in. There is no comprehensive assessment of the levels of satisfaction which complainants have about the ASB process and the responses they received. This makes it difficult to assess the performance and outcomes of action taken.
- 154** The SLA with Mediation Leeds, while proving an effective service to resolve disputes where tenants engage with it, does not currently provide value for money for WNWhL. The cost of the service is £22,950 a year. For 2007/08 there was a success rate of 46 per cent (16 cases out of the 35 accepted) but only 281 of the 470 contracted hours were used, making it an expensive service for WNWhL. In 2008/09 to date 19 cases have been accepted. Arrangements are in place to monitor the contract, with quarterly returns and six monthly meetings, which identified these issues and for 2008/09 the hours have been reduced to 340 (still above the usage level of 281). WNWhL cannot be sure they are obtaining value for money from this arrangement.
- 155** The effectiveness of introductory tenancies has not been assessed. Introductory tenancies have been in place for two years and while there has been an assessment of their impact on rent arrears there has been no assessment of their impact on ASB or other tenancy management areas. The ALMO cannot show the full impact of introductory tenancies on their ability to sustain tenancies.
- 156** Tenancy audits are not proactively systematic. WNWhL works with partner agencies to target identified hot spots for tenancy audits and these have delivered some positive results relating to abandoned properties and unauthorised occupation. However there is no routine proactive approach to identifying whether a property is appropriately occupied for secure tenant. The ALMO is looking to set up a routine audit process but until it is operation the ALMO cannot be sure that that the occupiers of its properties are the people issued with the tenancy.

How good is the service?

Estate Management

- 157** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a systematic approach to estate inspections, and resources are provided to help improve estates. The warden provision in multi storey blocks ensures they are well maintained. However, the quality of the grounds maintenance service is poor and the contract does not deliver value for money. It cannot be demonstrated that the cleaning contract is providing value for money.
- 158** There is a systematic approach to carrying out estate inspections. There are estate inspections every month and estate walkabouts twice a year. Although estate inspections are not advertised and invitations are limited, with advertisement limited to the website, the walkabouts do involve residents, tenant inspectors, wardens and councillors as well as other interested parties. The use of photographic evidence by the walkabout team enhances the service. Some hedges in the various schemes were overgrown; these were photographed by the team to be passed on to the enforcement team for further action. This evidence is also forwarded to the tenant to illustrate the problem. This enables residents to help in the identification of problems on their estates.
- 159** The ALMO provides resources to help improve estates. There is a budget of £750,000 delegated to Area Panels for environmental, community safety and community initiatives. Residents, including leaseholders, can bid against for environmental improvement projects from this budget. In 2008/09 this has led to prioritising £550,000 of resources and £37,000 of revenue resources to completed environmental improvement schemes. One example was the terracing and planting of an area that was left derelict after some redundant garages were knocked down. This approach enables the local communities to take an active interest and ownership of their estates.
- 160** Warden provision in the high rise flats delivers an acceptable standard of service. High rise flats were clean and well maintained. Staircases were clear and there were no signs of any rubbish on landings or stairwells. Lifts were clean and refuse areas were orderly and the chutes free from blockage. There was no sign of any graffiti. The effect on tenants living or moving into the area will be positive as the neighbourhood appears attractive to live in.
- 161** The quality of grounds maintenance is inconsistent and in sometimes poor. The contract specification is weak. It specifies the number of cuts per year rather than the standard to be obtained. This means the contract can be met by carrying out a set number of cuts each year irrespective of whether the grass needs cutting or not. On estates, grass and hedges are overgrown and cuttings are not removed. Litter was evident in a number of places. Customers are not satisfied with the grounds maintenance service. Estates are not kept in reasonable condition and do not look well maintained.

- 162** It cannot be demonstrated that the grounds maintenance contract is delivering value for money. There are some weaknesses in the current contract. For example, there is lack of clarity over land which should be included in the contract, with some pieces of land that are not in the contract with WNWhL that should be, and conversely pieces of land in the contract that should not be. This means the ALMO does not know if it is paying the correct amount for the services received. WNWhL employs a contract monitoring officer to highlight to the contractor faults or failures. Through the agreement the contractor then has five days to rectify faults which can cause short delays in issues being resolved. The contract also includes some conditions which exempt the contractor from carrying out the contract which means a consistent standard of service is not always delivered. This year the effect has been to leave grass to grow long with no reduction in costs on the contract.
- 163** WNWhL's cleaning contract cannot show it is delivering value for money. The current contract with the LCCs property services has not been tendered since CCT. The criteria for CCT are different from value for money and therefore it is unlikely that this service is the best option for residents. A caretaking survey has been recently undertaken but the results have not yet fed into the review. This represents a delay in achieving improved value for money.

Leasehold management and right to buy

- 164** This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Service standards are in place, but these are basic. There are weaknesses in calculating service charges, and leaseholders are not involved in service charge setting. WNWhL has limited access to information on leaseholders. The service cannot demonstrate it is meeting legal requirements, and leaseholder information on future proposed works is limited. A new leaseholder handbook has been published, and there is now a range of ways for leaseholders to become involved. WNWhL consults well with individuals on major works and leaseholders have a range of ways to pay for major works.
- 165** There is a Service Delivery Agreement which sets out the responsibilities of WNWhL and LCC in relation to the provision of leaseholder services. WNWhL are responsible for a narrow range of leasehold services, with most outside the scope of this inspection because they have been retained by LCC. WNWhL are responsible for services to leaseholders of flats and maisonettes, to provide information to the Council about planned and actual capital expenditure on blocks where leaseholders live, provide information to leaseholders about the services it manages and to facilitate a six monthly leaseholder forum. Other service elements such as collecting, maintaining and sharing leaseholder information, service charge calculation and collection and facilitating service charge loans are the council's responsibility. However the agreement is not being met and there is limited challenge of the council by WNWhL.

How good is the service?

- 166** Basic service standards are in place for this service area. The standards were agreed at leaseholder forum meetings, and are communicated within the leaseholder handbook. The standards only meet the basic legal requirements with only four service specific standards. The WNWhL general service standards also apply. However, the standards do not cover all aspects of the service or the areas more relevant to leaseholders, such as dealing with anti social behaviour or the financial support available. Performance against the standards is not reported back to leaseholders. This means leaseholders do not know well WNWhL is meeting the standards set.
- 167** There are weaknesses in the calculation of service charges for leaseholders. The Council has responsibility for this, Service charges are not currently depooled. Leaseholders are not charged for grounds maintenance services. Service charges under £250 and over spends are not itemised. Leaseholders have not been consulted on the costs of building insurance. WHWhL cannot demonstrate that it is charging its residents and leaseholders appropriately for the services they are receiving.
- 168** Leaseholder information is currently not directly accessible to WNWhL. The city council maintains a database which contains leaseholder information. While there are proposals to transfer this to the WNWhL's ICT system by April 2009 this is not currently directly accessible to the ALMO. However, information as provided when requested within one working day. There is limited diversity information available for leaseholders. This acts as a barrier to WNWhL tailoring or directing services to meet the needs of its leaseholders.
- 169** The ALMO cannot show that it meets the legal requirements for charging leaseholders for major works. The ALMO are unable to provide future five year projections on works as required by legislation. Leaseholder access to information about future proposed works is limited. The programme for the next year is available on the website. However while a three year projection of work is available, this is not widely publicised and leaseholders can only get hold of this information if they request it, or staff advise them it is available. This means leaseholders maybe receiving a different level of service depending on their own knowledge and the skill of staff they are dealing with. There is limited consultation with leaseholders about future proposals for works and the costs associated other than those required by law. In addition to not meeting their legal responsibilities this means the ALMO is not proving a customer orientated service.
- 170** A comprehensive leaseholder handbook was issued to leaseholders at the time of the inspection. The handbook is available in a range of formats and contains a range of useful information. However unlike the previous leaseholder guide it does not contain building insurance details at a glance which is something leaseholders express an interest in. This means that while leaseholders are getting good quality information, the ALMO has not used the opportunity of the new handbook to provide all the information that residents may want to see. The leaseholder survey showed that 78 per cent of leaseholders feel that WNWhL is good or excellent at keeping them informed about the issues affecting their property.

