

Allocations and Homelessness

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

Summary

- 1 Barking and Dagenham Council Housing Advice Service (HAS) is providing a 'fair' service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Customers generally have good access to the service and are provided with a range of ways to contact the service and to get information. Complaints are used to improve the service, but there is insufficient customer involvement and standards of customer care are not consistently high.
- 3 The allocations and lettings systems are accessible and transparent with robust review processes. However, the housing register has not been reviewed since 2005 and choice is not being maximised, as the number of lets to homeless households has been comparatively low, and many applicants do not understand the bidding process.
- 4 Diversity monitoring is not systematic and is not effectively used. Equality and diversity planning is not sufficiently robust and the approach to meeting BME housing needs is unclear. Standards of service vary for disabled customers and victims of domestic violence, but the Council acknowledges it needs to improve and is working positively with different communities.
- 5 Homelessness services are effectively focused on prevention and options. Performance on all homelessness key performance indicators is strong apart from the increase in the number of families in temporary accommodation. There are good services for young people and a range of effective preventative initiatives. The service is working well with partners and private landlords, but customers in housing need are waiting too long for advice and options interviews.
- 6 The strategic approach to homelessness and housing needs is confused and unclear. Planning and performance reporting is not robust as plans are not SMART¹ nor agreed with customers and stakeholders.
- 7 There are good floating support services for vulnerable homeless households and the quality of hostel accommodation is generally good. Progress against its temporary accommodation reduction plan has been slow but is now on track. Void levels in temporary accommodation are too high.
- 8 The Council has delivered a range of improvements in recent years most notably in increased service access, choice-based lettings, a range of prevention initiatives, and improvements in hostel and support services for homeless households. However, a number of planned improvements have not been delivered including a reduction in the number of families in temporary accommodation and the development of a service user's network.
- 9 There is a good level of commitment and leadership among key elected members in respect to diversity and community cohesion issues.

¹ A SMART plan has objectives or targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed.

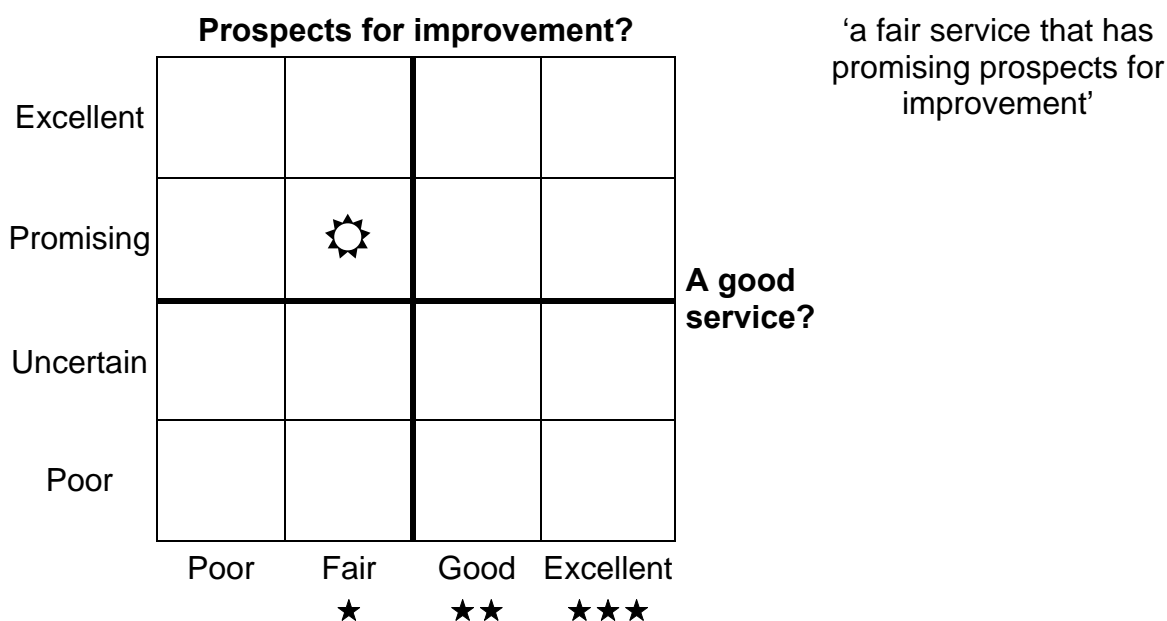
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- 10 Capacity has increased through partnership working and additional external and internal investment. For example, increased housing options staff, the housing modernisation programme, a foyer scheme and the rent deposit scheme. However, capacity is limited in some areas such as the private sector and customer care and diversity training has not always been effective.

Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham as providing a ‘fair’ one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart²



Source: Audit Commission

- 12 We found the service to be fair because of the following strengths.
- There is a wide range of ways for customers to contact the service, with extended opening hours and an emergency out of hours service.
 - The range and quality of information available to customers is reasonable, and there is a fully accessible website.
 - There are clear standards of service with opportunities for customers to give feedback and complain, and suggestions are handled well and acted upon.
 - Complaints are generally dealt with effectively, and are used for learning to improve the service.
 - The choice-based letting system is well managed and bids for properties can be made 24 hours a day for four days per week.

² 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.

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- The allocations policy is clearly written and comprehensive, and the allocations process is well managed and transparent.
- Review processes for each stage of the allocation process are robust.
- The housing advice service is focused on prevention and housing options, with proactive interventions for young people and a range of effective prevention schemes: mediation; a sanctuary scheme and a rent deposit scheme.
- There is good partnership working which has enhanced value for money.
- The quality of hostels and supported accommodation is generally good and there are good arrangements for assessing and meeting the support needs of residents.
- Investment in the service has resulted in improvements in service outcomes.
- The Council reduced the cost of its homelessness provision and has the lowest spend per head for homeless households.

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

- Customer care is not of a consistently high standard across the service.
- Monitoring of customer satisfaction and service user involvement in the development of the service is limited.
- Performance against service standards is not consistently good and complaints are not responded to within target times.
- Equality and diversity planning and monitoring is not sufficiently robust.
- The response to helping those who experience domestic violence (DV) is not consistently high, and services for disabled customers are variable.
- A significant number of service users find the choice-based letting system difficult to use.
- There has been an increase in the numbers of families placed in temporary accommodation and the level of lettings to homeless households has been comparatively low.
- The housing register is not up to date.
- Re-let times for empty council property are higher than the London average.
- The strategic approach to homelessness is unclear and the Council is failing in its duty to publish its revised homelessness strategy.
- Improvement planning and performance monitoring for homelessness and housing advice services has not been robust.
- The quality of private sector licensed accommodation is variable.
- The housing advice service VFM action plan has a number of outstanding actions.
- The current ICT systems are not fit for purpose.

14 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a generally good track record over three years of delivering improvements for service users, such as the choice-based lettings system; the one stop shop and call centre; a range of prevention initiatives, and the standard of hostel accommodation;
- the service has worked well in partnership to increase its capacity;
- the Council has been effective in attracting external funding for projects such as the new foyer service for young people which will increase its effectiveness at preventing youth homelessness;
- there is good performance against the homelessness-related Best Value Performance Indicators (see Appendix 1);
- substantial investment is being made in the service through the housing modernisation programme as part of a corporate strategy to raise service standards;
- the service is using complaints to improve service delivery; and
- positive relationships with private landlords are being developed.

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

- customer care is not of a consistently high standard and awareness of customer experience is low;
- not all targets have been met and the number of households in temporary accommodation has increased;
- homelessness action planning has been weak, and homelessness action plans are not SMART;
- capacity is limited in some areas such as private sector housing; and
- the approach to benchmarking is not fully developed.

Recommendations

- 16 In order 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 costs³ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 The Council should improve access to the service and customer care by:

- ensuring that all information (including leaflets and web-based) is periodically reviewed and updated;*
- regularly monitoring customer satisfaction with all aspects of the service and using this information to inform plans for improvement;*
- ensuring staff are aware of performance against service standards and know the areas for improvement;*
- introducing more quality assurance systems such as mystery shopping and random checks; and*
- implementing plans to involve service users in the development of the service including consulting them on the location of the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers have access to comprehensive and clear information;
- customer concerns are addressed in improvement plans; and
- the service delivers consistently high standards of customer care.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council should improve its approach to equality and diversity by:

- *extending diversity monitoring to all service areas and to include faith, sexuality and disability;*
- *analysing diversity monitoring data to develop targeted services and to inform a SMART equality and diversity service plan;*
- *reviewing and updating its approach to conducting equality impact assessments, and involve service users from different communities;*
- *refreshing staff training on diversity and domestic violence; and*
- *setting diversity objectives for staff as part of the performance and development review process.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the service will know the profile of its users, better understand their needs and be able to deliver more effective services; and
- customers will receive a more sensitive service from staff.

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

Recommendation

R3 The Council should improve access to and choice of social rented housing by:

- *involving service users in improving information that explains how the choice-based lettings system works;*
- *promoting the availability of assisted bidding and extend it to assist people in assessing whether a property is suitable for their needs;*
- *reviewing the categories of applicants who receive direct offers; and*
- *targeting homeless households for support with bidding.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will have greater understanding of how choice-based lettings work;
- vulnerable and homeless applicants are more likely to bid and be successful; and
- applicants will have a greater choice of properties to bid for.

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

Recommendation

R4 The Council should maximise the use of available accommodation across all tenures by:

- *reviewing its efforts to bring private sector empty property back in to use so that it meets its target;*
- *working with RSLs to minimise under-occupation of supported accommodation; and*
- *continuing to review each stage of the void management process to reduce the time it takes to re-let council housing.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- homeless households and customers in housing need will have their needs met more quickly;
- more vulnerable homeless people will receive appropriate support; and
- the Council and RSL partners will maximise rental income.

