

# ALMO

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# Inspection

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# Report

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Gateshead Housing Company  
February 2009



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# Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

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

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

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

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

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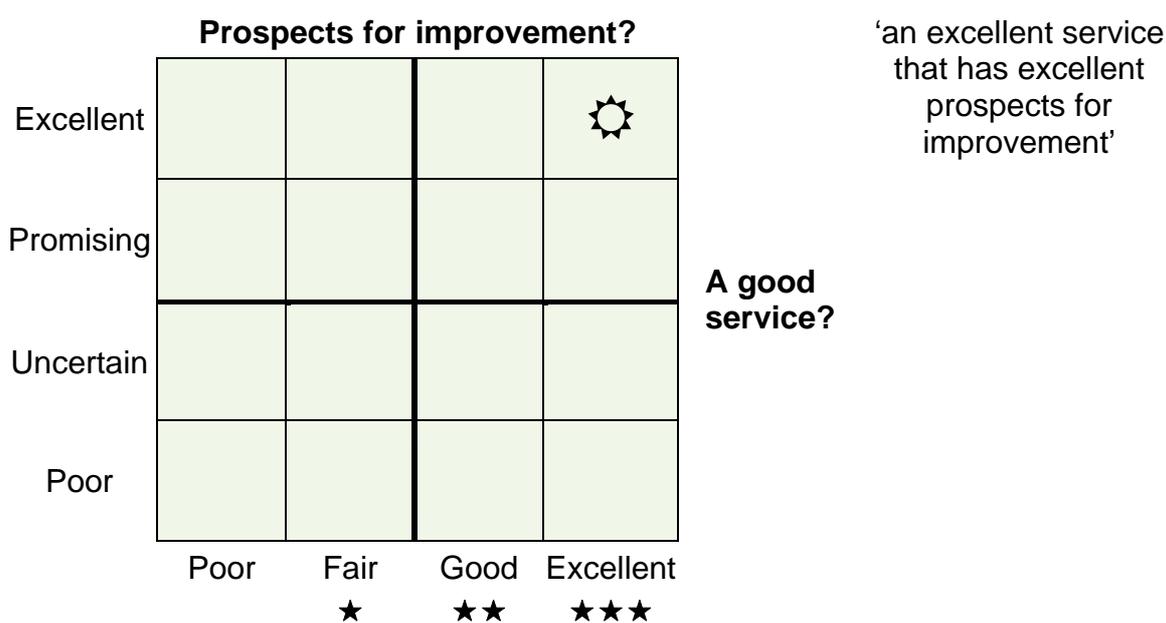
# Summary

- 1 The Gateshead Housing Company (TGHC) is providing an excellent three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 Underpinning service delivery is a strong commitment to customer care. Offices have been rationalised and modernised, offering excellent and accessible local facilities for callers. Information is clearly presented and widely available. Customers can now ring TGHC up to 8.00pm each weekday and until noon on Saturdays with 24-hour telephone access for emergencies and other online services.
- 3 A good understanding of the needs of all its customers enables most services to be adapted to meet individual needs. A website and additional support has been introduced specifically for young people. Customers are closely involved in the way services are developed and are very satisfied. Rent collection rates are above average and historically the best they have been in Gateshead.
- 4 Home improvement work is well managed, customer-focused and high quality. Significant Council investment over and above the decent homes programme improves the sustainability of stock. Empty properties are repaired to a high standard and the time taken to re-let them is reducing. A choice-based lettings service provides local people with clear information and choice to bid for vacant properties.
- 5 Estates are generally well maintained and common areas are secure and welcoming. TGHC and other agencies together effectively manage anti-social behaviour (ASB) and there is a strong focus on sustaining tenancies.
- 6 The company has a good understanding of its costs and has measures in place to drive out efficiencies, significantly outperforming its targets year-on-year.
- 7 A number of weaknesses remain. Customers have had difficulty in contacting the Repairs Reporting Centre by telephone and improvements are very recent and not yet proven over time. This is significant as one third of all calls concern repairs. Bulky furniture and waste left in some gardens is a blemish on otherwise high environmental standards. Not all sheltered housing schemes and communal areas fully meet DDA requirements Collection of arrears owed by former tenants remains low.
- 8 TGHC has established a positive track record of improving performance and customer satisfaction. Resourced plans address many of the weaknesses identified. Finances are relatively healthy and support priorities. Through developing staff and managerial resources, working effectively in partnership with others and a willingness to learn, capacity to support planned improvements is strong.

# Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed The Gateshead Housing Company as providing an ‘excellent’ three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 We found the service to be excellent because it has a range of strengths including:
- seven housing offices providing excellent local access to information and services;
  - customers are able to make enquiries until 8.00pm weekdays and until 12 noon on Saturday with 24-hour access to report emergencies or access online services;
  - individual profiles of each tenant are in place allowing TGHC to tailor services to meet individual needs, such as providing information in larger print or alternative formats;
  - vulnerable tenants are provided with additional support to ensure that they are assisted in accessing all services;

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

- improvements to over 7,000 homes to a standard above that required by the Government and making them easier to keep warm;
- additional improvements to make homes desirable, safe and sustainable through Council investment outside of the decent homes standard (DHS) programme;
- repairs are done quickly, by appointment and to a standard that satisfies customers;
- 99.47 per cent of properties have a valid gas safety certificate;
- above average amount of rent is collected without excessive use of legal action;
- estates are maintained to a high standard and communal areas are clean and secure;
- there is effective working with partners to reduce the level of anti-social behaviour and respond to hate crime;
- customers are provided with a variety of ways to get involved in developing and delivering services, including mystery shopping and training; and
- the quality of services for leaseholders is high.

11 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- customers have had difficulty getting through by telephone to report a repair and improvements are very recent;
- bulky furniture and waste left in some gardens;
- some sheltered housing schemes and common areas in other properties do not fully meet DDA<sup>2</sup> requirements;
- low levels of rent arrears collected from former tenants;
- only 65 per cent of complaints are responded to quickly with a further 17 per cent sent an interim response; and
- customer satisfaction is not measured in all areas, for example the rents service.

12 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- tenants and leaseholders are actively engaged in improving performance;
- TGHC has clear governance arrangements in place and strong leadership;
- partnership working is effective and the company successfully levers in significant additional funding;
- effective staff management practices are reducing sickness rates and staff turnover;
- the company is investing in training and development;
- staff are motivated and empowered;
- the company's financial position is healthy;
- the company has a strong track record of delivering improvements;

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<sup>2</sup> Disability Discrimination Act

## Scoring the service

- a wide range of changes have been introduced successfully, including freephone and appointments for repairs reporting, choice-based lettings and a mobile handyperson service;
- customer satisfaction with services has increased across the majority of areas measured, none are deteriorating;
- TGHC continually outperforms stretching efficiency targets and reinvests savings in priority areas; and
- planning and performance management arrangements are strong.

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

- problems contacting the Repairs Reporting Centre have taken a long time to resolve;
- the collection of rent arrears owed by former tenants has shown little improvement since the last inspection; and
- the company does not yet comprehensively measure and report service standards and customer satisfaction in all areas.

# Recommendations

- 14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the 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 access to services by:

- ensuring customers can report repairs by telephone quickly and efficiently.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will be more willing to report repairs; and
- customers will be more satisfied with the service.

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

## Recommendation

**R2** Maintain high environmental standards by:

- ensuring customers and neighbours keep their gardens tidy and clear of bulky waste and rubbish.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- people will have pride in their neighbourhood and feel safer.

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

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

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

#### R3 Improve income from tenants by:

- collecting a greater proportion of the rent arrears owed by former tenants; and
- identifying and adopting good practices to reduce the numbers of tenants leaving property owing rent and improving the level of arrears collection from those who do.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more income will be available for investment in services.

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

### Recommendation

#### R4 Improve the provision of information to customers by:

- setting challenging standards and responding quickly to customers who complain, acknowledging the complaint where an immediate response cannot be made and keeping customers up-to-date with progress;
- measuring customer satisfaction with services in all service areas, using the information to improve services and providing feedback; and
- measuring performance achieved against agreed service standards in all areas and providing regular reports to customers, the Board and managers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- people will have confidence that complaints will be acted upon;
- customer feedback will be provided in all service areas; and
- customers and TGHC will know how the company is performing against the standards set.

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

### Recommendation

#### R5 Ensure decisions are taken on the future of low demand sheltered housing schemes by:

- ensuring the Council has the necessary information it needs on current and potential future demand, on the condition of stock and the cost to bring it up to a sustainable level;
- considering alternative options and models fully; and
- setting clear dates when decisions will be taken by.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- difficult decisions will be taken in the light of available options;
- there will be clarity and certainty around future proposals; and
- investment decisions can be taken.

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

- 15 We would like to thank the staff of The Gateshead Housing Company and Gateshead MBC who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.
- 16 Dates of inspection: 17 November to 28 November 2008.

# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 17 Gateshead is the largest of five Tyne and Wear metropolitan borough council areas in the North East of England. Covering an area of 55 square miles, the borough lies on the south bank of the river Tyne. Its urban centre is supported by a large rural hinterland with a dispersed population.
- 18 The borough has an ageing and declining population of over 191,000,<sup>4</sup> of which 10 per cent are long-term sick or disabled. About 1.6 per cent of the population identified itself as of black and minority ethnic (BME) origin at the time of the 2001 census. The orthodox Jewish community is known to represent a further 0.8 per cent of the population but the census does not record this as a minority community. Since 2001 the borough has also become home to an estimated 1,000 asylum seekers and refugees.
- 19 Gateshead has high levels of deprivation, although things are improving. In 2007 Gateshead was ranked as the 50th<sup>5</sup> most deprived borough in the country (out of 354). This has improved from 36th in the 2004 index. Sixteen of its 22 wards are in the 25 per cent most deprived in the country and nine are within the 10 per cent most deprived. Unemployment at 4 per cent is relatively low, but the Council has estimated that 30 per cent of households have annual incomes of below £10,000.
- 20 There is a sustained focus on regeneration in the borough in response to industrial decline. The local economy is becoming increasingly dependent on service industries, the retail sector, arts and tourism, with the development of the Gateshead Quays as a cultural quarter. As part of the 'Bridging NewcastleGateshead' housing market renewal pathfinder, substantial resources are also being invested to transform the housing market.

### The Council

- 21 There has been political continuity, with longstanding Labour control. After the 2008 elections, Labour has 41 of the 66 seats, the Liberal Democrat opposition has 24 and the Liberals one. Council business is managed via a cabinet system, supplemented by scrutiny panels, advisory groups and special panels. Each of the ten cabinet members has a service specific portfolio, of which housing is one.

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<sup>4</sup> Office of National Statistics (ONS) mid-year estimate 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Indices of multiple deprivation 2007, measured by 'rank of average rank'.

- 22 The Audit Commission's CPA<sup>6</sup> assessment of Gateshead in 2007 was that it was a council that was improving strongly and demonstrating a four-star overall performance.

### The service

- 23 The Council set up The Gateshead Housing Company (TGHC) in January 2004. It is responsible for the management of almost 22,000 tenancies and over 700 leases, which represent about 25 per cent of the borough's housing stock. It also oversees the work of one tenant management organisation (TMO) which manages 279 properties on the Clasper Village estate.
- 24 A five year management agreement and a range of protocols detail the responsibilities delegated to the company by the Council and provide an operating framework. The agreement was renewed for a further five years in April 2008. The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering (including spending against the Council's capital programme);
  - rent collection, dealing with arrears and debt counselling;
  - consulting and informing tenants on issues which are an ALMO responsibility;
  - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
  - enforcement of tenancy and leasehold conditions;
  - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation;
  - estate management, caretaking and services under the supporting people programme; and
  - environmental protection and improvement.
- 25 The functions retained by the Council include:
- homelessness and advice;
  - provision of support in supported housing;
  - aids and adaptations;
  - services to asylum seekers;
  - housing strategy development and HRA<sup>7</sup> business planning; and
  - quality and standards.
- 26 TGHC is governed by a board of five tenants, five council nominees and five independents. It has four subcommittees which have limited delegated responsibilities. The company is managed by a chief executive and senior management team and it employs around 400 people.

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<sup>6</sup> Comprehensive Performance Assessment, a rating given by the Audit Commission.

<sup>7</sup> Housing Revenue Account

## Report

- 27 For the financial year 2008/09 the Council has agreed to pay the TGHC fees totalling £30.31 million, of which £17.33 million is for maintenance of properties and the remainder, £12.98 million for management services.
- 28 In 2005 the Audit Commission inspected TGHC and judged it to provide a good, two-star service, with promising prospects for improvement. That assessment enabled Gateshead to receive additional supported borrowing to bring its homes up to the Decent Homes Standard (DHS).

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29 Gateshead Council has a vision<sup>8</sup> of '*Local people realising their full potential, enjoying the best quality of life in a healthy, equal, safe, prosperous and sustainable Gateshead*'. The Council also has three promises:
- making Gateshead a better place;
  - listening to local people; and
  - delivering excellent services.
- 30 The Council has agreed six Corporate Priorities for the years 2007 to 2010.
- Building Stronger Communities.
  - Empowering Children and Young People.
  - Empowering Older People and Ensuring Healthier Communities.
  - Improving Accessibility, Connectivity and Economic Prosperity.
  - Serving our Customers.
  - Ensuring a Sustainable Gateshead.
- 31 The ALMO's vision is '*Working with the community to provide excellent homes and housing services*'<sup>9</sup>, and it has five key objectives:
- become an excellent organisation;
  - improve the sustainability of neighbourhoods and communities;
  - reshape provision of affordable housing to meet future local needs;
  - demonstrate value for money (VFM) and efficiency in all we do; and
  - secure the long-term viability of the company.
- 32 It describes the values which underpin the company's activities as follows.
- Being a listening and learning organisation – staying in touch with what customers want.
  - Being honest, accountable and transparent – delivering excellent services with integrity.
  - Being motivated, trained and committed across the company – delivering efficient and effective services.
  - Being positive and responsive – constantly striving to achieve excellence.

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<sup>8</sup> Our Vision 2030

<sup>9</sup> Source: 'Shaping the future' TGHC Business Plan 2006/09

## How good is the service?

- Being customer-focused, innovative and professional – involving customers in what we do
- Being caring and respecting – the people we work for and with.
- Embracing equality – valuing difference.
- A commitment to all our employees – celebrating our successes.

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

### Access and customer care

- 33** In 2005, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The company had generally addressed or was in the process of addressing all the weaknesses from an earlier inspection and had robust access arrangements in place.
- 34** Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong commitment to customer care and satisfaction rates are high. Offices provide accessible facilities and it is easy for customers to get in touch by telephone. TGHC provides high quality information via its three dedicated websites, comprehensive set of leaflets and a range of other feedback mechanisms. Performance against service standards, however, is not yet comprehensively measured and complaints do not always receive a quick response. Until recently, performance in answering calls to report repairs has been poor.
- 35** TGHC has a strong commitment to customer care. A clear customer service strategy commits it to staying in touch with what customers want, being customer-focused, and ensuring customers are at the centre of how the company operates. Training is at the heart of this and 255 staff have attended customer service excellence training. Front line staff are provided with 'A Guide to Your Role' produced with the involvement of customers and staff. A group of service champions from across the company meets monthly to progress and champion customer care issues. A dedicated group of customer service officers based in housing offices, and the introduction of awards for staff who have provided exceptional customer care, have helped improve consistency and satisfaction. In 2008, 80 per cent of customers responding to the company's annual survey considered their query had been satisfactorily resolved compared to 71 per cent in 2007 and 90 per cent were satisfied with the advice given. The most recent surveys reveal that 95.7 per cent of customers are satisfied with services, compared to 92.1 per cent in 2007.