- 171** WNWhL consults well with individual leaseholders about major works. WNWhL initially identifies if there is a residents' association for the scheme and will use this as the main point of consultation. If no resident group covers the area then a residents' meeting is held to start the consultation process. All leaseholders receive a home visit to talk through the costs as well as the formal consultation process which is undertaken by LCC. This assists leaseholders in making informed choices about the scheme.
- 172** There are opportunities for leaseholders to be involved. A leaseholder forum has been re-established. Leaseholders are invited to attend the Service Improvement Groups, Customer Sounding Boards, KLOE Strategic Boards and Area Boards. Over 40 leaseholders have been part of one of these groups. The ALMO has led on carrying out a leaseholder survey which is scheduled to be fed back to leaseholders and residents. The survey is relatively comprehensive covering quality of services as well as demographic information. A surprising result for the ALMO was the age profile of leaseholders which has resulted in the development of heating and thermal efficiency schemes being developed. WNWhL is beginning to respond to the needs of its leaseholders.

Allocations and lettings

- 173** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a robust process for re-letting properties. WNWhL applies the council's letting policy appropriately, and this is supported by WNWhL's letting policy. The letting system is accessible and support is provided to applicants to apply or bid for properties. Customers are offered significant choice, although some barriers exist in exercising that choice. Robust monitoring arrangements are in place. Appropriate support is provided to prospective and new tenants. However there is not a robust letting procedure, refusal reasons are not monitored and a large number of local letting policies exist which have had minimal customer consultation.
- 174** There is a robust process for re-letting properties. This commences at the point notice is given and includes actions for neighbourhood management, the repairs team and lettings team. There is focus on moving quickly through the lettings process to enable an offer of accommodation to be made by the time the 28 day notice of termination is complete. Sixty nine per cent of properties are advertised during the notice period. Viewings take place where repair work is still in progress where possible to help reduce turnaround times. This provides the opportunity for the new tenant to have some choice in the final work completed (dependent on the progress with works at the time of the viewing). A verbal update is provided by the contractor on planned work and up to £250 of additional work can be made at the tenant's request. However to date this has had limited impact on reducing re-let times.

How good is the service?

- 175** The Council's letting policy is appropriately applied within WNWhL. WNWhL has developed its own letting policy which mirrors the city council policy and focuses on customer choice and meeting diverse needs. WNWhL operates under the city-wide choice-based letting (CBL) scheme. Properties are offered to registered bidders with an appropriate level of priority and property size. Nine per cent of lets made in 2007/08 were made as direct lets outside this policy. The 'direct lettings' are audited by LCC. This helps to ensure transparency and flexibility in the allocation of properties to make best use of the stock available.
- 176** The lettings system is accessible. The bidding process is clearly explained in a well-presented leaflet. Available properties are widely advertised on the internet, in the local newspaper and through weekly flyers in offices. WNWhL offers support to make bids, helps people fill in forms and will make home visits if requested. Bids can be made by advocates or by staff on behalf of the applicant. Bidding is easy, being available by telephone, in person and via the internet. This approach means that customers generally find it easy to understand and use the system.
- 177** Customers are offered significant choice, although some barriers exist in exercising this choice. Bidders can choose from any area and property type, although they must satisfy the occupancy level required for the property. Twelve local housing associations and a number of private landlords advertise via the scheme, which extends customer choice. Applicants can also view a mutual exchange book in some offices. However using the web-based system applicants are not able to identify properties managed by WNWhL as all the Leeds ALMO properties are listed with Leeds City Council as the landlord, making it difficult for prospective applicants to specifically select WNWhL properties. In addition information on the expected waiting times for different sized properties by area is not made available to tenants to enable them to make an informed choice on what to bid for. A leaflet and poster has been produced but the information is not presented in an easy to use or easily understandable format. This means customers cannot always make an informed choice.
- 178** Robust monitoring arrangements check the quality of lettings decisions made. A lettings account meeting is held with the strategic landlord once a quarter to review use of the CBL in relation to levels of adverts, bids etc. Bypass reasons for offering properties are recorded and audited by LCC. Information is received on the lettings made by diversity groups eg race, gender and age. However there is no evidence of analysis or reporting of this within WNWhL or use of this information to ensure there are no barriers to access or to improve the service provided, and there is no evidence of targets set in this area. This monitoring ensures transparency in the allocation process.

- 179** There is appropriate support provided to prospective and new tenants. Accompanied viewings are carried out with the opportunity to meet the caretaker and scheme wardens where possible, and basic information is provided to the tenant. However this does not include any information on the local area. Tenancy support referrals are identified at the viewing stage. There is a comprehensive sign up process which includes provision of the sign up DVD to ensure consistency and a wide range of other relevant information. A new tenant visit is carried out within four weeks of tenancy commencement to ensure the tenant has settled in and to address any tenancy related issues early on. This helps to ensure new tenants know what is expected of them and improves tenancy sustainability.
- 180** There is lack of robust lettings procedure within WNWhL. A draft procedure has been developed but this does not make it clear which forms and what information should be recorded at each stage of the lettings process. There are some gaps in the guidance. For example, the procedure does not set out what is a reasonable refusal, or how to select applicants for property allocation. There is council guidance on key areas of the letting process but staff were not aware of this guidance. This makes it difficult to ensure staff follow a consistent approach.
- 181** There are a large number of local lettings policies in place and these include minimal customer consultation. There are over 130 local lettings policies for WNWhL, all of which place an age restriction on flats. These are subject to annual review by the local housing manager. However in some cases limited customer consultation was undertaken, and in many cases this was not with a group representative of the local community, and does not include someone from the letting team. The review also considers the demographics of existing tenants, stock profile, and the percentage of stock with no local letting policy applied in the area. There is some evidence of changes made following customer feedback or based on the previous year's lettings performance. This helps to ensure sustainable communities are established and maintained.
- 182** The lettings team does not analyse the refusals information received. This represents a loss of information when considering what action could be taken to speed up the letting time of individual properties which are difficult to let, or in understanding trends in refusals for particular properties or areas.

How good is the service?

