

West North

West Homes

Leeds

Leeds City Council

June 2010



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Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) Inspections

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

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

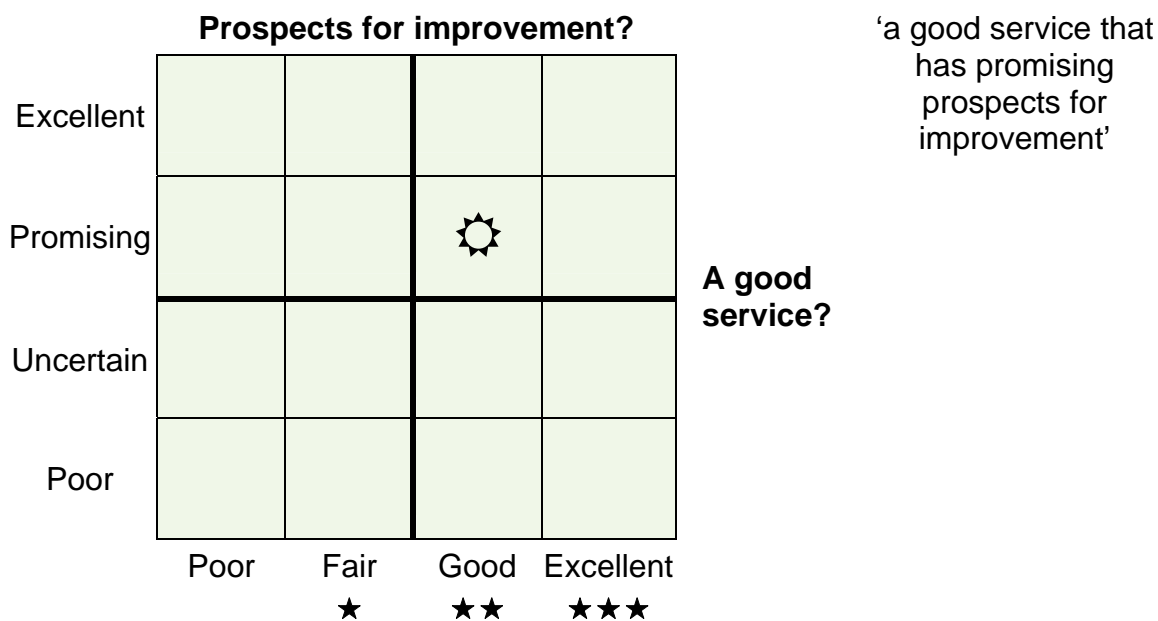
Summary

- 1 The service delivered by the arms length management organisation is good. Services are accessible to most customers, there is an ethos of customer involvement and a clear commitment to equalities and diversity. Repairs and maintenance services meet the needs of most customers and tenancies and estates are well managed. Value for money principles are embedded in the culture of the organisation and significant efficiencies have been made. There are, however, weaknesses in some areas. These include limited customer involvement in developing the strategic approach to access, delays in delivering some types of repairs and adaptations, poor performance in recovering debt and lack of modern facilities in some sheltered schemes.
- 2 Services have promising prospects for improvement because there is strong leadership and robust management systems in place, although some plans are weak.

Scoring the service

- 3 We have assessed West North West Homes Leeds as providing a 'good', two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 4 We found the ALMO's services to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- information for customers is clear and service standards are comprehensive;
 - there is a corporate commitment to equalities and diversity, supported by appropriate frameworks;
 - there are robust approaches to addressing hate crime, domestic abuse and safeguarding vulnerable people;
 - the ALMO has made significant progress in collecting customer profile information and is beginning to use it to tailor services to meet needs;
 - the improvement programme is customer focused and well managed and will bring all the ALMO's rented properties up to the Decent Homes Standard by December 2010;

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

- approaches to managing gas servicing and asbestos are robust;
- the repair service meets the needs of most customers;
- the ALMO has worked hard to relet its long-term voids;
- the aids and adaptations service is accessible and sensitively managed;
- there is a successful approach to financial inclusion;
- there is a clear and embedded ethos of customer involvement and customers are involved in driving service improvement in all areas;
- the response to antisocial behaviour is effective and partnership working is strong;
- estates are well maintained and the ALMO has addressed customer priorities for environmental improvements;
- the leaseholder service now meets legal requirements;
- the lettings system is easy for customers to access and good use is made of the housing stock in the way properties are allocated;
- effective support services are in place for customers in both general and sheltered housing and a focus on marketing sheltered schemes to potential customers from black and minority ethnic communities has been successful; and
- value for money principles are embedded in the culture of the organisation and significant efficiencies have been made.

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

- the recent strategic review of access arrangements was not comprehensive;
- the ALMO cannot demonstrate that contractors fully comply with its equalities and diversity objectives;
- performance is weak in delivering some types of repairs to published timescales;
- some customers wait too long for adaptations to be made and service take-up is low among black and minority ethnic groups;
- performance in recovering debt is below average;
- there is only limited customer influence over how money is spent;
- there are some weaknesses in how tenancy management and lettings procedures work in practice;
- poor quality accommodation is offered in some sheltered schemes and customers have limited flexibility in the level of support they can choose;
- the ALMO cannot demonstrate that it receives a value for money service from the Council for all the service level agreements and central service recharges in place; and
- the Council's 'Heatlease' and 'Total Heat' schemes mean some customers are less likely than others to be able to afford to have central heating installed in their homes, the way its lettings policy is interpreted encourages some customers to bid for properties they do not want to live in and some customers subsidise services provided to others via the service charges which it sets.

Scoring the service

- 6 The ALMO has promising prospects for improvement because:
- it has made significant efficiencies and improved aspects of service delivery, performance and satisfaction since the last inspection;
 - it has strong leadership, is a self aware, learning organisation and its culture is open and improvement focused;
 - its financial and risk management systems are sound and its future procurement plans are robust;
 - its staffing structure and ICT meets its business needs and partnerships are used effectively to boost capacity; and
 - the Council has plans to begin to address some of the weaknesses in its own approach which impact on the ALMO.
- 7 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- there are weaknesses in the ALMO's most important strategies and plans;
 - WNWHL does not have a consistent track record of improving performance and satisfaction levels in all service areas and both it and the Council have been slow to address some issues;
 - sickness absence levels are high; and
 - the board and staff profile do not fully reflect those of the communities where the ALMO works.

Recommendations

- 8 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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the strategic approach to access issues. This should include:

- better management of the contact centre's performance by:
 - building a more comprehensive picture of peaks and troughs in demand and ensuring an effective response to them;
 - reviewing service standards to make clear to customers and staff that automated messages lengthen call waiting times;
 - briefing staff about the advice which should be offered in cases of debt and antisocial behaviour and instigating a system of checking to ensure this advice is appropriately provided;
- better management of contractor performance by continuous monitoring of repair appointments which fall outside of target timescales and ensuring an effective response to them;
- putting management plans in place to mitigate the effects of decisions not to carry out unaffordable work to improve access to sheltered schemes and take decisions immediately after audits about how much work will be done in the general stock;
- exploring options to increase the take-up of adaptations among black and minority ethnic customers;
- putting a process in place to ensure that, in implementing future office closures or changes in opening patterns, local customers influence decision making on the basis of an informed understanding of the costs of the various options; and
- setting profile targets for staff and the board based on up-to-date customer profile information. Monitor and report on progress against all of these by each diversity strand and explore targeted recruitment options to bring both into line with the profile in a reasonable time frame.

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

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- access arrangements which demonstrably meet the needs of most customers and represent value for money. Customers will be aware of the services they can access, know what level of service to expect and whether this is being delivered.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the strategic approach to planning and performance management. This should include:

- establishing a system to ensure all plans are outcome focused and SMART¹; and
- reporting regularly to the board on cumulative and benchmarked performance against targets, in addition to 'snapshot' reporting.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clarity about the ALMO's objectives, a better understanding of its performance in key areas and approaches which are geared to continuous improvement of services.

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

Recommendation

R3 Review with the Council, customers and the other Leeds ALMOs the weaknesses in city wide policies identified in this report. Particularly:

- a replacement for leasing schemes for central heating replacement;
- failure to address pooling of service charges;
- the impact of the lettings policy on refusal levels and void turnaround times; and
- the poor quality of accommodation offered in some sheltered schemes, with a view to bringing it up to modern standards within a reasonable timeframe and particularly to eradicating the use of shared bathing facilities.

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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

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

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Timebound

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

Recommendation

- R4** Review, with customers, these recommendations and all the other weaknesses identified in this report:
- consider them in the light of good practice from elsewhere;
 - carry out impact and value for money assessments on potential solutions; and
 - develop an action plan to address them.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

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

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

- 9** We would like to thank the staff of West North West Homes Leeds and Leeds City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 15 March to 26 March 2010

Report

Context

The locality

- 10 The city of Leeds is situated in the north of England and is the country's second largest municipal district, at 55 hectares. In 2007 it was the 114th most deprived of England's 354 districts, which is an improvement on its 91st position in 2004, but this masks significant variations in affluence. Leeds is an important financial, legal and business centre with thriving suburbs, but over half of the super output areas in its inner city are among the 10 per cent most deprived nationally. Unemployment is relatively high at 6.6 per cent and the population is relatively young, with a large student population.
- 11 West North West Homes Leeds (WNWHL) manages 21,478 tenanted and 747 leasehold homes in northern and western Leeds. It also manages 2,703 garages and 45 shops. The area it covers contains 124,183 households and it manages just under 18 per cent of this housing stock. Shortage of affordable housing across the city means WNWHL has no 'low demand' estates.
- 12 The largest black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in WNWHL's area are in the Hyde Park and Woodhouse and Wortley wards, particularly in the Little London and Armley neighbourhoods. The Asian community is the largest single minority group in the area. The Government identifies parts of Armley, Bramley, Wortley and Little London as being among the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

The Council

- 13 At the time of the inspection a Liberal Democrat and Conservative alliance governed the Council. Shortly after the inspection, its political composition changed slightly. Of the 99 councillors, Labour currently has 48, the Liberal Democrat party 21, the Conservative party 22, Independents 6 and the Green Party 2. The Council has a leader and an executive board, which is its principal decision-making body.
- 14 Under the Comprehensive Area Assessment framework 'Oneplace' Leeds City Council was judged in 2009 to be a council that is performing adequately.

The service

- 15 WNWHL was established in April 2007, following the merger of two arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) and has an agreement to manage the stock until 2012/13. It was inspected in September 2008 and judged to be a 'fair' service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 16 The ALMO is one of three in the city and is responsible for:
 - managing and letting Council homes;
 - collecting rents, service charges, arrears and other debts;

- managing the repairs service and improvement programmes to meet the Decent Homes Standard;
- tenancy and estate management including dealing with antisocial behaviour;
- caretaking, cleaning, security and environmental management;
- support for resident involvement and participation;
- adaptations for older people with a disability; and
- sheltered and supported housing.

17 The functions retained by the Council include:

- overall housing strategy and enabling;
- determining policies on lettings, antisocial behaviour and rents;
- managing the Supporting People programme;
- homelessness, housing advice and administration of the housing register; and
- some leaseholder services and right to buy administration.

18 WNWHL has a board of 12 which is supported by two sub committees. It has four area panels, which have delegated responsibilities for environmental and community safety issues and local performance management. These are each made up of one tenant board member, two local councillors and up to nine elected tenants.

19 Day to day operational management of the ALMO is delegated to a chief executive and management team of three heads of service. It employs 377 staff in four 'one-stop shops', four housing offices and a headquarters building.

20 In inspections of the ALMO's forerunner organisations, we judged them to be delivering 'good', two star services, which allowed the Council to access £128 million supported borrowing to bring homes up to the government's Decent Homes Standard.

21 In 2009/10 WNWHL received a management fee of just over £28 million from the Council. Its capital improvement programme cost £24.2 million.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

22 WNWHL's vision is:

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

23 Its corporate values are to:

- put the customer first;
- demonstrate integrity;
- deliver excellence;
- deliver services right first time;
- be a learning organisation;
- embrace diversity;
- show innovation;
- be socially responsible and accountable; and
- be a good employer.

24 Leeds City Council's strategic plan 2008-11 aims to achieve:

- people happy, healthy, safe, successful and free from the effects of poverty;
- young people equipped to contribute to their own and the city's future well being and prosperity;
- local people engaged in decisions about their neighbourhood and community and helping shape local services;
- neighbourhoods that are inclusive, varied and vibrant, offering housing options and quality facilities and free from harassment and crime;
- an environment that is clean, green, attractive and above all, sustainable; and
- a city-region that is prosperous, innovative and distinctive enabling individuals and businesses to achieve their economic potential.

25 The local strategic partnership's vision is based on:

- 'narrowing the gap'; and
- 'going up a league'.

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

Access and customer care

- 26** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There was a corporate commitment to developing a customer care culture, local offices were accessible, written information was good quality and staff were customer focused. Published service standards were also in place but compliance against them was not systematically monitored or reported. There were also considerable delays in accessing services by telephone through the Council's contact centre, out of hours services were limited and access was not tailored to meet individual needs. Performance in handling complaints was also weak.
- 27** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. Information for customers is clear and front line services are accessible. Service standards are comprehensive and most aspects of performance management in this area are now strong. There are still weaknesses in performance and performance management at the contact centre, however, and in how complaints are handled. The ALMO's recent strategic review of access arrangements was not comprehensive.
- 28** Most information provided to customers is accessible and customer focused. Leaflets, the sheltered service booklet and the customer handbook cover key issues clearly and make good use of examples and illustrations. The quarterly 'Buzz' newsletter includes short, accessible news items and performance information. Key documents, including all service standards, some leaflets and the newsletter are translated into the ten most commonly read community languages and those in use are regularly reviewed to reflect changes in customer requirements. The website is easy to navigate and has facilities for translation, changing font sizes and listening to page content. The information it contains is up-to-date and it includes useful links to other sites, as well as allowing online rent payment and repair reporting. This means that customers should usually be able to find the information they need about services.
- 29** Face to face services are customer focused. Offices and one-stop shops are welcoming. Front line staff, including those employed by contractors, have had customer care training and some have been trained in basic British Sign Language (BSL). There are well advertised translation services to assist customers who do not speak English. Pilot surgeries are used where customer consultation has indicated a need, including: one in conjunction with a local mosque to coincide with a key prayer time; one in conjunction with a specialist voluntary sector organisation to meet the needs of its deaf customers, with a BSL interpreter present; and one in an outlying area with a predominantly older customer population, where a housing office has been closed. A mobile surgery is also being trialled at venues like supermarkets, although this has not yet been well-used. This means many traditional barriers to access have been removed.

How good is the service?