- 36** It is easy for most customers to access services. A restructure of local housing offices has reduced numbers from sixteen to seven but these are strategically located and modern. The exercise was completed in consultation with local customers, who helped determine opening hours. Surgeries are also held in two additional areas. All offices are accessible, equipped with induction loops, offer interpreting services, have private interview rooms and a free phone service for customers to contact other parts of the company or Gateshead Council. Payments can be made at 234 outlets, many of which are open evenings and weekends. Information and services are also available via three well presented websites: TGHC's main website; one dedicated to the Homechoice service; and an award winning website dedicated to young people. The company's website conforms to high accessibility standards. Over 60 per cent of customers surveyed said it was easier to get in touch in 2008 than 2007. Sixty-five per cent also said that it was easy contacting the right person to answer their query.
- 37** Customers can now access services by telephone at a time that is more convenient to them. Some services are available 24 hours a day, such as emergency repairs, HomeChoice bidding, care call and concierge services. Customers prefer to contact TGHC by telephone and can now do so for all services between 8.00am and 8.00pm on weekdays and until 12 noon on a Saturday. Non-repair calls are answered quickly and professionally. Over the period between November 2007 and November 2008 less than 2.9 per cent of calls were abandoned and 94.6 per cent were answered within the target time of 20 seconds.
- 38** Leaflets, newsletters and tenant information are consistently of high quality and widely available. For example the tenants' compact (Guide to getting involved) and tenants' handbook are well presented, make good use of colour, include relevant content and are easy to understand. Information for the decent homes improvement programme is of a similar high standard with information, such as product guides, presented in a way that is easy to understand. Newsletters are vibrant, colourful and attractive to the eye. They focus on tenant interests and make innovative use of adverts to promote relevant issues, such as the importance of paying rent. All documentation is available in other languages and formats. Talking leaflets are available online. TGHC also works with partners delivering services to its customers to help them develop written material, for example the Equipment and Adaptations leaflet produced jointly with the Council. This means that customers, including those who have low literacy levels, are likely to be able to access the information they require without having to ask for help.
- 39** Comprehensive feedback is provided to customers in a number of ways. Reports on performance, results of surveys and local initiatives are posted on the website and included in the newsletter. Information specific to younger people is also included on the MyPad<sup>10</sup> website and a newsletter dedicated to older people includes information they will be interested in. Performance information is broken down into the seven office areas. Quarterly reports with other local interest articles and information are displayed in the local housing office and distributed to all known local tenant and resident groups. These approaches mean customers are generally kept well informed.

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<sup>10</sup> MyPad is a TGHC website specifically designed for young people.

## How good is the service?

- 40 There is a Customer Charter which contains a comprehensive suite of service standards, but performance monitoring and reporting against them is underdeveloped. Standards have been reviewed in the last 12 months with service users and some, such as the length of time taken to respond to a report of ASB, are monitored. Not all, however, are measurable, measured or reported to the Board or the Performance committee. As a result, TGHC and its customers will not know what level of performance is being achieved
- 41 TGHC has mixed performance in managing complaints. It is making it easier for customers to complain but is not responding quickly to all of them. The company encourages complaints by publicising the system and making it easy to use. As a result, 'step' 1 complaints increased from 270 in 2006/07 to 397 in 2007/08. These are dealt with at the first point of contact but recorded to capture learning. Step 2 (formal) complaints, however, have fallen from 588 in 2006/07 to 423 in 2007/08 and step 3 complaints (Chief Executive review) have also fallen from 43 in 2006/07 to 37 in 2007/08. This suggests that complaints are being resolved at an earlier stage. The company captures learning from individual complaints and produces quarterly and six-monthly performance reports which include analysis of trends and reports of changes made to address problems. This means most of the problems highlighted by complaints are addressed and acted upon in terms of changes to systems and working practices.
- 42 However, the company is not responding quickly to all complaints, satisfaction levels are low and a small but significant number of complainants have to go to the Ombudsman service in order to have their complaint settled. A low 65 per cent of step 2 complaints are resolved within the target of 20 working days and a further 17 per cent receive a holding letter. Although our review found the standard of responses to be satisfactory, only 53 per cent of complainants think their complaint was fairly treated and only 51 per cent feel the reply addressed the issue. Three of seven complaints to the Ombudsman in the second half of 2007/08 were settled locally once the Ombudsman service got involved, with two cases still under investigation. This means a significant number of customers do not have full confidence in current arrangements and following a detailed review TGHC intends to introduce new procedures in 2009.

- 43** Poor performance, however, in answering the telephone in the repairs call centre has only recently improved. These are freephone calls and make up a third of all calls to the company. Additional staff were employed in October 2008 and the computer system was upgraded in November, which has resulted in improvements. Less than 5 per cent of calls were abandoned and 74 per cent answered within 60 seconds during the first two weeks in November and the time taken to register a repair reduced from a high of nine minutes to just over four minutes. Problems began when TGHC moved to its new offices and inherited a new telephone system in November 2007. This was further impacted in March 2008 when diagnostic software and direct appointments were introduced because this increased the length of each call. Performance has fluctuated over the last year, but 17 per cent of calls were abandoned before the customer selected a service and a further 16 per cent afterwards. Monthly monitoring also indicates that worst performance was 30 per cent of calls answered within 60 seconds in one month with the best performance at 79 per cent of calls in another month.. This means that, although the situation is beginning to improve and alternative reporting methods are also available, most customers who have reported a repair during the past year have had to wait too long to get through and this may have led to some repairs, including those for vulnerable people, going unreported.

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### Diversity

- 44** In 2005, we found that there were marginally more strengths than weaknesses in this area. TGHC had worked hard to address previous weaknesses and could have done little more in the time available. Equalities and diversity, however, are areas where the cultural effects of changes in policy and procedure can take some time to impact on outcomes. For this reason, many of the changes had yet to be fully felt at the time of the last inspection. Appropriate systems were in place to ensure that longer-term improvement would take place.
- 45** This is now an area of significant strength for the company. It meets its statutory obligations and has assessed the impact of its policies and procedures on vulnerable groups. TGHC has a good understanding of the profile and needs of its customers, uses this information to adapt the way services are delivered, has robust monitoring arrangements to identify potential barriers to access and provides additional support to vulnerable people. The company actively seeks out minority views and constantly monitors the diversity of customers involved in developing and delivering services. It also deals effectively with hate crime. There are, however, a number of weaknesses in procedures and the company has had little success in improving the diversity of the workforces of its partners.
- 46** Equal opportunities and diversity are strongly promoted by TGHC. There is a clear framework to develop this area and provide leadership. A Corporate Equalities Plan 2007/10 and a number of equality schemes and policies map out how the company intends to operate and improve. Performance is managed and monitored by a company equality group and overseen by a subcommittee of the Board. These arrangements help to translate the company's value of 'embracing equality – valuing difference' into action.

## How good is the service?

- 47 The company meets its statutory obligations and is taking action to ensure it can deliver services to diverse communities. Equality Impact Assessments have been carried out on all policies, procedures and services. TGHC follows the Commission for Racial Equality's code of practice on racial equality in housing and tackles harassment on the basis of the Code of Practice for Social Landlords. It complies with Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government (externally validated), and is currently working towards the new Equality Standard Framework. All staff and partners undertake equality and diversity training. Some staff also receive specialist training, for example around issues such as the protection of vulnerable adults and children and recognising domestic violence. Employees also have access to an electronic diversity resource that provides information about the various diverse communities in Gateshead and their needs and preferences. This means TGHC is equipped to identify and respond to the needs of different individuals and communities.
- 48 Strong monitoring arrangements are in place. An equalities and diversity monitoring framework has been introduced, including a comprehensive annual report reflecting on progress made. Performance against objectives in the Corporate Equalities Plan is regularly monitored and performance in most areas is monitored on the basis of diverse customer groups. For example, key satisfaction surveys, like the one for decent homes, break down responses by ethnicity, disability and age and trends are monitored to explore differential service delivery and its impact for these groups. TGHC benchmarks this data and reports it regularly to corporate and senior management teams, the Council and the Board. It is also displayed on the website. This means TGHC is able to identify and react to potential barriers to accessing services and customers and stakeholders can also see what progress is being made.
- 49 TGHC has a good understanding of the needs of its customers. It has a profile of 100 per cent of tenants in terms of age, disability and communication preferences. In addition, tenants are asked to volunteer information on their faith and sexuality although only a low number of tenants have responded. New tenants' profiles are added and existing ones refreshed at all available opportunities, including during annual tenancy visits. The information is used for operational and strategic planning and to ensure communication is tailored to meet needs and preferences. For example it has supported targeted work on rent arrears and tenancy turnover among young people and people from BME communities which have helped reduce instances of BME tenancies lasting less than one year from 20 per cent in 2006/07 to 10.8 per cent in 2007/08. At an operational level, repair job tickets and information for surveyors and liaison officers during improvement works include customers' communication requirements and information is provided to 658 tenants in alternative formats, including large print, audio and community languages.
- 50 The way TGHC engages customers during improvement works illustrates its robust approach. For example, all leaflets and brochures are presented in large print as standard and carry straplines about community language translations. Survey interviews are carried out using 'smiley face' flash cards which take account of language and literacy difficulties as well as visual impairments. There is also a standard checklist to ensure that any meetings and events are arranged in level access buildings with circulation space for wheelchairs, portable hearing loops and

they do not conflict with faith festivals. This helps staff to respect and meet the needs and sensitivities of all customer groups.

- 51** Vulnerable people receive a range of support to access and sustain tenancies. This covers all client groups and meets different levels of need. At the more intensive levels for example, TGHC customers access floating support provided by the Council to help refugees, young people leaving care and people escaping domestic violence. At a lower level, new tenancy officers work with all new tenants for up to 12 months to ensure they receive the advice and support needed to be confident in managing their tenancies. At an even lower level, tenants are offered advice and assistance on any housing matter, help in completing application forms, and support to develop some basic but necessary living skills, for example training on how to change a plug or how to put up a shelf. Examples of support include: a handbook adapted for customers with learning disabilities; a dedicated young persons' housing officer providing advice and assistance with applications and rehousing for the under 25s; furnished tenancies offered to tenants on demand; support to help vulnerable people to bid for properties; the single gateway scheme to help people who are, or at risk of, being excluded from social housing.
- 52** This support is having an impact in helping those who otherwise would have difficulties sustaining a tenancy. The number of young persons' tenancies lasting less than one year reduced from 94 or 41.6 per cent in 2006/07 to 42 or 18.8 per cent in 2007/08. Since April 2007 25 of the 30 care leavers housed by the company are still in their tenancies. Also, 24 people who were at risk of being excluded because of poor tenancy histories were successfully re-housed in 2007/08.
- 53** TGHC actively pursues the views of minority groups to ensure they have the opportunity to contribute to the way services are developed. A Disabled People's Housing Forum and a Visually Impaired Forum meet regularly and two conferences have been held specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender customers. Drop-in sessions have been introduced for people living in sheltered schemes and, following work with the Gateshead Muslim Society and Gateshead Visible Ethnic Minority Support Group, local surgeries have been introduced to canvass the views of minority community groups. A number of changes have been introduced as a result of this work, such as changes to the grounds maintenance service agreement, more accessible central heating controls and a strobe light and vibrating smoke alarm for those with a hearing impairment. Groups have also contributed to the development of service standards and amendments to documents such as the tenancy agreement. This means services have been improved as a result of the input of diverse customer groups.
- 54** TGHC monitors how representative people are who get involved in managing the business. Tenants are involved in a variety of ways. Of the 456 active tenants on the involvement database, over 5 per cent are from BME communities and 30 per cent have a disability or impairment. Young people are less well represented and the company has embarked on a number of initiatives to engage them, including visiting community organisations, Gateshead youth assembly and 'power' breakfast meetings in primary and secondary schools. It is too early to assess the full impact of these initiatives.

## How good is the service?

- 55** TGHC has responded positively to 2008 survey results that show some people remain less satisfied than others with services. People from minority communities and young people are less satisfied with services than tenants generally. For example, only 78 per cent of BME tenants and 90 per cent of young people are satisfied with services overall compared to 96 per cent of all tenants. Tenants with a disability and older tenants are more satisfied. Every BME customer who responded to the annual satisfaction survey was invited to a focus group or to attend BME surgeries and the BME forum. The resulting discussions led to a number of outcomes for BME customers including action to rectify individual issues, for example concerning repairs, encouraged more people to become involved and established regular drop in sessions. To be more relevant for young people, TGHC has developed a specific website, Mypad, for young people with information and opportunities to comment on services. Hyperlinks take users to properties that are available to rent. In addition to TGHC's normal publication routes, the site is listed in a local young person's publication, the 'Crack'. Although still lower than satisfaction across all tenant groups, young people's satisfaction has increased, with the gap around overall service delivery reducing from 8 per cent in 2007 to 5 per cent in 2008. The full impact will be assessed by a repeat survey in 2009.
- 56** TGHC has used its influence with partners to provide support to initiatives which improve community cohesion. Its Community Fund is based on a £50,000 per annum contribution from the company and further cash and in kind contributions from the three partner contractors (totalling £190,000 in 2007/08). Community groups with links to estates can bid for small amounts for funding or assistance to run a project which has community development aims. To date, the fund has supported a range of projects including the purchase of equipment for several community centres and residents' groups serving its estates and has funded the planting of a community garden.
- 57** The company has an effective response to hate crime. Working as part of a multi-agency group, TGHC has developed a strategy against hate crime and harassment. It has also contributed to updating the Gateshead community cohesion strategy and signed up to the Equality North East Business against Bigotry campaign. All housing offices are reporting centres, there are clear policies and procedures in place to deal with incidents and all front line staff have received training. Victims are referred to a range of agencies providing early intervention support, refuge or safe house accommodation and dedicated fast track court arrangements. Through the multi-agency agreement, support is provided both to the victim and the perpetrator. Recognising this willingness to take action, more reports are being made. In 2007/08 there were 26 breaches of tenancy conditions for domestic violence and ten racist incidents were reported. In the first eight months of 2008/09, these figures had risen to 37 domestic violence breaches and 16 racist, 4 homophobic and 1 transgender incident.

- 58** Equality and diversity outcomes from working with contractors, consultants and suppliers are mixed. TGHC requires them to comply with the law around equality, to promote equality, prevent discrimination and to train their workforce to understand their role. A strategic partner equality framework has been introduced which monitors performance against a range of indicators. This has succeeded in ensuring most (98 per cent at March 2008) partner staff receive equality and diversity training. However, despite targets to encourage contractors to recruit a workforce which reflects the local community, performance is weak. For example, the percentage of employees declaring a disability was 0.39 per cent in November 2008, compared to a target of 1.65 per cent against a local population of 30 per cent. Profiles by gender and ethnicity are equally unrepresentative. This means that strategic partners are not reflecting TGHC's level of commitment to equality and diversity or setting a good example. It also means the company is unable to advertise, for example, same-sex repair visits because it is unlikely to be able to meet demand for a response from female operatives.
- 59** There are also other weaknesses in arrangements. For example, operatives responding to out-of-hours emergencies are not provided with details of customer vulnerabilities or communication requirements. Complaints are not currently monitored on the basis of diversity strands as the database where complaints are currently recorded does not have this facility. This weakness is recognised and will be rectified when planned new arrangements are introduced in 2009. Until they are addressed, current services are less responsive than they could be and TGHC cannot explore trends in complaints made by vulnerable groups.