Supported Housing

- 183** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Sheltered housing schemes are generally well maintained, with reasonable levels of housing related support, and with customers encouraged and supported to participate in the running of schemes. Within schemes the quality of accommodation is not always meeting modern standards. WNWhL does not monitor the service received by customers if an emergency occurs out of hours and BME communities are under-represented in the service.
- 184** Sheltered housing schemes are generally well maintained, both internally and externally. They are decorated and equipped to reasonable standards and communal gardens are attractive. Full option appraisals have been carried out on four schemes which are being remodelled and improved, with further research on a range of indicators in progress to inform future decision making about all schemes. Tenants are consulted about the proposals and when work starts a dedicated staff member is available to offer reassurance and practical help. Tenants have a pleasant environment in which to live, and are supported throughout improvement works.
- 185** Reasonable quality housing related support is provided. The service has been externally validated and all services have been assessed as meeting the minimum acceptable standard (level C) on the Quality Assessment Framework (QAF) by the Council's Supporting People team, who fund the service. Support plans are in use, agreed with customers and reviewed at appropriate intervals. Customer satisfaction with the warden service is high at 91 per cent²⁵. Staff display a sound knowledge of sources of local support and assistance that can be obtained for tenants. Tenants are assisted to maintain their independence.
- 186** Customers are encouraged and supported to participate in the running of sheltered schemes in a variety of ways. Formal residents' groups operate in ten schemes. Tenants benefit from a range of social events and activities held in sheltered schemes, the majority of which are tenant led and organised. The sheltered tenants' compact was developed with tenant involvement and is monitored on a quarterly basis by tenants. Examples of where tenants have influenced the service are the changes to the grass cutting specification for sheltered schemes, and the flagging up of elderly tenants or those in sheltered schemes when other services are accessed such as repairs. Customers are able to influence the services they receive.
- 187** WNWhL has not taken any systematic action to explore and address issues of under-representation in sheltered schemes. Customer profiling information is not complete with only 57 per cent of profiling information collected, and not yet used to tailor and develop services. There are low levels of BME residents in sheltered (29 out of 1,700). While initial discussions have taken place with one agency working with Asian elders to explore reasons for this and potential barriers, no activities or actions have yet taken place to address and remove these barriers. People who would benefit from sheltered housing may not be accessing the service, or receiving a service appropriate to their needs.

²⁵ Service Improvement Group survey 2008 with response rate of 25 per cent

- 188** WNWhL has not separated out costs for the provision of support and housing related services within the schemes and does not separately identify these charges for tenants. This means that WNWhL does not know whether costs are being met, cannot identify potential value for money savings or that all tenants are paying for services that only some tenants receive.
- 189** WNWhL does not know the effectiveness of the CareRing service providing out of hours services to tenants in sheltered housing schemes. Tenants do not receive information about the level of service they can expect in an emergency. WNWhL does not have any formal agreement with LCC, is not aware of the levels of service offered and has no mechanisms to monitor this. WNWhL cannot be sure that tenants receive a service that meets their needs or provides value for money.
- 190** The quality of some accommodation is still poor. Some supported housing schemes comprise bedsit accommodation, some with shared bathroom facilities. Not all have lifts, restricting access to upper floors. There are low satisfaction levels with the standards of interior decoration at 71.17 per cent and garden maintenance at 62.46 per cent.²⁶ While option appraisals are being carried out some older people are currently living in unsuitable conditions.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 191** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The comparative cost of service provision is mixed. The understanding of costs at a service level is variable, and an understanding of how costs compare and the reasons for the WNWhL position is not well developed across the organisation. Action around improving the organisational understanding of VFM has been taken but is not fully embedded within the organisation. There are clear efficiency targets, and some savings achieved including the use of construction partnerships and procurement consortia. The merger has been used to deliver value for money savings. However there is not a robust strategic approach to value for money. The services provided by LCC have not been fully reviewed or market tested. The agreement with Property Management Services for gas servicing and electrical testing is not delivering value for money.

²⁶ Service Improvement Group survey 2008

How good is the service?

How do costs compare?

192 The comparative cost of service provision is mixed. The main cost comparisons are made using a national benchmarking group enabling comparison with approximately 21 metropolitan ALMOs. The overhead costs per property and the responsive and void repairs spend per property are within the top performing 25 per cent of organisations. This is supported by favourable comparative performance in relation to repairs satisfaction levels and the average number of weeks taken to re-let an empty property. The following areas however fall within the 25 to 50 per cent highest cost organisations: housing management pay costs per property, major and cyclical repair spend per property and tenancy related activities cost per property. The table below highlights the individual costs for key areas and how these compare to the benchmark group. This information was received during the inspection and further work is planned by WNWhL to understand the relationship between cost and quality. However until this is completed the organisation cannot demonstrate value for money for core service areas.

Table 1 Cost Comparisons for 2007/08

Service Area	Unit Cost (where reported)	Position ²⁷
Back office pay costs as % of direct housing management pay costs		3rd out of 21
Total core housing management costs per property	£298	12th out of 21
Major and cyclical repairs spend per property	£2484	15th out of 20
Responsive and void repairs spend per property		3rd out of 19
Responsive repairs management costs as a percentage of spend		13th out of 19
Total tenancy related housing management cost as pay cost per property		12th out of 21
Arrears management pay costs per property	£51	18 out of 21
Tenancy and estate management pay costs per property	£62	7 out of 21
Empty property management pay costs per property	£37	13 out of 21
Lettings pay cost per property	£15	9 out of 21

193 Understanding of costs at a service level is variable and an understanding of how costs compare and the reasons for the WNWhL position is not well developed across the organisation. Some steps have been taken to understand costs in the first 18 months of the organisation using cost comparison information from the two forming organisations. This information was fed into the service improvement groups for consideration when developing services. However due to the lack of cost information that relates to the new merged organisation, and in some cases considerable variation in the costs of the two forming organisations, service areas do not have a clear understanding of how their costs compare. There is limited action taken to address areas where costs are high, or costs are low and performance is low. Services have not yet been subject to a robust value for money assessment.

²⁷ A high position is a positive

194 Some more detailed analyses of costs has begun to be undertaken for individual service areas although this was relatively under-developed at the time of the inspection and outcomes to date are limited. For example, activity has been undertaken to map the cost and impact of staff attendance and support provided to individual resident involvement activities. Some initial work has been undertaken to understand the costs of staff time within neighbourhood offices. This work is still in its infancy and is still to be used to influence decision making.

How is value for money managed?