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

Recommendation

R5 The Council should improve the level and quality of housing advice by:

- *ensuring staff training is to a level so that staff can effectively assist with complex needs;*
- *reviewing staffing arrangements and levels so that customers can receive housing options and advice interviews quickly;*
- *reviewing arrangements for assessing the housing needs of offenders who may be eligible for release; and*
- *improving the standards of case file management.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers, particularly those with complex needs, will receive appropriate and high quality advice and support; and
- customers threatened with homelessness, including ex- offenders, are less likely to become homeless.

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

Recommendation

R6 The Council should strengthen its strategic approach to managing homelessness by:

- *ensuring the homelessness strategy and action plan are thoroughly reviewed and agreed with a wide range of stakeholders and service users, and that it is then published;*
- *producing SMART action plans to deliver the strategy;*
- *extending the homelessness forum membership to include service users and increase participation levels; and*
- *increasing the opportunity for stakeholder scrutiny through reviewing the chairing of the forum and ensuring that clear and regular written progress reports against the strategy action plans are provided.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council's plans are more likely to address the needs of homeless households; and
- priorities and resources will be more effectively targeted to prevent and reduce homelessness.

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

Recommendation

R7 The Council should develop its approach to achieving value for money by:

- *identifying all unit costs of the service, and benchmarking these against others;*
- *undertaking an analysis of benchmarking data to learn from the practice of high performers; and*
- *comparing the costs and outcomes of the various prevention initiatives with those of other local authorities and other relevant organisations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services will improve as the Council learns more from higher performers;
- the service will maximise outputs from partnership arrangements; and
- opportunities for efficiency savings will increase.

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

- 17 We would like to thank the staff of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 25 to 29 February 2008

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Report

Context

The locality

- 18 Barking and Dagenham is an outer London borough located about 11 miles from central London and is well served by underground, rail and road links to the city. This combined with lower than average house prices has made it an affordable location for many residents from neighbouring and inner London boroughs. The vast majority of households moving in to the Borough move from Redbridge and Newham and inner London boroughs.
- 19 The borough is at the heart of the Thames Gateway initiative which will bring significant regeneration and housing activity. The Barking riverside site will provide 10,800 houses with an expected 40 per cent of occupiers coming from within the borough.
- 20 The population is 169,199 living in 68,710 households. The borough has a higher level of older people and a higher than average number of children compared with London and nationally, however, the over 65 population is decreasing.
- 21 Barking and Dagenham is the 22nd most deprived borough in England with 48 per cent of the population living in the most deprived wards in England⁴. Unemployment is high at 9.2 per cent and the borough has the fourth lowest literacy rates nationally. There are high levels of teenage pregnancy and domestic violence in the borough.
- 22 Thirty-four per cent of households are council tenants, 3 per cent RSL tenants, 7 per cent live in private rented sector accommodation and 56 per cent are owner occupiers. Social renting is substantially above the London average
- 23 The average household income is the lowest in London at £22, 601 per annum, and the average house price is £247,311 compared with the London average of £357,976⁵. An estimated 2.2 per cent of households cannot afford market housing and live in unsuitable housing⁶. Council and private tenants are most likely to be in housing need with 76.7 per cent of households in need currently living in social rented housing.
- 24 Community cohesion is a high priority for the borough and its partners as the diversity of the population is increasing faster than any other area of the country. Historically there has been a White, predominantly working-class population in most parts of the borough. Black and minority ethnic residents now make up almost one quarter of the population; an increase of 15 per cent since 2001. The pace of change has led to concerns among some sections of the White population about the allocation of housing.

⁴ ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007.

⁵ Land registry 2008. The England and Wales average is £186,045.

⁶ Housing Needs Survey 2005.

- 25 An estimated 7 per cent of all households are over crowded and 21.2 per cent are under occupied. Overcrowding particularly affects Black and minority ethnic (BME) households, with 22.9 per cent of BME households being overcrowded compared to 5.5 per cent of White households; and as elsewhere in the country, BME households also disproportionately live in private rented accommodation.

The Council

- 26 Barking and Dagenham is one of 33 London boroughs in the London region.
- 27 The Council consists of 51 Councillors and is led by a long-standing Labour administration. The 2006 elections returned 38 Labour councillors, 12 British National Party councillors, and 1 Conservative. This is the first time a single party has formed an opposition to the Labour majority.
- 28 The Council operates with a Leader, Executive and scrutiny model. The Executive comprises ten members, one of which holds the portfolio for housing. The scrutiny function is performed by a scrutiny board and has series of scrutiny panels consisting of both 'back bench' and opposition councillors.
- 29 The Council was given three stars out of a possible four, in the Audit Commission's 2007 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).
- 30 The Council has responded to local concerns that housing allocations are more limited for local people by adopting a community cohesion strategy and a programme of community engagement which has involved a series of 'myth busting' presentations and articles and outreach work to explain the allocations policy and process.

The Service

- 31 The Council is organised into five departments: Adult and Community Services; Children's Services; Customer Services; Regeneration; and Resources. The Council's Housing Advice Service (HAS) is located in the Customer Service Department.
- 32 The HAS is responsible for the prevention of homelessness; the promotion of housing options; the assessment of households who may be owed a duty under homelessness legislation; the provision of temporary accommodation and support; the management of the housing allocations and lettings system.
- 33 80 staff are employed in the service which is overseen by the Group Manager. There are five teams: housing options, accommodation services, lettings, choice assessment and the private sector team.
- 34 The HAS is delivered from several locations but the main service is delivered at John Smith House in Barking, which it shares with the health service. In addition there is a One Stop Shop at the Barking Learning Centre in central Barking. General and youth outreach services or advice surgeries are delivered from a number of other locations.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 35** The aims of the service are set out in key corporate documents: the corporate plan, the housing strategy 2007/10 and the homelessness strategy 2006/10.
- 36** The corporate plan 2005/10 has five strategic priorities:
- working in partnership to deliver community priorities (one of which is improving health, housing and social care);
 - putting customers at the heart of what you do;
 - delivering VFM services;
 - delivering high quality services, and
 - value and invest in employees.
- 37** The housing strategy 2007/10 has rising to the challenge of affordable housing (to meet housing need) as a theme and includes targets for:
- 80 more sanctuary schemes for victims of domestic violence;
 - 9 more domestic violence refuge units;
 - new 118-unit foyer scheme for 16 to 24 years olds;
 - rent deposit scheme;
 - reduction of empty homes by five per year, and
 - establish Landlords Forum and London Landlords Accreditation Scheme.
- 38** The Homelessness strategy 2003 - 2008 had four key objectives:
- prevent homelessness with a target of a 5 per cent reduction year-on-year;
 - increase Housing options and choice including meeting the government target of a 50 per cent reduction in the numbers of households in temporary accommodation by 2010;
 - increase the supply of homes; and
 - provide quality services.
- These objectives have remained in the revised (unpublished) 2006/10 homelessness strategy, which has the additional aims of:
- increasing choices for homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless;
 - enabling preventative approaches, which contribute to the Government's agenda to prevent homelessness;

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- meeting the specific needs of particular groups, such as black and minority ethnic people, asylum seekers, travellers and gypsies, and other people with additional support needs and those experiencing domestic violence; and
- addressing immediate requirements and at the same time, plan to meet future requirements by contributing to the Housing strategy and the supporting people strategy.

39 The allocations policy has a number of aims including:

- offer applicants a more active role in choosing accommodation taking account of individual circumstances and waiting time;
- maximise the use of and efficiently let all housing stock available to the Council;
- provide applicants with sufficient information to make informed choices about opportunities for rehousing and understand the criteria and process adopted by the Council;
- offer applicants open and fair access to housing, provide choice and recognise diverse needs; and
- to reflect a balance between the housing needs of existing tenants and new tenants, whilst ensuring best use of our stock.

40 A corporate 'Done in One' strategy aims to resolve 80 per cent of all caller enquiries at the first point of contact.

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

Access and customer care

- 41 This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Customers can access the service in a variety of ways and offices meet the needs of customers. There are clear standards of service with opportunities for customers to give feedback and complain, and suggestions are handled well and acted upon. However, customer involvement in service development is limited and satisfaction is not measured across the service. Customer care is not of a consistently high standard; there are concerns about staff being rude or insensitive to the needs of customers; advice and information given is not consistent and performance against service standard has only recently met targets and is not systematically reported to customers or staff.
- 42 There is a wide range of ways for customers to contact the service. The service can be accessed by 'phone via Barking and Dagenham Direct call centre; in person at John Smith House (the housing advice centre), the one stop shop and other locations; via the website and by email and there are computer kiosks for customer use to access choice-based lettings. Customers can receive advice and information easily.