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### Stock investment and asset management

#### Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 60** In 2005, we found that arrangements to deliver improvements and planned works remained sound and there were marginally more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The company's approach to investment planning was generally robust. There were some weaknesses in the stock condition database.
- 61** In this inspection, we found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. TGHC has a robust asset management plan developed with the Council. Improvement work is well managed, customer-focused and high quality. There is significant Council investment, over and above the decent homes programme, to improve sustainability. There is still uncertainty, however, around the long-term future of some properties.

## How good is the service?

- 62** There is a robust strategic basis for asset management planning. The improvement programme was developed on the basis of a full survey of all multi-storey blocks, an audit of all stock against the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and a 45 per cent survey of a representative sample of the remaining stock. This is supplemented by a 100 per cent survey prior to each phase of works and actual costs have not deviated significantly from those originally forecast. TGHC's asset management strategy (2008/13) was developed jointly with the Council to complement the housing revenue account business plan and support the sustainable community strategy. It aims to achieve and maintain decency, to respond to customer priorities and promote estate sustainability. It is supported by a repairs strategy and a strategy for tackling difficult to sustain properties. Plans provide clear guidelines for investment.
- 63** There has been significant investment in the housing stock, in addition to funding to achieve the decent homes standard. Over £6.2 million has been spent, for example, on converting unpopular bedsits into larger flats, replacing lifts, refurbishing communal areas and installing digital television aerials. Grants have also been secured to bring gas supplies to 140 properties, leaving only 16 without access to a gas main. The problem of poor quality sheltered housing is being tackled, with two schemes demolished and conversion work<sup>11</sup> due next year on several others. Over the next five years, £40 million of prudential borrowing will support sustainability improvements and adaptations to bring properties into compliance with the Disability Discrimination legislation. The company is also adopting some radical solutions, such as the demolition of 94 non-traditional properties on one estate and their replacement with new homes offering a better mix of type and tenure. This reduces the amount of undesirable, hard to let stock.
- 64** Environmental upgrading plays a significant part in making improvement works sustainable. Five pilot schemes are complete and a further 19 are either in development or underway, using 5 per cent of the decent homes budget. Specialist support is provided by landscape architects but the content of schemes is largely determined via estate-wide consultation carried out by local task groups. Hardened verges, planting schemes, new fencing and soft landscaping are typical and help make the estates more attractive places to live.

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<sup>11</sup> Where schemes are considered to be sustainable but where the work was significantly more extensive than could have been done using DHS funds.

- 65** The Gateshead Standard of improvement works agreed with customers is higher than the Government's decent homes standard. Leaseholders are also offered the opportunity to have it done at a reasonable rate, with signposting to low cost loan schemes. Replacement doors are fitted to all properties. Additional action is taken to improve energy efficiency, with high efficiency boilers, focal electric fires and thermostatic valves fitted as standard and advice provided on how to get the best from heating systems. Cavity wall and loft insulation is done where possible and thermal render is used on non-traditional properties<sup>12</sup>. This has increased average SAP ratings from 61 in 2006/07 to 69 by the end of 2007/08, saved around £1.2 million on fuel bills and reduced CO2 emissions by 7,000 tonnes. The company has also taken an ecological approach to delivering the programme, where practicable. For example, on one estate, roof designs and proximity to a park presented opportunities for roosting bats so TGHC engaged an ecologist to assess the likelihood that improvements might disturb any wildlife habitats. This led to the installation of bat vent tiles during roof repair works.
- 66** Improvement work is well managed. The programme is prioritised on basis of estates which require the most work being done first, with internal and external improvements delivered in a single package. Performance management is strong, with a key performance indicator group reviewing performance regularly and exploring the background to any performance problems. This has helped improve performance, for example, on the time the contractor spends in each property, which has reduced from ten weeks in 2006/07 to eight weeks in 2008/09. There are also several examples of poor performance being addressed by close daily contact between client and contractors. This approach means the programme is progressing on target and within budget. Over 7,000 properties have been improved and 79 per cent of the stock met the decency standard by March 2008.
- 67** The programme is delivered in a customer-focused way. A compact is in place which outlines TGHC's commitments. Teams of liaison officers have specific responsibility for discrete elements of the process. This ensures customers receive sufficient advance notice of surveys and work due, opportunities to make informed choices about their fittings, finishes and kitchen layouts and have daily contact with a named liaison officer throughout the work period. Vulnerable customers are identified in advance and get additional support to pack and move furniture. All customers are provided with dust sheets and a waste disposal scheme, in conjunction with the Council, allows them to have any unwanted items removed free of charge from their homes during the fortnight before work begins. Issues such as decanting, refusals and complaints are appropriately managed and snagging lists are provided to customers to indicate clearly what work is outstanding and when it will be done. Homestyle and Homebonus vouchers are hand delivered seven days after handover to help customers meet the costs of redecorating. This approach has contributed to high and improving satisfaction levels of 99 per cent, compared to 91 per cent in 2007/08<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Cost of the energy efficiency measures was £2.428 million and the company contributed £631,499 towards these measures - approximately 26 per cent.

<sup>13</sup> including 98.7 per cent satisfaction with information provided in choices pack, 97.6 per cent with product choices, 95.3 per cent with notice given, 96.5 per cent with liaison officer preparation, 91.6 per cent with contractor tidiness, 97.4 per cent with contractor conduct, 92 per cent with being kept informed of progress, 92 per cent that illnesses were taken into consideration, 91.4 per cent that concerns raised were dealt with, 99 per cent with the products installed.

## How good is the service?

- 68** The company also has a robust approach to more routine asset management functions. Appropriate cyclical maintenance programmes are in place for annual lift maintenance, Legionella testing, electrical testing and painting. This helps ensure services are kept in a safe and working condition. TGHC complies with its legal duties around the management of asbestos. It has an electronic register of asbestos risks, which is updated whenever surveys are carried out or if asbestos is removed or deteriorates. Asbestos surveys are carried out on every domestic property before improvement or void works begin. Communal areas of all sheltered schemes and blocks of flats have also been surveyed and there is a forward surveying strategy to ensure any deterioration is tracked and managed. An asbestos policy is in place and clear instructions have been given to contractors about identification and removal. Appropriate training has been provided to staff and contractors. Specialist subcontractors are used for removal. Asbestos awareness leaflets are provided for customers in void and improvement packs. This approach means that risks are being effectively managed.
- 69** There are, however, some weaknesses in the systems which support asset management. For example, although this has not impacted significantly on operational programming, there is currently no functioning asset management database in use. Data is held on 70 per cent of the stock and this is in the process of being uploaded on to a new database, but this can not yet be used for business planning, modelling or reporting because it is incomplete. Asbestos data is also held on a separate database that is not linked to the housing computer system. This means that the company is not able to transfer asbestos information onto repairs job tickets. The contractor is required to check the database (via the internet) on every occasion before it sends an operative to a job and this increases the risks in this area.
- 70** Poor forecasting has led TGHC to install new gas fires in properties where they have subsequently had to be removed. The clay linings in the chimneys of most of its traditionally built houses are deteriorating to the point where the only solution is a costly flue lining to ensure hazardous gases are expelled if a gas fire is to be retained in the property. TGHC has now deleted the option of gas from the choices it offers customers during improvement works for this reason. Over the programme to date, however, it has removed 365 (of 1,627) newly installed fires which have subsequently failed flow tests. Failure to forecast the problem has cost £171,915 to date and could cost up to a further £592,500, in addition to the reputational cost of removing nearly-new fires from customers' homes.
- 71** There are no plans in place to ensure important electrical work is always carried out. Of the 435 refusals to date (6.1 per cent), 207 have required rewiring work. This has not been done and no plans are in place to do it. Although residual circuit breakers are installed, even where rewires are refused, there is the potential for outdated electrical installations to be in use for up to five years until the next electrical test takes place, often in the homes of older and more vulnerable customers.

- 72** A significant amount of work is still required to ensure the communal areas of multi-storey flats and sheltered schemes are fully DDA compliant. Work has been done on several schemes and part of the Council's prudential borrowing includes £4.65 million for DDA compliance. A further £9 million is required bring all low and medium rise flats into compliance, however, and decisions have yet to be taken about whether this can be justified, in business terms, because it is likely to include installing lifts in blocks with very small numbers of properties. As a result, residents and visitors with mobility issues may continue not to be able to make easy use of the Council's housing stock.
- 73** There is still an element of uncertainty about the long-term future of some multi-storey blocks and ten sheltered schemes. Work on these has been postponed until the end of the programme. Although customers have been kept informed about this, some vulnerable customers continue to live in poor conditions, including 16 people using shared bathing facilities in one sheltered scheme.

### Responsive repairs

- 74** In 2005, we found that although performance was improving, there remained more weaknesses than strengths in how the service was delivered and managed.
- 75** In this inspection, we found that strengths are now balanced with weaknesses. Most repairs are done by appointment and generally completed to a standard that satisfies customers. However, there are weaknesses in the repairs ordering process and some other practices are inefficient.
- 76** Most arrangements for ordering and carrying out repairs are robust. The tenants' handbook explains clearly who is responsible for which repairs. A call centre is open from 8.00am to 8.00pm on weekdays and on Saturday mornings and repairs can also be reported on line or at housing offices. Staff use computer software to help them correctly identify the repair required and make an immediate appointment, which is then confirmed in writing. Performance in making and keeping appointments is better than average, at 96.3 per cent between April and end of September 2008. This helps demonstrate that systems generally ensure the correct repair is ordered and is done at the customer's convenience.
- 77** Repairs are generally completed within target timescales and on the first visit. Appropriate response targets<sup>14</sup> are set for each category of repair. In the first half of 2008/09, 99.35 per cent of urgent works, 99.59 per cent of routine repairs and 97.64 per cent of planned repairs were completed within target times, although performance on emergency repairs was weaker, with only 98.47 per cent completed against a target of 99 per cent. Over 98.5 per cent of jobs were also completed at the first visit, largely because operatives are empowered to carry out small scale variations to the work ordered, if required. This level of performance is a significant improvement on the previous year and has resulted in reasonable customer satisfaction levels of 93 per cent.

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<sup>14</sup> 24-hour for emergencies, 3 days for urgent works, 20 days for routine works and 40 days for planned works

## How good is the service?

- 78** There are weaknesses in repairs ordering. For example, follow-up work and some weather-dependent external works do not generate an appointment letter so customers have nothing to remind them when contractors will call. The out-of-hours emergency service does not identify any special customer needs or vulnerabilities when it calls operatives out. Call centre staff also have no means of checking precisely what improvement works are due or whether fittings are still under warranty when a customer reports a repair which means that there is a risk that costly work may be ordered unnecessarily.
- 79** Some other current practices are inefficient . For example:
- doing too many repairs on an emergency or urgent basis, rather than as routine works;<sup>15</sup>
  - not negotiating a cost reduction with the contractor for batching repairs;
  - not using hand held computers to improve the efficiency of stores ordering;
  - not monitoring the level of variation orders to understand trends; and
  - not ensuring optimum use is made of multi-skilling to prevent repeat visits to complete a repair.

These are missed opportunities to improve efficiency and value for money.

## Empty (void) property repairs

- 80** In 2005, we found that although performance on the speed of void repairs was improving, there remained marginally more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Property standards were variable and performance management was not comprehensive.
- 81** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a clear re-let standard, properties are repaired to a high standard and the time taken to re-let them is reducing. Action is also being taken to make estates more sustainable and reduce the number of properties becoming empty. Repair costs for empty properties, however, remain high and only limited use is made of back to back lets.
- 82** Empty properties are of a high quality when they are let. Those visited during this inspection were all clean and in good repair. TGHC has revised its re-let standard with customers. The accessible new standard has been in use since August 2008. It is pictorial and clearly outlines both what the customer can expect and what his/her responsibilities will be if s/he takes on the property. Customer satisfaction levels have also increased, from 89 per cent in 2007/08 and early 2008/09 to over 95 per cent since the new standard was implemented.

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<sup>15</sup> In 2007/08 the ratio was 26:24:50 emergency: urgent: routine and 25:21:54 in 2008/09. Good practice suggests a balance of 10:20:70.

- 83** The sustainability of estates is improving with action taken to address difficult to let properties when they become empty. Empty properties on estates with a turnover of over 13 per cent are targeted for additional work when they become empty, such as decorating. Prospective customers are also offered inducements to accept the property including longer move-in periods and tailored furniture packages. Void levels and rent loss have fluctuated<sup>16</sup> over the past four years but difficult to let stock has reduced from 20 per cent of voids in 2005 to 6.8 per cent in 2008 and cumulative void rent loss to October 2008/09 was 1.6 per cent.
- 84** TGHC's speed in carrying out empty property repairs and its average repair costs have improved and are better than average for Metropolitan councils. Properties were empty for an average of 38 calendar days in 2007/08, falling to 36.5 in the first two quarters of 2008/09. Only half of this period, however, was due to the repair process (19.6 days in 2007/08 and 18.8 days to date this year), with the remainder being the result of a slow lettings process. Failure to improve more quickly has been due to the fact that a significant proportion of empty properties are brought up to the decent homes standard while they are empty. Performance on these major works voids has only improved from 49 days in 2007/08 to 43 days for the year to the end of October 2008 and average costs on them have been consistently high at over £8,000, compared to an average of £2,000 for minor works voids. High standards account for the high costs.
- 85** Only limited use is made of 'back to back' lets. The work is done and the property let before the first tenancy ends, allowing the new tenancy to begin on the same day as the old one ends, without any void rent loss. The company does between 70 and 80 of these per year and it has not considered how to increase this number in order to bring average turnaround times down and reduce void rent loss.

### Gas servicing

- 86** In 2005, we found more strengths than weaknesses in this area because the company had continued to put measures in place to ensure improving performance. Although there remained some weaknesses in performance management and reporting, managers did respond quickly to feedback and immediately improved processes.
- 87** Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses in this area. Most properties have a valid gas safety certificate. Robust arrangements are in place to address problems of access. However, little feedback is collected from customers and there are some weaknesses in procedures.
- 88** Most properties have valid gas safety certificates. There are 107 properties without one (0.57 per cent of the serviceable stock), of which 89 have been outstanding for less than three months and the remaining 18 for between three and six months. Risk is minimised by carrying out servicing whenever tenancies change hands and the work is always done in the presence of the new customer who signs for the safety certificate. All solid fuel appliances have also been serviced within the past year.