- 195** The Board has an increasing focus on value for money. A strategic VFM KLOE Board has recently been established. This comprises three board directors, service director and customer representation. All Board and Committee reports are required to consider the impact of VFM proposals. This helps to ensure an ongoing focus on driving value for money forward in the organisation.
- 196** There are clear efficiency targets set within the organisation. Each cost centre is given a target of 3 per cent gain for 2008/09. The AES target is £840,000, with a £1 million reduction in revenue spending agreed to reduce operational deficit in the year. This helps to secure additional resources to deliver the objectives of the organisation.
- 197** There are appropriate arrangements for the contracting of planned and capital improvement work. The Leeds Homes Construction Partnership is used to enable access to a range of large and SME²⁸ contractors. The framework is used to allocate on a cost and performance basis while allowing some consideration for consistency in delivery. Individual contractors are required to submit target costs for each scheme or element of the programme. Contract management arrangements are in place with Property Management Services monitoring performance of individual contractors. Open book accounting has been in place for the last year. This has been used to drive efficiencies within the ALMO.
- 198** The Leeds Home Construction Partnership is used to deliver efficiencies to delivery of the capital programme. Savings have resulted from improved specifications, reduced compound costs and savings on prelim costs. Savings are recorded for each scheme. This has resulted in cashable savings of 5.43 per cent (£393,105) in 2007/08. This has been achieved by the following: efficient use of materials (£44,000); inflation saving negotiated (£26,000); negotiations (£20,000); preliminaries savings (£144,000); pre-target cost agreed (£119,000); and shared preliminaries (£38,000). There is a target of total cumulative savings of £662,000 in 2008/09. Savings of £97,000 realised in 2007/08 through the partnership one contractor on revenue works through re-negotiation of prices, with a target of further savings of £200,000 in 2008/09. This increases resources available to deliver the programme.

²⁸ Small and medium enterprise

How good is the service?

- 199** Procurement Consortia are used to achieve savings. This includes the purchase of decoration vouchers with a 13 per cent rebate on the total purchased equalling a saving of £4,600 in 2007/08. Printing services are also provided however the overall saving has still to be quantified. Some supplies for the responsive repairs service are sourced using the a procurement club which has helped to contribute to the overall reduction from £72 to £67 per order for day to day repairs over a four year period. Further work is other areas including the sourcing of materials for gas installations. This enables increased resources to be used to deliver tenant priorities.
- 200** The merger has delivered value for money savings. A restructure following the merger reduced staffing costs within the organisation particularly at management level with a reduction of the senior management team from nine to five within the new organisation. This resulted in savings of £299,000. A review of service delivery areas was undertaken enabling re-investment in areas to improve customer services and tenancy sustainability such as complaints, tenancy enforcement and the tenancy support service. The merging of the two ALMOs has resulted in two responsive repairs contractors, which has brought the added benefit of comparing performance and sharing learning between the two contractors through regular joint meetings. This has resulted in improved outcomes for customers.
- 201** There is a lack of robust strategic approach to value for money. The recently produced VFM strategy does recognise the link between the cost of services, customer satisfaction, and the provision of high quality, high performing services. The strategy sets out in some detail what is expected from the organisation in ensuring VFM is being delivered. However the strategy does not provide a clear assessment of the current position of WNWhL, and what the priority areas for action need to be. It is not clear how WNWhL will move forward to meet the over arching objectives of the strategy.
- 202** The approach to VFM is not fully embedded across the organisation despite action to make VFM part of the culture. Action includes the inclusion of VFM targets for efficiencies for all service areas within the individual service plans. However in many cases these have not been identified or quantified, and do not clearly demonstrate how they support achievement of the targeted 3 per cent efficiency savings. Members of the finance team attend the service improvement groups to support individual areas in identifying potential areas of saving, or ways of improving VFM. VFM is included in the new standard agenda format for team meetings. There is some awareness amongst staff of value for money, however this tends to be at service manager level, with limited awareness of VFM at officer level.
- 203** It is not clear on what basis tenants and residents can make an assessment of the VFM of the rent and service charges they pay. There is limited information available for customers on the cost of services provided, or what their rent and service charge is spent on. Customers involved in the service improvement groups will have been involved in some discussions around VFM but this will only include a small number of tenants. Residents cannot make an informed judgement on value for money.

- 204** WNWhL has not fully reviewed or market tested all of those services provided by LCC. A three strand approach has been adopted with fundamental reviews including a value for money audit of areas with the largest spend, programme review which includes an element of internal audit work, and a light touch review using stakeholder feedback to drive service improvement. Total SLA costs are £4.623 million, and the fundamental review underway covers five services representing 88 per cent of the total SLA costs. The reviews cover ICT, the contact centre, property services management, building cleaning and supporting people with the purpose of assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the agreement and ensuring the service met the business needs of WNWhL. In some areas these are not complete, for example the contact centre SLA review requires further work and the building cleaning service has not been market tested. A number of remaining service reviews are programmed for 08/09 including payroll and pension SLA by internal audit, and a lighter touch approach on other areas including creditor payments, legal and democratic services, mediation, para legal SLA and the ASBU SLA. However it is not planned that these will include a robust option appraisal or market testing exercise. This means that there are delays in realising service improvements or efficiency gains in some areas of service.
- 205** The SLA with Property Management Services for gas servicing and electrical testing is not delivering value for money. A joint review and internal audit value for money review of the SLA between WNWhL and Leeds City Council Property Management Services has been undertaken recently. This highlighted that while WNWhL are paying a competitive fee for the service there are weaknesses in the quality of the service PMS provide. The existing SLA expired March 2008, and while a new draft SLA is in place this is not due to be adopted until September 2008 to enable it to take account of the outcomes of the reviews which have taken place. The internal audit review identified reduced assurance in a number of areas including not all contracts managed by PMS being subject to market testing, some elements of the service could be delivered cheaper in-house, no unit costs are identified which mean efficiency measures and gains cannot be identified which was a key component of the previous SLA, performance management arrangements are weak and inconsistent. The lack of a formal SLA means the arrangement is currently based on goodwill, and there is no formal arrangement to enable WNWhL to address the performance issues.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 206** This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. WNWhL has managed the change to the new organisation effectively and there are a number of improvements to services which are important to customers. Performance has improved in a number of key areas while efficiency savings have been achieved. However performance in relation to voids and customer telephone access continues to decline. The previous inspection recommendations have not been fully delivered, and there has been slow progress in improving some service areas including gas servicing, leaseholders, and in completing the review of SLAs with the council.
- 207** WNWhL has managed the change process to the new organisation effectively. Key changes include the development of a vision and objectives for the new organisation with the board and customers, and a staff restructure and governance review to support delivery of the objectives. Other changes included introducing effective internal communication, and performance management and service improvement arrangements. Staff are positive about the change process and understand their role within the new organisation. A comprehensive rebranding and marketing exercise has been completed with few references found to the former ALMOs during the inspection. This provides a strong basis for the organisation to move forward.
- 208** Improvements have been made to a number of services which are important to customers. Following the restructure, time has been spent working with customers to develop policies and service standards for each service area, building on the areas of strength from the predecessor organisations, and incorporating best practice from other organisations. All key policies and strategies are updated. This enables customers to know the level of service they can expect. Customer involvement have been developed enabling engagement with customers in a wider variety of ways. WNWhL achieved its TPAS²⁹ accreditation. Communication to tenants and residents has improved through the introduction of the Buzz newsletter, new leaseholder and tenant handbooks and a suite of leaflets. There has been focus on developing services in priority areas for customers including the recent introduction of the specialist tenancy support team and tenancy enforcement team. A free phone number has been introduced for repairs and general enquiries. The empty property standard has been improved ensuring works are completed prior to tenants moving in, with an increased range of quality checks to ensure standards are maintained.
- 209** WNWhL has achieved efficiency gains in its first year of operation. £1.169 million efficiency gains were achieved in 2007/08 exceeding the target set of £995k. This has enabled reinvestment in priority areas for customers including environmental works to support the decent homes programme.