- 30** Service standards are comprehensive in every service area. These have only been in place since December 2009, so meaningful performance data was not available at the time of this inspection, but customers have been involved in developing them at service improvement groups (SIGs) and performance against most of them is measurable. Performance will be reported back to these groups and more widely to other customers in the newsletter. This approach means customers and staff understand what service they should expect to give or receive, whether it is being delivered and whether a complaint might be legitimate.
- 31** Most customers can access services. A comprehensive range of data is collected, including the numbers of hits and transactions on the website and satisfaction levels across services. Data about service usage is broken down by diversity strand and compared with customer profile data. This indicates that 87 per cent of all households have made some contact in the last twelve months and that their profile broadly reflects that of the customer body, which provides some reassurance that no obvious barriers to access exist. The data has some limitations in that it does not highlight method of contact, which would assist the ALMO in developing access arrangements in future, but it does demonstrate that WNWHL has done a significant amount of work to make services accessible.
- 32** There is a mixed picture in terms of contact centre performance. Positively, satisfaction with the quality of service received and the ability of operators to deal with enquiries is relatively high, at 93 and 91 per cent respectively. The average queuing time was also 49 seconds^I and only 4.1 per cent of calls were abandoned before being answered during the first three quarters of 2009/10, both of which are significant improvements on performance in previous years. In addition, calls to customers who chose not to queue and pressed the button for a return call were made in an average of less than two hours^{II}. However, only 75 per cent of calls were answered within 20 seconds^{III}. Also, even allowing for bad weather towards the end of the period, around 30 per cent of calls^{IV} were potentially avoidable repeat calls only made to chase up issues already reported. This means that, despite some improvements, the ALMO is still not delivering telephone services in line with all of the standards it has set and repeat calls, resulting from service failure, continue to divert staff from answering new calls.
- 33** Although the performance of individuals working within the Council's contact centre to deliver telephone services for the ALMO is closely monitored, there are weaknesses in how WNWHL manages performance at the strategic level. For example:
- it has not explored how many customers use land lines and how many use mobile phones, so it does not know whether its free phone service is benefitting more customers than it disadvantages and it has not explored its options for promoting other options;

^I against a 50 second target

^{II} against a three hour target

^{III} against an 80 per cent target

^{IV} against a 24 per cent target

- it does not monitor the impact of longest and shortest call waiting times but concentrates on average waiting times and abandonment rates. This approach also ignores out of hours waiting times. This means WNWHL does not have a full picture of peaks and troughs in demand and performance, despite the fact that call waiting times have been as long as 11 minutesⁱ during exceptionally bad weather and as long as eight minutesⁱⁱ even during 'normal' periods, so it is missing opportunities to ensure a responsive service is provided at all times; and
 - service standards do not take account of the fact that an answer machine message lengthens calls by providing information for customers and signposting to other access routes during busy times. This means customers may have a false impression about whether the standard has been met.
- 34** The approach to handling complaints has improved but retains weaknesses. An accessible and well-promoted three stage process is in place, with diversity monitoring indicating no obvious barriers for excluded groups. Standard letters are clear and sensitively worded and the ALMO has also adopted a compensation policy. However, manual systems for managing complaints are cumbersome and open to human error and only 84 per cent of cases are handled in the ten day target timescale. Although fewer now proceed to stages two and three and the introduction of a customer panel at the final review stage has resulted in more customer focused solutions, five complaints have been upheld by the Ombudsman in the last year and there is a mixed picture in terms of customer satisfaction, with only 58 per cent satisfaction with how complaints are handled and 59 per cent that they are handled fairlyⁱⁱⁱ.
- 35** The ALMO's recent strategic review of access was not comprehensive. It was based on office usage and cost information but was not informed by up-to-date customer profile data. It focused on face to face services and telephone contact, but did not explore opening times or out of hours services and it ignored access to specific services like repairs. Customers were consulted on its recommendations, rather than involved in the process, and these included significant changes without a clear rationale for making them, so their choices were not well-informed. This approach means the review was of limited value in strategic planning and has resulted in the replacement of one office by surgeries, without clear support from local people. Weaknesses in the review also mean that recent attempts to improve the use of the website and plans to address under-use of some offices are not based on either a sound understanding of how customers prefer to access services or on their access to the internet, so it is not clear whether the changes will meet their needs.

ⁱ 669 seconds

ⁱⁱ 489 seconds

ⁱⁱⁱ Figures for the first three quarters of 2009/10

Diversity

- 36** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There was a strong corporate approach to equalities and diversity (E&D) and staff demonstrated an awareness of the issues. WNWHL had challenged itself against national standards and action had been taken to improve access and to support excluded customer groups. Customer profiling, however, was underdeveloped and the approach to domestic violence and hate crime had some weaknesses.
- 37** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. There is a corporate commitment to E&D, supported by a strategic framework and work on equality impact assessments in key service areas. There have also been a number of successful community cohesion initiatives and there are robust approaches to addressing hate crime and domestic abuse and to safeguarding adults and children who are at risk of abuse. Although the ALMO has made significant progress in collecting customer profile information and is beginning to use it to tailor services to meet needs, it still has some gaps in knowledge and usage of this data and it has more work to do to ensure contractors fully comply with its E&D objectives.
- 38** There is a clear commitment to addressing E&D issues. 'To embrace diversity' is a corporate value and a range of tools are in use to help embed this into the organisation's culture. These include E&D impacts being noted in every board report and E&D being a standard agenda item at SIGs and staff meetings. All staff and board members have undergone 'grass roots' training, with additional sessions provided on mental health, drugs, alcohol, hate crime and faith issues, depending on job roles. Induction for new staff members also includes a module on diversity issues and one on hate crime and domestic violence. Board and staff champions are in place to raise awareness around E&D issues and the staff diversity champions' group has had input into articles with inclusivity messages in the staff newsletter, in 'Buzz' and on the website and has organised cultural diversity events.
- 39** This approach is supported by a robust strategic framework. A comprehensive cohesion and diversity strategy^I incorporates the single equality scheme and action plan. The ALMO's approach is also being strengthened by implementing a plan to meet the requirements of the Code of Practice for Racial Equality in Housing^{II} by December 2010. In partnership with the Council, the ALMO has reached level four of the former Equality Standard for Local Government and has developed an action plan to achieve an excellent rating against the replacement Equality Framework by March 2011. Progress against these plans is being monitored by a diversity KLOE board. A vulnerability policy is also in place, which outlines how staff will check customer support needs at key stages, such as application and sign-up, and covers issues like the sharing of information with partner organisations. These various approaches should ensure that the organisation continues to have a clear focus on E&D issues.

^I 2009/13

^{II} formerly established by the Commission for Racial Equality and now administered by the Human Rights Commission

- 40 There is a sound approach to equality impact assessments (EIAs). Staff have been trained to do these in their service areas, with clear guidance and quality control provided by the cohesion and diversity team. Although some of the managers we met during this inspection could not talk knowledgeably about plans or outcomes in their areas, others did understand the purpose of the assessments and were able to demonstrate that they had changed the way services are delivered. For example, automatically using translated publicity materials in neighbourhoods with larger BME communities and different rent statement formats for some customers, including hate crime victims in the 'direct let' priority category for rehousing and allowing support dogs to live in flats with customers who have sensory impairments. This means that the use of EIAs is beginning to change the way staff think about service delivery and to help ensure excluded groups are not disadvantaged by the ALMO's policies or processes.
- 41 WNWHL supports a range of community cohesion activities. It has held events in sheltered schemes to encourage tolerance between generations and raise awareness among young people around dementia and mental health issues. The ALMO also sponsored a local cricket match to help improve relationships between communities in one area. Its 'fusion' celebration of diverse fashion, food and music and its 'cooking around the world' projects have particularly brought women together from different communities and its support of language classes in one neighbourhood has helped 11 people integrate more easily into the city, with two going on to paid employment and one to a higher level course. This approach is helping to promote better community cohesion in the neighbourhoods which the ALMO manages.
- 42 The approach to addressing hate crime and domestic abuse is robust. There is a clear domestic violence policy¹ in place and hate crime is specifically highlighted in antisocial behaviour (ASB) policies. Joint working is strong in these areas and WNWHL takes an active part in multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC), where information is shared about the highest risk cases of domestic abuse and joined-up solutions are developed to assist survivors. Two ALMO staff have been trained as domestic abuse champions and are passing their training on to colleagues to help with identification, risk assessment and referral of cases. The ALMO effectively promotes its services for customers who experience all types of abuse, with incident reporting available online and all ALMO offices being hate incident reporting centres. It also recently participated in a multi-agency hate crime action day in a 'hotspot' area, with a resultant reduction in reporting. These various approaches mean that customers can be confident they will receive a sensitive and supportive service if they come forward to report abuse.
- 43 There is a robust approach to addressing safeguarding issues within WNWHL. Most staff and contractors have had safeguarding training and are all trained as 'alerters'. They make referrals through to the tenancy support team, which passes them to the Council using a robust procedure. An officer is then allocated to each case to ensure updates are received from the Council on progress. This approach is quite new but 19 alerts have already been received and referred through. This approach means staff have a clear means of raising concerns about adults or children who they suspect might be at risk of abuse and the ALMO has appropriate processes in place to ensure they are acted upon by the appropriate authorities.

¹ reviewed in July 2009

How good is the service?

- 44 WNWHL has made progress in gathering and using customer profile information. The ALMO holds profile information for 83 per cent of tenants^I and there is ongoing work to complete this exercise. This information is easily accessed by staff and has been used, for example, to target young people with rent arrears for a texting campaign, to improve the sensitivity with which vulnerable people are approached about access for gas servicing and to translate rent statements into community languages. The data has also been used at a strategic level to support business planning and strategy development and to inform the annual review of which document translations should be offered. This means services are increasingly being designed and tailored to meet the specific needs of individual customers.
- 45 There are still gaps, however, in the ALMO's understanding of its customer profile and it does not make good use of this or satisfaction data to improve some services. By the time of this inspection, for example, profile data was held on only 32 per cent of leaseholders, which limits the extent to which services are tailored to meet their needs. Also, although it knows that almost 5 per cent of its customers would prefer to specify that appointments are not be made at prayer times and a potentially larger group might prefer same gender visits, these options are not advertised and only those customers who assert their requirements receive a tailored service. Although the ALMO analyses satisfaction information by diversity strand, managers were unable to demonstrate to inspectors that this data is effectively used to address imbalances in service delivery. This means opportunities are being missed to identify barriers and drive improvements by making better use of the ALMO's existing data.
- 46 The ALMO has an underdeveloped approach to ensuring contractors commit to promoting E&D in their workforces. Recent work has been done to involve contractors in E&D training and cohesion events and they are required to provide evidence of E&D policies during procurement exercises. However, there are no targets set out in contracts to focus attention on the employment of excluded groups and there are no rewards or sanctions in place to ensure contractors comply. This means that, although each of the ALMO's large repair and improvement contractors can demonstrate significant use of local labour^{II} and some have made progress in employing BME staff^{III}, none has demonstrated significant employment of women^{IV}. This is being addressed as part of Procurement 2011, but failure to do so sooner has been a missed opportunity to ensure the face of the organisation is reflective of the community it serves and to provide positive role models for excluded groups.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 47 Last time strengths outweigh weaknesses. The strategic approach was strong, with customer influence over planning and delivery of improvements. Programmes were also in place for cyclical maintenance. Some customers received a different level of service than others, however, as a result of the Council's Heatlease scheme.

^I with 100 per cent held on gender, 93 per cent on age, 82 per cent on faith, 78 per cent on ethnicity, 72 per cent on sexuality and 70 per cent on disability

^{II} ranging from 50 per cent to 87 per cent

^{III} with levels of up to ten per cent

^{IV} with the best achieving only 19 per cent

- 48 In this inspection we found that strengths still outweigh weaknesses. Most aspects of the improvement programme are customer focused and managed well. WHWHL is particularly improving energy efficiency and it will bring all the ALMO's rented properties up to the Decent Homes Standard by December 2010. WNWHL has robust information about the work needed in its stock in future and it has appropriate arrangements in place for cyclical maintenance. The approach to managing asbestos is robust, although there are minor weaknesses. There are also minor weaknesses in the way improvements are being delivered and the Council's Heatlease scheme means some customers are still less likely than others to be able to afford to have central heating installed in their homes.
- 49 The improvement programme is being delivered to timescale and on budget. The housing stock was 86 per cent decent by December 2009 and the rest of the work required is programmed and fully funded. This means all of the ALMO's customers will live in properties which meet the government's Decent Homes Standard by the end of December 2010.
- 50 The delivery of the improvement programme is customer focused. Customers receive a comprehensive handbook, are given dedicated liaison officers throughout the process and customer profile information is given to contractors early in the process allows tailoring of the service to meet specific requirements. Occupational therapist assessments are commissioned by the contractor and adaptations are delivered as part of the programme, to the same specifications used for one-off work. Some limited respite facilities are available on appropriate schemes, with decanting arrangements made in exceptional circumstances. There has been a good choice of fixtures, fittings and finishes and contractors are required to pay compensation for missed appointments. This approach has resulted in high customer satisfaction of over 90 per cent on most schemes and around half have scores of over 95 per cent.
- 51 The ALMO is improving the energy efficiency of the homes it manages:
- its 20 remaining customers whose homes have SAP^I ratings of under 35 have been offered replacement heating systems and insulation as part of the improvement programme, although many have chosen to retain a solid fuel alternative;
 - it has piloted the installation of 56 air source heat pumps^{II} which are helping to improve energy efficiency in properties which do not have a mains gas supply^{III}. In addition, it is currently installing a gas supply in two neighbourhoods at no cost to itself^{IV}, which is benefitting home owners as well as tenants;^V

^I standard assessment procedure - the nationally recognised measure of thermal comfort in domestic premises

^{II} £245,000 and £220,000 has been spent in 2008/09 and 2009/10

^{III} it has 3168 homes in this category, of which 2028 are in 'electric only' blocks of flats

^{IV} using £535,000 of 'infill' funding

^V in one area it has been taken up by 85 tenants and 85 home owners and in the other it is being taken up by 40 tenants and 74 home owners

How good is the service?

- it has used £34,500 of energy efficiency funding to install cavity insulation, cladding and a new insulated roof as part of the £1.4 million refurbishment of one of its multi-storey blocks, increasing average SAP ratings from 53 to 60 and reducing individual fuel bills by between 23 and 49 per cent; and
- it has accessed £246,000 of energy grant funding in 2009/10 which is being used to supplement a £500,000 contribution each from the Council and its own reserves in 2009/10 to externally clad non-traditional properties.