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<sup>16</sup> Ranging from 1936 and 1600 empty properties losing between 2.1 to 1.7 per cent of the annual rent roll

## How good is the service?

- 89 The procedure for ensuring entry for servicing is robust. Action begins six to eight weeks before the certificate expires, with accessible appointment times being offered by local engineers. A 'quick access squad' of three engineers then uses over-lock stickers and carries out abandonment checks if access has not been gained by the anniversary date. A long legal process to gain entry using possession proceedings has very recently been replaced by the use of magistrates' court warrants, although this procedure was so new at the time of the inspection that it had not yet impacted significantly on performance. Service interval programmers are used if customers regularly refuse to allow access for servicing (78 are currently in use). These are designed to be easily understood by customers with sight or hearing problems and prompt customers with chaotic lifestyles or those who do not want to allow access to make contact, without cutting off their supply.
- 90 Appropriate arrangements are in place to make sure gas installations are safe. TGHC employs two quality auditors to carry out random checks on 10 per cent of servicing work and 2 per cent of improvement scheme installation work and they also deal with any complaints about gas repairs or servicing. In addition, the contractor employs its own auditors to monitor the work of engineers. Over 13,000 carbon monoxide detectors have been installed during improvement works, alongside smoke alarms. There is also a reasonable procedure in place to deal with situations where customers are forced to sleep temporarily in rooms with fixed, open-flued appliances, involving clear referral protocols to ensure needs are assessed and reviewed and the appliance serviced regularly throughout the temporary period. These arrangements mean customers can be confident that potential risks are being minimised.
- 91 There are, however, a number of weaknesses in gas servicing. For example:
- the use of large print and plain language is not extended to letters threatening legal action;
  - cards left by contractors do not carry straplines in commonly read community languages;
  - the contractor is not provided with information on the customer's vulnerabilities before visiting;
  - the need for servicing is only flagged on the housing computer system after the gas safety certificate expires so opportunities are missed for staff to make an appointment if a customer makes contact about other issues;
  - TGHC does not check with contractors to ensure follow up repair work is carried out; and
  - customer satisfaction data is not used effectively to improve the service, with a return rate of only 2 per cent to determine satisfaction levels of 94.4 per cent and no evidence that feedback has informed service improvement.

This means TGHC has missed opportunities to improve efficiency and customer focus.

### Aids and adaptations

- 92** In 2005, we found that the service had many positive elements and had been shaped around meeting users' needs. The service being delivered was generally good within the narrow constraints of the company's responsibilities.
- 93** In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. TGHC's only responsibility for aids and adaptations is during improvement programmes. The Council determines policy, assesses need and provides the service in all other circumstances. Adaptations managed by the company are provided quickly and customers are generally satisfied with them. However, there are weaknesses in performance management.
- 94** The service is accessible. A guide to the service, issued in large print as standard and carrying community language straplines, was launched in August 2008. This is available on the website, in improvement programme information packs and provided at sign up. It clearly defines what adaptations are available, what happens at each stage of the process and outlines service standards. Our mystery shopping calls to TGHC were dealt with effectively and sympathetically, with each stage of the process clearly explained. This means that sufficient information is available to help people use the service.
- 95** The elements of the service delivered by TGHC are well managed. Two part-time occupational therapists are seconded from the Council. They respond to referrals from resident liaison officers prior to improvements, when kitchen and bathroom planning helps identify mobility problems or bathing needs. The Council then funds the materials and equipment required to do the work and the labour is funded by the company. Average waiting times for major adaptations in the first two quarters of 2008/09 were 8.4 weeks<sup>17</sup> and for minor works were 0.9 weeks. This compares with council performance of 10.6 weeks for major adaptations and one week for minor work in private sector properties. There was 100 per cent customer satisfaction<sup>18</sup> with the overall process during this period. This demonstrates that properties are adapted quickly, and to the customer's satisfaction, in order to help them continue to live independently.
- 96** There remain weaknesses in performance monitoring in this area. Waiting times are only monitored from the point of approval of the occupational therapy assessment, so the monitoring does not identify delays waiting for the occupational therapist to visit and make a decision. Satisfaction is also only measured at the end of the process, so although customers are invited to comment on each stage, this does not have the immediacy for them which it would have if surveys were done at 'pinch points' in the process. This is a missed opportunity to diagnose elements of the process which could be improved.

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<sup>17</sup> Compared with 10.6 weeks in 07/08

<sup>18</sup> 98.2 per cent with the installation process, 100 per cent with the standard of information received and 100 per cent with the behaviour of operatives

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### Housing income management

- 97** In 2005, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The company continued to manage rent accounts and current tenant arrears effectively. In response to the previous inspection report criticisms it had reviewed intervention on debt advice and worked hard to cement relationships with the voluntary sector. There were some weaknesses, however, in the management of former tenant arrears.
- 98** In this inspection, we found this area to be a strength. Rent collection levels have further risen without excessive use of legal action and good relationships have been established with the Courts and other local agencies. An emphasis is placed on preventative measures with staff trained in benefit and debt advice. The company has recently run an award-winning arrears prevention campaign. However the recovery of former tenants' arrears has not been prioritised, despite it being a recommendation from the previous inspection report and collection levels remain low. Customer satisfaction is not monitored.
- 99** Rent collection is improving and is above the average for similar organisations. From 96.9 per cent of rent due collected in 2006/07 collection rates have increased to 97.3 per cent in 2007/08 and 97.4 per cent for the half year 2008/09. This compares to 97.9 per cent being achieved by top performing organisations in quarter 1 of 2008/09. Overall the average level of arrears for each tenant has reduced from £128.77 to £113.09, and the overall proportion of tenants in arrears has reduced from 54.1 per cent to 39.2 per cent. Present performance represents the best ever seen in Gateshead and has been achieved without the excessive use of legal action.
- 100** TGHC has a strong emphasis on improving income management through preventative work. It is easy for tenants in arrears to get advice on benefits and debts. All staff dealing with tenants in arrears have had basic welfare rights and debt advice training. Staff have easy referral routes to specialist debt and welfare rights advice and tenants can make an appointment to see an independent advisor at any housing office. The service has secured additional income for tenants amounting to £76,770 in additional benefits in 2007/08. A high profile award-winning campaign to warn tenants of the dangers of not paying their rent was recently run and led to a reduction in arrears. Tenants whose account is not in arrears are also entered into a quarterly prize draw. This will help tenants meet their financial obligations and reduce poverty.
- 101** The company contributes to wider anti-poverty initiatives in the borough. As well as financially supporting and promoting the use of advice agencies in the borough, it is working with the Council's financial inclusion group to extend the use of credit unions. TGHC's web site has a link to the Council's online benefit entitlement calculator and staff have read-only access to council tax and housing benefit IT systems. Front line staff are trained to verify claimant income to speed up processing housing benefit claims. Money-saving initiatives are also promoted among tenants such as applications for Warmzone grants to improve energy efficiency and low cost weekly paid household insurance. Staff attend the local court

users' group and have promoted their eviction protocol with the courts and other agencies. Partners are positive about TGHC's contribution to reducing poverty levels in the borough.

## How good is the service?

- 102** The diversity of tenants in arrears and the impact of recovery action on diverse communities are closely monitored and have been used to shape services. Those under 25 and BME tenants have higher than average arrears and higher proportions of them are in arrears. To address this, new tenants, often young and increasingly from a BME background, have specialist support workers and are offered services to make their tenancy more sustainable through, for example, furniture packages. This has led to some success with a reduction in the number of tenancies failing within the first year.<sup>19</sup>
- 103** It is easy for tenants to pay their rent and TGHC has promoted the most efficient means of payment. Tenants can pay their rent at a variety of locations such as local housing offices, council offices, online and over the telephone and at shops offering pay point facilities. Direct debit is actively promoted through prize draws, the tenants' newsletter and other places as well as at the letting interview. This is proving effective with the use of direct debit increasing from 11.7 per cent of tenants at the last inspection in 2005 to 16.8 per cent currently. This range of payment options helps to reduce arrears for tenants and the cost of collection for the landlord.
- 104** The importance of paying rent is emphasised to tenants at every opportunity. Housing benefit entitlements are calculated for prospective tenants at the letting interview so they know from the very start how much rent they will have to pay. Benefit and debt advice is also offered. Rent statements and other correspondence to tenants about rent are clear and friendly, encouraging tenants to contact their housing officer if they are experiencing difficulties.
- 105** A higher quality service and performance justify above average costs. Benchmarking data shows costs per property for arrears management to be slightly over ALMO's median figure at £44 per property. However, rent collection rates are increasing and possession proceedings and arrears are falling. Savings have been achieved through housing staff undertaking court advocacy work and making applications for possession proceedings on line. The award-winning arrears prevention campaign improved arrears collection rates by a factor of seven when compared to the cost of the campaign. In addition to helping tenants keep their tenancies, high performance attracts bonuses through the management agreement with an additional £200,000 awarded for additional income collected in 2006/07. This in turn can be used to fund additional staff to further improve services.
- 106** TGHC has not improved the collection of former tenants' arrears. It has only recently acted to address this and targets are not challenging. For the last three years the amount of former tenants' arrears collected has remained broadly consistent and the use of external debt collection agencies has only recently been trialled. Despite low performance, this year's collection target is less than the previous year's performance. Former tenants' arrears have reduced mainly due to the write off of significant amounts of arrears<sup>20</sup> and the reduction in tenancy turnover.<sup>21</sup> Of new debt created, only around a third is collected. A robust approach to collection should include former tenants' arrears as this maximises income and sends out clear messages to tenants that this is taken seriously.

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<sup>19</sup> Failing tenancies for under 25s reduced from 41.6 per cent to 18.8 per cent and for BME tenancies from 20.0 per cent to 10.8 per cent

<sup>20</sup> Nearly £2 million (around 3 per cent of the total rent roll) in 2007/08

<sup>21</sup> New former tenant debt has reduced from £1,014,965 in 2005/06 to £765,894 in 2006/07

- 107** TGHC does not survey customers to gather levels of satisfaction with the service and identify areas in need of improvement. This is a missed opportunity to monitor performance and improve services.

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### Resident involvement

- 108** In 2005, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in the service. TGHC had moved forward significantly in this area and had addressed most of the problems identified previously. Positive outcomes were evident in both resident involvement and community development, although the pace of change in providing training to boost capacity had been slow and there was still some work to do to ensure the company effectively engaged with hard to reach communities.
- 109** In this inspection, we found resident involvement to be a strength. A variety of ways to involve tenants have been developed and it is easy for tenants to make their opinions known. Levels of satisfaction with resident involvement are above average and there are numerous examples of changes to services following the involvement of tenants. Tenants are encouraged to influence how local budgets on environmental improvements are spent. However electronic means of involvement are underdeveloped and customers are not closely involved in the management of the decent homes programme.
- 110** TGHC demonstrates a commitment to involve tenants in all services and the strategic direction of the company. Tenants have agreed a clear Customer Involvement Strategy with the company with the twin objectives of tenants influencing all aspects of the service and to build communities. This is supplemented by the Resident Agreement, updated in early 2008, outlining the company's commitment to tenants and what tenants can expect in involvement. Five tenants sit on the Board and other tenants are involved in shaping services through service improvement groups. One estate is managed through an estate management board made up of local residents making decisions within an agreed framework about the management of their area. Customers are able to influence the way services are delivered.
- 111** Customers can get involved in a number of different ways, each requiring varying levels of commitment. They are outlined in 'A simple guide to getting involved' with descriptions of the degree of influence each has on the company and the degree of commitment required to properly fulfil each role. Opportunities to become involved are advertised in newsletters and on the website as well as staff directly encouraging tenants to take part in such activities as estate walkabouts. Although only around a quarter of all properties are covered by formal tenants' associations, TGHC encourages people to be involved in whatever way they can. Results of involvement are reported back in newsletters through the 'You said, We did', section. This gives assurance to tenants that their opinions are valued and acted upon. Customer satisfaction with opportunities to become involved is demonstrated by the 95 per cent satisfaction in TGHC's own annual survey.

## How good is the service?

- 112** TGHC actively pursues the views of minority groups to ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute to the way services are developed. Good use is made of existing forums such as the disabled people's housing forum and a forum for people who are visually impaired. Two conferences have been held specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender customers. Drop-in sessions have been introduced for people living in sheltered schemes and, following work with the Gateshead Muslim Society and Gateshead Visible Ethnic Minority Support Group, local surgeries have been introduced to capture the views of minority community groups. Staff take opportunities to attend events for young people such as Gateshead College's 'freshers week'. Meetings are held in accessible venues and care is taken to ensure it is easy for people to attend with transport and other facilities such as crèches provided. Publicity and material feature diverse images and one Board member is from a BME background. A number of changes have been introduced as a result of this work, such as changes to the grounds maintenance service agreement and more accessible central heating controls.
- 113** TGHC monitors how representative the people are who get involved in managing the business. Tenants are involved in a variety of ways including as Board members, through participating in estate tours, representing tenants on service improvement groups, membership of an editorial panel and through carrying out mystery shopping. Of the 456 active tenants on the involvement database, over 5 per cent are from BME communities and 30 per cent have a disability or impairment. Young people are less well represented and the company has embarked on a number of different ways to engage them including visiting community organisations, Gateshead youth assembly and 'power' breakfast meetings in primary and secondary schools. TGHC has developed a specific website for young people and is listed in a local publication, the 'Crack', for young people with links to the MyPad web page and hyperlinked to properties that are available to rent. Although still less than that found with older tenants, the gap in young people's satisfaction with services and general tenants has narrowed significantly across all the areas surveyed. For example, dissatisfaction with services overall were 8 per cent less in 2007 reducing to 5 per cent in 2008.
- 114** Resident involvement is well resourced and directed into areas which tenants have previously stated are important to them. The ALMO's resident involvement section has a staff of four and a budget for events of £40,000. Costs broadly mirror those of other ALMOs and TGHC achieves high levels of satisfaction for this area of its work. Tenants have an annual conference where they set the agenda and debate the areas of service most important to them, currently, ASB, the local environment and repairs. These areas are appropriately resourced with tenants having an opportunity to influence decisions on how money is spent to address local issues such as diversionary projects for young people or local environmental improvements. This has given tenants a sense of ownership of their local area and a belief that their involvement will make a difference.

- 115** Resident involvement is an integral part of the duties of all staff and targets are set around this. The central resident involvement team arrange centralised formal resident activities while estate-based staff focus on local involvement. Estate-based staff have targets set for involving tenants on such things as estate walkabouts and making sure the results are reported in local newsletters. Staff time is directed into areas which tenants have identified as priorities and this targeting is having some success with falling levels of reported ASB and generally good estate environments. The integration of involvement activity into estate staff's day-to-day work has given it relevance for tenants who may not wish to be involved in more formal centralised structures such as Board membership.
- 116** Tenants involved in participation activity are appropriately supported in their roles. An assessment of any skills gap is made for new tenant board directors and any necessary training put in place. Training is tailored to meet specific issues such as value for money and contractor selection. New members are mentored by an experienced Board member. At a broader level, courses are offered to volunteers, for example, on how to run effective meetings in order to get what you need from them. Courses are also provided for young people on life skills and being involved in your community. Tenants are helped to develop confidence and make an effective contribution to the running of their homes and local areas.
- 117** A significant number of changes to services have come from tenant involvement. As well as tenants directing spends from environmental and community funds to local improvement schemes, their involvement in service improvement groups has led to a large number of changes such as the Homebonus and Homestyle schemes. Changes such as this will give confidence to other tenants that becoming involved is worthwhile.
- 118** The use of electronic means of participation is underdeveloped. The company has a well developed website and has also designed a page on Facebook specifically for young people which is closely monitored for the appropriateness of comments. This is a good start in providing access through media that young people are familiar with. However, this could be further developed by using electronic or text as a means of communication which may encourage more tenants to become involved in, for example, commenting on services.
- 119** Customers are involved in some but not all levels of delivery of the decent homes programme. Customers have been involved in the selection of partner contractors. They have also been involved in the selection of product ranges, such as fires, tiles, the development of standards and Homestyle and Homebonus proposals. However, there is no customer involvement in the core group or any of the working groups which manage the DHS partnership. This is a missed opportunity to ensure full participation in key decision-making.