²⁹ Tenant Participation Advisory Service

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 210** There are some areas where performance has improved when comparing WNWhL to the predecessor organisations. Between 2005/06 and July 2008 the following areas demonstrate a positive direction of travel: rent arrears as a percentage of rent roll, average time taken to complete non urgent repairs, average times to complete adaptations, the percentage of repairs completed in government timescales, and the percentage of non decent homes. Performance for repairs appointments made and kept had improved between 2005/06 and 2007/08, however performance has declined between 2007/08 and July 2008. Rent collection performance had remained stable.
- 211** The performance in relation to voids has declined. For example, relet times have increased from 24.1 days for West Leeds and 27.21 days for North West Leeds in 2006/07 to 30.4 days at 2007/08 year, and to 33.06 days at July 2008. The percentage of properties untenanted has increased from 1.44 per cent for West Leeds and 1.28 per cent for North West Leeds at the end of 2006/07 to 1.59 per cent at the end of 2007/08, and to 1.51 per cent at July 2008. However this has been accompanied by improvements to the standard of void properties. The increased voids and re-let times represent a loss of income to the organisation with void rent loss increasing from 1.26 per cent at 2007/08 year end to 1.48 per cent at July 2008.
- 212** Customer telephone access performance has deteriorated. The percentage of calls answered declined slightly from 93 per cent at the end of 2007/08 to 92 per cent at July 2008. The percentage of calls answered in 20 seconds has declined from 50 per cent at end of 2007/08 to 47 per cent at July 2008. The average waiting time has increased from 64 seconds for 2007/08 to 82 seconds at July 2008. WNWhL has been slow to tackle the performance related issues with the council, and this results in difficulties in customers accessing services.
- 213** WNWhL and its predecessor ALMOs have been slow to address the previous inspection recommendations. The predecessor ALMOs had failed to deliver on many of the recommendations partly due to the focus on the review of the ALMOs within Leeds. However, WNWhL has also been slow to address some areas and waited for the result of its mock inspection in October 2007 before determining action on the way forward for many individual service areas. Appendix two sets out the detail of the current position. Seven out of the eleven West Leeds recommendations have been completed, with four still in progress. Ten out of the 18 Leeds North West recommendations have been completed with six in progress and two not complete. Priority was not given to addressing the areas of weaknesses previously identified.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

214 There are some service areas where the pace of change has been slower than expected. The issues with the gas servicing arrangements were only identified in May 2008 despite poor performance and inadequate service arrangements existing prior to this. Action has now been taken to address some of the weaknesses in the service but these have only recently been introduced and outcomes are limited. Slow progress has been made in improving and developing the leaseholder service. This is partly due to the lack of clarity over the responsibilities between the council and the ALMO but this has not been appropriately challenged by WNWhL by the time of the inspection. There have been delays in commencing a comprehensive review of the SLA arrangements with the council with reviews only commencing on the five highest area of spend earlier this year and some of those reviews not yet completed at the time of the inspection. This results in delayed outcomes for customers and delays in improving value for money or achieving savings.

How well does the service manage performance?

215 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The objectives of the organisation are clearly understood. There is a clear focus on continuous improvement and performance management which is becoming embedded in the culture of the organisation. The board and LCC actively manage the performance of WNWhL. There is an openness to learning from customers and other organisations. WNWhL has plans in place and actions underway to address a number of weaknesses identified within this report. However there are some weaknesses in performance reporting with a lack of commentary and some inaccuracies in figures reported. The performance frameworks are not well developed in all service areas. It is not clear how some policies and strategies will be delivered.

216 WNWhL has clear objectives for the organisation for the next few years, and these are understood in all areas of the business. The Business Plan sets out the key strategic objectives in light of financial resources, demand for services, sustainability and wider strategic considerations. A comprehensive suite of service improvement plans is in place for each service which include consideration of the overall objectives, the cross-cutting themes of access, diversity, value for money and service user involvement, performance and risk. The senior management team has carried out a range of activities following the merger to help embed the culture and values of WNWhL which is seen as being very different to the two former organisations. Senior managers demonstrate awareness of the future challenges facing WNWhL and take action at an early stage to address these. The Personal Appraisal and Development Scheme (PADS) is used to make corporate and service improvement plan objectives relevant to individual officers and most officers are clear about their priorities and performance expectations. This ensures the organisation is focusing on the priority areas for improvement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 217** WNWhL is focused on continuous improvement and this is embedded within the organisation. Central resources help to embed a systematic approach to performance management and continuous improvement. Strategic KLOE Boards for the three cross-cutting themes ensure priorities are discussed and taken forward. A service improvement planning approach is embedded across all customer facing services through the Service Improvement Groups (SIGs) since January 2008. The groups focus on delivery of the service improvement plans resulting from the mock inspection results and outcomes include the development of policies and service standards for each service areas. The SIGs will focus on performance through use of the local performance frameworks. Staff demonstrate a commitment throughout the organisation to the continual improvement of services. This helps to drive forward service change quickly and improve services and outcomes for customer.
- 218** There are a number of strengths in the corporate scorecard approach. The scorecard focuses on a suite of indicators in line with the four key strategic objectives of customers, homes, communities and neighbourhoods and business and people. Indicators cover a wide range of services and include financial, customer and process elements. Comparisons are made to other organisations, quartiles, targets and previous year end. It incorporates indicators required to be reported to CLG, the national benchmarking club or the council as well as some locally developed indicators which underpin the strategic objectives. This is reported to SMT, Board, the two board subgroups and Directors' Working Group. The Board Directors' Working Group look at more detailed performance in areas of concern or business critical areas such as recent reports on gas servicing and void property management. This provides an overview of the strategic performance of the organisation.
- 219** The council manages the performance of the ALMO effectively using a two tier approach. WNWhL Business Improvement Team officers meet with LCC officers to review performance against the LCC scorecard and WNWhL Corporate Scorecard. This is supported by a quarterly meeting of WNWhL Chief Executive with the Head of Strategic Housing from LCC to discuss performance. Performance indicator targets are renegotiated annually with LCC and link to the penalties and incentive scheme which LCC has in place with all the ALMOs. This helps to ensure WNWhL is contributing effectively to achievement of LCC's housing objectives.
- 220** WNWhL is open to learning from other organisations and external challenge. Staff and tenants have benefited from visits to other high performers to explore customer involvement arrangements and the use of customer inspectors. A mentoring arrangement is in place with another local three star organisation for staff and involved tenants. One outcome of this has been exploring new ways of engaging with customers resulting in an additional 20 customers signing up to the customer sounding boards. A mock inspection was carried out in October 2007, and there is an ongoing relationship with a 'critical friend' to support the service improvement agenda. This highlights areas for improvement in line with current best practice.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

221 Plans are already in place with action progressing to address a number of areas for improvement highlighted within this report. Examples include:

- a range of initiatives to improve leaseholder services including introducing the gas safety service, a competitive insurance scheme and the option to buy into capital works to enable a more customer focused approach to leaseholder services;
- improvements to service delivery at the Contact Centre including reducing telephone answering times, the provision of more detailed call flow analysis and the recruitment of seasonal staff to meet peaks, assessments of queries answered at first point of contact, and process mapping functions to streamline the activities required;
- further embedding the approach to value for money through application of the VFM toolkit and workbook, with external consultancy support and challenge. This will help to support managers in identifying projected to deliver the efficiency targets for each service area;
- service improvement group analysis of the comparative cost and performance information for 2007/08 obtained from the national benchmarking exercise to identify areas for improvement;
- improvements to the sheltered housing service in line with broader LCC policies and strategies with an emphasis on varying levels of support and helping people to stay in their own homes. Further work is planned on the collation of data on demand, occupancy levels, physical condition etc of sheltered schemes to inform option appraisals on the remaining sheltered schemes;
- working with contractors to address the weaknesses in the approach to gas servicing including addressing the contract management issues which exist, further embedding the servicing arrangements, introducing referrals to tenant support team, the introduction of a new work flow system to manage gas servicing programmes and introducing a consistent method to customer satisfaction monitoring.