These various initiatives will bring the average SAP rating at the end of 2009/10 to an estimated 71, which is an increase on the average figure of 68 at the beginning of the year^I. They also mean WHWHL will have only 90 properties with SAP ratings of below 42 by the year end.

- 52 There are appropriate arrangements for cyclical maintenance and fire safety. Domestic electrical systems are serviced every ten years and the ALMO recently adopted a tenancy enforcement approach to customers refusing access. Lift, plant, fire safety equipment and legionella testing is carried out in line with recommended practice. A five year internal and seven year external cyclical painting programme is in place. In areas where hard wired smoke detectors are not being fitted as part of improvement works, WNWHL is working with the Fire and Rescue service to install battery operated alarms, with 1100 fitted in the homes of people with disabilities and those aged over 75. It has also worked with Fire and Rescue to develop a fire safety policy, a three year investment programme to address fire safety issues in communal areas and an awareness raising campaign. This approach means customers can be confident that the ALMO is taking reasonable steps to ensure their homes do not fall into disrepair and risks to their safety are being managed.
- 53 Most stock condition data is sound. Although the SAP rating data held by the Council is not yet reliable, other information is held by the ALMO and is robust. It has fully surveyed 65 per cent of its stock, with a further 20 per cent due in 2010/11 and much of the remainder having had elemental surveys. Its asset management database is also updated with information on any improvements, void, repair and adaptation work carried out. The database identifies which properties are decent and where components are due to fail. Although detailed programmes have yet to be developed for 2011/12 and beyond, the data has been used to inform the 30 year investment forecasts which the Council requires to support its option appraisal. It has also given some clarity about the extent of work required and the cost of carrying out a 'mop up' programme of decent homes 'refusal' work between 2010/11 and 2012/13^{II}. This approach means that WNWHL understands how much it will cost to maintain its properties in future and is keeping this information up-to-date.

^I although these figures are based on a 69 per cent sample provided by the Council and many not be reliable

^{II} 492 customers have refused 1,186 elemental pieces of work and 200 of these properties have yet to be surveyed. The ALMO has calculated that this will cost a maximum of £2.9 million, assuming all elements fail at the survey stage

- 54 WNWHL's approach to managing asbestos is robust and it complies with its legal duties as a landlord and employer. It employs two specialist staff to manage compliance, all customer facing staff have recently had asbestos awareness training and it requires contractors to confirm that they have trained all of their own staff. There is a clear asbestos management policy and measurable service standards in place, which clarify for customers what to expect if asbestos is detected in their homes. The policy is based on leaving undamaged asbestos undisturbed and monitoring it for deterioration. The ALMO has surveyed the communal areas of its stock^I and has an ongoing reinspection programme in place to help identify any deterioration in asbestos containing materials^{II}. Asbestos survey information is kept on a web-based database which staff and contractors can access on a 24 hour basis. Although the ALMO has only carried out asbestos surveys in 35 per cent of its customers' homes, they are done prior to all demolition, improvement, adaptation and void work, so risk to these operatives is being effectively minimised and the database is likely to continue to grow by around 2,500 properties per year.
- 55 There are, however, some minor weaknesses in the management of asbestos which do not affect the ALMO's compliance with legislation. Repair job tickets highlight where a survey has been done but only supervisors know about the type and location of any asbestos found. Even though procedures require them to check the database, failure to specify this data on the job ticket itself means there is a risk in a busy working environment that operatives will not know what to expect before beginning work because the check will not be done. The ALMO has a new tracking system in place which allows it to check when database records have been accessed but this is only used retrospectively on problematic cases, rather than being routinely monitored to track how well the system is used by contractors. Also, although customers are given a general leaflet about asbestos as part of the tenant handbook and are offered the opportunity to ask for a copy of any survey report on their homes, this is not routinely sent out, which means they may take unnecessary risks when doing DIY.
- 56 The ALMO has not taken comprehensive decisions about making the communal areas of its housing accessible to any customers and visitors who have a disability. The costs of compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in the communal areas of multi-storey blocks and sheltered schemes have been quantified. A two year plan is in place to deliver the highest priority works identified^{III} and a policy decision has been taken to do some further works, such as lighting upgrades at a later date, when current systems fail^{IV}. Management plans are not yet in place, however, to address the implications of work which is unaffordable. For example, the cost of installing lifts in one sheltered scheme which is located on four levels makes the work uneconomic but the ALMO has yet to address the fact that areas of the scheme are inaccessible by changing the way it is let and managed. It will also not begin to audit the communal areas of its low-rise general needs stock until 2010/11. This means some customers, potential customers and visitors are not currently able to access a significant number of the ALMO's properties and it is unclear how long this situation will continue.

^I 2.58 per cent have yet to be done because access has been difficult in leasehold blocks

^{II} 98.9 per cent have been reinspected at least once within the last 15 months

^{III} £548,000 in sheltered and £1.16 million in multi-storey blocks

^{IV} a further £39,000 and £106,000

How good is the service?

- 57** Elements of improvement programme are not customer focused or efficient. This is published on the website, a letter is sent at the beginning of the financial year to those customers who are affected and a follow-up letter is sent by the contractor three months before work is due. Because work is based on a pre-site inspection, however, with some components proving to be in better condition than anticipated, decisions are not made about what will be done at each property until shortly before work begins. This means that those who require rewiring, for example, do not have sufficient notice to avoid redecorating in advance. There is also limited support for vulnerable customers who need to redecorate afterwards. All customers receiving a new kitchen or bathroom have it redecorated and full redecoration has followed extensive work in one sheltered scheme, but most other disruptive work generates only a decoration voucher or cheque payment^I. The ALMO has a policy of doing work for vulnerable people, up to the value of the voucher, but this is not advertised and there has been no customer take-up. This means that some of its most vulnerable customers may struggle to redecorate their homes after improvements and this may also act as a deterrent to having the work done.
- 58** An unequal service is being offered to some customers. The Council's Heatlease^{II} programmes mean that all customers who have had central heating installed since 1997 have been required to pay a service charge to cover the cost of leasing these systems^{III} for a period of between 10 and 12 years. At the end of this period, the charge ends and the Council owns the system. The first of six phases^{IV} of the scheme is due to end later this month. Some customers who had central heating installed prior to these schemes had a rent increase imposed when heating was installed and some did not. This means that customers living in similar properties and neighbourhoods are required to pay different charges, depending on when their heating systems were installed. Because the service charge is eligible for Housing Benefit, it also means that those customers on low incomes who do not qualify for benefit or are intermittent claimants may be deterred from having central heating installed because of this long term cost commitment. It may have contributed to the fact that between 350 and 600 of the ALMO's properties will have no central heating by the end of the improvement programme^V, despite the local strategic partnership (LSP) commitment to narrowing the gap between richer and poorer communities in the city.

Responsive repairs

- 59** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. It was easy to report repairs, they were usually done on time and customers were satisfied. However, there was only a limited appointments system in operation, too much work was being done on an emergency basis and there were performance management weaknesses.
- 60** In this inspection we found that there is still a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Some elements of repair reporting are customer focused but others are not. The service is generally efficient but aspects of performance management are not strong. The service meets the needs of most customers but the ALMO is still not performing well in delivering all types of repairs to its published timescales.

^I up to a maximum of £400, depending on the extent of work required

^{II} and its successor Total Heat

^{III} or the cost of borrowing to pay for them under Total Heat, which replaced Heatlease in 2006

^{IV} approx 17,500 properties, citywide

^V depending on refusal and void levels in the final year

- 61** Elements of the repair reporting processes are customer focused. There are three well advertised repair categories^I and repairs can be reported in a range of ways. Appointments are made for all internal works and external jobs requiring access. Each generates a repair receipt by post, a text and a telephone call reminder^{II}. Clear and reasonable protocols are in place for contact centre staff about upgrading repair priorities for vulnerable customers and vulnerability and risk information is automatically transferred to job tickets, so operatives know about any specific customer requirements. There is also a contractor-funded compensation scheme for missed appointments. These various approaches result in low 'no access' figures^{III} and 97.33 per cent of appointments were kept in 2009/10, which puts the ALMO among the best performing comparators.
- 62** Most elements of the repairs service are efficient. Ordering systems ensure faulty improvement work is passed back to the originating contractor, rather than being repaired by the ALMO. WNWHL now also does reasonably well in carrying out low priority work on a planned, rather than responsive basis. It did 53 per cent of repairs in this way in 2009/10, largely by batching high volume work^{IV} into mini programmes, 90 per cent of which are done within 60 days of being ordered by the customer. This approach has helped keep spending on repairs in line with budgets, despite projected overspends early in 2009/10. The ALMO's average repair costs also put it among the lowest 25 per cent of comparator organisations^V.
- 63** The service delivered meets the needs of most customers. Clear service standards include a code of conduct for operatives^{VI} and performance against them is monitored via satisfaction surveys, and reported as part of the local performance framework^{VII}. The average time taken to complete non-urgent repairs is 9.32 days and 98.92 per cent of urgent repairs were done within government timescales in 2009/10. The out of hours service is also an accessible and efficient 'make safe' one. Overall, the service generates high levels of customer satisfaction, at 97.33 per cent among customers who had work done during 2009/10^{VIII}. Rudimentary work to analyse satisfaction on the basis of diversity strands indicates there are no significant differentials in the responses of customers from excluded groups who have had work done, despite more negative responses to wider STATUS surveys about repairs and maintenance issues.
- 64** Elements of performance, however, are less positive. Only 96.69 per cent of all repairs were done within target timescales in the year to February 2010, with only 95.04 per cent of emergencies and only 95.97 per cent of non-urgent works done within timescales in the first three quarters of the year^{IX}. This is particularly significant because excessive numbers of emergency repairs are still ordered^X. This means over 2,500 customers had to wait longer than advertised for work to be done last year, of which over 600 were in emergency situations.

^I 24 hour, 3 day and 20 day

^{II} 'ring ahead' took place in 98.5 per cent of appointments in the first 11 months of 2009/10

^{III} 2.3 per cent in the year to February

^{IV} typically guttering, path, brickwork and roofing repairs

^V Housemark 2008/09

^{VI} including wearing uniforms, showing identification and behaving professionally

^{VII} generally indicating compliance

^{VIII} although the sample size is relatively low at under 11 per cent

^{IX} year end figures not available at the time of writing

^X 20 per cent of repairs were emergencies, 18 per cent urgent and 62 per cent routine in the first 11 months of 2009/10

How good is the service?

65 There are also still some weaknesses in performance management in this area. For example, the ALMO does not effectively monitor 'right first time' because it only considers whether the job has been done to the customer's satisfaction and in one visit. This excludes other key factors, like whether the work was done at the appointed time or within the priority timescale and whether it 'stayed fixed' for a reasonable time period afterwards. WNWHL has also been slow to make best use of its surveyors in its mature partnering context. It is in the process of redirecting surveyors from pre to post-inspection work to increase their focus on quality assurance, so pre-inspections have gradually reduced from a level of 9.25 per cent in April 2009 to a cumulative figure of 7.54 per cent over the first ten months of the year. Failure to achieve and adhere to its 5 per cent target throughout the year, however, means insufficient resources have been available for post-inspection work, with only 6.71 per cent of jobs post-inspected^I in the first ten months of 2009/10. This means opportunities may have been missed to drive service improvement by learning from quality assurance and to regulate the discretion given to contractors to vary work^{II}.

66 Elements of repair ordering are not customer focused. For example:

- contact centre staff work through the appointment slots available until they find one which meets the customer's needs but appointments are only made for 'morning' or 'afternoon'. Although there is scope to tighten the timeframe offered by, for example, making requests like 'avoid school run', this is not advertised so only those customers who specifically request it are given this option. Mystery shopping during this inspection indicated that the contact centre does not routinely make clear that appointment slots can be tightened or that weekends are available for key trades and none of the customers we met were aware that these options were available. This means those customers who do not understand the system may be more inconvenienced than those who do;
- in the case of jobs which need a surveyor's visit to specify the work required, the original job order is cancelled by the surveyor and a new order raised. Although surveyor visits are done promptly, this can still mean a period of days or weeks is added to the customer's waiting time. The ALMO has recently recognised this as a weakness and is developing a method for monitoring and reporting the full 'end to end' time but this is not yet in use and the performance reported still masks the fact that some customers wait longer than advertised for repairs to be done; and
- although the contact centre records the number of appointments which fall outside of target timescales, the ALMO assumes these cases are all the result of customer preference. This means it is not monitoring the data available to explore whether sufficient resources are in place at the right times to deliver optimal efficiency and customer service.

^I against a 10 per cent minimum target

^{II} 17.3 per cent of jobs were varied by up to £500 in the first three quarters of 2009/10

67 Although it is reducing, disrepair remains an issue. The ALMO attracted 31 cases last yearⁱ, of which 17 are still outstanding. This issue cost it £32,943.18 in compensation and £15,434.19 in repair costs last year. A further 21 cases were reported in the first three quarters of this year, most of which are still ongoing. This means that failure to address repair issues in a timely or efficient way in the past is resulting in costly and time-consuming work now and means resources are being diverted from addressing current customer priorities.

Empty (void) property repairs

68 Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. A lettable standard was in place and the budget had been increased to reflect improvements in it. There were robust arrangements for void repairs and comprehensive performance monitoring arrangements helped ensure they were repaired to the satisfaction of new customers. However, the number of empty homes and the length of time taken to relet them were high and there was little guidance about the security or decoration of void properties.

69 In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. A clear lettable standard is still in place and is consistently applied and the ALMO has worked hard to relet its long term voids, despite this impacting negatively on the average speed with which it has let homes. There is also now a robust policy in place to govern void security, but the decoration voucher policy remains poorly publicised to customers.

70 Empty homes are repaired to an acceptable standard. This has been agreed with customers and is applied consistently. Although customer satisfaction with the condition of their new homes is not highⁱⁱ, offers are seldom refused as a result of it. Satisfaction surveys in 2009 highlighted that the standard of cleaning was poor, so the ALMO has responded by appointing a new contractor which provides a better service for a lower price. This approach means customers should be able to set up home as soon as their tenancy commences, without the need for extensive cleaning or repairs.

71 WNWHL has taken steps to reduce the number of empty homes it manages. A combined empty homes and allocations team has improved communication and increased focus on performance, with the number of untenanted homes having reduced from 1.44 per cent of the housing stock in April 2009 to 1.14 per cent by the end of February 2010ⁱⁱⁱ. The number of long term voids has also reduced from 118 to 50 over the same period. Visits to properties before customers leave them and the use of a 'How to leave your home and garden' leaflet have increased the number of empty homes which can be relet immediately and 125 were let on a 'back to back' basis in the first ten months of 2009/10. Refusal reasons are closely monitored and, if investment in improvements in harder to let properties would be off-set by reduced rent loss, this is considered. For example, the least popular stock is bedsit accommodation in sheltered schemes with shared bathing facilities, so WNWHL has installed showers where possible and holds open days to highlight the positive aspects of these schemes. This approach is helping to reduce the income lost as a result of properties standing empty (only 0.98 per cent of the total rent payable in 2009/10) and the blight which this causes in their neighbourhoods.