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### Tenancy and estate management

#### Tenancy Management

- 120** In 2005, we found that the company had worked hard to address previous criticisms and was now making progress in dealing with cases. There were significantly more strengths than weaknesses in how this service was delivered.
- 121** This is now an area of strength. TGHC and other agencies are effectively managing ASB through a variety of approaches. An emphasis has been placed on preventative measures and the use of non-legal means to resolve disputes. The service would be further strengthened with the periodic sampling of satisfaction and general levels of satisfaction with the management of ASB are low.
- 122** Tenants are made aware of their rights and responsibilities at the earliest possible opportunity. At the lettings interview tenants are shown a video outlining their rights and responsibilities as a tenant including clear company messages about paying rent and being a good neighbour. All new tenants are given an introductory tenancy and the implications of this are clearly explained. New tenants are visited twice in the first year of their tenancy. Introductory tenancies are only converted to secure tenancies following careful liaison with other sections dealing with rent arrears and ASB. There is a clear protocol in place for their termination and tenants are advised of their right to appeal. Falling levels of ASB and rising levels of tenancy sustainability indicate that introductory tenancies are having a positive impact.
- 123** An emphasis has been placed on supporting people in the early days of their tenancy and more generally in sustaining tenancies. The lettings interview is used to determine if tenants need any additional support and good links with other agencies ensure that a package of support is already in place for the most vulnerable tenants, for example, care leavers. Dedicated workers are in place to support young people and other means of sustaining tenancies such as furniture packages are also available. TGHC has had some success in maintaining tenancies with the number of new tenancies failing in their first year falling from 12.1 per cent in 2006/07 to 8.9 per cent in 2007/08. This fall is even greater among the young and tenants from a BME background. Reducing tenancy turnover helps to build sustainable communities and more stable lives particularly for those tenants who are vulnerable.
- 124** Tenants are encouraged to develop their life skills. An extensive range of training courses are available to all tenants. The courses include DIY, part funded by a national DIY chain, and other life skills such as healthy living. Outcomes from training courses are closely monitored. External funding for some courses has been secured from Skills for Life. Training could be further improved by strengthening links to employment prospects through joint working with statutory and voluntary sector agencies and local employers. Tenants have easy access to training which will add value to their tenancy.

- 125** TGHC's response to ASB is effective. A wide range of measures is used to deal with and prevent ASB in the borough. In an attempt to avoid further entrenching social exclusion, TGHC has an emphasis on avoiding formal legal action as means to deal with ASB. In partnership with Safer Gateshead Partnership, a graded response to ASB has been agreed and promoted with the courts and police. Acceptable behaviour contracts and estate agreements are successfully used in several areas. Local estate budgets are used to improve security, remove poor design features and organise events to divert young people away from causing a nuisance. A dedicated young persons' officer works in schools and develops diversionary activities in partnership with others. An example is the campaign with a local rugby team offering free tickets to young people and their families who take part in Respect<sup>22</sup> workshops. The number of incidents reported has reduced significantly. Youth disorder incidents fell by around 60 per cent in the last year and reports of ASB reduced over the same period from 1,734 to 706 cases. Other indicators of ASB have also fallen with the number of illegal bonfires and wheelie bins being set on fire having also fallen by 70 per cent. This has happened without the excessive use of legal action with only one non-crime related ASBO applied for in the last year. TGHC's estates have become safer and pleasanter areas to live.
- 126** TGHC has comprehensive and up-to-date policies and procedures to address ASB and hate crime. The ASB and hate crime reporting policy and procedure was revised in September 2008. The procedures incorporate all the features needed to combat problems and make close links with wider Council community safety initiatives. The procedure has an emphasis on supporting victims. Action plans to deal with cases are agreed with complainants, recognising sensitivities such as offering same-sex interviews. Complainants are kept up-to-date with progress on their case. Guidelines are clear and ensure cases are dealt with consistently.
- 127** It is easy for tenants to report ASB and complaints are generally dealt with effectively and promptly. TGHC are signatories to the Respect Standard for Housing Management and tenants are actively encouraged to report ASB. Comprehensive information on how the company will deal with ASB is available on the website and in leaflets. ASB can be reported over the phone, in person or via an email and an out-of-hours service is available. There are clear service standards in place with emergency cases being dealt with within 24 hours. A well-resourced, specialist ASB section has been created to deal with serious or difficult cases. Cases are well managed through an electronic management system and appropriately dealt with. Responding in this manner gives tenants confidence that their complaints will be taken seriously and effectively dealt with.

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<sup>22</sup> Respect is a government campaign to intervene and tackle underlying causes of anti-social behaviour.

## How good is the service?

- 128** TGHC has established itself as a key partner in the multi-agency approach to dealing with ASB and other hate crime in the borough. TGHC sits on all relevant panels such as MAPPA<sup>23</sup> and CDRP<sup>24</sup>. Other agencies such as the police and the local Safer Gateshead Partnership confirm that TGHC plays a key role as an active partner. There is good local liaison between agencies and numerous examples of where a coordinated local approach has led to successful outcomes without reverting to legal action. These include working with the fire brigade to reduce the number of fires and fire-related injuries and a multi-agency approach with the police, education and social services to deal with ASB on a specific estate. A coordinated approach is providing more effective and longer lasting results.
- 129** An innovative approach is being pioneered to support tenants experiencing difficulty maintaining their tenancies or at risk of losing their tenancy through anti-social behaviour. Working with the local primary care trust, a community psychiatric nurse works on a part time secondment with the company taking referrals from estate-based staff of tenants who maybe experiencing mental health problems. This has identified and addressed previously unmet need and helped vulnerable tenants access services are get the support they need. This is a good example of agencies working together to support vulnerable people and sustain communities.
- 130** More robust measures are needed to assess the true quality of the ASB service. The service is currently measured across a number of indicators which include: satisfactory resolutions which have not involved legal action; cases responded to within service standards; customers who considered TGHC's intervention had made a positive difference and the percentage of customers satisfied with the service received. However, the approach would be strengthened by the periodic sampling of satisfaction while TGHC actively deals with the complaint rather than at the end when the complaint has been resolved. Satisfaction levels as to how complaints about ASB are dealt with are relatively low. Only 61 per cent of customers are satisfied with the outcome from their complaint, a reduction on previous years. While this score is broadly consistent with that of other social housing providers a significant number of tenants' expectations have not been met.
- 131** TGHC has a well publicised but recent commitment to deal with hate crime. Hate crime recording only commenced in April 2008 and up to November, 24 cases had been reported, the bulk of these involve racial harassment. Local housing offices are hate crime reporting centres and publicity in offices and through specific events such as, 'Not in my Neighbourhood Week' has encouraged complaints. However, although planned, there are presently no targets to increase reports of hate crime. Events to encourage reporting have been organised with other agencies, such as a publicity campaign and a strategy to launch multi-agency action against hate crime and harassment Frontline employees have received training on how to respond to complaints. A sympathetic and effective response to hate crime complaints will encourage others to come forward.

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<sup>23</sup> Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements dealing with high risk offenders.

<sup>24</sup> Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership

## Estate Management

- 132** In 2005, we found some weaknesses in this area. Estate maintenance standards were variable and the company did not have adequate systems in place to drive them up to a consistently high quality.
- 133** In this inspection, we found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. High standards of estate management and maintenance have been maintained. A tour of estates and common areas of flats found high levels of cleaning and maintenance. Area-based staff are encouraged to spend time out on their estates. However, bulky waste was evident in a small number of gardens and tenants and leaseholders do not have the opportunity to routinely comment on the standards of caretaking. The Council continues to have responsibility for grounds maintenance, the warden service and street cleaning.
- 134** TGHC is maintaining a visible presence on its estates. Front line staff are encouraged to spend time getting out and about. Each officer now spends between 15 and 45 per cent more time on estates in 2008 than in 2004. Officers have become better known and are available to see and take reports of ASB and environmental problems. A programme of annual visits to tenants has been introduced beginning by targeting all tenants over 75. Access to and confidence in services is improved by staff having a high and visible profile on the estates.
- 135** Estate profiles have been used effectively to identify estates showing signs of instability and to put in place remedial measures. Using a matrix of indicators, TGHC has a good understanding of the sustainability of each estate. The total stock has been divided up into estates of around 200 homes and a detailed profile compiled. Monitoring identifies estates which maybe showing signs of stress such as high tenancy turnover, increasing ASB or increasing rent arrears levels. To address the decline, an estate action plan is put in place incorporating a series of measures such as improved security, estate clean ups and local lettings schemes. Its impact on sustainability is closely measured through the estate profile and if necessary further action taken. All estates previously identified as showing signs of being unsustainable are now more stable and fewer are categorised as at risk.
- 136** Estate environment has been identified as a priority and services have been arranged around this. Tenants have been informed of the estate management and cleaning standards they can expect through articles in newsletters and notices in common areas of flats. Area managers report quarterly on their neighbourhoods covering a number of indicators that reflect the living experience in their area. Estate Officers carry out tours on each estate on a minimum bi-monthly cycle, with the dates of the tours widely publicised in housing offices, community centres and various other locations to encourage involvement from local tenants. About 60 per cent of tours are accompanied by tenants. As a result, tenant satisfaction in 2008 with the appearance and maintenance of their estate has increased from 78 per cent in 2007 to 81 per cent.

## How good is the service?

- 137** TGHC works well with the Council and tenants to maintain estates and common areas. The service level agreement with the Council for estate maintenance was reviewed with tenants in 2007 and is monitored on a monthly basis. TGHC and the Council have a jointly funded neighbourhood pride budget for estate improvements. Estates are generally well kept with few signs of litter or graffiti. Common areas of flats are similarly attractive and secure with high standards of caretaking. Empty properties are generally secured without the use of metal shutters and the gardens are kept clean. There are a number of budgets and incentives for tenants to help them maintain their environment and four neighbourhood agreements are in place. TGHC funds small public arts projects and play facilities and other budgets are available to tenants to spend on estate improvements. The annual garden competition is growing in popularity and a 'garden tools' library is available for tenants to borrow equipment. A gardening service is provided for 700 tenants who cannot maintain their own garden. TGHC is responding to tenants' priorities.
- 138** Tenants are not routinely surveyed on standards of cleaning and maintenance of common areas. Tenants are only asked about the standards of general caretaking on an annual basis as part of a general satisfaction survey. This is too infrequent and is a missed opportunity to get early feedback on standards.
- 139** There is an inconsistency in TGHC's approach to dealing with bulky waste in a small number of gardens. While at least one tenant has been evicted for failing to maintain their garden, tours of estates showed a small number of other gardens with bulky waste for which no action had been taken. The recent introduction by the Council of a charge for the collection of bulk rubbish has also led to a problem with collection of bulky waste and TGHC has yet to put any measures in place to deal with this. An inconsistency of approach undermines tenants' confidence in the landlord's stated resolve to improve their local environment.

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## Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 140** In 2005, we found that the company had continued to improve and there were more strengths than weaknesses. Eighty per cent of leaseholders said that service charges were good value and 89 per cent were satisfied with services offered<sup>25</sup>. Time taken to invoice leaseholders also fell from 25 to 23 weeks in 2004/05.
- 141** There continue to be considerably more strengths than weaknesses. The service has further improved from the previous inspection with clearly defined service standards, rising levels of satisfaction and a well established leaseholder forum which has implemented a number of service improvements. However, satisfaction with cleaning and grounds maintenance services is not routinely gathered, a buy back policy has not been agreed with the Council and the management fee does not cover the cost of the service. The administration of right to buy, responsibility for home ownership policies and the setting of service charges has remained the responsibility of the Council.

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<sup>25</sup> Tenant and leaseholder survey January 2005.

- 142** There is a clear resolve to continue improving the service. A greater range of services are now offered such as low cost weekly paid home contents insurance and gas servicing, although take-up of the latter has been low because, if problems are identified, the customer has to find a reliable engineer elsewhere to carry out follow-up work. A detailed set of service standards has been agreed through the leaseholder forum, some of which are of great importance to leaseholders; such as actual costs of recharges to leaseholders for services being within 5 per cent of estimates. Leaseholder satisfaction levels are increasing across the board with significant improvements in some areas. For example, satisfaction with cleaning standards has improved very significantly from 34 per cent in 2007 to 80 per cent in 2008, over the same period satisfaction with grounds maintenance increased from 55 to 66 per cent. These are based on an annual survey. However, this is too infrequent to monitor cleaning standards on an ongoing basis as it may be a long time from the point when the service deteriorates. A clear focus is driving up the standard and choice of services.
- 143** Collection rates of service charges are high and all charges have been depooled. For 2007/08 collection rates totalled 97.4 per cent of total charges and TGHC is on track to meet this year's target of 97.5 per cent. The approach to collecting service charge arrears follows the same principles as that for rent arrears. It is easy to make a payment, with as many payment options open to leaseholders as that for rent payers. High collection rates have resulted in money being available to invest in services.
- 144** Appropriate arrangements are in place for statutory consultation on improvement and maintenance works. A formal procedure for the consultation around section 20<sup>26</sup> and for improvement works in excess of £250 is in place. TGHC is consulting with leaseholders on varying their lease to make the annual servicing of all gas appliances mandatory. On all correspondence, TGHC advises leaseholders of their right to appeal to the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal but has yet to have any formal disputes with leaseholders where they have not wanted, or agreed to proposed works. Leaseholders are aware of their rights and responsibilities.
- 145** Information for leaseholders is good. Every quarter all leaseholders are sent a schedule of repairs completed in the communal areas of their blocks. Leaseholders are asked to comment on the quality of the repair and if they are liable for their recharge. This gives leaseholders the opportunity not only to have their comments heard but also to make sure they are not mistakenly charged for any work undertaken. A plain English and user-friendly leaseholders' guide has been provided for all leaseholders and those who are thinking of buying their property. The guide clearly sets out the rights and responsibilities of leaseholders and encourages people to carefully consider the implications of buying their own home. There is a regular leaseholder newsletter detailing such things as cleaning standards and how leaseholders can complain. All leaseholders have been provided with a useful handbook and a lot of information is available on TGHC's website. Leaseholders are clearly informed of their rights and obligations and are kept up-to-date with developments in the service.

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<sup>26</sup> Section 20 of the Housing Act 1985 as amended by The Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 places a requirement on landlords to consult, in a prescribed format, leaseholders before undertaking major works of repair or improvement, or entering into long-term contracts for the provision of service.

## How good is the service?

- 146** TGHC has responded to the concerns and complaints of leaseholders. A large number of complaints were made about the standard of repairs to communal areas and that some repairs were being incorrectly recharged to leaseholders. Leaseholders are now issued with a quarterly schedule of repairs completed in their block, so they can comment on the quality of the repair and receive prompt notification if they are liable for any recharge. A low cost repairs service has been introduced for leaseholders over the age of 50, where charges are only made for the materials used. Shaping services around customers' needs and complaints will improve levels of satisfaction.
- 147** TGHC has a good understanding of how its costs compare to others. It is benchmarking its costs against those of other providers in order to understand how its costs compare. Results show above average costs, above average collection rates and very high levels of leaseholder satisfaction. From 31 other leasehold service providers, TGHC are 2<sup>nd</sup> in satisfaction levels, 9<sup>th</sup> for total service charge collection, and 17<sup>th</sup> for total costs of service. Above average costs reflect the above average service being provided.
- 148** Preparations for recharging leaseholders for decent homes works are not yet comprehensive. Most leaseholders will shortly receive large bills for decent homes works and collection rates for major repairs works are low. A financial package to assist leaseholders has been agreed with the Council including interest free loans over a five year period. However, it is likely that some leaseholders will still struggle to meet their commitments and the Council has not yet agreed a buy back policy. Without a buy back policy and in a depressed housing market, in which it will be difficult to sell leases, TGHC may be facing the prospect of applying for the forfeiture of leases. The financial package to assist leaseholders also consists of a charge against the property for those leaseholders who are in severe financial difficulty and are unable to pay their major works bills.
- 149** Although service charges have been depooled, tenants continue to subsidise leaseholders. The current management fee only covers around a half of the total cost of the service with the remainder being subsidised by the HRA<sup>27</sup>. Leaseholders have agreed that the management fee should be increased to cover all of the costs with phased increases over three years, despite the total increase being less than some annual rent rises. It will not be until 2010/11 that the fee reflects the cost of the service by which time the HRA will have subsidised leaseholders by a further £48,000.