- 43 Extended opening hours are increasing access for customers. Barking and Dagenham Direct is open from 8.00am until 8.00pm Monday to Friday with an emergency out of hours service seven days a week. The one stop shop, the Barking Learning Centre, is open until 7.00pm during the week and from 9.00am to 5.00pm on Saturdays. Customers who are unable to contact the service during standard office hours are able to access the service.
- 44 The contact centre provides effective access to HAS services. Staff are trained and have scripts to provide initial information on choice-based lettings and other housing issues, and can post leaflets or the *Choice Homes* magazine to customers. Performance against targets has been variable over the past year, but it is now meeting targets to answer 90 per cent of all calls and to answer 70 per cent of all calls within 20 seconds, although these targets are not particularly challenging. Customers can have good quality telephone access to services.
- 45 The housing advice service (HAS) service standards are clear and concise. The service standards are available in a booklet and via the website, and performance against the standards is displayed in service areas. Customers know what level of service to expect and how well the service delivers them.
- 46 Offices are welcoming, well equipped and fully accessible. An assigned officer 'meets and greets' customers to advise and direct them. Offices have minicom facilities, lettings kiosks, children's play areas and a water machine. Private interview rooms have panic buttons and computers. Customers have suitable facilities to meet their needs.
- 47 The range and quality of customer information is reasonable. A range of service information is available in reception areas and in interview rooms including leaflets, booklets, posters and magazines such as '*Choice Homes*' which advertises available property. However, some of the leaflets are not clearly set out. For example, the HAS guide to homelessness does not state it is a guide to homelessness on the front cover. Customers can be informed about most aspects of the service.
- 48 The website is fully accessible. It has speech enabled using specialist software, different text size, an effective search engine, and some translated information about how to access translated materials. Navigation from the homepage is easy with quick links to the HAS pages and to make comments and complaints. More customers can access the service using the website.
- 49 The HAS web pages are well organised but information is not comprehensive. For example, the allocations policy and recent housing advice satisfaction surveys results are available, but customers cannot apply for housing online⁷ and key information such as domestic violence leaflets and the homeless persons' self-help pack are not available. Summaries of the 2003 homelessness review and strategy are available, but not the more recent homelessness review, strategy or action plan. Customers cannot access all services and may not find the information they need from the website.

⁷ This refers to customers not being able to make a housing application online via the Councils' website. Applicants can bid for available properties via the East London Lettings Company website.

- 50 The arrangements for dealing with complaints are generally effective. Complaints leaflets are widely available and customer complaints are responded to fairly. Responses are clearly written and explain the next stage of action. There have been 13 complaints reviewed by the Ombudsman relating to HAS services in the past three years but none have found maladministration. Complaints can be made in a range of ways all of which have been used. There is close monitoring to ensure that the complaint is dealt with appropriately, but the corporate 'Done in One' strategy has resulted in thorough but slow responses often missing target times. Only 70 per cent of complaints were responded to in target and some took up to six weeks to resolve. Customers can be confident that their complaint will be thoroughly investigated although not necessarily quickly.
- 51 Complaints are used to learn and improve the service. Staff provided a range of examples where service has been improved including changes to the wording in the *Choice Homes* magazine and to viewing letters. Customers can see that their complaints and suggestions do have an impact on service delivery.
- 52 Regular monitoring of customer satisfaction across the service is limited. Monthly exit surveys are conducted at John Smith House, but there is no satisfaction monitoring of other areas such as advice surgeries, allocations and lettings, or temporary accommodation. *Tell Us*⁸ forms are available in reception areas but are not offered in other languages or formats. Exit survey findings are published and have led to improvements such as better office signage. The Council is not aware of how customers experience key areas of the service.
- 53 Service user involvement in the development of the service is limited. For example, service users were not involved in developing the service standards and are not involved in the homelessness forum. A commitment to develop a service user network has not been implemented. Without customer involvement the service may be out of touch with customer concerns and not focus on the right priorities.
- 54 The main HAS office, John Smith House, is not easy to find and waiting times are too long and not properly monitored. The office is located in a residential area and there was no consultation on the location. Underground and bus services are not in the immediate vicinity and customer parking is very limited. Frontline staff receive regular customer complaints about the location and 28 per cent of customers surveyed in December 2007 still had difficulty finding it however, the Council has plans to review how and where the service is delivered. The 15 minute waiting time target is not being met but waiting time is based on customers own perceptions as a planned automated ticketing is still to be introduced. Customers may be deterred from seeking advice, particularly those with mobility difficulties.

⁸ Tell Us is the Council's corporate scheme to gather feedback, comments and suggestions from customers.

- 55** Customer care is not of a consistently high standard. Some staff demonstrated a high level of customer care and are viewed as extremely helpful by customers, but this is not the case for all staff. A number of partner agencies have experienced poor customer care and interviewing practices, including sensitive inquiries being carried out at the reception or the public area, and agencies' staff and clients being treated rudely. This is consistent with our reality checks and views expressed at a service users' focus group. Customers said they are often treated like a number and are not listened to or believed. Not all customers receive a quality service and may be deterred from using the service.
- 56** Customer enquiries are not handled consistently, and staff knowledge is not comprehensive. Only 41 per cent of customers surveyed in 2007 said that staff resolve their enquiries effectively, against the corporate target to resolve 80 per cent of all caller enquiries at the first point of contact. Customers state that explanations of the bidding system are not clear, information varies from one officer to another, and repeat visits are often necessary to clarify information. In inspectors reality checks conflicting information was given; for example, about RSL housing and how to get a housing application form. The lack of consistency and knowledge has resulted in poor customer service which could affect customers' choices.
- 57** Performance against service standards is not consistently good and frontline staff are not aware of how they are performing. Performance is improving with 90 per cent of letters now being responded to within the ten-day target in November 2007. We found that calls to the call centre often relate to failure to respond in a promised timescale.

Diversity

- 58** In this area weaknesses outweigh strengths. There is a strong corporate commitment to equality and diversity but this has not successfully impacted at the service level. Understanding of the profile and needs of service users is limited, and diversity planning and monitoring is not robust. Monitoring data is limited, is not used to target resources and plan service improvements and does not cover sexuality and faith. Approaches to addressing particular needs are unclear. However, there has been an effort to work with different community groups, support is available for vulnerable residents and good quality interpreting and translation services are available.
- 59** The level of understanding of the profile of service users and potential service users is limited as diversity monitoring is not systematically carried out. Applications, homelessness decisions, award of preferences and lettings are monitored by ethnicity but this does not extend to other diversity strands such as faith, sexuality and disability. The Council acknowledges that it needs to improve its understanding of the profile of its' service users, and it has carried out some out-reach work to promote choice-based lettings, but without monitoring who is bidding, it cannot target its efforts effectively. The Council does not have a full picture of who is using the service and cannot effectively plan appropriate services.

- 60 Equality and diversity planning and reporting is not sufficiently robust. The departmental plan duplicates the corporate plan targets, which is incomplete and focused on processes rather than outcomes. There is no data about faith, disability or sexuality. Targets in the service plan are not based on any needs analysis, and targets to collect, analyse and act upon diversity data have not been met. The plan has been revised but progress reports against the plan have not been evidenced. Without clear outcome-focused plans that are closely monitored, the service cannot know what impact it is having in promoting equality.
- 61 Equality impact assessments (EIAs) are not robust and show a lack of understanding of the assessment process. The assessment of the housing strategy describes issues particular communities face but does not assess the impact of the strategy on them, and the action plan is not SMART⁹. Actions from EIAs conducted at service level are integrated into the housing improvement plan and monitored by a departmental equality and diversity group, but the targets in the plan are not SMART or challenging, for example to 'ensure service delivery meets the needs of our customers'; the associated task is to collect service user diversity data. Without robust equality impact assessments managers cannot be confident as to how their strategies and service plans will affect different communities - either positively or negatively.
- 62 The approach to addressing the housing needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities is unclear. BME households disproportionately live in private sector housing and have higher levels of homelessness and overcrowding. The housing strategy refers to a BME housing strategy, but officer's were unaware of this and state that it is incorporated in to the housing strategy; the 2006/10 homelessness strategy states that the BME housing strategy is being updated and includes a plan to provide temporary accommodation to meet BME needs but this has not been delivered. Without a clear strategic approach, the Council may not effectively address the disproportionately high levels of BME housing need.
- 63 Information is not consistently offered in other languages and formats such as large print, Braille or audio tape. For example, , the housing advice service booklet *A guide to homelessness* does not offer other formats but the housing options team booklet does. Both booklets have translated strap lines at the back, but the languages vary. The domestic violence booklet has fewer translated strap lines, but there is no information about other formats. Customers may not receive important information nor receive an equal level of service.
- 64 The housing application form does not adequately consider same-sex couples. It defines partners as a couple living as man and wife, with no reference to same-sex couples, and sexuality is not being monitored. A new form has been drafted and is to be introduced in 2008. Same-sex couples may lack confidence that their housing needs will be accurately assessed.

⁹ A SMART plan has objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed.

- 65 While a number of positive projects have been put in place, the Council's response to victims of domestic violence (DV) has a number of weaknesses. The domestic violence policy is not explicitly victim centred which reflects partner agencies concerns that some women have felt as though they are being interrogated rather than supported, and about a lack of sensitivity and awareness of both the issue and the Council's policy. The policy does not fully address issues for women living in other tenures but there are good arrangements in place to signpost to specialist agencies. High risk cases are referred to the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and have regular contact from DV advocates. People escaping DV may not receive a sensitive service and may be deterred from seeking support and continue to live in fear of violence.
- 66 Services for disabled customers are variable. Offices and the website are accessible and BSL¹⁰ interpreters and minicom facilities are available although rarely used, but there is a lack of suitable adapted accommodation resulting in some disabled residents in hostels being unable to move on, despite being ready to do so. Some customers feel that staff are not understanding of disability issues and random file checks found that one disabled resident was housed in a flat without adequate disabled access. The Council has a sensory impairment team that provides training and advice to housing services, but basic provision such as offering information in other formats such as Braille is not always made. This means that disabled people are not consistently receiving an equal service.
- 67 Equality and diversity training for staff is not fully effective. All staff attend diversity training but some concerns expressed by customers and poor quality EIAs (as outlined elsewhere) shows that its impact has been limited. The Council has produced a quick reference guide *Shall I Take My Shoes Off?* to support understanding of different cultures and faith but without effective training, customers may not receive an equal level of service.
- 68 Support arrangements for vulnerable people are reasonable. There are specialist services for young people, and staff can assist customers with literacy difficulties to bid for property although some customers felt that staff are not sensitive to the needs of people with dyslexia. However, the actual number of assisted bids is low with only 16 assisted bids being made between October 2007 and March 2008. There is a floating support team based at the Council's hostel and Supporting People staff work closely with vulnerable people in temporary accommodation to assist them with choice-based lettings, and floating support is available for tenants who move on from temporary accommodation.
- 69 There is clear leadership on diversity issues among key elected members. The Council leader holds the portfolio for equality and diversity, and there are equality champions for lesbian and gay, black and minority ethnic and disability issues. The Council has achieved level 3 of the local government equality standard. At a corporate level, diversity targets for staffing have been met, and the Council has focused on achieving diversity at management level by adopting targets for the top 5 per cent of earners, which they are close to achieving. Training is offered to Councillors in all parties but this is not always taken up.