ⁱ out of 66,000 repairs done

ⁱⁱ 84.9 per cent satisfaction with internal and 89.2 per cent with external condition in the six months before this inspection

ⁱⁱⁱ outperforming the target of 1.25 per cent

How good is the service?

- 72** A clear void security policy is in place. A risk-assessed plan has been developed for each area which indicates the type of security measures which will be used and this is reviewed every three months, based on experience and intelligence from agencies such as the police. This approach balances the need to protect properties with the need to maintain a pleasant living environment for neighbours. This more measured approach to the use of overt security has also resulted in savings, with around £71,000 being spent in 2009/10, compared to £90,000 in 2008/09.
- 73** There is a complex picture in terms of the speed of reletting empty homes. Because the ALMO has relet 70 long-term void properties between April 2009 and February 2010, its performance has been distorted, with an average relet time over the period of 87.78 days. If adjustments are made to exclude improvement works but retain long term voids in the calculation, this figure would drop to 45.74 days, which is still high in comparison with others. Performance improved more dramatically shortly before this inspection as the volume of long term voids being relet reduced, with an average relet time in February of 32.28 and in March of 27.3 days. This means that the ALMO has increased its rental income and improved the sustainability of estates over the past year by reletting properties which have been empty for a long time but it is still too early to detect a sustained period of speedy reletting of standard voids as a result of the efficiencies made in managing void properties in recent months.
- 74** Customers are unclear about the ALMO's approach to decorating empty properties. Lettings staff have some discretion to provide vouchers to new customers to help them buy decorating materials. These are awarded where substantial repairs have been done during the time the property was empty, leaving one or more rooms with damaged decorations. The letting standard does not clearly explain this, however, so some customers might be discouraged from accepting a property because of the potential cost of redecorating.

Gas servicing

- 75** Last time weaknesses outweighed strengths. Performance management and reporting were weak. Attempts to gain access did not begin until after gas safety certificates had expired and the service did not take account of the needs of vulnerable customers. Recent improvements had not yet impacted on outcomes.
- 76** In this inspection we found that strengths now significantly outweigh weaknesses. Performance and performance management have improved and there is a focus on the needs of vulnerable people in gaining access to their homes. Action has also been taken to help ensure leasehold properties have regular safety checks.
- 77** Performance is strong in this area. During this inspection only 14¹ homes with a gas supply did not have a valid gas safety certificate and only one of these was overdue by more than one month. Customer satisfaction with gas servicing is also reasonably high, at 93.3 per cent. This means customers' homes were safe, with 99.91 per cent of properties having a valid gas safety certificate.

¹ out of 15,973

- 78** Processes in this area have been strengthened since the last inspection. It has a clear gas safety policy and procedure, based on an 11 month servicing schedule. There is a focus on vulnerable customers, with profile information shared with contractors to help them tailor their approach to meet individual needs. The ALMO offers evening and weekend appointments to meet the needs of customers with weekday commitments. Some of the tools used include 'anniversary cards' sent eight weeks before safety certificates expire, regular articles in Buzz magazine, a hard-hitting poster and leaflet campaign developed with customers and a prize draw for those allowing access at the first attempt, which is sponsored by contractors. Addresses where servicing is overdue are flagged on other systems so that an appointment can be made if customers make contact about other matters and stickers are placed over door locks to remind customers and their neighbours of the need to make contact immediately. Service timer clocks are fitted when new systems are installed and in homes where it has been difficult to gain access, but there is a strong emphasis on ensuring that these do not put the most vulnerable customers at risk in cold weather. These measures have helped ensure a timely approach to servicing and reduced the need for legal action, with only two injunctions used to gain entry since April 2009.
- 79** Record keeping and quality assurance measures are sound. Gas safety certificates are updated daily and stored electronically and regular reconciliation helps ensure all homes with a gas supply are included in the servicing schedule. The ALMO carries out a 5 per cent quality audit of the work done and any issues identified are raised at monthly contract management meetings, alongside customer satisfaction responses, with appropriate corrective action taken. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support customers forced to sleep temporarily in rooms with open-flued appliances by installing carbon monoxide detectors, while changes in appliance and rehousing options are explored in longer-term cases. These approaches mean the ALMO is able to demonstrate that it does everything reasonable to safeguard its customers.
- 80** The ALMO has strengthened its approach to gas safety in leasehold properties. Alongside mandatory annual flue checks, these customers are offered the opportunity to purchase a one, two or three star service¹. Those who choose not to do so have to provide evidence that a gas safety check has been carried out. This means the ALMO is taking reasonable steps to help safeguard these customers and their neighbours.

Aids and adaptations

- 81** Last time strengths outweighed weaknesses. The service was well publicised. Delivery procedures were robust, partnership working with the Council was effective and customers were involved in service development. Appropriate resources were in place and performance was in line with targets. However, there were weaknesses in performance management and reporting and customer satisfaction, in particular, was not being monitored.
- 82** In this inspection we found that strengths still outweigh weaknesses. The service is accessible for most customers and processes are sensitive and well-managed. Some customers, however, wait too long for work to be done and service take-up is low among BME groups.

¹ with one being a basic safety check and three stars including breakdown cover

How good is the service?

- 83** The service is accessible for most customers. The ALMO carries out adaptations for adults living in its properties and also helps them access equipment, which is provided by the Council. This service is publicised in newsletters and on the website. All Housing offices, one stop centres and sheltered schemes display leaflets and posters and front line staff have been given guidance on signposting customers to the service. Smaller adaptationsⁱ can also be ordered without the need for an occupational therapist (OT) referral. This approach means that most customers should be aware of the service and should not find making an application a daunting process. Demand for it increased by 50 per cent during 2009/10ⁱⁱ.
- 84** The approach in this area is particularly customer focused. An in-house OT and a dedicated surveyor concentrate on developing appropriate and sometimes innovative solutions to meet individual needs. Material and equipment reviews have resulted in increased choice for customers and the disabled customer forum is involved in developing and reviewing the service. This approach helps ensure it meets the needs of this vulnerable customer group and has contributed to high satisfaction levels with both major and minor works of 100 per cent in the first three quarters of 2009/10.
- 85** Performance management in this area is now strong. The ALMO monitors whether contractors comply with its code of conduct and uses tenant inspectors, in addition to its own surveyors, to test the quality of work. WNWHL has also recently begun monitoring the longer-term impact of adaptations by using a questionnaire six months after work is completed. This indicates that 98 per cent of customers consider their adaptation has improved their quality of life, 96 per cent think it has met their needs and only 8 per cent say they need further adaptations. This approach and the visits which it prompts are beginning to help WNWHL in strategic planning.
- 86** Performance in this area is mixed. In order to reduce the time taken to complete major adaptations and to address a projected overspend on minor adaptations, the ALMO has increased the budget by £350,000 from its own resources. All major adaptations are now completed within target timescalesⁱⁱⁱ and the waiting list has reduced from 289 to 49 customers, most of which are low priority cases. The average wait across all the priority categories of major adaptations, however, remains too long at approximately eight months^{iv} during the first 11 months of 2009/10. This places the ALMO among the lowest 25 per cent of comparable organisations. Also, although the average wait for minor works falls within the target seven and 28 day timescales, only 63 and 84 per cent meet these deadlines, so a significant number of customers wait longer.
- 87** There is relatively low take-up of adaptations from BME customers. The ALMO has identified and tried to address this with promotional events at a local mosque, but this has not led to an increase in referrals. This means the ALMO cannot demonstrate that it has identified and removed barriers to accessing the service for these groups.

ⁱ ie costing under £1000 and taking less than either seven or 28 days

ⁱⁱ An increase of 247 on the previous year

ⁱⁱⁱ 51, 76 and 214 days respectively for high, medium and low priority works

^{iv} 245 calendar days

Housing income management

- 88** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There was a range of payment options and customers received accurate and timely information about their rent accounts. Arrears cases were well managed and there was a good range of debt advice available. However, service charges did not reflect the cost of the services delivered, rent collection performance was weak and there were no incentives for customers to maintain clear rent accounts.
- 89** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. It is easy for customers to manage their accounts, robust arrears recovery processes are in place and there is a successful approach to financial inclusion. Performance in recovering debt, however, remains below average and the Council has yet to address the fact that some customers subsidise services received by others.
- 90** It is easy for customers to manage their rent accounts. All new customers have an indicative Housing Benefit calculation done and receive a temporary payment card at sign-up so that they can begin paying rent immediately. A full range of payment options is offered, with a prize draw to encourage payment by the cost effective method of direct debit. These various approaches help ensure rent is paid, with 33 per cent of customers who have rent to pay now doing so by direct debit.
- 91** There is a good range of customer information. A helpful leaflet explains how rent is calculated in line with government rent convergence requirements, outlines payment options and explains the ALMO's approach to recovering rent arrears. Relevant articles are also included in 'Buzz', a booklet is available which gives advice on managing debt and prospective customers also receive information when viewing properties about the costs of running a home. Quarterly rent statements are easy to understand and customers can also check their balance online. Rent arrears letters are clear and include contact details for money advice services, reminders about payment options and a form to assist customers in calculating their income and expenditure. Between 96 and 100 per cent of those customers surveyed^I in the three months leading up to this inspection found correspondence and information about rents account easy to understand and between 88 and 100 per cent being satisfied overall with the service. STATUS survey results also indicate that the wider customer body is largely happy with the service^{II} and benchmarking with comparators on this indicator places it among the best 25 per cent of performers.

^I in the ALMO's monthly telephone customer survey of those who have used the rents service

^{II} 79.7 per cent satisfaction

How good is the service?

- 92 The ALMO has a clear income management policy and comprehensive debt recovery procedures. These have been developed with customers and have a strong focus on prevention and on support for vulnerable people. The ALMO works particularly closely with the Council's housing options staff to prevent evictions of any households which include vulnerable people. In dealing with arrears among current customers, managers carry out compliance checks on 10 per cent of cases to ensure appropriate action has been taken and there is some use of profiling to target activity. For example, there was a pre-Christmas personal contact campaign aimed at those customers in arrears who were least likely to pay during that period. As a result, 800 repayment arrangements were either made or renewed. The customer profile has also been used to target contact by email and text with customers in the 25-44 age group who owe over seven weeks rent. This approach has contributed to an increase by 395 in the number of clear rent accounts and by 530 in the number of arrears cases in 2009/10. In dealing with arrears left by former tenants, there is an emphasis on pre-termination visits to begin recovery early, while the whereabouts of the outgoing customer are still known. A dedicated staff member coordinates recovery action, with referrals to external collection agencies once all other options have been exhausted. Write-offs of unrecoverable debts take place quarterly with £470,000 being written off in 2009/10. These approaches have contributed to reduced debt levels.
- 93 There is a strategic approach to financial inclusion. A number of the key objectives in the 2008-13 strategy have been delivered, including an expanded in-house benefits advice team, an online guide to claiming Housing Benefit and 'let's talk money' training for all front line staff. The city's credit union is actively promoted by the ALMO, along with awareness raising activity about extortionate credit. Although take-up is lowⁱ the ALMO promotes a low-cost home contents insurance scheme and has also held 'feeling stretched' and 'making every penny count' events to promote advice services and the credit union, as a response to the recession.
- 94 Partners are positive about the approach and particularly strong relationships exist with the Council's Housing Benefit service and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB). Key ALMO staff are trained to verify customer income details and have access to the Council's IT system to track Housing Benefit claims. This helps reduce unnecessary delays in assessing entitlements, which the Council does in an average of 13.35 days. The ALMO initiated and participated in two recent housing benefit take-up campaigns which have generated an extra £628.64 per week for customersⁱⁱ. WNWHL's in-house benefit advisor and a co-located CAB worker have also raised further additional income of £244,800 between April 2009 and the time of this inspectionⁱⁱⁱ and they have supported both tenants and leaseholders in dealing with £642,559 of debt, including £71,000 of rent arrears. These approaches have helped ensure income has been maximised and debt minimised for some of the ALMO's poorest customers.

ⁱ 6 per cent of customers

ⁱⁱ annual projection £30,175, including backdates of £2,100

ⁱⁱⁱ and an overall total of £755,000 since April 2007

- 95 Significant weaknesses still exist, however, in the approach to income management. Inspectors found, for example, that callers to the contact centre are not consistently offered appropriate advice on rent and debt issues, despite it being the first contact point for customers experiencing financial difficulties. Also, although the Council has disaggregated the costs of delivering services which are not covered by rent, the service charges which customers pay do not yet reflect the economic costs of delivering them, so some customers who do not benefit from additional services currently subsidise others who do receive them.
- 96 Performance in collecting rent debt is mixed:
- levels of former tenant arrears (FTAs) are relatively low among comparator organisations at 1.5 per cent^I;
 - the ALMO is among the best 25 per cent of comparator organisations in minimising its use of legal action in current customer arrears cases^{II};
 - WNWHL collected 100.17 per cent of in year rent due in the first three quarters of 2009/10. This figure is deceptive, however, because its overall collection rate was only 96.85 per cent at the end of the year, reflecting both the fact that it is more effective in dealing with newer debt than older debt and that it has a number of repayment agreements in place which will take some time to impact on collection rates; and
 - although current arrears have reduced over the past year, they remain above average among comparators at 3.21 per cent of rent due^{III} and with 6.65 per cent of customers owing over seven weeks rent^{IV}.
- 97 Performance in recovering recharges for repairs is weak. The system is designed to deter abuse, either when properties are left in poor condition or when customers report repairs which are their own responsibility. Although payments can be made in instalments, there is a £16 administration fee which many cannot afford to pay. Of the £11,632 raised in 451 cases in the first 11 months of 2009/10, only £521 was recovered by the Council and, even if all the payment agreements are adhered to, only 13.57 per cent of the debt will be recovered. There is also no system in place to monitor the value for money (VFM) impact of recharging, taking into account any reduction in reporting as a result of the deterrent and the costs of often abortive recovery action. These weaknesses mean a significant number of customers continue to owe the Council money, which could be spent on service improvement.

Resident involvement

- 98 Last time strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a wide range of opportunities for involvement, appropriate support was available and customer involvement had impacted on services. However, there were low numbers of customers actively involved, particularly from excluded groups.