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## Allocations and lettings

- 150** In 2005, we found that the company had responded positively to all previous weaknesses and that the system was now transparent, with more strengths than weaknesses. TGHC had also been very proactive in working with the Council to widely consult on and develop its planned choice-based lettings (CBL) system which it was to introduce in April 2006. Although it was beginning to tackle low demand

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<sup>27</sup> Housing Revenue Account. Councils who own property have a duty to maintain a Housing Revenue Account separate from the General Fund account to record income and expenditure relating to housing. The majority of expenditure incurred on housing is met through tenant rents.

issues, its performance on voids remained poor, with some inflexible and inconsistent procedures.

- 151** In this inspection, we found that strengths now considerably outweigh weaknesses. An effective choice-based lettings service has been introduced. Support is available for applicants when bidding for properties and a new tenancy support service has led to an improvement in tenancy sustainability. Few properties are in low demand and most properties attract a considerable number of offers. There is a transparency to the lettings process and local lettings policies have been used to address specific issues. Although falling, there is potential to reduce re-let times further. Few incentives are offered to vacate property too big for a tenant's current housing need. The Council retains responsibility for the allocations policy and homelessness.
- 152** The allocations policy is transparent and accessible. It describes clearly how properties are allocated and how an applicant's entitlement is calculated. The policy has been shaped around the needs of service users and includes a system of appeals against allocation decisions. Publicity material is readily available. Letters to applicants are in plain English and contain all the information an applicant needs to guide them through the system. People in acute housing need, around half of allocations, are offered properties quickly. Applicants understand how properties are allocated and why another applicant may get a property instead of them.
- 153** It is easy to access the choice-based lettings service and care is taken to ensure that all sections of the community are using the service. Staff are available to give advice until 8.00pm weekdays and Saturday mornings. Applicants can bid online, via text or telephone as well as at a housing office. Vulnerable people have a member of staff allocated to them to bid on their behalf and applicants not actively bidding are routinely contacted to see if they need any help. Applicants from BME backgrounds appear to have no difficulty in accessing the scheme. Around 4.3 per cent of the Housing Register and 4.8 per cent of bidders are from BME communities and 4.95 per cent of lettings go to BME applicants. It is easy for all sections of the community to bid for affordable housing.
- 154** The introduction of choice-based lettings has been a success. Most properties attract on average around 200 bids each and some considerably more. Successful applicants report high levels of satisfaction with the system and other agencies working in the field are also similarly impressed. The number of voids fell from 475 in April 2007 to 326 in April 2008 and membership of the scheme has grown from 7,438 applicants to 10,048 in April 2008. Around 58 per cent of properties are accepted after the first offer compared to only 30 per cent two years ago. More people are happy with the opportunity to choose where to live and to exercise more control over the process.
- 155** Available properties are widely advertised and well presented with clear descriptions of the type of property. Properties available for rent are advertised in a variety of locations: the Homechoice website; all housing offices; through staff and the Homechoice newsletter. Housing association properties and, for a small fee, privately rented properties are also advertised in the newsletter. The most popular means of bidding is through the website but the Homechoice newsletter is also sent to around 6,000 applicants each week. Applicants can easily see which properties are available and their likelihood of success in bidding for them.

## How good is the service?

- 156** The cost of delivering the service when compared to other similar services appears high. A costs comparison with benchmarked data shows the service to be broadly comparable with other services, however, when compared with an ALMO benchmarking club the service is the most expensive. Several attempts to reduce costs have been made including comparing the cheapest and most effective means of advertising properties, selling of advertising space in Homechoice to accredited private landlords and the increased use of e-access to services. Positive outcomes such as improved tenancy sustainability, falling void numbers and high customer satisfaction make it good value for money.
- 157** TGHC has good working relations with the Council and other housing providers in the region. TGHC contributes to initiatives such as a regionalised choice-based lettings scheme and has pioneered the introduction of an IT-based sub-regional exchange scheme. Lessons are learned from membership of the northern CBL benchmarking club. Cross authority working is also in place to develop specialist supported housing schemes where there is insufficient demand in one borough. TGHC helps the Council to discharge its statutory duties to the homeless and generally provides good assistance when dealing with emergency housing and other cases such as those being referred through MAPPA. All emergency re-housing cases have a dedicated case worker and other cases such as those seeking re-housing for medical reasons are dealt with appropriately. People living in the most acute housing need are dealt with efficiently and quickly receive appropriate offers.
- 158** Local lettings schemes have been used effectively to address local problems. Four local lettings schemes have been used to maintain the sustainability of a specific area or multi-storey block. In one local lettings plan this has involved imposing a minimum age bar but only after an assessment of what alternative housing is available for young people in the area. Local lettings schemes have also been part of a package of measures designed to address specific problems such as ASB. Schemes are operated for a fixed period following which a careful assessment of their impact is made and if appropriate the area comes back under mainstream lettings policy. Using local lettings policy in this time limited manner helps sustain an area and reduces the risk of ASB.
- 159** In conjunction with concerned agencies and applicants the allocations policy has recently been comprehensively reviewed. A new policy which more accurately reflects housing need is to be introduced with four rather than the present two bands of housing need. The policy will also incorporate a number of features to make better use of the existing stock. This includes incentives for tenants of family type properties to move to smaller accommodation which better reflects their housing need. Other improvements include a number of measures to avoid people having to be admitted into emergency homelessness accommodation and the scheme better reflects the CLG's<sup>28</sup> Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation.

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<sup>28</sup>

The department for Communities and Local Government

**160** Some weaknesses remain. These include:

- few incentives are currently offered to encourage people to downsize to smaller accommodation, although to address this issue the Council has recently agreed to introduce such a scheme;
- some photographs of empty properties are slow in getting into the newsletter, taking around three weeks from the point the outgoing tenant first gives notice or from the point the company becomes aware that the property is empty;
- properties still take on average nearly two offers to let, which is high for a choice-based system. The main reason given for refusing properties is because of their location; and
- some descriptions of properties are unclear, particularly bed sits with shared facilities.

Reducing the time taken to advertise properties and the number of offers required for a successful let will further help reduce re-let times.

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### Supported and Sheltered Housing

**161** In 2005, we found that there were more weaknesses than strengths in this area. TGHC had not moved forward significantly in terms of service provision, although the older persons' strategy had begun to impact. Relationships with support providers and residents were strong and there was flexibility around provision. However, the company had not considered the impact of charging the economic cost of the warden service in sheltered accommodation, there were weaknesses in reporting on NASS<sup>29</sup> accommodation issues and also in advice given to furnished tenants.

**162** A number of improvements have been introduced in the service and strengths now outweigh remaining weaknesses. Good relationships with support services and residents have been maintained and standards of management and maintenance are high. Satisfaction levels among residents are high and the service is well resourced. However, not all schemes fully meet DDA requirements and some accommodation is in low demand with decisions awaited on the future of ten schemes. There has been no change in the management arrangements with the Council still providing housing-related support and TGHC maintaining the buildings.

**163** Visits to sheltered schemes found them to be attractive, well maintained and secure. Comments from the previous report about risk management systems have been addressed by using a 'red box' system which allows secure storage at each building of key documents such as fire risk assessments, Legionella testing information and asbestos surveys. Emergency Service partners and contractors have access to these boxes and can refer to them in emergencies. Vulnerable older persons' accommodation is now safer and more secure than it previously was.

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<sup>29</sup> National Asylum Support Service

## How good is the service?

- 164** Older persons' housing services are well resourced with a dedicated sheltered housing management team. A team of five staff including specialist sheltered estate officers has been introduced and works closely with the Council's elderly persons' services. The team have training specific to their area of work and a series of courses on POVA<sup>30</sup> is underway. TGHC is applying for Centre for Sheltered Housing accreditation and has already secured the elderly accommodation quality mark.
- 165** The service emphasises personal contact effectively. Officers accompany prospective tenants on initial viewings, and carry out follow up visits within six weeks. Estate tours are undertaken every two months at each scheme with a drop-in session an hour beforehand to allow tenants to ask any questions and identify areas of concern if they are not able to accompany the officer on the tour. Tenants of each scheme decide how to spend an annual allocation of funds to each scheme. The company has a full profile of all the tenants in sheltered accommodation and any special needs they may have. The profile is used to tailor services to meet individual needs such as residents needing more frequently visits. Support plans have been agreed with all residents. A handyperson service is also available for people to do small jobs work such as change light bulbs for only the cost of the materials. Tenants can easily access services and communities are encouraged to grow.
- 166** TGHC has maintained high levels of satisfaction among residents of sheltered housing. In 2008, 91 per cent of tenants said they were satisfied with services and 94 per cent said they were satisfied with ways to get involved with the service. The latter figure is a particular improvement from the previous year's figure of 75 per cent while the former reflects well established high levels of satisfaction. Everyone who said they were dissatisfied had a personal visit to follow up on the reasons for their dissatisfaction. As a result, action is taken to address individual concerns - this included redesigning an area to make it less attractive for youths to congregate, improving lighting and putting in a fence to prevent people using land as a short cut. New service standards have recently been introduced although no performance information has yet been fed back to tenants. The standards were developed by the Older Persons' Service Improvement Group and have been publicised in the bi annual 'Here and Now' newsletter delivered to every tenant over 50. High levels of satisfaction generally reflect good services which will help attract new tenants to schemes.

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<sup>30</sup> Protection of Vulnerable Adults

- 167** TGHC is taking action to address any identified high turnover and difficult to let property in its sheltered housing stock. Feedback from exit interviews and refusals is analysed to understand why schemes may be unpopular. Vacancies are now more widely advertised through the CBL scheme and changes are being made to properties. One scheme has been changed to provide extra care using DoH<sup>31</sup> funding and a programme is underway to either demolish or install an additional bedroom into unpopular one bedroom sheltered properties. In others action has been taken to make better use of accommodation such as introducing or extending local lettings policies, working with social services to use units for respite care or to facilitate hospital discharge, for example, as alternative accommodation while a patient is waiting for an adaptation to their home. These actions are having an impact, for example, the turnover of units in one scheme has fallen from 24 per cent in 2006/07 to 5 per cent in 2007/08. However, options appraisals have been carried out on ten schemes with the most issues and decisions have not yet been reached on the way forward. Sheltered housing schemes cannot sustain a large number of voids without it leading to an overall deterioration in the scheme; letting them more quickly and using the accommodation in partnership with other care agencies will help maintain the schemes.
- 168** Work is closely coordinated with the Council and other agencies. The supported tenancy forum is guided by a series of protocols such as for care leavers and the single gateway scheme to support people moving to independent living. TGHC enjoys a good relationship with support agencies and shares common aims and objectives. At a scheme level sheltered estate officers work closely with the Council's sheltered scheme officers to ensure a seamless, joined up service is provided to tenants. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and estate officers attend the six weekly meetings held by each scheme officer with their manager. A coordinated approach such as this is more likely to lead to desired outcomes than one where agencies are working in isolation.
- 169** Outcome targets are not yet in place for the sheltered housing estates team. Current targets are more process driven, such as completing accompanied visits in three days, follow up visits within six weeks and do not measure what outcomes the team are achieving such as increased tenant satisfaction and reducing voids. Presently the quality of work is not as closely measured as the quantity of it.
- 170** Not all schemes fully meet DDA requirements. This means that some people with mobility problems may experience difficulty is moving around part of the scheme or using some of its services. For examples lifts are not always big enough to allow wheelchair bound tenants to turn easily. However, there is a rolling programme of improvements, currently on track, over the next three years to ensure building are all brought up to the required standard.

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<sup>31</sup> Department of Health

## How good is the service?

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 171** In 2005, TGHC's understanding of VFM issues was improving as service reviews progressed but the company did not have a sophisticated approach to assessing unit costs or benchmarking. Repairs and improvements represented the largest proportion of the company's expenditure but TGHC's approach to VFM in these areas was still under development. The company had made progress in procurement, where both repairs and improvements had recently been the subject of Egan-based market testing.
- 172** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Generally, the quality of services is high and their costs are mid-range. There is a strong focus on value for money, with a clear strategic approach, training for managers and staff and a programme of improvement reviews. Good use is made of benchmarking. TGHC consistently exceeds its annual efficiency targets and is able to redirect savings into priority areas. However, service level agreements have not all been rigorously reviewed and a number of inefficient practices remain.

### How do costs compare?

- 173** Overall, the cost of services is mid-range. Some costs are higher than average and some are lower. For example, average weekly management costs per dwelling were just below average compared to 23 comparator metropolitan ALMOs at £15.43 in 2007/08 but average weekly repair costs of £15.46 were above average ranking 9th out of 22. Accommodation and IT costs are high, while accountancy and building cleaning costs are low. TGHC has a good understanding of most of its costs and how they compare to others and 92 per cent of customers consider that their rent represents good value for money.
- 174** The company now makes good use of benchmarking information and benchmarking clubs. It is a member of a range of national and local benchmarking clubs and in service areas where clubs do not currently exist, like resident involvement, it is working with other landlords to establish a suite of benchmarking indicators. This activity identified that the rent and income service, for example, had low resources which contributed to low levels of performance. As a result, the team has been increased in size and the service is improving. Visits are also made to other organisations where performance is strong in order to benchmark processes. For example, TGHC discussed the approach to financial inclusion with a local council and adopted many of its ideas in developing a new approach.