WNWhL is planning effectively for service improvement in a number of service areas which will deliver improved outcomes for customers.

222 WNWhL is communicating how well it performs to tenants and residents. Some performance information is provided to customers on a regular basis. Monthly performance posters are displayed in local offices with a separate sheltered performance poster in sheltered schemes. Both contain information on performance against a range of customer selected indicators and highlight performance against target using traffic light colour coded smiley faces. The same information is published within the Buzz newsletter. This ensures tenants are aware of WNWhL performance in key areas.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 223** There is an appropriate number of methods to enable customers to monitor and challenge performance, and to drive forward service improvement. This includes customer representation on the majority of the SIGs, the CSBs, complaints review panel, and the repairs satisfaction meeting. Area panels can be used to highlight local performance issues. A team of tenant inspectors carries out a regular programme of repairs and voids reality checks. Some tenants are involved in estate walkabouts monitoring local estate standards. This improves accountability to tenants and results in improved services.
- 224** There is a lack of commentary and analysis of performance information within the corporate scorecards and other performance reports for the Board. The reports do include some basic analysis of the current position and trends but do not contain detailed information on key areas of the business. For example, the technical difficulties and therefore lack of accuracy of some of the repairs figures was not highlighted. The Board did not raise the lack of information on the number of properties without a valid CP12 certificate as an area for concern. There is no commentary on the action being taken to address the very poor performance in relation to the contact centre. The board is not fully aware of the issues affecting performance and this impacts on their ability to challenge performance.
- 225** The performance management framework is not consistently embedded for individual service areas. Local performance frameworks are agreed for 20 individual service areas which mirror the corporate performance reports. The performance monitoring and management arrangements are embedded for some areas including diversity, access, improving homes and responsive repairs. These incorporate a comprehensive suite of national and local indicators with trend information and comparative information. Gaps exist in the key indicators for estate management, supported housing, income management, empty properties and planned maintenance. Outline performance frameworks are still in their infancy and under developed for customer involvement, gas servicing, lettings, neighbourhood planning and tenancy management. Work is in progress to gradually address these gaps. The reports all lack commentary or analysis of the information presented, with no indication of the reasons behind performance or detail of the action to be taken to address issues. The performance culture is not embedded at all levels within the organisation, however WNWhL have recognised this and have plans in place to address this. Performance management is not yet driving service improvement across all areas of the business.
- 226** Accurate performance information cannot be reported for key areas of the responsive repairs service. This is due to interface problems between the WNWhL system and the contractor system. Figures reported inaccurately include the number of jobs outstanding after 12 weeks, and the percentage of appointments made and kept. Key information such as jobs completed right first time and level of no access jobs are not recorded. This impacts on the ability of the ALMO to understand current performance levels and to challenge the performance of the contractor.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 227** There are inconsistencies and gaps in the performance management arrangements. There are some areas where accurate performance information cannot be collected. Accurate and relevant indicators for gas servicing are not collected and reported. This resulted in delays in the board being able to challenge the poor performance of this area. The response times for graffiti removal are monitored inaccurately on the housing management system as this is set up with the incorrect target time of 28 days for removal. Other areas with issues include sundry debtor accounts for leaseholders, ASB and complaints. There are examples where different figures are reported by the organisation or provided to the inspection team. This makes it difficult to understand current performance and impacts on the ability of the senior management team and board to challenge performance in areas which are critical to the business.
- 228** There is limited local accountability in relation to performance. While performance is reported at area panels, the information is not broken down to individual office level. However work is underway to address this and area panels are currently involved in the selection of indicators each area panel would like to see reported. Area specific information is not reported in local offices. Some indicators cannot be broken down to neighbourhood level, for example, the satisfaction results for local offices for the access customer satisfaction form. This makes it difficult for tenants and residents and other local stakeholders to understand the performance of services in their area and impacts on their ability to challenge weaker performance.
- 229** There is a lack of clarity over the agreed targets in some areas. For example, different targets are agreed internally for the contact centre compared to the published targets and the targets included within the SLA with LCC. Targets for completion of the customer profile vary in different reports. The target average times for aids and adaptations are different within the performance framework and the published leaflet. This makes it difficult for customers to understand the standards they can expect, and for staff to know what they are aiming to achieve.
- 230** There are weaknesses in the delivery of policies and strategies. There are a number of policies which are not being delivered. For example, the gas safety policy sets out a series of commitments which are not in place including the commitment to test smoke or carbon monoxide detection equipment, the use of free phone numbers, or the publishing of an annual programme. There are a number of strategies which do not make it clear what the priorities are or how they will be taken forward and objectives delivered. Many strategies do not specify the priority actions or direction WNWhL is moving in and many are not accompanied by action plans. Examples include the asset management strategy, procurement strategy and value for money strategy. This makes it difficult to measure delivery of policies and strategies.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 231** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a sound approach to human resource management, with staff changes managed well and a strong focus on training and development. There are clear plans to improve the diversity of the workforce and to improve local employment levels. ICT is invested in to improve capacity and efficiency. Financial management and budget setting arrangements are strong. The approach to risk management is robust. Sickness levels are high but WNWhL is taking a range of action to reduce levels. The strategic approach to procurement is weak with a reliance on expertise in the council to support this area. The ALMO has not challenged the council appropriately in a number of areas.
- 232** WNWhL has a sound approach to managing human resources (HR). There is a comprehensive HR strategy which includes workforce planning, learning and development, and pay, recognition and reward. This sets out clear equalities and diversity priorities and is supported by a range of policies and procedures which are currently being updated to meet the needs of the organisation. Advice and support is available to managers including support in recruitment and selection, coaching and PAD process. Support and advice is provided for staffing reviews and changes, examples including the caretaker review and changes to support services in sheltered housing. WNWhL is meeting individual staffing needs.
- 233** Staff structure changes have been appropriately managed. The staff restructure following the merger of the organisation has focused on the objectives of the organisation, and has resulted in increased resources in priority areas including support to vulnerable tenants, tenancy enforcement and business improvement. The staffing structures of the two previous organisations have become aligned as one organisation without an adverse impact on staff morale.
- 234** There is a strong focus on training and development. Training needs are identified in a variety of ways including an assessment against the business needs, requirements identified by SIGs and the annual PADs. Day release and other external and professional courses are available to all staff. The impact of training is measured with staff required to identify how training assists them to deliver the business and 80 per cent of staff surveyed felt that the post training discussion around how what they have learnt will be used was useful. A comprehensive leadership development course has been delivered to all managers aligned to the objectives of the organisation and supported by mentoring. Programmes are in place to train all staff in customer care and diversity. Staff are supported to carry out their job.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 235** WNWhL has set challenging targets in relation to the diversity of the workforce, and clear action is being taken to help achieve these. The percentage of top earners from the BME community is 15.79 per cent against a target set of 17 per cent. The percentage of staff meeting the DDA definition is 5.08 per cent against a target of 6 per cent. The percentage of women who are top earners at 42.1 has achieved the target set of 42 to 48 per cent. Initiatives to encourage a diverse workforce include mentoring for BME staff with four placements being taken from the long term employed and one from a BME employment initiative. Discussions are underway around the use of PATH³⁰ placements, and the organisation has the Disability Two Ticks accreditation.³¹ This helps the organisation develop a diverse workforce representative of the local community.
- 236** WNWhL has a commitment to increasing local employment and is taking action to support this. The main contractors are encouraged to have 50 per cent local labour and currently achieve 46 per cent local labour and 36 per cent West Yorkshire Labour. One contractor works with two local schools to offer four individuals a work placement each year covering all aspects of the building industry. Another participates in a City Stewardship scheme and, through partnership with the ALMO and two local colleges, supports two apprenticeships within the WNWhL area. WNWhL supports a work placement through the Leeds Incapacity Employment project which has resulted in individuals entering permanent employment. This brings additional benefits to the communities in which WNWhL operates.
- 237** Sickness levels are high and recent action has been taken to address this. Staff sickness days last at 16.9 days at August is above the target set of 11 days and compares unfavourably to the national average figures of 8.4 days and the northern England average figures of 11.3 days.³² A range of action has been taken to improve staff attendance including a contract with an external sickness reporting and management organisation through a spend to save initiative. This costs £17,000 per year with no fee paid if sickness is not reduced by 10 per cent. The current cost of sickness to the organisation is estimated to be £400,000. Other initiatives include a staff attendance incentive scheme rewarding staff on a sliding scale for no or little sickness during the year, costing a maximum of £38,000 per year. This represents a maximum spend of £38,000 which would be recovered if sickness levels are reduced by 10 per cent. Other initiatives include increased management focus on this area with individual team targets, and information for managers on the impact of sickness in terms of cost and service downtime. Current sickness levels impact on the capacity of the organisation to deliver services.
- 238** Appropriate health and safety arrangements are in place. Repairs operatives are provided with appropriate protective equipment. Regular health and safety briefings are held at tool box talks. With one contractor a £50 prize draw is offered for operatives to increase their ownership in reporting potential health and safety issues while working on site. Asbestos awareness training is provided to operatives and other WNWhL staff. This helps to reduce risk to staff.