^I at the end of 2009/10

^{II} at the end of 2009/10, it had served notice on only 17.8 per cent of customers and evicted only 0.26 per cent

^{III} at the end of 2009/10

^{IV} at the end of 2009/10

How good is the service?

99 In this inspection we found that strengths now significantly outweigh weaknesses.

There is a clear and embedded ethos of involvement and customers are involved in driving service improvement in all areas. There is also now an emphasis on the involvement of people from excluded groups. There is limited involvement of customers, however, in deciding how money is spent.

100 An ethos of customer involvement is embedded throughout the organisation and there is a range of ways for customers to get involved. Although a dedicated team ensures involvement is consistently in use across services, it is seen as the responsibility of all staff and the ALMO has a significant budget^I to support customer involvement initiatives. These include:

- tenant and resident associations (TaRAs) receive ongoing support from neighbourhood housing staff and annual visits from the specialist team to advise them about bidding for funds and to offer specialist help with their activities;
- representatives from neighbourhoods without TaRAs meet on a regular basis and have a place on the 12 person customer involvement network executive, to help ensure all geographical areas are represented in discussions;
- there are regular specific-interest forums for customers with a disability and those living in sheltered housing;
- customer-led sounding boards are in place in key service areas and send representatives to service improvement groups (SIGs), where staff and customers work together;
- bi-annual leaseholder forums and customer sounding boards, a monthly SIG and wider written consultation on key issues like the cost of buildings insurance help ensure leaseholders have dedicated involvement opportunities;
- a bi-monthly forum for BME women which sets its own agenda and has received presentations on the benefits advisor service, the money advice project and adaptations. This group has provided opportunities for members to progress, with one moving on to the diversity KLOE board, another to the repairs sounding board and two becoming community health educators; and
- there is a 178 person home consultation panel for customers who wish to be involved remotely via email, letter or text.

This variety of approaches allows individual customers to participate in ways which suit their lifestyles and interests and there are now 390 customers who are active in some way. It also helps ensure a 'bottom up' influence from customers in all key service areas and satisfaction with opportunities for involvement in decision making is high at 69 per cent^{II}. The involved customers we met during this inspection were positive about their opportunities for involvement and the extent of their influence.

^I £138,560 excluding salaries

^{II} STATUS 2009

101 There is evidence that customers help review performance and improve services. A programme of customer mystery shopping, telephone surveys and inspection, along with sounding board discussions in each service area, has generated suggestions for SIGs and KLOE boards. SIGs also set service standards and review performance in their areas and operate as key bodies, in terms of accountability. Examples of service improvements which they have generated include:

- a code of conduct for repairs contractors;
- the recent introduction of 'house MOTs' where repairs have not been ordered for over a year and customers are vulnerable;
- a choice of designs now being offered on the window replacement programme;
- improved signage and communal kitchens in sheltered schemes;
- improvements in the documentation provided in the viewing pack and in the leaseholder guide;
- a compact for disabled people which involves the diversity SIG monitoring adaptations, repairs and lettings to adapted homes; and
- introduction of a sliding scale of furniture charges for furnished tenancies, rather than a fixed charge.

102 There is an emphasis on the involvement of excluded groups. E&D training and customer profile information is provided to TaRAs to help them focus on better meeting local needs and TaRAs have targeted their publicity better by using community languages. There is also a smallⁱ diversity community fund available to support better engagement of under-represented groups. Bids to this fund are determined by the customer involvement network executive (CINE) and it has funded initiatives like an event to capture the views of members of the Polish community in one area. Although some excluded groups still express relatively low satisfaction with opportunities for involvement in decision makingⁱⁱ, this has improved since a 2008 Council surveyⁱⁱⁱ. Also, although young people are still under-represented, there is now a broad reflection of the gender, ethnicity and disability of the wider customer profile in those who are currently active.

ⁱ £9,000

ⁱⁱ In the 2009 survey there is a 1.6 per cent gap between white and BME customers and a 0.2 per cent gap between people with and without disabilities

ⁱⁱⁱ although this was a less reliable sample size

How good is the service?

- 103** There is a degree of customer control and influence over how resources are directed. The four area panels are made up of a mixture of customers, councillors and board members and they have been delegated the responsibility for spending environmental improvement funds^I. Investment criteria are based on community partnership agreements, which are influenced by a 'community concerns' survey in each area, so there is a clear focus for investment on the issues which matter to local people. Small scale local initiatives can also be put forward by community groups to address specific emerging issues. Examples of support provided include community safety initiatives, such as CCTV and security lighting^{II} and environmental improvements like garage refurbishment, provision of parking bays, landscaping and fencing^{III}. This means that, although limited funding has been available for the use of 'safer by design' products as part of the improvement programme, customers have influenced the ALMO to help design out crime in other ways.
- 104** There is no customer influence, however, over budget setting or management. They are not yet involved in determining how resources are spent, except on environmental improvements, through area panels. There are no events held with customers to ensure budgets reflect their priorities and there have been no mature discussions about the costs of delivering services in different ways, despite the opportunities offered by, for example, the access review. This means the organisation cannot yet fully demonstrate that it is spending money in line with informed customer choices.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy management

- 105** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. It was easy to report ASB and there was a range of policies in place. WNWHL took an active part in multi-agency working and there was a range of preventative and diversionary activities. However, performance and case management was ineffective and tenancy audits were not carried out in a systematic way.
- 106** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. Partnership working is still strong, the approach to case management is customer focused and effective support is in place for both complainants and perpetrators of ASB. Access to the service, however, is not consistently easy and the ALMO is not yet doing all the visits it aims to carry out.

^I £480,000 in 2009/10 and £1.21 million over a two year period

^{II} spending £70,000 since 07/08

^{III} spending £1.7million since 07/08

107 There is a robust strategic approach to dealing with ASB. The tenancy agreement has been reviewed to address unfair terms and increase its clarity on ASB issues. The ALMO has carried out a self-assessment against the Respect standard and has an action plan in place to address gaps in compliance. Action taken to date has included:

- staff training on the use of early intervention tools like mediation, which has had a high 72 per cent success rate for the ALMO;
- ‘face the people sessions’ to allow customers to raise concerns;
- the use of over 4,000 ‘good neighbour’ agreements in seven areas which reinforce the standards of behaviour expected from neighbours, as a tool to improve the reputations of some areas and promote demand for rehousing in them;
- a range of diversionary activities, particularly for young people, including sponsorship of a range of sporting activities and urban arts projects; and
- a recent review of procedures, with cases now referred earlier to the dedicated enforcement team for the use of acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs).

These various approaches have helped it focus on prevention and early intervention, improved consistency and speed in case handling and promoted clear messages to both perpetrators and complainants about how ASB will be addressed.

108 Partnership working in this area is strong. On a case by case basis, the ALMO works with the Police and the Council to access a range of legal remedies, including injunctions and closure orders. It also participates in intelligence sharing and various multi-agency forums to address ASB, often taking the lead on initiatives such as clean-up days and ‘operation champion’ events designed to increase the visibility of agencies on estates and reassure the local community.

109 The approach to managing ASB cases is customer focused. A system is in place to keep complainants updated, with ‘buddying’ to ensure staff holidays and sickness do not prevent action being taken. A dedicated IT module tracks cases and is automatically updated with customer profile information. ALMO staff and those in the Council’s specialist team can access one another’s systems to check case progress and update customers, where necessary. Customers are contacted prior to case closure to check that they accept the case being closed. This approach means cases are well managed.

110 Effective support is available for both complainants and perpetrators of ASB. The ALMO helps complainants to record evidence by providing dictaphones, cameras and diary sheets in a range of formats. Witness support and court familiarisation visits are offered, along with rehousing opportunities, home security improvements and reassurance visits from ALMO and partner agency staff. These measures help ensure complainants continue to support the ALMO in taking action, even in the most difficult of cases. The in-house tenancy support team works with perpetrators assessed as being vulnerable to help them sustain their tenancies by modifying their behaviour. Support is also provided to some perpetrators via referrals to the local family intervention project, with ASB having stopped in the two cases referred to date.

How good is the service?

- 111** Access to the ASB service, however, is mixed. Positively, the ALMO participates in awareness-raising events with partners to assure customers that their cases will be taken seriously. An out of hours ASB reporting line has also been in place since September 2009, staffed by specialists, which has been well-used^I. Inspectors found that this provides a responsive service and satisfaction levels are encouraging, at 78 per cent^{II}. In addition, successes are publicised in newsletters in order to encourage reporting. However, inspectors found that daytime calls to the contact centre are less successful for customers, with limited or unhelpful advice sometimes offered by operators. This may be responsible for the fact that the STATUS survey indicates 32.8 per cent of customers feel staff are unable to help when they report ASB.
- 112** Although performance in liaising with customers about their ASB cases has improved, this was from a low base and does not yet meet service standards. A sustained focus on improving performance in this area has led to some improvements, with good performance in responding to calls made to the emergency reporting line^{III} and through the website^{IV}. Other aspects of performance, however, were weaker, with only 88 per cent of other complainants contacted within three days and only 63 per cent of emergency referrals contacted within one day during the last six months of 2009/10. Also, only 78.25 per cent of customers were contacted every 28 days for a case update during 2009/10. This is reflected in relatively low levels of satisfaction with ASB case handling and outcomes, at 71 and 67 per cent respectively, against an 85 per cent target. This means that, although some output-focused service standards are being met, this is not always the case and the ALMO's customers are still not receiving the quality of service or outcomes they expect.
- 113** There has also been limited success in carrying out periodic visits to customers. Visits should take place after one, five and eight months during the period of the introductory tenancy and every two years once it becomes secure. These standards are not being met, however, and failure to ensure visits take place at five and eight months in particular means the ALMO has not taken these opportunities to address tenancy breaches early. There have been only four extensions of introductory tenancies (with three of these due to rent arrears) and there have been only eight terminations in the period since the ALMO was set up. Also, because only 21 per cent of secure tenancy visits have taken place in the first year of the two year programme, opportunities many also have been missed to signpost customers to support and to detect fraud and sub-letting. A system of prompting staff about introductory visits was introduced shortly before this inspection and wardens have been drafted in to help with ongoing visits in sheltered schemes, but these measures have yet to impact significantly on outcomes.

Estate Management

- 114** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There was a systematic approach to estate inspections and resources were helping improve estates. Warden provision in multi-storey blocks ensured they were well maintained. However, the quality of the grounds maintenance service was poor and neither it or the cleaning contract delivered value for money.

^I 179 calls received in the first six months of operation

^{II} of a high 37.5 per cent return rate

^{III} 99 per cent have been contacted within 24 hours since it was established in September 2009

^{IV} 93 per cent during 2009/10

- 115** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. Estates are well maintained, grounds maintenance is well managed and the ALMO has addressed customer priorities. There is an effective estate improvement partnership in place, which also delivers a concessionary gardening scheme for vulnerable people. There are some weaknesses, however, in performance and performance management in this area and the approach to recycling and sustainability is mixed.
- 116** Estates are well maintained, clean and tidy. Although satisfaction with neighbourhoods as places to live decreased slightly from 80 to 78 per cent between 2007 and 2009^I, benchmarking of this indicator still puts the ALMO among the best performers^{II}. This positive picture is also supported by relatively high satisfaction of 75 per cent^{III} in an ongoing survey about how estate services are provided and in 87 per cent satisfaction with cleaning standards by the in-house service. Effective IT in this area helps ensure that most issues are pursued following estate inspections. For example, the system generates standard letters to customers about untidy gardens and emails to Council departments about fly-tipping or graffiti removal. It puts reminders in staff diaries for follow-up work and generates reports for managers about staff progress in addressing issues identified. This approach instigated action on untidy gardens alone in 486 cases in the third quarter of 2009/10, with 412 being satisfactorily resolved by the middle of the following quarter.
- 117** The ALMO addresses customer priorities on estates through its partnerships and local area management plans. It has tackled concerns about litter and tipping by holding a range of clean-up days run jointly with partner agencies, local businesses and local people and has addressed concerns about car parking issues through environmental improvements made by area panels. Its partnership work with an environmental charity has included extensive customer consultation on plans for neighbourhoods. This has led to the development of an environmental response team which has brought 17 unused sites on WNWHL estates back into public use, provided job opportunities as part of the 'future jobs fund' initiative and supported projects for young people which help give them a pride in their neighbourhoods, including 'young rangers' and 'dream scheme' initiatives. This approach is helping to improve the appearance of neighbourhoods, in addition to attracting external funding and expertise.
- 118** Gardening initiatives contribute to the pleasant appearance of estates. Some support is available to vulnerable customers in maintaining their gardens. Although there has been limited take up-to-date^{IV}, the garden maintenance service has been well promoted. It is free because it is supported by the 'future jobs fund' and it provides up to four visits each year to customers identified by the profile as having a disability. This helps ensure support is available to those vulnerable customers who need it most.

^I STATUS

^{II} Housemark

^{III} in the second half of 2009/10

^{IV} only 35 customers have accessed it

How good is the service?

- 119** Grounds maintenance contracts are well managed. There is a dedicated monitoring officer within the ALMO, who randomly inspects 10 per cent of sites each month and often involves customer inspectors. There is a clear system for addressing poor performance, with rectification notices issued where standards are unacceptable and the contractor having five days to respond before a fine is imposed. In practice, problems tend to be addressed before the deadline. Regular monitoring meetings also take place where service failures are discussed.
- 120** There are still, however, some weaknesses in performance and in performance management in this area. For example, satisfaction with grounds maintenance is relatively low, at between 67 and 70 per cent, based on monthly surveys of both general and sheltered customers. Some service standards are also not being met, with only 86 per cent of graffiti and 75 per cent of fly-tipping having been removed within target timescales in the first 11 months of 2009/10. Fixed penalty fines are used in partnership with the Council to address untidy gardens, domestic waste, fly posting and dog fouling. Although 212 have been issued in the area covered by the ALMO since the scheme began, however, it does not monitor how many relate to its customers or what impact their use has had on outcomes. This means WNWHL cannot demonstrate that all of its estate management techniques are working well and it is unable to promote the success of some tools as a deterrent to bad behaviour.
- 121** Although estate ratings appear to be improving over time¹, the ALMO cannot demonstrate that its approach to awarding these scores is robust. Estates are given 'traffic light' ratings, based on inspections by staff and customer inspectors who use pictorial prompts to help ensure consistency. Since April 2009, however, almost one fifth of inspections have not involved customers, which means that ratings may be unduly distorted by staff perceptions. The ALMO is also missing the opportunity to promote neighbourhood ratings to applicants awaiting rehousing, whose responses could provide a reality check for the organisation about the links between the quality of estate management, sustainability and demand issues.
- 122** The approach to sustainability and recycling on estates is mixed. Elements of the ALMO's approach are innovative, including building recycling facilities into the bin store of a multi-storey block during its recent improvement and the funding of recycling areas in some neighbourhoods. It has also worked with its environmental charity partner to design planting schemes which require less maintenance, reducing carbon emissions. However, there is no clear plan, agreed with partners, to implement future recycling and sustainability initiatives, despite the fact that ten of the ALMO's 44 multi-storey blocks are reliant on nearby recycling facilities because there are none in the blocks and there is limited recycling of garden waste. This means opportunities are being missed for the ALMO to challenge itself and its customers on environmental issues or to make itself accountable for outcomes in this area.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 123** Last time weaknesses outweighed strengths. The service did not meet legal requirements in some areas and WNWHL had limited access to information about leaseholders so it could not tailor services to meet their needs.