¹⁰ BSL - British Sign Language

- 70 Good quality interpreting and translation facilities are available. There are contracts with two services which have been regularly used by staff and have provided a quick and efficient service, so customers with limited English can access the advice and services that they need.
- 71 The service is working positively with different communities to increase awareness of housing options and allocations, and to promote community cohesion. A 'myth busting' campaign has focused on how the allocations process works; presentations have been made to various community groups and meetings, such as a Turkish women's group, and monthly advice sessions at a Somali community centre have raised awareness of private sector housing options. The Council is also funding local community organisations to manage various community forums, such as the lesbian and gay forum, to develop capacity for shaping services. Outreach work is helping to ensure that marginalised sectors of the community receive an equal service.

Allocations and lettings

- 72 This is an area with a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council replaced a traditional points-based allocation system with a choice-based lettings system called More Choice in Lettings (MCIL) in April 2005. Registration onto the scheme is accessible and there is a clear allocations policy which customers were consulted on. The bidding and allocations process is transparent and well managed. There are robust review processes in place. However, the Council has not reviewed the housing register since 2005 and there is still a high level of customer confusion about how the bidding system works. Arrangements for short listed applicants to view properties are inflexible and choice is not yet being maximised as a significant number of properties are let as direct offers.
- 73 The registration scheme is open and accessible. Anybody over 16 years of age can apply for housing. There are clear criteria for excluding people from the register: for serious anti-social behaviour (ASB) or because they are subject to immigration controls. Case file reviews showed that immigration status is thoroughly checked. Exclusions for ASB have strict criteria relating to outright possession and no exclusions have been made on this ground since the MCIL system was introduced. Excluded applicants are written to and advised of their right for a review. Verifications are carried out by estates officers for transfer applicants and by assessment officers for homelessness applicants. The 28-day target for registering new applicants is met where all relevant documentation is submitted. Anyone who wants to register for housing is able to do so or receive a clear explanation as to why they are not eligible.

- 74 The allocations policy is clearly written and comprehensive. Customers were consulted on the policy when it was developed in 2005. It is widely available and sets out eligibility criteria, explains the categories for reasonable or additional preferences, and the circumstances and categories of applicants to whom a direct offer will be made. An assessment officer awards any preferences which are checked by a second officer for quality assurance. Additional preferences prioritise statutory homeless people and those with other urgent needs. Once the application has been assessed the applicant is written to and advised of their priority and how to bid for accommodation. Customers who have a housing need have clear information about how their needs will be assessed and what type of housing they will be considered for.
- 75 There are clear review procedures in place for each stage of the process. There is a comprehensive staff review manual in place. Applicants who are not satisfied with decisions relating to eligibility, award of preferences and exclusion from the register can request a review. These are undertaken by a manager who was not involved in the original award of preferences. However, the assessment letter does not advise applicants of their right to a review of the preferences awarded, as required under legislation. Applicants who feel they have not been accurately assessed can be confident of receiving a through review.
- 76 The allocations process is fair and transparent with a clear rationale to shortlisting and deferred applicants. A weekly list of properties is matched against priority applicants, such as adult services referrals, and the remaining properties are put in to the bidding system. The live bidding system allows applicants to check online at any point in time what their position is in terms of bidding, so they will know if they should be short listed. There are multiple checks and balances on the MCIL system to ensure that the correct allocation and offers to view are made. All reasons for deferring (skipping) an applicant are recorded on files and the applicant in question is written to and advised of the reason for omission from the viewing. The final position and waiting time of successful bids from the previous week are published in the *Choice Homes* magazine so that customers can gauge their chances of success in subsequent bids. Customers can be confident that housing is being allocated in accordance with the allocations policy.
- 77 The MCIL system is effectively implemented and managed. The East London Lettings Company (ELLC) manages the system under a service level agreement with the Council. Available property is advertised on the ELLC website and in the weekly magazine which can be posted directly to customers. Applicants can bid for available property over the 'phone, via the web site, by text or at a kiosk in the HAS office and other locations, although they can only bid for one property at a time and cannot withdraw a bid once it has been made, which can restrict choice; 85 per cent of bids are made online. All new applications are loaded on to the system every night which identifies an applicants eligibility, so it will not accept bids for properties that an applicant is not eligible for (for example, a single person would not be able to bid for a three-bedroom house). Bidding is open 24 hours a day from Friday until midnight on Monday. Bids are quickly reviewed and shortlists produced within the 48-hour target of the end of the bidding process. Applicants receive at least two days written notice of the viewing. Customers' bids are dealt with quickly to maximise the opportunity for letting available property.

- 78 Viewing arrangements are maximising opportunities to let available property. The top two shortlisted applicants are invited to the viewings. The second placed applicant waits until the first placed applicant has viewed and made a decision. This was lowered from three clients after feedback from applicants about being invited without the chance of viewing. At the viewings estates officers are able to provide information and take action which could be a deciding factor for acceptance of the property, such as raising outstanding repair jobs and clarifying housing options. Efficient viewing arrangements can reduce the length of time households remain homeless or in housing need.
- 79 The Council provides useful information about mutual exchanges and mobility schemes to increase choice. The tenant's handbook provides information about mutual exchanges and national mobility schemes. The Council does not maintain an exchange register nor advertise them via the MCIL system, but its website provides a hyperlink to useful government information about free exchange schemes. This is providing people in housing need with an additional way to identify suitable accommodation both within the borough and in other areas.
- 80 There is an effective approach to tenancy fraud. There is a specialist tenancy fraud officer who liaises with housing assessment officers, estates officers and other government agencies. Estates officers conduct annual tenancy audit visits. The Council subscribes to the national fraud initiative, and success in recovering fraudulent tenancies are featured in the *Spotlight* magazine. This approach to tenancy fraud helps to ensure that council housing is fairly allocated.
- 81 The Council has positive working relationships with RSL partners in respect of the nominations process. The Council has nomination agreements with eight RSLs and effectively provides appropriate nominations within agreed timescales. RSLs have good communication with the service; queries are resolved easily and officers are helpful. Good working relationships ensure that referrals and nominations are more likely to be accurate and applications processed efficiently.
- 82 The nominations agreement is clearly written but monitoring is not always robust. The agreement sets out responsibilities and timescales for both parties, the percentage of nomination rights for different property types, the monitoring arrangements and issues such as confidentiality of shared information. New lets are monitored by the East London housing partnership, and re-lets are monitored via review meetings with individual RSLs using CORE data. However these do not discuss the agreement in detail and are focused on development issues. One of the main RSL partners was unaware of a formal nomination agreement being in place but said there is an understanding about the percentage of stock they will provide to the Council. Nominations agreements can clarify responsibilities, but may be ineffective if they are not closely monitored.

- 83** Arrangements for supporting people to bid for accommodation are not robust. A Council survey found that 68 per cent of MCIL users find the system easy to use. However, focus group users found the bidding system complicated and assistance is limited to the end of the process once the applicant has chosen a property to bid on. Call centre and reception staff stated that a major part of their week is spent clarifying the system. If customers find the bidding process confusing they may be deterred from bidding and will not receive the housing they need; this will disproportionately affect vulnerable customers.
- 84** While the Council is offering choice, it is not yet being maximised for all customers. Lettings by direct offer have been high with one third of lets for Council and RSL nominations being made this way. Direct offers were initially being made under a major regeneration and decant programme, but now that this is complete, the level of direct lets has fallen significantly to 28 per cent. Specified categories of applicants are given priority for a direct offer, for example adult services referrals and care leavers, but if these applicants choose to exercise choice and bid for a property, they are not given priority, which acts as a deterrent to bidding. Sheltered housing is excluded from the MCIL system as the range and variation of sheltered housing has required the Council to assess the level of care provided first. There are plans to include sheltered housing in the MCIL scheme this year, and the Council is talking to partners about moving to choice for all client groups in 2008 with only referrals from the public protection and prolific offenders panels being made direct offers. This means that the MCIL scheme is not yet comprehensive and the Council is not yet maximising choice for all customers.
- 85** The housing register is not kept under regular review. The last major review was in 2005 despite a policy commitment to undertake annual reviews. More than 10,000 applicants are currently registered and the Council does not know how many of these still have a housing need. File checks showed that some customers had been written to for not bidding for over 12 months and were advised that they will be made a direct offer if they do not bid, which is not in keeping with the Councils policy of choice. Without regular reviews the Council cannot have an accurate picture of the level of need in the borough.
- 86** The level of lettings to homeless households is low when compared with other similar boroughs. In the year to date, 16 per cent of lettings (including direct lets) have been made to homeless households against an 18 per cent target. Approximately 30 per cent of lets are to existing tenants which is higher than the two of the CIPFA family group boroughs who monitor this. By failing to ensure property is let to homeless households, there is an over reliance on temporary accommodation which the Council has a target to reduce.