## How is value for money managed?

- 175** TGHC has a strong focus on delivering improved value for money. Clear leadership is provided and a robust framework has been put in place. A VFM service improvement group, with customer representation, oversees progress made against value for money and procurement strategies, it identifies where areas and processes should be investigated and identifies VFM opportunities. The group reports to the VFM and Audit Committee on its progress and a VFM officer provides capacity to coordinate and support VFM specific work and research. VFM implications are identified in all papers presented to the Board. Training on value for money has been provided for all TGHC managers, staff and active customers, based on a survey to establish baseline levels of understanding which will be repeated to capture the benefits realised. This approach is helping to ensure that VFM is becoming embedded into the way the company operates and that the issue has a high profile within the organisation.
- 176** A programme of VFM reviews has started to systematically examine prioritised business areas. By far the most significant is a review of procurement down the supply chain, which has led to streamlining of suppliers associated with the improvement programme which will deliver almost £10 million of efficiencies over the next three years. Other smaller scale reviews are also delivering improved VFM, such as an annual £40,000 efficiency savings from recruitment arrangements.
- 177** TGHC is exceeding its annual efficiency targets. In 2007/08 the overall efficiency gain was 3.78 per cent, exceeding the government target of 2.5 per cent and its own target of 3.22 per cent.. A further 3.56 per cent is forecast for 2008/09. Examples of efficiencies delivered include a remodelled office network resulting in £68,000 savings annually, re-tendering TGHC's insurance contract saving £45,000 in 2007/08 and re-negotiating agency rates to collect water rates on behalf of Northumbrian Water. As a result, TGHC is able to make a significant contribution towards the Council's annual efficiency statement and release funding for investment in front line services. In 2007/08 £1,095,000 savings were re-invested, providing additional resources for choice-based lettings, funding for a post dealing with ASB and additional posts within the Rent and Income teams.
- 178** TGHC is active and successful in attracting external funding to deliver improved services. Examples include £460,000 from Safer Stronger Community funding in 2006/07 and 2007/08 to improve the environment on six estates. Additional funding from the same source provided four additional members of staff to target ASB. Other examples include funding to reduce the impact of low-level criminal damage across Gateshead and a separate amount for a service to provide small jobs around the house free of charge for older customers. Most significant, is the funding levered in via the partnership with Gateshead Warmzone, which part funds insulation and energy efficiency advice work amounting to £1.5 million and income maximisation work securing over £740,000 in additional welfare benefit income for tenants.

## How good is the service?

**179** There are a range of other positive actions that are delivering improved value for money. Examples include:

- transferring partner staff to monthly paid salaries with incentives to multiskill and reduce the need for more than one operative to call;
- introducing an appointment-based system that allows home working for all operatives;
- identifying preferred supplier partners able to supply all three contractors at a low cost and consistent quality; and
- rehousing 181 disabled people via HomeChoice between July 2007 and May 2008 into adapted housing, saving over £1.6 million in potential adaptation costs.

All these initiatives contribute to either improving services or getting the same standard of service at a lower cost.

**180** TGHC has made a reasonable decision in taking an estate by estate approach to home improvements. Improvements to small pockets of poorer quality non-traditional stock are incorporated into the wider programme of DHS works on estates. Although this leaves a small number of customers in poorer quality homes for longer, economies of scale are required to deliver everything in the Gateshead Standard. Early customer consultation on programming confirmed a preferred 'whole house', 'estate by estate' approach. The use of the sustainability matrix in prioritising programming has also meant that, if the standard of properties was sufficiently poor to be impacting on the estate's sustainability in terms of reduced demand for homes, the whole area has been improved early in the programme.

**181** In some areas, TGHC has chosen to spend more than average to improve quality. For example, it spends more than similar providers on office accommodation (the second highest expenditure in 2007/08, per property managed, of 22 benchmarked ALMOs). Although costs will fall in future as a result of the reduction in housing office numbers, they will remain above average. However, the benefits are clear. Visitors to offices have a very positive experience and improvements in the quality of the working environment for staff has contributed to increased staff morale, reduced absences and reduced staff turnover.

- 182** There is still a mixed picture in ensuring services provided by the Council provide value for money. Responsibility for grounds maintenance on estates, which costs over £1 million annually, has not been transferred to TGHC but it influenced a review of provision and secured an improved service for the same cost. Most of the support services provided by the Council under service level agreements have been reviewed and some, such as human resources advice and occupational health are now provided by external suppliers. In other areas, however, like financial services, existing agreements have been extended until resources are in place to undertake a meaningful review and in others, like building cleaning, reviews have involved only limited examination of comparative costs before the agreement has been extended with clearer and expanded specifications of the ALMO's requirements. There has been no VFM review or market testing of drainage repairs or gas servicing of non-domestic properties, despite the former being worth a significant sum<sup>32</sup>. This means TGHC cannot demonstrate that tenants are getting value for money in all areas.
- 183** Some inefficient practices remain in the way TGHC delivers its responsive repairs services. These include, for example, a high proportion of repairs undertaken as emergency or urgent and not monitoring the level of variations to repair orders. It may be possible to achieve better value for money for customers in these areas.

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<sup>32</sup> £593,000 in 2007/08.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

**184** In 2005, we found marginally more drivers than barriers to improvement in terms of track record. The company had focused on improving in the areas identified previously and had made significant progress in improving outcomes for customers, but it still had weaknesses in performance and it did not have an embedded focus on improving VFM over time.

**185** TGHC is now establishing a positive track record where strengths outweigh weaknesses. A wide range of changes have been introduced successfully. Performance has continued to improve along with customer satisfaction. The company continually outperforms its own stretching efficiency targets and reinvests savings in priority areas. However, in two areas, the effectiveness of actions is limited.

**186** Services have continued to improve across most of the organisation. These include improving access for customers, service delivery to diverse customers and achieving better value for money. In addition, the company has improved services that are customer priorities, such as tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB). Analysis of performance up to 30 September of 2008/09 shows that of 26 key indicators measured, 25 reflected improved performance over 2007/08, 22 achieving targets and with only one, average days to complete non-urgent repairs, where performance had deteriorated from the previous year. As a result, customer satisfaction is increasing. Provisional results from the 2008 Status tenant satisfaction survey show 11 of 16 indicators increasing and five remaining broadly the same.

**187** Homes and frontline services are improving. Improvements are wide-ranging and include:

- investing over £1 million a week to improve over 7,000 homes to a standard greater than the government's Decent Homes Standard;
- restructuring the office network including modernising offices at Wrekenton, Leam Lane and Felling and re-located Dunston, Teams and Whickham housing offices to a newly modernised access point at Dunston Activity Centre;
- introducing a freephone and appointments system for repairs as well as extending contact times and simplifying repairs categories;
- providing a broad range of involvement opportunities with over 400 customers now involved with service design and delivery;
- embedding equality across the company, achieving level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government;

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

- developing HomeChoice, the choice-based lettings system, in partnership with the Council to improve customer choice; and
- providing a mobile handyperson service that carries out a wide range of environmental and estate maintenance tasks, to all estates across Gateshead.

**188** Changes are having positive impacts. For example:

- non-decent council housing has fallen from 43 per cent of the stock in January 2004 to 20 per cent by April 2008. The company is on target to deliver 100 per cent decency by 2012;
- more responsive repairs are carried out within tight target times;
- reducing the level of current tenant rent arrears;
- tenancies failing within the first year of creation have fallen by around 68 per cent between 2003/04 and 2007/08;
- performance on all the elements of void turnaround time has improved – 63.3 calendar days in 2004/05 reduced to 38.4 days by 2007/08; and
- the sustainability of estates is improving<sup>33</sup>. The number of estates with two or more red lights has reduced over a year from 41 to 19 in September 2008.

**189** Some aspects of service provision have received national recognition. In 2007/08 TGHC was awarded 'Partnering Scheme of the Year' at the national Housing Excellence awards for the £1 million a week home improvement programme. Effective use of communication was also recognised in 2008 with the 'Rent arrears - don't let it end in tears' initiative and follow-up campaign winning the National Federation of ALMOs' award for the best use of communication. Other providers now come to TGHC to learn how to improve their services.

**190** Over the past three years TGHC has established a strong track record of improving efficiency. Efficiency savings of over £3 million have been achieved with funding redirected into front line services in line with customer priorities. The current year's target is forecast to be exceeded with significant savings being realised from the programme of improvement reviews particularly in relation to streamlining suppliers and materials for the DHS programme. This is forecast to deliver up to £10 million efficiency savings up to 2012.

**191** TGHC has worked with the Council to take some politically difficult decisions when required to do so. For example, it market tested all of its repair works, despite original plans only to market test 25 per cent and allow LES<sup>34</sup> to do the rest, on the basis of the same price. In order to support this decision, an independent review was carried out of the tendering process and the Council accepted its findings, despite the fact that this led to a significant reduction in the size of its direct services organisation. Similarly, the two organisations took on board advice that the award of the first DHS contract to LES without market testing was anti-competitive and all have now been fully market tested. Services are now provided at competitive rates.

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<sup>33</sup> As measured by an estate's matrix that monitors six 'risk' factors on estates, such as rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.

<sup>34</sup> Gateshead Council's direct labour organisation called Local Environmental Services.

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

192 However, in two areas only limited progress has been made. Both were covered by recommendations in the last inspection report and, unlike the other five, have not been fully addressed. Despite improving access to repairs services forming part of one recommendation, there have been problems accessing the service by telephone over the past year. This has taken a long time to resolve. In addition, although there have been changes to the way former tenant arrears are managed, the collection level remains low. Customers are not benefiting by the improvements expected.

**Table 1 Previous recommendations**

Recommendations	Progress
<b>R1</b> Review the effectiveness of current repair reporting processes and implement improvements in access, repairs diagnosis and the interpretation and use of data on repairs to drive service improvement.	Partially complete
<b>R2</b> Implement quality audit systems for ensuring voids reach a uniform and acceptable standard at the point of being ready for let and for ensuring gas servicing works are of an acceptable standard. Incorporate these into existing performance management and reporting systems.	Complete
<b>R3</b> Carry out a review of former tenant arrears recovery processes and an analysis of debt in management with a view to improving performance, performance management and performance reporting in this area.	Partially complete
<b>R4</b> Carry out a review of tenancy management procedures and strategies to ensure all gaps are filled, staff are involved in development and trained at implementation stages and appropriate performance management arrangements are in place to ensure quality (including in the area of ASB where procedures are thorough but strategy and performance management are less so).	Complete
<b>R5</b> Review its approach to external environmental maintenance, including negotiating a more active role in specifying and monitoring the quality of grounds maintenance on estates and enhancing its estate tours system.	Complete

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

Recommendations	Progress
<p><b>R6</b> Develop a more sophisticated approach to ensuring value for money by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing an understanding of costs in each service area,</li> <li>• benchmarking on cost and quality issues across all services and</li> <li>• ensuring reviews are prioritised on the basis of VFM; and</li> <li>• routinely reviewing the VFM impact of policies and initiatives introduced with a focus on improving VFM over time.</li> </ul>	Complete
<p><b>R7</b> Review with the Council the basis of charging for reciprocal services and the disaggregation of the management fee with a view to ensuring these are based on the actual costs of delivering services in future years.</p>	Complete

Audit Commission 2005

## How well does the service manage performance?

**193** In 2005, we found more drivers than barriers to improvement in this area. The company was developing a longer-term perspective in its planning, had clear and challenging high level plans which dovetailed with those of relevant partner organisations and it was beginning to develop efficiency plans. Some of its service level plans required review, however, and it had not challenged the Council in some key efficiency areas. There were arrangements to support continuous improvement, including strong leadership, sound high level performance management systems, learning from other organisations and appropriate relationships with the Council, but there were weaknesses in frontline performance management in some service areas.

**194** This is now an area of strength with significant drivers in place to improve performance. Planning and performance management arrangements are strong, including financial and risk management. There a number of effective mechanisms in place to drive improvement. The company is ambitious, open and willing to learn from others. However, there are still a number of areas of weakness, including measurement of service standards.

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

- 195** A clear strategic planning framework is in place. At the highest level is a robust Business Plan, with vision and mission statements, five key objectives and eight core values, all developed with stakeholders. Each service area has its own plan that sets out challenges for the year to come and makes clear links with corporate and service specific objectives. These feed down to individual annual appraisals, where objectives are linked closely to service and corporate plans. Online software displays the hierarchy of plans, with different viewing options available to all users. This allows users to see how their contribution fits with others and how they are contributing to higher level objectives.
- 196** Plans aim to improve the right things. A strong customer service strategy and action plan show how front line services will be further improved, including the development of a customer relationship management system to provide a better service at the first point of contact. A new customer service charter includes among other things more challenging response times to answer the telephone (15 seconds). A new compliments and complaints policy and procedure, including a more stretching target of ten days to respond, has also been approved by board and council and will be introduced in the 2009. This means weaknesses in frontline access have been recognised and are in the process of being addressed.
- 197** Working with the repairs partner, TGHC has clear plans in place to improve VFM on repairs. Sufficient data has been collected on the costs of doing work by appointment and negotiations are almost complete around adopting target costs for all repair and replacement work from January 2009. The partner will shortly also introduce electronic satisfaction surveys and stores ordering, using handheld technology and plans to send multi-skilled operatives on estate tours to do work immediately it is identified. These approaches should help improve efficiency in the delivery of repairs.
- 198** TGHC has plans to improve standards in its sheltered housing schemes. In partnership with the Council, it is working towards accreditation from the Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies. This requires it to meet ten minimum standards for service delivery, equality and diversity, independence and empowerment, collaboration and community development and the physical environment. A programme is also underway to introduce computer facilities for tenants in all sheltered schemes, with training provided by Age Concern. In addition, a programme of DDA improvements are to be completed in conjunction with DH works up to 2011/12 to ensure all sheltered schemes and communal areas are fully accessible. These are currently around 20 per cent complete. These plans should help bring standards in all schemes up to current legal requirements and modern standards within a reasonable timeframe.
- 199** TGHC has a strong performance management framework in place, supported by bespoke IT. Performance information is held on a web-based system which is accessible to all staff. This allows for comparisons over time and with recent benchmarking data. An officer has responsibility for overseeing the system and providing periodic quality assurance checks on a sample of data. As a result, TGHC has a very good understanding of how it is performing and managers can make informed decisions, based on reliable data, and accurately report progress to tenants and leaseholders.

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

- 200** TGHC has developed effective reciprocal mystery shopping arrangements with seven local housing organisations. Trained tenant inspectors of each of the seven organisations carry out reality checking with partner organisations, assessing for example how easy it is to access services or obtain information. This has a number of benefits including sharing training and experience, bringing consistency, enhancing tenants' knowledge of service delivery in other organisations and improving their capacity to influence future service development. Performance is managed and reported at appropriate intervals and levels. Corporate and senior management teams monitor performance monthly, focusing on any areas of concern and celebrating improvement.
- 201** Performance is managed and reported appropriately. Corporate and senior management teams review performance monthly, focusing on areas of concern and celebrating improvement. Performance is formally reported quarterly to the Board, performance committee and Gateshead Council as part of scrutiny arrangements. Information is also provided quarterly to tenants in a variety of ways, including the newsletter, website, and posters in local offices and distributed to local tenants and residents groups. This approach means that the board and Managers have information available to take informed decisions.
- 202** The company continues to develop its performance management arrangements. It has developed a range of new service indicators will give tenants and partners a better indication as to how the company is performing. For example, the percentage of repairs completed first time and the percentage of leasehold charges collected. In addition, new indicators are being introduced to measure progress in achieving value for money and to monitor the environmental impact of services provided. Performance of the repairs reporting centre is now being managed effectively. Team meetings consider breakdowns of lost calls and call answering times. There is random listening-in to calls by the centre manager to provide quality control. TGHC has a number of mechanisms to address under-performance and service improvement. These include:
- peer reviews where trained peers have carried out mini-inspections of particular service areas;
  - a programme of value for money reviews again addressing specific areas;
  - performance clinics established for a limited period of time to look at a specific area of business or performance indicator;
  - service improvement groups that include a number of service users addressing particular business areas; and
  - working with specialist consultants in particular areas, such as identifying procurement improvements.

These tools are driving improvements in many areas and are increasing customer satisfaction.

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

**203** A robust five year Medium-Term Financial Strategy, updated in May 2008, provides financial direction and allocates resources to priority service areas. There is a clear annual zero-based budget process in place, with devolved budgets to individual managers. Each budget holder receives monthly management accounts relevant to their budgets and these are closely monitored at various levels. Resourcing of improvement actions is assessed and included as part of the annual planning cycle. This helps ensure resources are closely aligned to services delivered.