¹ the number rated 'red' reduced from 25 to 3 per cent and the number rated 'green' increased from 71 to 82 per cent

- 124** In this inspection we found that there is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The service meets legal requirements and the ALMO works well with the Council to help it manage leases. Information provided to leaseholders is comprehensive and many of the services offered to tenants have been extended to them. Several key initiatives, however, are new and not yet changing on outcomes, and performance against service standards in this area is not being managed effectively.
- 125** The Council and ALMO work closely together to provide a joined-up service. Although WNWHL employs a dedicated leasehold officer and its front line staff have had training in dealing with leaseholder enquiries, a number of key functions in this area have been retained by the Council, so joint working is essential. Staff at WNWHL have access to the Council's IT systems to help them deal with enquiries, regular joint meetings consider service delivery issues and a representative from the Council attends the leaseholder SIG and forum meetings. The Council has recently adopted a buy back policy to assist customers who are in financial hardship and it works with the ALMO to ensure service charges reflect the actual cost of delivering services and that a range of ways to pay is available. This approach means customers receive a seamless service, despite elements of it being delivered by different agencies.
- 126** Information for leaseholders is now comprehensive. Leaseholders have a dedicated web page and newsletter, in addition to 'Buzz'. Some newer initiatives like the opportunity to buy into building contents insurance have only been publicised via the website to date, but a useful leaseholder guide and a series of fact sheets cover most other issues. The annual service charge statement is clear and is preceded by an estimate, to give customers an opportunity for challenge. This approach has resulted in relatively high leaseholder satisfaction levels of 71.2 per cent in 2009¹.
- 127** Although the ALMO has offered most of its tenancy management services to leaseholders, many are new and there are still some weaknesses in implementing these initiatives. For example, take-up of gas servicing and insurance services is still very low. Although leaseholders can find out easily which improvement works are planned for their areas by inputting a post code on to the ALMO's website and loans are available to help them buy into major repairs and improvement works, they are not provided with guarantees following works carried out and they cannot access to the ALMO's repairs service. These weaknesses mean most have still not had work carried out to the same timescales, quality and price as their tenant neighbours.

Allocations and lettings

- 128** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. WNWHL applied the Council's lettings policy appropriately. The system was accessible and support was provided to applicants with applications and bidding. Weaknesses, however, included weak monitoring of reasons for refusal and a large number of local lettings policies which had had minimal customer consultation.

¹ based on a 23 per cent sample

How good is the service?

- 129** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. The lettings system is easy for customers to use, local lettings policies have been reviewed and revised to ensure they continue to meet need, adapted properties are let to those who will make best use of them and under-occupation and mutual exchange schemes are well-used. Performance in registering housing applications within target timescales have been mixed, however, and too many properties are refused.
- 130** The lettings system is accessible and customer focused. Properties are widely advertised. A good range of information and one-to-one support is available to help customers use the range of bidding methods available through the city-wide 'choice-based' scheme and to support them in subsequently viewing and signing up for tenancies. Contact is made with customers who do not actively bid to ensure they understand how to use the system and to offer support and turnover information is designed to help customers understand their prospects of being rehoused in different areas. Customers considering accepting the offer of a property take part in an accompanied viewing, with a contractor's representative present to discuss any work which is due. Arrangements for signing up new tenants are flexible, with Saturday morning appointments offered, and a good quality DVD introduces the services available to new tenants in an accessible format. Appropriate arrangements are in place to assess the support needs of applicants at both the application and sign-up stages, allowing support packages to be put in place early to help vulnerable customers sustain their tenancies. Despite STATUSⁱ survey results indicating low customer satisfactionⁱⁱ, this is not reflected in the satisfaction levels expressed by those customers who have actually used the service in recent months. This indicates that these approaches have contributed to high customer satisfaction with the overall process of 95.1 per cent between April and December 2009.
- 131** The ALMO has comprehensively reviewed its local lettings policies. It makes mostⁱⁱⁱ lettings on the basis of the Council's city-wide policy and the Council audits these regularly. In some neighbourhoods, however, it has local policies to help improve the sustainability of specific communities and these are reviewed annually. All customers in the areas affected were consulted, along with 10 per cent of applicants. This led to the retention of 32 policies where WNWHL was able to demonstrate that they continue to contribute to sustainable communities. Twelve were withdrawn, 14 amended and several new policies were introduced. Reviews done six months into the operation of the revised and new policies indicate that they are beginning to improve the sustainability of these neighbourhoods.
- 132** Efforts are made to match empty adapted homes with applicants who need them. Specific features of adapted properties are included in property adverts. Lettings staff know which applicants need specific adaptations and have an up-to-date list of adapted properties. The in-house OT visits adapted homes to check their suitability before offers are made, can bid for homes on behalf of applicants and takes part in accompanied viewings to discuss further adaptations required. This approach helps ensure expectations are realistic, the needs of applicants with disabilities are appropriately assessed and adaptations are seldom removed from properties.

ⁱ 2009

ⁱⁱ 61.9 per cent with support provided to new customers and 51.5 per cent with the advice given on moving home

ⁱⁱⁱ 6 per cent of lettings are made as 'direct lets'

- 133** Schemes to address under-occupation and the mutual exchange scheme are well used. The under-occupation scheme pays customers who choose to move from tenancies of large properties into smaller homes £1,000 for every bedroom they free up. In the first ten months of 2009/10, this freed 44 family-sized homes for reletting and a further 29 customers had been accepted on to the scheme and were awaiting the offer of a smaller home. The mutual exchange option, which can help customers swap homes with one another rather than waiting to be moved by the ALMO, is promoted well and can be accessed online. In the first ten months of 2009/10, 123 households have successfully completed mutual exchanges. This means that the ALMO is making the best use of the homes it manages and helping customers to move, even where demand significantly outstrips supply.
- 134** The speed of registering new applications for rehousing is variable and does not meet the service standards advertised. Between April 2009 and February 2010, only 83 per cent of applications were registered within the ten day target timescale. Although this improved to 95 per cent in the three months prior to the inspection, this still means some customers do not receive a prompt registration service.
- 135** Too many offers of properties are refused by customers and these figures continue to rise. In the first two quarters of 2009/10, 39 per cent of offers were refused, which increased to 50 per cent by the end of December. WNWHL is working closely with the Council to address this issue by, for example, asking customers to specify the reasons for refusal more clearly in order to understand them better, and by specifying bedroom sizes and including local amenity details in adverts to assist customers in making informed choices at the bidding stage. There remains a perception among staff and customers, however, that they must remain 'actively bidding', whether or not they have a serious interest in the properties available. The current levels of refusals mean that properties are left empty too long and rental income is not being maximised.

Supported Housing

- 136** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Sheltered housing schemes were well maintained, with reasonable levels of support and with customers encouraged to participate in their running. The quality of accommodation, however, did not meet modern standards, WNWHL did not monitor the emergency service received by customers out of hours and BME communities were under-represented among customers.
- 137** In this inspection we found that there is still a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Effective support services are in place for customers in both general and sheltered housing. Sheltered schemes offer a range of activities and benefits for customers and a focus on marketing them to potential customers from BME communities has been successful. There remains a mixed picture, however, in terms of the quality of accommodation and the flexibility of the support offered in sheltered schemes.

How good is the service?

- 138** The ALMO provides effective support services for vulnerable customers. This is done effectively with partner agencies. For example, its partnership with the Keyring service intensively supports nine customers with specific disabilities to live independently and it works closely with social care colleagues and voluntary sector agencies to plan and deliver support in sheltered schemes. At a less intensive level, its in-house tenancy support team provides assistance, based on vulnerability assessments made at the sign-up stage or at any point in a tenancy where its sustainability is at risk. This team has been in place since January 2008 and it had received 325 referrals by March 2010. Although more needs to be done to track successful outcomes from floating support, only two of the service's 216 closed cases culminated in evictions and satisfaction on closed cases to date is reasonable, at 70 per cent. These approaches help ensure that vulnerable customers receive sufficient support to live independently in their homes and sustain their tenancies.
- 139** Support plans are the key driver for delivering customer focused services in sheltered housing. Although these are only done an average of 11.75 days after the tenancy commences and may miss opportunities for support to be provided at this crucial time, they have been refined over time following feedback from customers, are reviewed annually and the version currently in use includes sections on addressing cultural issues as well as support needs. This approach helps ensure clarity between staff and customers about what they should expect from the support relationship and gives customers the opportunity to challenge staff if the services they receive do not meet their needs.
- 140** Customers living in sheltered housing receive an effective service from the ALMO. A range of activities in schemes enhances the quality of life of residents. For example, exercise classes, coffee mornings and tea dances are held regularly and some schemes have computers for customers to use. Benefit take-up campaigns have been targeted at sheltered housing and a number of customers have been able to maximise their incomes. A range of events has also been held to raise awareness about health and safety issues, such as the 'sloppy slippers' campaign to help safeguard customers against falls. This approach has resulted in high satisfaction of 90 per centⁱ with the warden service, 92 per cent with the 'Care Ring' service provided out of hours by the Council and overall satisfaction with the ALMO among sheltered residents of 87 per centⁱⁱ, which is higher than among the general customer population.
- 141** There has been a focus on marketing the least popular sheltered stock and increasing the numbers of BME customers it attracts. All sheltered schemes now produce a profile leafletⁱⁱⁱ which describes local services and transport links and scheme activities. This, along with wardens being present at accompanied viewings, is designed to help prospective customers and their carers make informed choices. ALMO staff have also visited a number of faith groups and community centres to promote sheltered housing among BME groups. This has resulted in more BME customers moving into sheltered schemes, with them making up 9 per cent of new customers in the first ten months of 2009/10, compared with less than 1 per cent in 2008/09.

ⁱ January 2010

ⁱⁱ STATUS 09

ⁱⁱⁱ replicated on the website

- 142** The quality of accommodation provided in sheltered schemes is mixed. Positively, all those which will not be transferred into the forthcoming private finance initiative (PFI) scheme^I late in 2010 have had work to bring them up to the Decent Homes Standard. One scheme which is due for retention has also had significant remodelling because it was in very poor condition. DDA compliance work to communal areas is complete in four schemes, with the remainder scheduled for 2010/11 and work is ongoing with the fire service to install systems for customers with hearing difficulties, such as visual and vibrating warnings of fire alarm activations. Area panel bids have also been successful in improving signage and landscaping at a number of schemes. Around seven per cent of the sheltered housing, however, is no longer fit for purpose because it offers only bedsit accommodation with shared bathing facilities^{II}. The ALMO's recent decision to install showers in these properties if they are refused at the void stage will not benefit existing customers. Although two additional bedsit sheltered schemes have been included in the reserve list for the PFI project and an option appraisal recommending disposal of a further scheme is currently being considered by the Council, this means some sheltered stock does not currently meet modern standards.
- 143** The warden service in sheltered housing does not ensure a tailored service is delivered to all customers. Although support planning allows for minimal intervention, with customers able to opt out of daily visits, the ALMO has not explored imaginative models of service delivery so they are not yet offered a range of service options. This means prospective customers may be deterred from applying because there is a lack of clarity about the level of independence they can choose to retain. We also found that there are weaknesses in quality control systems around support planning, with a number of those plans sampled in one scheme being out of date. This means the ALMO cannot demonstrate that all customers are receiving the individual service they require.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 144** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Clear efficiency targets were in place and some savings had been achieved. However, the comparative cost of service provision was mixed and the understanding of costs at service level was variable. The services provided by the Council had not been fully reviewed.
- 145** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. Although there remains a mixed picture in terms of cost and quality indicators, the ALMO makes good use of benchmarking data to drive service improvement. Value for money (VFM) is embedded in the culture of the organisation and significant efficiencies have been made. WNWHL has also begun to attract inward investment to support service improvement. Although it has reviewed all of its service level agreements with the Council, however, some reviews have been more robust than others and the ALMO is still unable to demonstrate VFM for all the central service recharges that it pays.

^I 'Lifetime Neighbourhoods for Leeds'

^{II} this relates to 143 units, of which 40 will be remodelled as part of the PFI scheme

How good is the service?

How do costs compare?

- 146 The ALMO makes good use of benchmarked cost and quality indicators. It participates in a national benchmarking service covering all the services it provides. There has also been some additional benchmarking of customer involvement activity. Although only limited work has been done to benchmark costs and performance for leaseholder services and aids and adaptations, this means WNWHL's managers are generally able to use benchmarking as a tool to improve services.
- 147 There is still a mixed picture in terms of benchmarked performance on cost and quality indicators. Positively, 2008/09 benchmarking indicates:
- WNWHL's overheads as a percentage of direct costs were below average among comparators. Office costs were particularly low, with finance, ICT and central costs being at or slightly below average;
 - it was among the cheapest 25 per cent of comparators for the direct costs of resident involvement and its customer satisfaction levels on whether their views were taken into account put it among the highest 25 per cent;
 - it was among the cheapest 25 per cent of comparators in terms of average repair costsⁱ and, despite weaknesses in performance, its customer satisfaction levels put it among the best 25 per cent;
 - decency levels and the percentage of customers satisfied with the overall quality of their homes were both above average among comparators; and
 - its direct costs for housing management and customer satisfaction with complaints handling were average and satisfaction with its ability to deal with problems put it among the best 25 per cent of comparators.

Less positively:

- it was among the cheapest 25 per cent of comparators in terms of the costs of collecting rent and expenditure on voids and it had significant performance weaknesses in both areas;
- its direct costs of estate services were above average, although this was reflected in the fact that the number of customers satisfied with their neighbourhoods was among the top 25 per cent of comparators; and
- its direct costs of ASB handling were among the most expensive, but satisfaction was relatively lowⁱⁱ.

This means the ALMO could not demonstrate that all or most services were high quality and low cost at the time of its last major benchmarking exercise. It will benchmark again at the end of 2009/10, by which time staffing restructures will have reduced costs in some areas, but the recent STATUS survey has not significantly changed the satisfaction picture. Although 76.4 per cent of customers think they receive VFM for the rents they pay, overall satisfaction of 77.5 per cent remains below average among comparatorsⁱⁱⁱ.