- 87 The arrangement for short listed applicants to view properties is not customer focused. Customers are not given adequate time to consider an offer of housing. Staff have numerous viewings scheduled so if customers are late for the viewing they lose their position of first choice for the property; an example was given where a customer was only 15 minutes late. On viewing a property, applicants have to make up their mind immediately whether to accept the offer even if their partner has not been able to attend; customers are also not allowed to bring children to viewings. If the property has outstanding works and is not ready to let customers are still required to sign an undertaking to accept the property at the viewing. Applicants are not having a fair and equal opportunity to consider the offer or to discuss it with their partner or other household members.
- 88 Allocation files are not maintained to a consistent standard. Reviews of a randomly selected sample found that there was not a clear rationale as to what documents should be held on file. Photo ID, MCIL forms and current status were not held on some files. Documents were not chronologically filed and there were no cover sheets summarising actions. Some files had post-it notes attached to the front to denote 're-housed', without explanatory letters in the files. However, thorough checks had been undertaken in relation to immigration status, medical needs and home visits. Verifying information was evident and checklists of information had clarifications of actions on home visits. Poorly managed files can result in customers not receiving accurate advice and mistakes being made.
- 89 Re-let times for empty council property are worse than the London average. Voids re-let times have been increasing since March 2007 to 37.01 days in September 2007. This figure includes sheltered housing voids but even excluding those properties, the service is still above the 27 days target at around 30 days. Limitations in current IT systems do not allow an analysis of the level of and reasons for refusals by applicants. Without this analysis, the Council does not know how efficient its system is; inefficient letting of council property can contribute to the length of time in temporary or unsuitable accommodation for many households.

Homelessness and housing advice

- 90 In this area there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Services for homeless households are generally good with a strong focus on prevention and options. There are a range of preventative schemes often delivered in partnership, and services for young people are good. Use of temporary accommodation is high but reducing, and the quality of hostels and floating support is good. However, the strategic approach to homelessness is weak, and the quality of temporary accommodation is variable, with some poor examples of private sector leased accommodation. Some homeless applicants have to wait too long for an appointment and do not always receive clear and consistent housing advice.

Housing advice, homelessness prevention and options services

- 91** The housing advice service is well publicised and focused on prevention and housing options. Over recent years resources have been re-focused on homelessness prevention rather than assessment. There are now 15 frontline prevention staff compared to six frontline assessment staff. Homelessness preventions increased from six to nine per 1,000 households in 2006/07 which is in the top 25 per cent of all authorities. Homelessness approaches and acceptances have decreased and rough sleeping and repeat homelessness have been virtually eradicated. Information is provided on all tenures and housing options including shared ownership. 594 cases of homelessness were prevented in 2005/06. The Council is successfully reducing the number of households that become homeless each year.
- 92** There are proactive interventions with young people to prevent and address youth homelessness. For example, the Axe Street project outreach service for young people; the East Street advice centre, and the development of a 116-unit foyer scheme. There has been an outreach project to schools called 'Talking Heads' which is delivered with the teenage pregnancy unit to raise awareness of housing options and the allocations process. Homelessness acceptances for 16 and 17 year olds reduced from 47 per cent in 2003/04 to 17 per cent in 2005/06 against a London average of 15 per cent (but there is a higher level of young people in the borough). Young people have access to a range of support and advice to reduce the risk of becoming homeless.
- 93** There are a range of effective prevention schemes in place, primarily:
- mediation for young people who have been asked to leave home. All 16 to 17 year olds approaching the service receive a home visit and can be referred to a mediation service, which can help delay eviction while appropriate supported accommodation is found. The contract is now part of a wider CLG mediation pilot and this has improved the feedback received on outcomes of mediation;
 - a sanctuary scheme for people experiencing domestic violence or race hate crimes assisted 95 households in 2006/07 and 102 in the first three quarters of 2007/08. It is delivered in partnership and is available across all tenures; and
 - a rent deposit scheme has been used successfully and is expanding. The scheme began in January 2007 and rehoused 131 households in just over a year. The £80,000 budget is being increased to £200,000 in 2008/09. Landlords have to register with the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme. The majority of a focus group of temporary accommodation residents were unaware of the scheme so it could be more effectively promoted.

- 94 Positive relationships are being developed with private landlords. The private landlords' forum was relaunched in November 2007 following a successful landlords' day with over 70 landlords attending. The forum now meets twice a year (although the 2008/10 homelessness strategy action plan says every two months), and an annual landlords' day is planned. Effective relationships with private landlords can help prevent evictions and promote good practice in the private rented sector.
- 95 There is good partnership working in place. For example, HAS staff work closely with the housing benefit service, the multi agency public protection agency and the prolific and other priority offender panel. Two housing benefit staff are based within the service. A number of partners reported improved working relationships and partnership networking lunches have recently been established. Partnership working can increase options for customers and help prevent homelessness.
- 96 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) are used reasonably well to help prevent homelessness. Frontline staff are fully aware of DHPs as an option, and a housing benefits officer is based within the service to process DHP applications. However, the annual budgets have not been spent in full; in 2007/08 £58,199 of a £173,000 budget was not awarded.
- 97 Arrangements for early notification of potential cases of homelessness are not robust. There are no protocols or procedures in place to give early notification to housing options staff of possession proceedings and potential homelessness by estates officers or local RSLs. Notification is sometimes too late for any effective options work to be conducted.
- 98 There is a gap in prevention services for ex-offenders. Housing options staff do not visit people due to be released from custody to carry out a homelessness assessment; the youth offending team is willing to do these assessments as homelessness can delay their release, but the Council has not yet provided the required training. The Council is not maximising the use of external resources to prevent homelessness.
- 99 There are performance failures in the private sector housing team. It is not achieving its annual target for bringing empty properties back into use. Corporately, 16 have been achieved against a target of 20 in the year to date, but the private sector team has only achieved one against its own target of five. Inspections of private sector leased properties are only carried out if a tenant makes a complaint, and post-inspection of sanctuary scheme security works are not conducted. The Council is not ensuring that it meets minimum legal standards in bed and breakfast hotels in the borough, and may be leaving vulnerable homeless people or women at threat of domestic violence at risk.
- 100 Households who are threatened with homelessness are not receiving a prompt service. The target to carry out a home visit to all homeless households on the day they contact the service is not being achieved, and despite the increase in staff, there is currently a two to three-week wait for a housing options interview. These limitations mean that the service is not maximising the opportunity for early homelessness prevention.

- 101** The level and quality of housing advice is not consistent for all customers. The quality of housing advice has received external accreditation but in-depth housing advice casework is currently limited as some staff have not yet received comprehensive training. There is currently no capacity to staff a court advice scheme nor represent cases in court. Some focus group residents had not had clear advice and were not aware of alternative housing options. Partner agencies said that young people who are increasingly being deemed intentionally homeless without other accommodation options or helpful advice being offered.

Homelessness strategy, services and applications

- 102** The strategic approach to homelessness is unclear and the Council is failing in its duty to publish its revised homelessness strategy. A homelessness strategy was published in 2003 but it was not reviewed annually nor reported on to partners and stakeholders. A review was conducted in 2005 as part of the housing strategy review and a revised homelessness strategy was drafted for 2006/10 but this has not been published. Some managers are unaware of the new strategy and others stated that the homelessness strategy is now integrated into the housing strategy 2007/10; that strategy does not adequately address all the statutory requirements for a homelessness strategy. The effect of this is that service users, partners, stakeholders and staff have not got a clear understanding about the Council's strategic approach to homelessness and so cannot effectively monitor progress against plans.
- 103** Monitoring of the homelessness strategy and action plan is not robust. Monitoring of the plan is via the homelessness forum which meets quarterly, but the level of scrutiny is limited. The forum has not met regularly, participation levels are variable and there is no service user involvement; some partners said they are not always informed of the meetings. Detailed progress reports against the strategy and action plan are not produced. Some activities are reported through the housing advice service improvement plan but this is not SMART and is not an effective monitoring tool. Without a clear framework for reporting against the strategy and action plan and clarity about which strategy and action plan is current, managers and stakeholders cannot effectively monitor progress against plans.
- 104** Improvement planning for homelessness and housing advice services has not been robust. The 2003/08 homelessness strategy action plan only covered the years 2003/04 to 2005/06 and a new action plan was not put in place until 2008/10. The action plans are not SMART; for example, targets and milestones are unclear and not all actions highlighted in the strategy are included in the action plan (such as the development of a user network and the need for suitable temporary accommodation for people with disabilities). However, some of the aims such as an end to rough sleeping and an end to the use of bed and breakfast accommodation except in emergencies have been achieved.

- 105** Involvement of stakeholders, service users and other housing providers in the development of the strategy and action plan has been limited. There was limited involvement of service users in developing the 2003/08 homelessness strategy and in the 2005 review of the strategy. The homelessness forum was involved in a review of the homelessness strategy action plan in 2007, but this was after the new homelessness strategy had been drafted in 2006. Without full involvement of service users and other stakeholders the Council cannot be confident that it is establishing the correct priorities and allocation of resources.
- 106** Systems are in place to ensure that staff are regularly updated on changes in homelessness policy and case law. There is a staff homelessness procedures manual - although this was published six weeks before the inspection. Staff have access to the necessary legal text books and case law updates.
- 107** Homelessness assessments have not been within target. Although there has been a steady improvement in assessment times over recent years, the average time taken to issue a decision letter was 35 days in 2006/07, against a target of 33 days, which leaves homeless applicants unclear about their status and entitlement.
- 108** The review process is robust. All applicants are advised in writing of the outcome of the homelessness assessment and their right of review, although review letters are not in plain English. Review forms are readily available and staff are prompted to explain the review process when customers express dissatisfaction; they do not have to explicitly request a review. An independent reviews officer carries out all reviews, and 84 per cent were within the required time frame in 2006/07. Review decisions and Counsel's opinions are used for staff training. Applicants can be confident of receiving a fair assessment of their circumstances and the service uses reviews to improve accuracy of initial assessments
- 109** Homelessness caseloads are now at a manageable level but the quality of case file management is variable. Caseloads average 30 compared to 50 several years ago and caseworkers have sufficient uninterrupted time to carry out casework. However, handwritten notes are not always signed; the files do not always have the full case history nor always show the latest position and next steps to be taken. One case file reviewed revealed delays in correspondence being forwarded between two council offices. Poor case management can lead to poor quality advice and mistakes being made.