³⁰ Positive Action Training Highway national programme

³¹ A recognition given by Jobcentre Plus to employers who have agreed to take action to meet five commitments regarding the employment, retention, training and career development of disabled employees.

³² Taken from CIPD assessment.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 239** WNWhL is investing in information technology to improve capacity. Since the merger the ALMO has invested in new systems for asbestos, repairs diagnosis, asset management, tenancy management and customer relationship management. Other improvements include the ability to text customers. Future plans for enhancements include the development of mobile working, use of customer information and work flow management software to support planned and capital programmes. There is a SLA with the council to deliver ICT services which has recently been reviewed demonstrating provision of a quality service at a low cost comparatively. This provides a dedicated ICT team for the three Leeds ALMOs and the TMO who oversees the programme of development work against business needs and the provision of training. WNWhL does not have its own ICT strategy but works within the Cross ALMO ICT Strategy which is due to be reviewed later this year. These shared systems enable greater resources to be available for the development or procurement of systems to meet local needs. This improves the capacity and efficiency of some services and enables access to improved intelligence for the organisation to monitor and plan services.
- 240** WNWhL manages its finances appropriately. There were some issues with the budget for 2007/08 as these were set based on the level of budget from the two previous organisations and did not take account of the service reviews planned or the changes in standard of service that results. This has been addressed in the budget setting arrangements for 2008/09. Strong financial management arrangements resulted in a revenue surplus of £4.919 million in 2007/08. Support is provided to managers and budget holders with regular reporting arrangements in place. There is detailed financial monitoring for capital, planned and responsive repairs, the largest area of spend for the organisation. This covers average unit cost per area of work and detailed year end forecasts. This is used to facilitate discussions between contractors and technical teams to ensure spend is in line with the budget. Budget holders meet with finance team representative every two months to look at the current budget position and to highlight any areas of risk. Financial statements are monitored by the council quarterly. Budget setting processes are aligned to business planning processed. This ensures the organisation has the resources available to deliver the WNWhL objectives.
- 241** The arrangements for the management of risk are robust. There are 20 individual risk registers linked to each service improvement plan, with an overarching risk register with the 12 key risks to the business for the year. The approach adopted follows the corporate LCC risk management approach, and the Director of Finance sits on the LCC Corporate Risk Management Group. Quarterly risk register reports are made to the strategic landlord, which considers the action taken to mitigate the risk. Bi-monthly reports on risk are made to the SMT and the Organisational Sub Committee. Relevant managers and board members have attended risk management training delivered by the Council which has improved their response to risk. The 20 service risk registers are reviewed bi-annually by the finance team, with exception reporting to SMT. The ALMO has a joint emergency plan in place with the council, although it does not have its own business continuity plan. This helps to reduce the likelihood of service failure.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 242** The ALMO is taking timely action in relation to the future procurement of maintenance contracts post 2011 for the delivery of stock investment and repairs. Extension agreements within the existing contracts are being used to enable all stock investment and repairs contracts to end March 2011. The vision is the use of one or two contractors to deliver all aspects of the service with a focus on the long term cost of work with improved use of warranties etc. This is expected to give customers a more streamlined service and result in efficiency savings, while encouraging delivery partners to have a longer term community focus. Customers and key stakeholders have been involved in setting the vision and an initial market testing exercise is in progress to inform the way forward. Working groups are focusing on particular areas of the contract. Plans are in place to enable sufficient time to develop a detailed specification prior to going to the market in April 09, with the planned appointment commencing April 2011. This will ensure the new contract is influenced by customers and enables time a seamless service between the ALMO and the contractor to be developed.
- 243** The strategic approach to procurement is weak. A procurement strategy has been recently approved. This recognises procurement as the whole life cycle costs balanced with meeting customer requirements, and includes some focus on improved consultation in procurement. The strategy focuses on maintenance procurement. There is no procurement plan to support the strategy and there is no clear timetable in place for future procurement, other than for asset management procurement after 2011 but these are not included in the strategy. The use of modern procurement methods has not been fully explored with the only example being basic e-purchasing and there is no clear plan to develop this or other forms of modern procurement further within the strategy. A list of approved suppliers has not been developed outside maintenance. This makes it difficult for stakeholders to establish how WNWhL intends to procure goods and services in future and for WNWhL to track whether it is delivering its objectives through procurement.
- 244** There is limited procurement expertise within the ALMO. WNWhL rely on the Council's Procurement Team or the SLA with Property Management Services for advice and operational support. There is a lack of training or clear guidance for managers within the organisation to ensure they are clear on their responsibilities for the procurement of services, goods or consultancy. The ALMO has not developed its own controls or guidance and continues to use the Council's. This does not represent an arms length arrangement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