ⁱ excluding management costs

ⁱⁱ 71 per cent with case handling and 67 per cent with outcomes for 2009/10

ⁱⁱⁱ STATUS 2009

How is value for money managed?

- 148** Front line staff and managers have a good understanding of VFM issues. Staff can give examples of efficiencies made and managers talk knowledgeably about cost, performance and quality benchmarking in their areas. Other building blocks are also in place to reinforce these messages, including a VFM section in all board reports, a bi-monthly VFM KLOE board which takes a strategic lead on the issue, a new VFM staff champions group which will provide challenge on how proposed savings might impact, and a new 'hotmail' VFM suggestion scheme for ideas which will go to the champions group. These illustrate how VFM awareness is being embedded in the organisation, resulting in significant efficiencies. WNWHL made £468,000 cashable revenue gains in 2008/09^I and £1,586,489 in 2009/10. There were also £374,121 of non-cashable efficiencies and £814,778 of cashable capital efficiencies in 2009/10.
- 149** Much of this saving has been achieved by reviewing the way services are delivered. For example, £282,000 has been saved in customer services and £525,000 in caretaking. Although some of these savings have been used to support a balanced budget, they do not represent cuts in services. Efficiencies in the business improvement team, for example, have allowed the creation of a specialist procurement post and £354,000 will shortly be reinvested in enhancing caretaking, now the service has been reviewed. Other service enhancements have resulted from smaller scale efficiencies. For example, £11,000 savings from the decoration voucher scheme have been reinvested in the service by introducing welcome packs for new customers. This means WNWHL does not concentrate solely on cutting costs, but aims for a balance of cost, quality and performance in deciding how resources are spent.
- 150** The improvement programme has been robustly challenged to generate efficiencies. The ALMO made savings of £580,487 in 2008/09 on its management. There is also less roofing work required than anticipated in the final phases of the programme and the average price per unit has also been reduced by over half through renegotiation^{II}, which has saved £600,000 on the budgeted cost. In addition, prices for kitchen and bathroom replacements and rewires have also been driven down, with savings of £74,000 in 2009/10^{III}. These savings have all been invested in the programme, allowing more work to be done in other areas.
- 151** Some significant savings have been made as a result of effective partnerships with the two repair contractors. These are both open book, time and materials contracts^{IV} so productivity is key to VFM. Both involve bi-monthly strategic meetings where contractors are required to report on VFM initiatives, like improving the specifications of the fittings they use, reducing overheads and rationalising billing arrangements. The economic climate also allowed WNWHL to negotiate reduced profit margins and tighter performance targets on both contracts as part of extension negotiations, generating collective cost savings of £100,000 in 2009/10. Some success has also been achieved in negotiating an extension with gas servicing contractors, who have reduced their prices and included a smoke alarm test for 2010/11.

^I £420,000 of which was a void revenue budget saving through partnering

^{II} from £6868 in earlier phases to £3222

^{III} saving £1172 on each kitchen, £514 on each bathroom and £676 on each rewire

^{IV} without profit share

How good is the service?

- 152** There are several examples of procurement being used to maximise the ALMO's purchasing power. For example, it has begun to do limited partnering down the supply chain, with all of its contractors now using a particular shower in adapted properties because the ALMO has established it as the optimum product in terms of cost, quality and ongoing maintenance arrangements. Other modern initiatives have been piloted, including e-auctions for the ordering of internal doors. Because both repair contractors were involved in this process, the ALMO has been able to align prices between them and generated savings of 25 per cent. It has also benchmarked adaptation prices and specification quality across both contractors and negotiated savings of £130,000. Changing cleaning contractors has also generated £70,000 savings to date.
- 153** The ALMO has had some success in attracting inward investment. In 2009/10 it brought in £482,191 of external funding from a range of sources, including £107,000 match funding attracted via its environmental partner for projects and £246,000 grant funding for energy efficiency work. The Fire and Rescue service has also provided free smoke alarms. A comprehensive life skills training programme for customers has been supported by contractors and by £20,000 funding from the healthy living network. External funding is also supporting a new training programme for 25 managers. An arrangement with a fuel supplier has generated £34,000 in introduction fees for every void property signed-up with its supply in situ. The ALMO has also generated £11,000 income by selling its human resources service to the other two ALMO's in the city. These various successes in raising money from outside the organisation have boosted WNWHL's capacity to deliver services for customers.
- 154** Although appropriate management arrangements are in place for the ALMO's service level agreements (SLAs) with the Council, some reviews of agreements have been more robust than others. For example, WNWHL has succeeded in reducing the price it pays for the contact centre but it has taken a long time to improve performance there and it still falls short of expectations in some areas. Also, WNWHL has not robustly reviewed its SLA for professional technical services. Its fee is 6 per cent of the value of each of the contracts it manages on the ALMO's behalf but reviews of the service in the past have been based only on basic benchmarking exercises and costing the option of bringing it in-house^I. There has been no market testing and no quality review. This means the ALMO cannot robustly demonstrate that the service delivers VFM.
- 155** The ALMO has also had mixed success in challenging a number of the central service recharges which it is required to pay. These include the mailroom/internal post recharge^{II} which was unsuccessfully challenged in November 2009 and the recharge for the creditors team which it successfully reduced from £135,000 to £24,000 this year. In total, the ALMO pays £371,000 per year in central recharges and it cannot demonstrate that it receives VFM in each case.

^I resulting in only elements of compliance work and the management of the painting programme being brought in-house
^{II} £42,800

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 156** Last time there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There were a number of improvements in services, performance had improved in some key areas and efficiency savings had been achieved. However, performance in managing empty homes and service level agreements with the Council had declined and recommendations from previous inspections had not been fully implemented.
- 157** In this inspection we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. The organisation has made significant efficiencies, improved services and improved some areas of performance and satisfaction since the last inspection. Performance and satisfaction levels in other areas, however, have not improved and both the ALMO and the Council have been slow to address some issues.
- 158** The organisation has changed dramatically over its lifetime. It faced major challenges, initially, in merging two cultures and addressing outstanding performance and human resources issues. Key figures consider that the organisation lacked self awareness during its first eighteen months of operation and this came to a head with its last inspection. During the intervening period, the organisation has taken on board the criticisms made by inspectors and has largely implemented their recommendations. There have been monthly meetings of the board and KLOE boards to give members control and 'culture for change' workshops for staff have helped managers identify and address barriers to a cohesive culture. Restructuring in key areas has improved communication and working practices. 'Storyboarding' initiatives and the achievement of a range of accreditations have also encouraged staff to focus on the impact they make on outcomes for customers. These initiatives have resulted in the ALMO improving the overall service it provides from 'fair' to 'good'.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

159 A range of service improvements in the last 18 months have contributed to the LSP objective of 'narrowing the gap' between neighbourhoods in the city. In addition to generic improvements, such as the introduction of 24 hour reporting facilities for ASB and improved communication with leaseholders, the ALMO has worked hard to make better use of customer profile data to tailor services to meet individual needs. Most of its customers live in the city's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods and these have all benefited from modernised homes, environmental improvements, the provision of diversionary activities for young people, a reduction in the number of long term empty homes and the use of local lettings policies to help improve the sustainability of neighbourhoods. A significant number of the ALMO's poorest customers have also benefited during the recession from its partnership work around income maximisation, healthy eating, the provision of business advice and energy efficiency work. There is a more diverse customer base in sheltered housing than there has been before and more people with disabilities wait for shorter periods for adaptations to their homes. This means some of the city's poorest people now live in better quality housing and receive better housing related services than they did before the ALMO was set up.

160 In some neighbourhoods, WNWHL has worked particularly hard to address problems. For example, the Council's 2008 survey^I, indicated that customer satisfaction on one estate was relatively low^{II} and ASB was perceived to be a bigger problem there than elsewhere^{III}. The ALMO addressed the issue using a range of tools, including:

- a community language poster campaign, a leaflet aimed at young people and an awareness-raising day to promote reporting;
- surgeries aimed at young parents and at BME customers; and
- a partnership urban art project funded by the area panel to provide diversionary activities for young people.

WNWHL's 2009 STATUS survey indicated that, although satisfaction remains relatively low in this challenging neighbourhood, it has increased significantly to 70.4 per cent^{IV}. The number of customers who consider vandalism and graffiti to be a problem is now relatively low, at 29.3 per cent and satisfaction with the neighbourhood as a place to live has increased from 67.4 to 68.8 per cent.

161 The ALMO has made significant efficiencies. It set a target of £2 million in cashable revenue gains over the course of the current management agreement^V, realising £468,000 in 2008/09 and £1,586,489 million in 2009/10^{VI}. In 2009/10 there were also £374,121 of non-cashable efficiencies and £814,778 of cashable capital efficiencies. Review work done recently will also begin to impact on VFM in the next financial year, for example, the customer services review will generate savings of £282,000 and there will be customer input into how this is spent, with some of the efficiencies ring-fenced to this service area. This means WNWHL will meet its target in less time than envisaged and will be able to redirect savings into service improvements.

^I not comparable with STATUS because of small sample size

^{II} at 64 per cent

^{III} 65 and 67 per cent of customers said they felt vandalism and graffiti were problems

^{IV} satisfaction among customers under 24 and from BME communities increased from 50.3 to 52.4 per cent and from 63.4 to 67.6 per cent, respectively

^V to March 2013

^{VI} of which a significant proportion will have ongoing efficiency implications in future years

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

162 There have been some positive performance and satisfaction trends since the ALMO was set up. For example:

- there were increases in satisfaction with front line access to services between the 2007 and 2009 STATUS surveys, although sometimes from a low baseⁱ;
- the percentage of properties which meets the Decent Homes Standard increased from 74.67 to 86.9 between 31 March 2008 and 31 March 2010. STATUS results indicate that satisfaction with property condition increased from 72.9 to 73.8 per cent over the same period;
- the percentage of urgent repairs completed within government timescales has improved from 98.61 per cent in 2007/08 to 98.92 per cent in 2009/10;
- although it has fluctuated, the average time taken to complete non-urgent repairs reduced slightly from 9.72 days to 9.32 days between 2007/08 and 2009/10. Also, 99 per cent of urgent works were done within target timescales in the year to February 2009/10, compared to 97.67 per cent in 2008/09ⁱⁱ;
- there was an increase in overall satisfaction with repairs and maintenance services from 77.3 to 78.1 between the 2007 and 2009 STATUS surveys, which was mirrored in the more detailed responses in this areaⁱⁱⁱ;
- there was a steady increase in the percentage of properties with a valid gas safety certificate from an estimated 97.65 at 31 March 2009 to 99.84 per cent at 31 March 2010^{iv};
- as a result of bringing long term voids back into use, void levels and void rent loss have reduced. The number of untenanted properties dropped steadily from 2 per cent in 2007/08 to 1.01 per cent in 2009/10, with a corresponding reduction in lost income from 1.26 per cent to 0.98 per cent over the same period;
- although the rent arrears of current customers remain high, they reduced from 3.48 to 3.21 per cent of the total rent due between 2007/08 and 2009/10. There was a reduction in the number owing more than seven weeks rent from 6.76 to 6.65 per cent and there was a steady reduction in legal action to pursue rent arrears with 17.8 per cent of cases generating a notice of intention to seek possession in 2009/10, compared with 22.99 per cent in 2007/08. Evictions dropped from 0.3 to 0.26 per cent over the same period;
- there was a steady reduction in FTAs from 2.52 to 1.5 per cent of the total rent due between 2007/08 and 2009/10^v;
- only 43 per cent of customer complaints were resolved in ten days in 2007/08 and 78 per cent in 2008/09 but this increased to 84 per cent in the first three quarters of 2009/10;

ⁱ satisfaction with ability to get hold of the right person increased from 70.2 to 72.1 per cent; with helpfulness of staff increased from 84.5 to 86.7 per cent; with staff ability to deal with issues increased from 79 to 79.4 per cent; and with the final outcome of contact increased from 65.5 to 67.9 per cent

ⁱⁱ figures unavailable for 2007/08

ⁱⁱⁱ satisfaction with being told when workers would call increased from 85.3 to 87.7 per cent; with time taken before work started increased from 78.5 to 79.7 per cent; with speed of completion increased from 84.9 to 85.8 per cent; with attitude of workers increased from 92.6 to 93.5 per cent; with overall quality of the work increased from 85.3 to 85.7 per cent; and with keeping things clean and tidy to a minimum increased from 87.7 to 89.5 per cent

^{iv} 16 cases on 31 March

^v largely due to write-offs of £891,000 in 2008/09 and £470,000 in 2009/10

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- although satisfaction with the overall service remained fairly static between the 2007 and 2009 STATUS surveys^I and reduced among customers with disabilities^{II}, it increased significantly among BME customers^{III} and younger people^{IV}; and
- there was an increase in satisfaction with VFM for the rent paid from 75.2 to 76.4 per cent between the 2007 and 2009 STATUS surveys.

163 There have, however, also been weaker performance trends in some areas. For example:

- although it remains among the better performers, the percentage of repair appointments made and kept by the ALMO has deteriorated steadily from 97.67 per cent in 2007/08 to 97.33 per cent in 2009/10;
- in the first three quarters of 2009/10, only 95.04 per cent of emergency repairs were done within target timescales, compared with 98.61 per cent in 2008/09^V;
- as a result of bringing long term voids back into use, the average speed of reletting empty homes has deteriorated. Even if major works are excluded from the calculation, average void periods have increased from 30.4 days in 2007/08 to 44.24 days in 2009/10 because more homes have been empty for long periods prior to repair work beginning; and
- although it has increased slightly since the ALMO was set up, the percentage of rent collected is low and there have been fluctuations from 96.81 per cent in 2007/08, down to 96.63 per cent in 2008/09 and back up to 96.85 per cent in 2009/10.