Temporary accommodation

- 110** The quality of RSL managed hostels is high. There are two hostels managed by a specialist RSL that provides 71 self contained units of supported accommodation. The standard of accommodation is good and residents receive welcome packs. There is good service user involvement and information, and a range of activities inside and outside the hostels that residents are encouraged to take part in.

- 111** The quality of accommodation at the Council's hostel is reasonable. The hostel at Boundary Road is in good decorative order but is not self contained - residents have to share kitchens and bathrooms. Residents do not receive a welcome pack, and there is very little service user involvement: there are no residents' meetings or satisfaction surveys (although they are planned and there has been significant investment and improvement since 2003). Informal feedback from residents is positive.
- 112** There are clear arrangements for assessing and meeting the support needs of people moving into temporary accommodation. Following a risk assessment the floating support team conducts a needs assessment for all households. Clients receive a prompt service being placed in temporary accommodation on the day they present. There are arrangements in place for the storage of property and there are usually fortnightly visits to clients, and support plans are reviewed quarterly.
- 113** The floating support team provides an effective service. There are four generalist and four specialist support officers and it is contracted to work with 100 clients. Where a household has needs that the team is unable to meet, they are referred to other support services in the borough. The team achieved positive outcomes for 97 per cent of cases in 2006/07.
- 114** There are effective arrangements for out-of-hours emergency cover. All three hostels have 24-hour staffing and a housing advice service officer is on call outside office hours to deal with urgent homelessness cases and other emergencies.
- 115** The use of temporary accommodation is now reducing from a high of 841 in June 2007 to 718 in February 2008. This is still well above the December 2004 baseline figure of 496, but the measures in place such as the preventative initiatives and recruitment of two temporary accommodation visiting officers should ensure a continuing decline. A temporary accommodation reduction strategic plan 2007/10 sets out clear monthly reduction targets from a baseline of 740 at December 2007. Monthly targets were not produced prior to this but it is on target and a reduction strategy group is monitoring progress. The Council now has a clear approach to achieving the governments' target of an overall 50 per cent reduction in the use of temporary accommodation by 2010.
- 116** Additional resources have assisted in reducing the use of temporary accommodation. Two officers have been employed (with CLG funding) to visit households in temporary accommodation to encourage realistic bidding for secure accommodation via the MCIL system, and to check occupancy and standards. Around 430 out of 718 households have so far been visited and there has been an increase in successful bidding as a result, so dedicated resources are ensuring that people can move out of temporary accommodation quickly.

- 117 The use of temporary accommodation is closely monitored. There are weekly temporary accommodation reduction meetings and a carefully balanced programme to reduce the number of private sector licensed (PSL) properties while retaining a sufficient number to offer some choice of area to residents. Work is taking place to try to ensure that PSL properties, no longer required as temporary accommodation, are available for rent-deposit scheme placements or other permanent lettings.
- 118 The quality of PSL accommodation is variable and there are no published letting standards. Focus group residents had been allocated properties with bare floorboards, poor quality furniture and broken essential kitchen equipment. Tenants were dissatisfied with their living conditions, with repair requests going unanswered and some having to spend their own money on refurbishments. Residents do not know what standard of service and accommodation to expect.
- 119 Inspection arrangements of PSL property are weak. At one property visited, there was a serious disrepair and health and safety issues. The property was a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) shared by four households; there had been no heating for over two weeks and only intermittent hot water; a power socket was off the wall with bare cables protruding; water was leaking from the bathroom to kitchen; a smoke detector had fallen from the ceiling and fire extinguishers were empty. Residents had reported these issues to the managing agent but they had not been resolved or picked up on routine visits by the agent. Residents may be exposed to health and safety risks and the Council is not meeting all its statutory duties to inspect.
- 120 Referral procedures to the two RSL-managed hostels are not effective. All referrals are made via the HAS, which has not always used referral forms although this has recently improved. Void levels across the two hostels consistently run at 20 per cent which has resulted in a loss of £60,000 in rental income over the life of the two hostels. Valuable temporary accommodation with support is not being fully utilised to the benefit of homeless households.
- 121 There is a shortage of supported housing in the borough which limits opportunities for people to move on from hostels. Residents in the two RSL-managed hostels who are ready to move on are not able to do so, and some have been there beyond the 6 to 12-month target period. Staff across the service point to a need for more supported housing in general and, in particular, the need for more dedicated housing support at the Boundary Road hostel.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 122** In this area weaknesses outweigh strengths. Benchmarking is significantly under developed. Unit costs for homelessness presentations and hostel accommodation are high. There is a clear framework in place for managing value for money (VFM) but the housing advice service action plan has a number of outstanding actions. The Council has increased investment in the service which has helped prevent homelessness but it does not know how this compares with other authorities. The cost per letting of council property compares well and a housing modernisation programme is focused on improving efficiency through investment in ICT and business processes and has already increased efficiency in some areas.

How do costs compare?

- 123** The services' approach to benchmarking is significantly under developed. There has been limited benchmarking of complaints and homelessness with nearest neighbours but there has not been comprehensive benchmarking of costs and quality for all service areas. Where costs have been compared with other local authorities this has not been used to look at the processes behind the performance outcomes. There is a good understanding of the unit costs of temporary accommodation but not of how they compare with other councils. Because benchmarking results are not being used to inform plans for improvements, opportunities for achieving value for money may be missed.
- 124** A benchmarking exercise was undertaken but this only involved one neighbouring authority. While it showed that the service is performing better in a number of areas, the Council is not comparing itself with high performing authorities. Without a more comprehensive approach to benchmarking, the Council will not identify many areas for improving VFM.
- 125** Average costs per hostel unit are very high compared with other local authorities. Costs for hostel accommodation have increased significantly due to an increase in staffing and void levels in the hostels has resulted in a loss of £60,000 rental income over the lifetime of the two RSL managed hostels.
- 126** Costs per letting compares reasonably well. Using data from a national benchmarking service, the Council was ranked fourth among ten London boroughs in 2004/05 (middle quartile) with a cost per property of £23.23 against a median of £34.14.
- 127** The Council has a low spend per head for homeless households. Based on CIPFA statistical analysis, spending on homelessness per head was the lowest in 2005/06 which was largely achieved through the reduction in use of bed and breakfast accommodation and greater use of private sector leased property for temporary accommodation.

How is value for money managed?

- 128** There is a clear framework for managing value for money. An annual efficiency statement sets out key targets across the Council, with an overall efficiency target of 3 per cent for 2007/08. There are value for money (VFM) champions in each department and each service has a VFM action plan which is monitored quarterly. All managers and team leaders have received training in achieving VFM in 2007. The Council monitors progress against efficiency targets through a VFM sub-group of the corporate management team.
- 129** However, the housing advice service VFM action plan has a number of outstanding actions. It is still to identify how the three per cent annual efficiency savings are to be achieved across the service, identify all unit costs and undertake an analysis of benchmarking data to identify learning from others to inform best practice. The service could potentially achieve greater efficiency savings if the VFM action plan was effectively implemented.
- 130** Investment in the service has resulted in improvements in service outcomes, but the Council does not know if they are the most cost effective approaches. Expenditure per homeless household increased from £904.45 in 2004/05 to £1,362 in 2006/07 and there has been investment in a range of prevention initiatives such as the rent deposit scheme. Without comprehensive benchmarking the Council doesn't know if this increased expenditure is VFM.
- 131** The current ICT systems are not fit for purpose and result in a number of inefficiencies. For example, additional expenditure is spent on staff to undertake collation and analyses of performance data, and reports have to be produced manually. Some improvements have recently been made such as the introduction of a new record management system at the end of January 2008 which has improved the processing time for housing applications, but customer and performance information has to be manually collated from different systems. The system also limits the ability to offer more cost effective, web-based services for customers or options such as mobile working which would improve access for customers.
- 132** Re-let times for empty council property have increased. Void re-let times have increased since March 2007, reaching 37.01 days at September 2007. Inefficient use of council housing stock can increase the reliance on temporary accommodation, increase costs, and lose rental income.
- 133** The cost of homelessness provision has decreased through reducing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, and increasing the use of private sector landlords. In 2006/07 this saved £70,000. The current efficiency target of £100,000 for the homelessness service is on target for the year-end through increased income from temporary accommodation.
- 134** Some efficiency savings have been made through competitive tendering. The interpreting and translation services were subject to tender which resulted in a faster service for customers and a saving of £30,000 per year in retainer fees. Competitive tendering can ensure cost effectiveness and improved services for customers.

- 135 The Council has successfully kept rents paid to agents for private sector leased (PSL) properties at the same level since 2002, and there is a low level of voids in PSL properties (around one per cent). PSL property is being effectively and efficiently utilised.
- 136 Partnership working with other agencies has enhanced value for money through contributing to the reduction in homelessness. For example, through working with the East London housing partnership on overcrowding and under occupation; additional CLG funds to target prevention, and working with a mediation service to prevent youth homelessness.
- 137 Corporately, the Council has achieved efficiency gains, and it achieved level 3 for VFM in its 2007 CPA¹¹ assessment for the use of resources. Corporate efficiency gains through for example, reviews of back office functions such as printing services will have brought other cost savings to the service.