245 There are a number of areas where WNWhL is led by the council and has demonstrated little challenge until recently. This includes areas such as the performance of the contact centre and the services received from Property Services Management. There are some examples where LCC policies have been amended following the work of WNWhL such as aids and adaptations. However, there are areas of delegated responsibility where the council is setting the policy direction or WNWhL is still heavily reliant on the council on service delivery. For example, the management of leaseholders, the setting of service charges for tenants, procurement arrangements and the delivery of the gas servicing programme. There are a number of areas where consistent action needs to be taken across the three ALMOs which makes responding to local needs more difficult, for example, the provision of IT services and management of the housing management system. The risk is the ALMO may not develop policies or services in the most appropriate way for its tenants.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 2

Performance Indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	WNWhL 2007/08 ³³	MBC top quartile 2006/07
63 Average SAP Rating	61.7(LWH) 60.4(LNWH)	65.4(LWH) 63.8(LNWH)	67.2	67
66a Performance rent collected	96.40 (LWH) 96.54 (LNWH)	96.68 (LWH) 96.94 (LNWH)	96.81	97.74
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	7.96(LWH) 7.19(LNWH)	7.44(LWH) 6.96(LNWH)	6.76	3.98
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	38.83(LWH) 25.73(LNWH)	36.35(LWH) 13.57(LNWH)	22.99	22.75
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.46(LWH) 0.17(LNWH)	0.46(LWH) 0.24 (LNWH)	0.30	0.41
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	75 (LWH) - (LNWH)	83 (LWH) 70 (LNWH)	77.4	77
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	51 (LWH) 57 (LNWH)	51 (LWH) 57 (LNWH)	73.6	67
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	45.74(LWH) 42 (LNWH)	41.29 (LWH) 29.75 (LNWH)	35.10	23
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	-2.62 (LWH) 8.3 (LNWH)	9.63(LWH) 10.69 (LNWH)	25.33	29.2
212 Average re-let time (days)	45 (LWH) 26.9 (LNWH)	24.1 (LWH) 27.21 (LNWH)	30.4 (new definition for 07/08)	37

³³ Unaudited figures

Appendix 2 – Previous Inspection Recommendations

Table 3 Leeds West Recommendations

Leeds West Recommendations	Progress
Strengthen the focus on users and tenants by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> publicising the details of the adaptations service; developing a customer profile for each service; agreeing targets for lettings to diverse groups; and involving customers in policy development at a strategic level. 	Completed In progress Completed Completed
Strengthen performance management arrangements by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a clear performance management framework to inform service planning and review; reviewing all service plans to ensure they have SMART targets which are agreed with customers; identifying how compliance with service standards will be monitored by the Board; and identifying the main barriers to improved performance in income management. 	Completed Completed In progress In progress
Address capacity issues by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring the stock condition database can accurately predict decency and stock condition levels. 	Completed
Integrate value for money into working practices by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a comprehensive procurement strategy which outlines the organisation's approach to the procurement of all services. 	In progress
Develop a comprehensive asbestos database.	Completed

Appendix 2 – Previous Inspection Recommendations

Table 4 Leeds North West Recommendations

Leeds North West Recommendations	Progress
Establish clear timeframes and standards by which contact centre performance needs to be improved, and develop a plan for alternative service delivery arrangements should the required improvement not be achieved. This should also take account of relative cost issues and should be completed by Sept 2004.	In progress
Set out clear service standards and sign-posting for service users, on the different elements of environmental maintenance service provision that are now available. This should be completed by September 2004.	Complete
Develop and implement systems to facilitate systematic learning from customer complaints, and ensure this is used for quality assurance purposes.	Complete
In consultation with customers, determine whether the current office opening hours are maximising service access. This should be completed by December 2004.	In progress
Ensure that all customer surveys use consistent information to improve base data for the overall satisfaction with the service.	Complete
Ensure that systems are developed to enable learning from available customer survey data.	Complete
Ensure that all survey data is monitored by ethnicity to establish service access and delivery issues for different groups.	Complete
Develop a framework for reporting the monitoring of service usage by different groups to the Board.	In progress
Set out a clear purpose for and means by which expanded customer profile data will be used to analyse service access and delivery issues.	Complete
Implement the principles within the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice for Rented Housing, and ensure these are integrated fully with the Equalities and Diversity Action Plan.	Complete
In consultation with customers, explore the relative costs and benefits of current service delivery approaches such as neighbourhood offices and the alternatives, and use this to inform the establishment of appropriate service access arrangements. This work should be completed to inform a clear plan for resulting changes by Dec 2004.	In progress
Develop local performance indicators for the repairs and maintenance service where these are currently lacking (such as in capital programme delivery), focussing on the elements that are important to customers. Measures of customer satisfaction should be included within this. This should be completed by December 2004.	Complete

Appendix 2 – Previous Inspection Recommendations

Leeds North West Recommendations	Progress
In relation to gas servicing, ensure that systems are developed to fully implement no-access procedures within designated time frames. This should be undertaken urgently.	Not complete
Develop local performance indicators to measure the impact of housing support services on sustaining the tenancies of vulnerable people, living in homes managed by LNWH.	In progress
Set out how the service improvement plan supports achievement of the levels of performance identified for 2006/07 within the business plan.	Complete
Develop clear mechanisms for updating and reporting risks to the Board on a regular basis.	Complete
Establish a clear service level agreement for the services purchased from the Corporate Debt Recovery Unit.	Not complete
Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in the report.	In progress

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:
 - visits to offices;
 - visits to estates and schemes;
 - observation of the staff and offices;
 - observation of tenant meetings;
 - observation of scheme/estate visits and meetings;
 - focus groups with frontline staff;
 - staff and board member interviews;
 - interviews and focus groups with tenants and leaseholders;
 - inspections of empty properties, repairs and investment schemes;
 - mystery shopping and reality checks; and
 - file checks for rent arrears, repairs, gas servicing, complaints and anti-social behaviour.

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)

Resident involvement and value for money

- 1 WNWhL are developing a model for the understanding of which resident involvement mechanisms are proving the most effective and cost effective. An initial survey of customers who had been involved in a variety of ways w indicated that 87 per cent of involved tenants felt their involvement in activities made a difference to the services provided, or led to other benefits for the community and 82 per cent were happy with the levels of support offered to enable them to take part. WNWhL is now correlating these results to the involvement mechanisms used. Costing assessments using a variety of headings, such as staff time, publicity, venue hire etc for all resident involvement activities are now in use, with a scoring mechanism in place to assess the outcomes of that activity, with a matrix under development to assess the value for money of that particular activity. This will be a useful mechanism to direct future resources to those activities with greatest impact.

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