**204** Risks in general are being well managed. There are two risk registers, one covering corporate risks and the other operational ones. Gas and asbestos risks are identified in the operational risk register with actions included to mitigate most of the risks posed. After assessing the likelihood and potential impact of the risk in each area, actions are identified to mitigate the risk.

**205** A strong learning culture has developed. TGHC welcomes scrutiny of its service provision to identify areas where it can improve. Examples of external review include a peer review of responsive repairs in 2006, led by external consultants who supported reviews of both the housing income management service and ASB service during 2007. Learning includes visits to and hosted visits from other high performing organisations such as Your Homes Newcastle, Kirklees Council, and Wearside Women in Need. These have helped to deliver service improvements for victims of domestic violence and to develop a gardening scheme for vulnerable older people.

E-learning for example covering diversity is an area of good practice TGHC shares with others. Partners also contribute towards learning, for example assisting with the design of the new complaints procedure. Between the DHS partners, there are examples of learning such as one's liaison officers shadowing the other two to bring down refusal rates on its schemes or promoting site safety.

**206** Complaints are being used as a source of improvement. TGHC has made it easy for customers to complain. Details are logged and examined periodically to identify any learning from individual complaints, common themes or trends. An analysis and evaluation report is produced periodically for the performance committee and the Board. For example, leaseholders are now sent a schedule of all repairs completed within their blocks' communal areas so they can comment on the quality of the repair and establish if they are liable for recharge.

**207** Some weaknesses remain in managing performance effectively. These include:

- performance against service standards is not comprehensively measured and reported;
- routine surveying of customers' opinions is not comprehensive, for example satisfaction with cleaning standards of communal areas or with the rent collection and allocations services;
- some target setting is not stretching, such as the target for ordering and keeping repair appointments; and
- the number and value of variations to repair orders is not measured.

A comprehensive picture of performance is not provided.

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

**208** There are weaknesses in corporate risk management around gas servicing. There is no clear scheme of delegation in place to outline where responsibility lies if there are failures in the policies or procedures in use, despite the fact that legal action was taken against the Council for gas-related weaknesses in non-domestic premises since the last inspection. Issues around gas servicing have not been highlighted as a training issue for Board directors or key staff at any point during the intervening period. Board directors may not realise the personal implications for them of failing to take appropriate action.

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

**209** In 2005, we found that there were more drivers than barriers in this area, with effective human resource and training policies in place and some success achieved in attracting inward investment. There remained a need to develop comprehensive IT and procurement strategies.

**210** In this inspection, we found that this is an area of strength. There are clear governance arrangements in place and strong leadership. Partnership working is effective, the company levers in significant additional funding and is involved in wider local issues such as regeneration and health. Human relations practices are reducing sickness rates and turnover, and helping to develop a dynamic and positive improvement culture. The company's financial position is healthy and the company is investing in training and development. Procurement arrangements are strong and TGHC is building its ICT capacity.

**211** TGHC has a clear governance structure headed by a Board of fifteen directors. Board meetings are businesslike and inclusive covering relevant strategic business issues with an appropriate degree of challenge before decisions are taken. More detailed business and scrutiny is delegated to the four committees; diversity and access, human resources, value for money and audit, and performance. There is a clear system of appraisal and performance review including training and development requirements for all Board members including the Chair. The Council has confidence in the senior management and the board of TGHC, providing ambition and bringing new thinking to areas such as customer involvement and financial inclusion. This confidence is reflected in the renewal of the management agreement for another five years from April 2008 and supporting the ALMO to secure developer accreditation with the Housing Corporation.

**212** TGHC has strong leadership both at Board and officer level setting clear direction, developing a strong performance framework and improving services with customer involvement. There are clear plans to develop the business over the medium term, for example by offering management services on an agency basis to other housing organisations with only small volumes of stock in the area and becoming involved in housing development. A strong performance and improvement culture is in place. Staff are proud to work for TGHC and feel empowered and encouraged to innovate. There are good working relations with virtually all stakeholders, including Gateshead strategic partnership, the Council, trade unions, other agencies and customers. This

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

provides an appropriate climate to change and improve the way services are delivered.

- 213** The company operates at an appropriate arm's length from the Council. Performance is monitored formally every quarter and reviewed annually. Relationships are open and honest and have matured since the ALMO was first established. The company is free to organise and deliver its services in the way it wants with general oversight by the Council.
- 214** TGHC is actively involved in the wider issues in Gateshead and the region. The Chief Executive is a member of the LAA Strategic Implementation Group and the Gateshead Strategic Partnership Steering Group, to ensure that the company has an impact on, and contributes to, the broader community. The company is active in other strategic groups such as helping to secure ALMO representation on the North East Housing Board Executive. To address the green agenda a number of policies and targets have been developed, including an Environmental and Sustainability Policy Statement and a Green Tenancy Guide. In addition to working with the Council on a joint venture to develop new properties on council land, TGHC is exploring funding options for combined heat and power district heating schemes and negotiating with energy suppliers on a reduction in the use of recalibrated prepayment meters in its stock. These initiatives would result in considerable savings in fuel costs for tenants and leaseholders. TGHC is influencing the wider agenda dealing with issues such as helping people to feel safe, take pride in neighbourhoods and contribute to wider regeneration.
- 215** Staff are effectively managed with a reduction in absenteeism and turnover. A new five-year Human Resources strategy was approved in July 2008, setting out clearly how people management and development activities will contribute to the successful delivery of strategic objectives. Flexible working patterns have been introduced such as part-time or term-time working. Performance appraisal is used effectively with all staff having regular supervision and annual reviews. Job evaluation has been effectively delivered and the company now has a fair and equal pay structure. This has been identified by the trade union Unison as national good practice. Sickness absences continue to fall year on year. In 2005/06 the average days lost per employee was 15.1 days, falling to 12.43 in 2007/08. The company has achieved this by tightening up absence procedures, offering counselling, managerial interviews and offering occupational health services to employees with a range of health-related initiatives. The company is also retaining experienced staff. Turnover rates have fallen from an average of 13.25 per 100 in 2005/06 to 11.36 in 2007/08 with 9.4 projected for 2008/09.

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

- 216** Investment in staff training and development is above average. Training needs are identified as part of the appraisal process and collated into an annual training programme. All staff have received training in diversity and front line staff have received training on hate crime and domestic violence. Managers all receive training in performance management. In 2008/09 TGHC is spending an average of £329 on each employee compared to a CIPD 2008 public sector average of £222. The budget has doubled over the past two years. This is mainly as a result of the introduction of a management development programme for 65 middle managers and support for professional training. TGHC provides 4.4 days of training per employee plus qualification training which compares with the CIPD<sup>35</sup> average of 4.7. All training is evaluated. Consultants provide evaluation of the management development scheme showing that people are better equipped to manage risks and plan strategically. Service specific training, for example covering debt recovery, has resulted in significant increases in repayments.
- 217** Action is being taken to ensure TGHC has a board and workforce that reflect the community and tenants it serves. The position is closely monitored. To recruit and retain employees, the company operates flexible working hours and will accommodate different patterns of work to try and meet individual needs. Currently 48 of the 409 employees take advantage of these flexible practices. TGHC offers work placements to help vulnerable people find their way back into work. To address under-representation, TGHC is targeting recruitment to a current board vacancy at young people. Around 50 per cent of the workforce is female, 24 per cent have a disability (compared to 30 per cent in the community) and 2.9 per cent are from BME communities.
- 218** In some areas of the company the workforce does not reflect the diversity of the community. These include senior managers and partner contractors' workforces. TGHC has had little success in increasing the number of female or BME staff in the top 5 per cent of earners. Only 24 per cent of top earners are female and none are from black and minority communities despite action such as the mentoring scheme, flexible working practices, and targeting job adverts, for example through the BME housing forum and minority ethnic job websites. Although partnering contracts have succeeded in promoting trades and employing 133 local apprentices, in general there has been little change in the under-representation of women or people with a disability or from a minority community. The balance does not yet represent the profile or provide a positive model for local people.
- 219** The company's financial position is healthy. A robust five-year medium-term financial strategy underpins the business plan. TGHC has a track record of operating within its annual fee with small surpluses held in reserve to provide funding to cover unforeseen expenditure. The management fee is negotiated annually and includes an increase this year to cover additional costs of introducing single status job evaluation pay rates for all staff. Incentives are built in for rent collection performance above CPA thresholds which the company is achieving. The Council also has significant reserves in the HRA which are being used to fund interest on prudential borrowing to improve energy inefficient and unpopular properties.

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<sup>35</sup> Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

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

- 220** Overall procurement arrangements provide a strong platform for improving efficiency. The procurement strategy provides clear direction and set of targeted actions. Major contracts are all subjected to competitive tender and significant improvements are being delivered through the rationalisation of suppliers. Most service level agreements have been reviewed and now deliver a greater level of outputs although more rigour should have been used with some in considering comparative costs. The focus on value for money ensures there is continued effort in securing increased efficiencies year on year and releasing funding for re-investment.
- 221** TGHC is building its ICT capacity. A number of key systems are provided through a SLA<sup>36</sup> with the Council that gives the company access to a greater level of expertise and support. For example it can access specialist network expertise and the Council provides helpdesk facilities for TGHC freeing the company's IT staff to concentrate on other matters. The company has a clear ICT strategy and has employed a strategic ICT manager to develop the service and deliver the strategy. An early start has been made in establishing an ICT user group so that the service is driven by the business needs of the organisation. Key aspects to be delivered through the strategy are developing links between the asset management system and the housing management system, integrating complaints and ASB records onto the housing management system. These are not currently integrated, and there are separate asbestos and gas servicing databases limiting the company's ability to improve efficiencies and introduce good practices.
- 222** TGHC is working effectively with others to lever in additional funding to help extend and improve services. The company works closely with the Council to enhance services in a number of areas including HomeChoice, disabled adaptations, management of sheltered housing schemes, neighbourhood management, grounds maintenance and delivery on the Respect Agenda. In multi-agency partnerships TGHC helps to respond to local and neighbourhood issues such as litter and ASB. The company funds a caseworker in the Citizens Advice Bureau to provide specialist debt advice and liaise with creditors. In partnership with a well known DIY<sup>37</sup> company, the company delivers the Homebonus scheme providing free DIY courses for customers. Examples of attracting funding include £898,000 from Gateshead Warm Zone to install energy efficiency measures, £20,000 from the PCT to fund a mental health and housing link worker and £58,180 from Link Age Plus to fund a small task scheme where elderly residents can get assistance with minor jobs. These all contribute to providing a wider range of services to TGHC's customers.

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<sup>36</sup> Service Level Agreement

<sup>37</sup> Do it yourself.

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

**223** Strong communication arrangements are in place both internally and externally. Internal communications include regular staff meetings, an annual staff conference, quarterly Buzz@ meetings for whole company updates including key issues and performance, and a regularly updated intranet. Internal arrangements also include periodic golden heart awards for staff providing outstanding service. External communications include the website, regular publications and articles in local media and circulations, periodic newsletters including some targeted specifically at older people (mailed twice a year to all tenants aged over 50 years) and ones based on the seven geographic areas covered by the office network, and an annual tenants' conference. As a result, staff and customers know what is going on and how the company is performing.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 2 Gateshead performance 2005/06 to 2007/08**

<b>Performance indicator (BVPI ref)</b>	<b>2005/06</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>Mets top quartile 2007/08</b>
63 Average SAP rating	58	61	69	72.8
66a Percentage rent collected	96.9	96.92	97.34	98.3
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	10.11	9.05	7.39	3.2
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	26.66	22.66	30.26	22.3
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.41	0.31	0.5	0.3
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	-	75	No survey	79.2
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	64	No survey	69
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	40	36	24.63	18.8
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	11.6	32.8	22.1	29.7
212 Average re-let time (days)	50	41	38 (est.)	32

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# Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - a review of key documents including the ALMO delivery plan; customer information and board performance reports;
  - a review of the ALMO's website;
  - interviews with a cross-section of The Gateshead Housing Company staff;
  - interviews with key Gateshead Council managers and the leader and portfolio holder for housing;
  - focus groups with tenants; leaseholders; frontline staff; repair operatives; and partners;
  - observation of tenant meetings;
  - observation of a Board meeting;
  - reality checks of customer access points, both in person and by telephone; and
  - visits to tenants whose homes had received major works and to vacant ready to let homes.

# Appendix 3 – 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)

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## Addressing diversity in the approach to improvement work

- 1 All leaflets and brochures are presented in large print as standard and carry straplines about community language translations. Survey interviews are carried out using 'smiley face' flash cards which take account of language and literacy difficulties as well as visual impairments. A standard checklist ensures that any meetings and events are arranged in level access buildings with circulation space for wheelchairs, portable hearing loops and do not conflict with faith festivals. This helps staff to respect and meet the needs and sensitivities of all customer groups.
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## Supporting vulnerable people

- 2 Vulnerable people receive a range of support to access and sustain tenancies. This covers all client groups and meets different levels of need. At the more intensive levels for example, TGHC customers access floating support provided by the Council to help refugees, young people leaving care and people escaping domestic violence. At a lower level, new tenancy officers work with all new tenants for up to 12 months to ensure they receive the advice and support needed to be confident in managing their tenancies. At an even lower level, tenants are offered advice and assistance on any housing matter, help in completing application forms, and support to develop some basic but necessary living skills, for example training on how to change a plug or how to put up a shelf.
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## Seven way mystery shopping

- 3 TGHC is involved with six other organisations to develop and share mystery shopping resources. Partners are able to share the costs of training and developing customers volunteering to become mystery shoppers. All partners were able to share and compare practices, standards and case studies with each other, identifying and adopting best practice for use. Benefits include sharing development costs and making more resources available, introducing consistency and developing the confidence and skills of individual's involved.
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### MyPad website for young people - [www.mypadgateshead.co.uk](http://www.mypadgateshead.co.uk)

- 4 Following consultation with young people, TGHC has developed MyPad, a website dedicated to improving communication and information on housing options and support specifically for young people. The website is advertised locally in publications for young people and has links from other TGHC websites. Young people advise on the content and way information is presented.

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### Secondment of mental health worker from the PCT

- 5 TGHC customer profile identified that some of customers with connections to anti-social behaviour were vulnerable because of mental health illness. In partnership with the local PCT, a mental health and housing link worker is seconded to the company. The officer provides advice and assistance to staff and operates with a caseload taking referrals from local housing officers. This provides a more holistic approach, ensuring customers are aware of and can access appropriate specialist and support services. Staff are provided with mental health awareness training and access to specialist advice.

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### Respecting local wildlife

- 6 On one estate, roof designs and the proximity to a local park presented opportunities for roosting bats. TGHC engaged an ecologist to assess the likelihood that improvements might disturb any wildlife habitats. This led to the installation of bat vent tiles during roof repair works.

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### Developing life skills

- 7 Tenants are encouraged to develop their life skills. An extensive range of training courses are available to all tenants. The courses include DIY, part funded by a national DIY chain, and other life skills such as healthy living. Outcomes from training courses are closely monitored. External funding for some courses has been secured from Skills for Life.

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### Leaseholder information

- 8 Every quarter all leaseholders are sent a schedule of repairs completed in the communal areas of their blocks. Leaseholders are asked to comment on the quality of the repair and if they are eligible for their recharge. This gives leaseholders the opportunity not only to have their comments heard but to also make sure they are not mistakenly charged for any work undertaken.

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# The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

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