¹¹ CPA is a corporate performance assessment, which is undertaken by the Audit Commission.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 138 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has successfully implemented a restructuring of the service resulting in a significant change in focus from managing homelessness to preventing it. A number of improvements over the past three years have directly benefited service users. There has also been a general improvement in performance indicators. However, not all targets have been met and the number of households in temporary accommodation has not yet declined below the 2004 baseline figure.
- 139 In several key areas the service has effectively implemented change that has led to improvements in service delivery. In particular, refurbished hostel accommodation has resulted in a high quality of provision, underpinned by strong support services (see 'Temporary Accommodation', above). This has directly benefited service users and has helped to prevent repeat homelessness.
- 140 There has been a good track record in developing prevention initiatives. In particular, the rent deposit scheme, the sanctuary scheme and the youth out reach work (see 'Housing advice, homelessness prevention and options services', above). These initiatives are helping to prevent homelessness.
- 141 There has been a significant improvement in homelessness-related Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) over the past three years. The Council's performance is among the top 25 per cent of councils for time spent in bed and breakfasts; the number of families in hostel accommodation; homelessness prevention; number of rough sleepers and level of repeat homelessness. However, performance in respect to the percentage change in the number of families in temporary accommodation is poor and among the bottom 25 per cent (see Appendix 1 - Performance Indicators). The Council's focus on prevention is having a positive impact on homelessness.
- 142 The key objectives of the homelessness strategy 2003/08 have been delivered, for example, a 5 per cent reduction year-on-year in homelessness. Performance on both the number of acceptances and the number of preventions has improved with an overall reduction in the number of homelessness acceptance by more than 50 per cent in the past three years and a reduction from 49 per cent to 17 per cent for 16 to 18 year olds.
- 143 The Council has ended the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children other than in emergency situations and has effectively eradicated rough sleeping and repeat homelessness.

- 144** Nearly all of the relevant housing advice service targets in the housing strategy 2007/10 have been met, including the introduction of a rent deposit scheme, and the establishment of a private landlords' forum. The development of a 118-unit foyer scheme for 16 to 24 years olds is on site and on schedule and the number of sanctuary schemes for victims of domestic violence has been exceeded. Plans to develop nine more domestic violence refuge units are, however, behind schedule which may result in an inadequate level of provision.
- 145** Working with a specialist RSL, 71 units of high quality supported accommodation are being provided to homeless households as well as through the Councils own hostel which has recently been refurbished.
- 146** The introduction of a One Stop Shop and the Barking and Dagenham Direct call centre has significantly improved access for customers and another one is planned for Dagenham at the end of 2009. The joint location of services such as health, housing benefit and the learning centre has enhanced service delivery for the customer.
- 147** The Council has delivered on most of its allocations policy objectives. The introduction of choice-based lettings has increased choice for applicants although the number of direct lets is still relatively high. Applicants receive good quality information about the properties available. However, many customers still do not fully understand the process and how to bid effectively and the Council is not meeting its own voids target to efficiently let its stock.
- 148** Despite investment at corporate and service level in delivering good customer care this has not been fully effective with variable standards of customer care being demonstrated in the housing advice service.
- 149** A number of targets have not been met, for example:
- the number of homeless households and vulnerable single people in temporary accommodation has increased;
 - a plan to develop a service user network has not been implemented;
 - the plan to bring five empty properties back in to use per year;
 - response times for complaints;
 - service standards have not been consistently met
 - a target on the effectiveness of services to help victims of domestic violence has not been met; and
 - the housing advice service VFM action plan has a number of outstanding targets and actions.

40 Allocations and Homelessness | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 150 There are a number of issues relating to allocations and lettings where improvements have not been delivered:
- choice has not been maximised as direct offers have been high;
 - the housing register has not been kept under regular review, but plans are in place to review it in July 2008;
 - the level of lettings to homeless households has been comparatively low; and
 - re-let times for empty council property have increased.
- 151 At a corporate level, there is a clear commitment and leadership on diversity, and a clear framework for managing value for money; but, there is a limited track record of effective application of these at the service level, that would have a positive impact for service users.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 152 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh the strengths. Although there is a clear corporate planning framework, at a service level homelessness action planning is not robust; action plans are not SMART¹² and performance management reports, though regular, are weak and not clear. There is a lack of clarity among officers about the status of the homelessness strategy and action plan. Service users are not engaged in performance planning and benchmarking is not fully developed. However, the Council does learn from other authorities and there are good working relationships between departments and between officers and members. Complaints are used to improve service delivery and there are clear arrangements in place for managing staff performance.
- 153 The strategic approach to addressing homelessness is unclear. The status and inter-relationship of the 2003/08 and the 2006/10 homelessness strategies; the 2008/10 homelessness strategy action plan and the housing strategy 2007/10 are not clearly understood by key managers, staff, or partners. The Council states that the 2006/10 homelessness strategy superseded the 2003/08 homelessness strategy and has been used as the working strategy since 2006, but this is not published in accordance with statutory requirements. The 2006/10 strategy was not referred to by housing advice staff and managers during the inspection nor in the Council's self-assessment; staff stated that the strategy had been incorporated in to the housing strategy. Without a clear and published homelessness strategy, the Council, partners and service users cannot be clear what the Council is aiming to achieve.
- 154 Improvement planning for homelessness and housing advice services has not been robust. The 2003/08 homelessness strategy had action plans for 2003/04 to 2005/06, but there was no plan for 2006/08. A new action plan was adopted for 2008/10. The action plans are not SMART: targets and milestones are unclear and not all actions in the strategy are included in the action plan, such as the development of a user network and the need for suitable temporary accommodation for people with disabilities. Annual reviews of the homelessness strategy 2003/08 have not been carried out and published.

¹² SMART plans have objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timed.

- 155 Performance monitoring structures are in place but they lack user involvement. Performance is monitored through the housing and decent homes sub group, the homelessness forum, the departmental management team, and the housing improvement board but none of these involve service users. Progress against the housing improvement plan, KPI data, service standards and more recently customer satisfaction surveys are reported on but reporting is not comprehensive; key aspects of the service are omitted such as satisfaction with temporary accommodation. There is limited opportunity for service users or stakeholders to influence targets and measure performance.
- 156 The housing service improvement plan is not SMART and cannot adequately measure performance. Apart from timescales there are few SMART objectives and targets against which to assess performance, and it is not focused on outcomes for residents. For example, one target is to increase the transparency of the choice-based lettings system, but there are no performance measures or targets in place. Without a SMART service improvement plan the service cannot demonstrate whether it is delivering its stated aims.
- 157 There are a number of policy commitments that have not been delivered. For example, the commitment to conduct annual reviews of the housing register in the allocations policy and the commitment in the homelessness strategy to annual reviews.
- 158 Monitoring of private sector leased properties is not robust. There are no regular meetings with the 12 agents of the 700 private sector leased properties. Agents are required to issue welcome packs and visit residents every four to six weeks, but there is no system to check that this is happening.
- 159 The level of awareness of day to day performance issues and how the service is experienced by its customers and others is low. For example, inspectors found significant levels of dissatisfaction with the location of John Smith House, variable levels of customer care when interviewing customers, dissatisfaction with quality of temporary accommodation, and concerns from some partners about approaches to diversity and customer care issues, of which there was no or low levels of awareness. Recent initiatives have been introduced such as monthly satisfaction exit surveys at John Smith House and Tell Us feedback forms, but without more systematic engagement of service users the Council may not be effectively targeting its efforts to improve the service.
- 160 The Council learns from other high performing authorities, although more could be done in this area. Officers and managers have visited another London borough to learn about their youth homelessness service, which informed the development of the youth outreach work at East Street. Officers also visited another borough when developing the rent deposit scheme. The contact centre has looked at other public and private services for examples of good practice. The Council also liaises regularly with CLG specialists to learn from good practice in homelessness prevention.

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- 161 The service is using complaints to improve service delivery. There are well publicised systems for service-users to submit compliments, complaints and suggestions such as the corporate 'Tell Us' campaign, as well as via the complaints procedure. Issues identified from complaints are raised with individual officers and as general learning points in team meetings. For example, complaints from private sector leased properties have been used to identify problems with particular letting agents. Customers can see that their feedback is responded to effectively.
- 162 There are service level agreements in place to clarify and regulate arrangements with key partners. SLAs are in place with the Barking and Dagenham Direct call centre which is monitored through a regular liaison meeting; the East London Lettings Agency for the management of choice-based lettings and with RSL partners on the provision of temporary supported accommodation. Nomination agreements are also in place with RSL partners. SLAs set out responsibilities and targets and help to manage performance.
- 163 There are effective inter departmental working relationships. A joint services group meets which allows for discussion about void management and tenancy allocations. Early notification of void property to the allocations team allows for early viewing of properties. Good inter-departmental working results in a more effective service for customers.
- 164 There are good working relationships between officers and key members. Senior officers meet regularly with executive and shadow portfolio members and have an open and professional relationship. All councillors are briefed on current homelessness issues and there is a good level of awareness and commitment to service improvement among key councillors. Councillors from the majority and opposition parties have the opportunity to meet regularly with senior officers to discuss their issues and concerns.
- 165 A system of cross-party scrutiny panels involving backbench and opposition councillors scrutinise specific services, and can set up panels around specific issues of concern and question executive members and officers. There is a members' group that scrutinises complaints which resulted in an amendment to the allocations policy to include some award of priority for local connection.
- 166 There is a good level of commitment and leadership among key elected members in respect to diversity and community cohesion issues. There are specific diversity champions for issues relating to disability, gender, race and sexuality. Members have been actively involved at sub regional level to look at issues such as provision for victims of domestic violence, and violence within same-sex couples, and have supported community cohesion initiatives such as Unity Week.
- 167 The Council has shown leadership in responding to concerns about the use and allocation of housing. A 'myth busting' campaign aims to raise greater awareness and understanding of how housing resources are allocated. Regular information is provided through the *Spotlight* magazine to explain how homes are allocated, senior officers give presentations to various community groups and meetings and councillors have engaged other community leaders.

- 168** Arrangements for managing staff performance are generally good. Staff receive regular supervision meetings and annual appraisal reviews. Individual staff objectives and targets link back in to the service plan targets. Call centre operatives receive twice daily updates on performance against call handling targets and daily updates on individual performance.
- 169** Quality assurance mechanisms are used to check performance in respect to internal processes, but less for customer outcomes. Managers randomly sample case files; a second officer checks all awards of preferences in the allocations system and a manager signs off all homelessness decisions. Call centre managers regularly monitor calls and use the findings to identify training needs. However, there are no quality assurance checks on for example the quality of private sector and bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 170** All employees and members are required to adhere to a code of conduct which includes the requirement to disclose any interests which may conflict with the Councils' interests in a register, although some senior staff were unaware of the register so it may not be being regularly reviewed and updated.
- 171** There are effective mechanisms in place for staff to contribute to the development of policy and practice, although they have less involvement in the development of strategies. Staff are involved in developing the service through a well developed staff suggestion scheme with related staff awards, team meetings, briefings and working groups. There was some staff involvement in the development of the 2008/10 homelessness action plan. Staff involvement maximises their expertise and experience to bring improvements to services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 172** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is significant internal investment and re-investment of efficiency savings, including a housing modernisation programme which will increase staff competencies and performance management. There are plans in place to extend the service and effective partnerships to increase capacity and the Council has brought in significant external funding. Training for staff and members is widely available but its effectiveness is not always clear. There are some capacity issues around staffing levels particularly in the private sector team and in respect to adequate office space.
- 173** Significant investment is being made into the service through the housing modernisation programme. The programme takes a holistic approach to change management and has challenging and ambitious plans to deliver improvements through business review, engaging customers, building staff skills and competencies, improving the IT infrastructure and achieving a cultural shift. £7 million over five years has been committed to deliver the programme which is currently on target and which has a planned return on investment of £8 million over five years. The programme is managed via the housing modernisation board which receives monthly progress reports against the programme implementation document.

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- 174** New ICT systems will be introduced across the service by the end of 2009 and some improvements have already been implemented. For example, a new system has allowed for the electronic recording and management of all documentation received by the service. This has led to improvements for customers such as faster processing of housing application forms. The programme will also allow for an online housing applications and other web-based services, and will increase staff capacity by enabling mobile working.
- 175** External funding and resources have been secured. £14 million Housing Corporation funding was secured for the foyer development; the annual CLG grant has increased by £40,000 in addition to a one off £40,000 to undertake a tenancy audit of private sector leased properties. £100,000 has been allocated under the East London housing partnership to work on under occupation and over crowding. A scheme worth £70,000 in partnership with the youth offending team is employing young offenders to decorate the hostel and includes an eight-week college course and an apprenticeship with the Councils maintenance contractors. External funding sources increase capacity to deliver services.
- 176** The new foyer service for young people will increase the Councils effectiveness at preventing youth homelessness. Working in partnership, a 116-unit foyer project will open for 16 to 24 year olds in Barking in November 2008. This will provide accommodation, training and employment and other youth services.
- 177** Increased investment in the service has brought tangible benefits for service users. £125,000 efficiency savings were re-directed in to staffing resources in the Housing advice service which increased the number of housing options and advice staff to focus on homelessness prevention. £400,000 has been invested in improving communal areas in the Boundary Road hostel. From April 2008 an additional £120,000 will be invested in the rent deposit scheme to support the Councils objectives on the prevention of homelessness.
- 178** There are plans in place to extend access to advice and choice. For example, there are plans to provide daily advice surgeries for young people from the East Street advice centre from March 2008; to amalgamate the options and prevention roles to promote a more comprehensive approach, to open a second one stop shop in Dagenham at the end of 2009 and to include sheltered housing in the choice-based letting scheme to widen choice for older people.
- 179** The Council has delivered and has further ambitious plans for housing development. 940 affordable homes have been developed since 2003 and a further 425 affordable new homes are planned by 2010. Subject to mayoral approval 10,800 new homes, including 4,000 affordable homes, are planned for the development of the Barking Riverside. Increasing the supply of affordable housing will contribute to the reduction of housing need and homelessness.
- 180** There is a comprehensive corporate procurement strategy which the housing advice service adheres to and benefits from corporately procured back office services such as the single point agency contract for employing agency staff.

- 181** There is generally effective team-working across the service. Managers and staff across the various housing advice teams meet regularly and work closely together; there are joint services meetings to monitor. For example, the void process to identify where improvements can be made. There are plans for job shadowing across the service which will also improve staff understanding and inter departmental working.
- 182** There is a good level of commitment to and investment in staff and Member training and development. The Council was awarded Investor in People status in 2005. Staff are positive about the opportunities they have for training and development and evaluation of training is followed up at regular intervals to measure how staff perceive the effectiveness of the training on their ability to do their job. Staff have regular briefings on legislation, case law and policy issues. Officers were positive about the training options. There is a management development programme in place for middle managers and many Councillors have attended the IDeA leadership academy.
- 183** The current ICT systems are not fit for purpose. The limited capacity and capability of the current IT system means that a number of stand alone spreadsheets have to be used to produce reliable performance monitoring information and additional staff are required to maintain these. The Council is responding to this through the investment in the modernisation programme as mentioned above.
- 184** There is limited long term in-depth housing advice casework at present. Some staff have not yet received comprehensive housing advice training and are not able to represent cases in court or staff a court advice scheme.
- 185** The private sector housing team is not fulfilling some key functions. For example, the team is not carrying out its programme of inspections of bed and breakfast hotels in the borough which is a statutory duty, nor does it carry out inspections of PSL properties unless a tenant makes a complaint. The team is also responsible for managing contractors for the sanctuary scheme works but again is not inspecting works, which are instead signed off by the resident and contractor.
- 186** The high level of agency staff has now been reduced. There were around 30 agency staff in 2006 out of 80 full-time equivalent posts, but this had reduced to ten in February 2008. The current round of recruitment will result in only having agency staff to cover long term sickness.
- 187** Sickness levels have increased and are above target. Sickness levels increased from 8.8 days per full-time equivalent employee at 31st March 2007 to 9.8 days in January 2008 (just above the corporate target of 9.5 days). Managers attended 'Improving Attendance workshops' in 2006/07 and there are monthly sickness panel meetings chaired by the Divisional Director of Housing. Increasing sickness levels reduce the capacity of staff teams to deliver services.

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- 188** There are not enough interview rooms at John Smith House. Frontline staff stated that customers sometimes have to wait for an interview room to become available. This was also reflected in the reports from customer satisfaction surveys where customers had commented that interviews should be conducted in a confidential interview room. Staff also stated working space for staff at John Smith House was often inadequate. Inadequate office accommodation impedes effective working.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Homelessness and related performance indicators

Indicator	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Quartile 2006/07
BVPI 183a - average number of weeks in BandB (families)	4 weeks	1 weeks	0 weeks	1st
BVPI 183b - average number of families in hostels	5	1	0	1st
BVPI 203 - percentage change in number of families placed in TA	-15%	-3%	57%	4th
BVPI 213 - cases of homelessness prevented (per 1,000 households)	N/A	6	9	1st
BVPI 214 - cases of repeat homelessness (percentage)	N/A	0%	0%	1st
BVPI 202 - number of rough sleepers	5	1	0	1st
BVPI 225 - action taken against domestic violence (percentage of answers 'yes' to checklist)	N/A	73%	91%	(Quartiles not applied)

Source: Audit Commission and CLG Best Value Performance Indicator data.

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 the following.
 - Observing reception areas at the housing advice centre, an area housing office and the One Stop Shop.
 - Exit interviews with customers at the housing advice centre and area housing office.
 - Shadowing calls to Barking and Dagenham Direct Call Centre.
 - File checks on allocations, homelessness assessments, complaints and staff appraisals.
 - Focus group with residents of temporary accommodation.
 - Focus groups with new tenants who had successfully bid for property in the past year.
 - Focus groups with frontline staff.
 - Focus groups with partner agencies.
 - Visits to hostels and supported accommodation.
 - Visits to private rented licensed temporary accommodation.
 - Telephone calls to customers who had recently made a complaint.

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)

Shall I take My Shoes Off?

- 1 The Council has produced a quick reference guide for staff on different cultures and faiths and includes information about diet, naming systems, language and issues for home visits such as greetings, dress, gender, times of worship etc.

Talking Heads

- 2 The housing advice service is working with the youth services to deliver a programme of information in schools delivered by pregnant teenagers to raise understanding of housing issues among younger people and tackle misconceptions about pregnancy and housing allocations.

'Myth Busting' Work

- 3 In response to a rapidly changing population, the Council has undertaken a range of activities to promote community cohesion, and to provide all sections of the community with useful information about council services and how housing resources are allocated. Regular information is provided through the *Spotlight* magazine; senior officers give presentations to various community groups and meetings, and councillors have engaged other community leaders.