164 Between its 2007 and 2009 STATUS surveys the ALMO has also noted some areas of deterioration. For example:

- satisfaction with neighbourhoods as places to live deteriorated from 79.5 to 77.6 per cent and, although the gap narrowed among BME customers^{VI}, there were significant reductions in satisfaction among other excluded groups^{VII};
- although it remains among the best performers and there was an increase in satisfaction with opportunities for participation among young people^{VIII} and BME customers^{IX}, this was not mirrored elsewhere, with an average drop from 73.6 to 69.4 per cent;
- although the wording of the questions in this area changed, there was also a general drop in satisfaction with being kept informed and with the extent to which customers consider their views are being taken into account^X;

^I up from 77.4 to 77.5 per cent

^{II} from 80 to 78.4 per cent

^{III} up from 67.1 to 71.2 per cent

^{IV} from 59.3 to 61 per cent

^V figures unavailable for 2007/08

^{VI} with an increase from 66.1 to 67.3 per cent

^{VII} satisfaction among customers who consider themselves to have a disability dropped from 80.7 to 74.4 per cent and among the under 25's from 63.4 to 57 per cent

^{VIII} from 56.8 to 61.4 per cent

^{IX} from 66.8 to 68.1 per cent

^X from 83.2 to 74.4 per cent and from 86.6 to 68.3 per cent

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- there was a reduction across the board in satisfaction with the overall quality of customers' homes^I, from 81.4 to 77.5 per cent; and
- there was a notable reduction in satisfaction among BME and disabled customers with the quality of repair work^{II}.

165 There has been slow progress in modernising the sheltered housing service. This has made a loss for some years and the ALMO has not had the capacity to address this, so it took the view that another bidder might be able to offer customers better VFM. When it became apparent that no bidders were emerging, WNWHL strengthened its management capacity and won the contract. This means, however, that opportunities were missed to improve services sooner and some customers continue to live in poor quality homes.

166 The Council has also been slow to address some of the concerns raised at the last inspection. For example, it has yet to develop an equitable replacement for 'Heatlease and Total Heat'. It has also not yet fully addressed the issue of rent pooling which was first raised by the Audit Commission over four years ago. It has identified the costs of delivering services but has not yet consulted on, and still has no plan to end, the system which makes some customers pay for services received by others and which would allow them to make informed judgements about VFM in the services they purchase. In addition, it has not yet addressed the fact that the way its lettings policy is interpreted encourages high priority applicants to bid for properties they do not want. These failures to act in a timely way hamper the ALMO's ability to further improve services.

How well does the service manage performance?

167 Last time strengths outweighed weaknesses. The objectives of the organisation were clearly understood, there was a focus on continuous improvement and performance management was becoming embedded in the culture. There was learning from customers and other organisations and plans were in place to address a number of weaknesses. However, performance reporting was sometimes inaccurate and performance frameworks were not well developed in all service areas. It was also not clear how some policies and strategies would be delivered.

168 In this inspection we found that strengths still outweigh weaknesses. The ALMO has strong leadership, it is a self-aware, learning organisation and its culture is open, with a focus on improvement. The performance management system in use meets WNWHL's needs, although aspects of performance reporting to the board are weak. There are a number of weaknesses in the strategies and plans the ALMO uses, although these have not proved to be a barrier to effective decision making. The Council has also put in place plans to begin to address some of the weaknesses in its own approach which affect the ALMO.

^I although the wording of the question changed slightly

^{II} down from 78.9 to 75.9 per cent and 88 to 86.3 per cent respectively

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 169** Strong leadership is in place within WNWHL. The senior management team operates effectively and is more confident in identifying and articulating weaknesses than in the past. It has motivated and empowered staff since the last inspection and its strength is recognised by partner organisations. There is also some evidence of leadership from the board. For example, members have challenged performance on arrears recovery and void turnaround during the past year and taken a particular interest in the workforce change policy and restructuring arrangements. This has helped ensure clear priorities were established and staff were supported to implement them.
- 170** There are appropriate monitoring relationships between the ALMO and Council. Quarterly strategic meetings between the Council's portfolio holder, the ALMO's chair and senior officers from both organisations are mirrored by parallel operational meetings. Discussions have included key issues like the culture change programme and progress in developing fire safety assessments, in addition to standard performance items. The Council is currently developing a supplementary assurance framework which will allow each of its ALMOs to sign off their own performance and receive their incentive payments, on the basis that a programme of internal audits on high risk issues is taken under the Council's control. These arrangements and the Council's proposals for change should ensure the ALMO maintains its 'arm's length' ability to manage the housing stock, while the Council fulfils its role as strategic landlord.
- 171** The ALMO is a learning organisation. It has explored good practice from the best performers in reviewing its services. It has also invited external challenge through peer review and the use of specialist consultants. There are also some examples of learning from customer satisfaction surveys and complaints. Perhaps most significantly, however, WNWHL can demonstrate that it learns from its own performance problems. For example, excessive numbers of emergency and urgent repairs were reported during the period of extreme weather in January 2010. A system was established whereby contractors 'telephone screened' these jobs, prioritised the most essential and obtained customer agreement to downgrade others. Because this worked so well, the idea has now been adopted as a tool to help reduce emergencies at other times and is beginning to bring emergency repair numbers down.
- 172** WNWHL is self-aware and has been responsive to our feedback. A large number of small scale improvements were made immediately after weaknesses were identified by inspectors. Examples include redesigning a number of leaflets and posters to provide clearer information for housing applicants and customers with debts. It also upgraded its website and instructed the contact centre to better promote issues such as the flexibility of the appointment system, the way in which batched repairs are done, the decoration allowances available for each room and how the estate grading system works. It also immediately began fitting smoke alarms in void properties and issuing leaseholders with guarantees for major repairs and improvement works done at their homes. Longer-term and strategic criticisms were also taken on board and work began immediately to revise policies and strategies, including: the VFM strategy action plan; delegations of authority around health and safety issues; targets for carrying out needs assessments with potentially vulnerable customers; and dealing with the refusal of electrical works on the improvement programme.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 173** The ALMO has made good use of the data it holds. For example, activity based costing has been used in the income management team to identify where time has been lost and where there are bottlenecks in processes. A similar exercise is ongoing in neighbourhood housing teams and will follow in voids. Although the caretaking review is still underway, where caretaker posts have become vacant a cost benefit analysis has been done to explore how best to deliver the service. Several of these posts have then been replaced by the contract cleaning service in readiness for a more responsive environmental caretaking service once the review is complete in July 2010. This approach has helped maintain effective services, sometimes on a short-term basis until more major change is implemented.
- 174** The culture of the organisation is open and there is a focus on improving services. Although many managers are relatively new in post and some are interim, they have settled quickly into their roles. Communication across service areas and between staff and managers is effective, with quarterly staff events increasing cohesion and a corporate briefing helping ensure consistent and timely messages are transmitted. The reward and recognition scheme ensures staff and teams who perform effectively are nominated for rewards to a panel which includes customers. There is a focus on ensuring that customer facing services and initiatives which improve VFM are recognised. This has created a sense of healthy competition between teams and increased awareness of performance issues.
- 175** Although the ALMO's corporate performance management system is unnecessarily complex, it does meet the ALMO's needs because it supports the delivery of improvement plan objectives. It is a project control approach to improvement plan and strategic project actions, with the achievement of each task having to be validated by managers. There are different access levels for different staff groups, regular reporting for key managers and email alerts for staff where actions are outstanding. The system also draws data from other systems to produce performance reports. This helps ensure any failures to deliver against objectives are detected early and addressed.
- 176** Aspects of performance reporting are helpful. For example, performance is reported effectively to customers via monthly performance posters, the newsletter and the website. Area panels also receive a scorecard covering the indicators which most interest the customers in their areas^I and the complaints panel^{II} receives a summary of complaints by service, speed and satisfaction. These approaches help to ensure that the ALMO is subject to scrutiny and is accountable in terms of its front line service delivery.

^I estate quality, contact centre performance, satisfaction and customer involvement

^{II} made up of ten people who have made complaints in the last 12 months, the main contractors and managers

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

177 The ALMO is in the process of improving its planning system. Managers have had clear direction about the round of service planning underway, including the need for a three year approach and SMART, outcome focused objectives. Operational planning is also underpinned by shared principles about making neighbourhoods pleasant places to live, maximising the quality of service delivered from resources available and better tailoring of services to meet the needs of individual customers. This means that, although some of its existing strategies provide the organisation with limited direction, it has been able to take robust strategic decisions. In asset management, for example:

- the ALMO has begun to prioritise future investment in non-traditional stock. Its original funding bid included only decent homes work to these properties, so although none are classified as defective and all will be decent by the end of 2010, most still require work to further enhance their energy efficiency. It will put £500,000 of its reserves into this work in 2010/11 but this represents only 3.12 per cent of the work requiredⁱ, so it is now exploring inward investment options;
- because 15 per cent less work than anticipated has been necessary on the improvement programme over the last two years, the ALMO has been able to reverse the 2007 city-wide decision to carry out only 'basic decency' work. Those customers who subsequently had work done have had to choose between a replacement bathroom or kitchenⁱⁱ but the 2010/11 programme will return to offering both. The 2011/12 capital programme will revisit those properties where only a bathroom has been replaced over the past two years and install a new kitchen. Bathroom replacements in those properties where only kitchens have been replaced will be done in 2012/13, if sufficient funding is available;
- a review of garage sites and plots will be carried out by August 2010ⁱⁱⁱ; and
- the ALMO is beginning to consider how customers might be involved in reviewing estate viability issues to better inform future investment planning, once decency is achieved and the focus is on elemental replacement.

178 Appropriate plans to drive service improvement are also in place in a number of other areas. For example, the sheltered support service will be modernised in July 2010 and a recent successful funding bid means that the family intervention service will also be supplemented in-house by extending floating support early in 2010/11. A new £75,000 incentive scheme for customers leaving their homes in good condition has the potential to reduce void repair costs and increase the speed of reletting from 2010/11. Plans are also in place to identify the 1,000 most vulnerable customers who have not accessed repair services recently and to offer them a 'house MOT' in 2010/11. This will help overcome any barriers to accessing the service and provide an opportunity to identify any other needs they may have.

ⁱ 568 have been improved and 709 have yet to be improved, at a cost of £16.01 million

ⁱⁱ 22 chose bathrooms and 333 chose kitchens

ⁱⁱⁱ there was investment in these before 2008/09 but they have since been neglected in favour of spending on homes

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 179** The Council has taken on board some of the Audit Commission's previous criticisms and plans are in place to address them. For example, it accepts that 'Heatlease' has impacted on the popularity of central heating installation across the city and has included the provision of central heating in its 30 year investment plan because it recognises that it will have a significant number of properties without central heating after 2010. It has yet to determine how it will fund this work, but has committed to making decisions on these issues by June. It has also put in place a three year capital programme to upgrade 'Carecall' and associated equipment in its sheltered schemes and has committed to ensuring that this will be complete in WNWHL's stock by the end of 2010/11. This means the ALMO will be able to deliver a speedier and confidential service, customers will have access to less cumbersome alarms and better use can be made of telecare in future. This will provide a better emergency response service and contribute to more tailored support solutions in future.
- 180** Performance reporting to the board, SIGs and KLOE boards is mixed. Although key performance indicators (KPIs) are reported regularly, a confusing dual reporting system is in place. A one page 'traffic light' summary only covers the most recent month's performance, while a more detailed 'dashboard' report gives the last quarter's performance against the same period in the previous year. Neither, however, provides the focused cumulative picture or benchmarking data which members require in order to take a high level view of trends. More positively, board members also receive a written report on the weaker aspects of performance, which includes some trend analysis and projections to the year end on appropriate issues. Financial reporting to the board is also very accessible, with information presented in a way which members can easily understand and risks clearly highlighted. This mixed picture, however, makes it difficult for members to form a rounded picture of the relevant issues and at the board meeting we attended there was very little challenge, despite some significant shortfalls in performance.
- 181** The ALMO has not yet fully evaluated the impact of some of the tools it uses. Some 'no access' measures for gas servicing, for example, have been introduced relatively recently and it does not yet have a comprehensive picture of which have had the greatest impact in achieving first time access. Although it is beginning to monitor these and will explore its findings with the service improvement group, it is not yet in a position to use this data to drive service improvement.
- 182** Despite the recent improvements outlined earlier, many of the ALMO's existing plans are weak. The business plan is short-term and out of date. Some financial modelling has been done for the three year period to the end of the management agreement and the vision established in the current plan is likely to remain relevant into the future. However, its objectives relate only to 2009/10 and a plan for 2010-13 will not be developed until the summer of 2010/11. This means that service plans are being written before the overarching plan, rather than flowing from it, so the ALMO risks a lack of synergy between them.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

183 WNWHL's service improvement plan (SIP) for 2009/10 is not outcome focused and its objectives are only partially SMART^I. Because it concentrates on addressing process weaknesses identified at the last inspection, most of its objectives are output-related, rather than focusing on the outcomes these should have on customers. Where objectives do specifically relate to outcomes they tend to be described in general terms, so it is rarely clear how success will be measured. It is also not clear, in some cases, what deadlines and resources are in place to support the achievement of objectives. These weaknesses mean there has been an over-reliance on the ALMO's validation system^{II} to track outputs, rather than requiring staff to demonstrate success in terms of measures relating to the customer experience, which means there is a risk that objectives will be met without the service being improved.

184 There are weaknesses in a number of the ALMO's other key strategies. For example:

- the access to services strategy is based on an understanding of the customer profile which was five months out of date when it was adopted, during which period a significant amount of new profile data was collected. This means that it is founded on unreliable information about, for example, how many customers have internet access or prefer to make telephone contact, which are key factors underpinning a successful strategy for future service delivery. Although it focuses on the right issues, the strategy is not clearly written and the accompanying action plan lacks precise targets and deadlines in key areas such as the reduction in contact by letter and increases in the use of telephone, email and website services. This limits opportunities to track and challenge progress;
- the VFM and Procurement Strategy 2010-13 does provide a degree of strategic focus on key issues like embedding a VFM culture and using benchmarking to drive VFM and it makes a commitment to ethical procurement and diversity issues. Its emphasis, however, is on the early part of the three year period it relates to and it does not include a SMART, outcome focused action plan to make clear how objectives will be achieved;
- the fuel poverty strategy is underdeveloped and out of date. Its focus is on the asset management aspects of fuel poverty and it does not explore the broader range of initiatives and funding opportunities in this field, or the links with the wider financial inclusion and sustainability agendas. Although work began on a more comprehensive strategy during 2009, this had stalled at the time of the inspection, it had not been adopted and no improvement plans had been written to support it; and
- the asset management strategy is short term and does not provide sufficient information about longer term investment needs or projected resources to drive investment decisions.

^I Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Timebound

^{II} under which managers are required to sign off achieved objectives

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

185 There is also a weakness in the Council's strategic approach, which impacts on the ALMO. Although it has worked hard to include several sheltered complexes in its forthcoming PFI scheme and it recognises the need for a capital investment strategy for sheltered housing, this has not yet been developed. There are significant quality issues in some schemes, including shared bathing facilities, but initial investment forecasts indicate that this is likely to require a level of investment which cannot be met in the short or medium terms and that it may need to consider partnership solutions. The lack of clear direction from the Council on this issue has resulted in the ALMO carrying out an option appraisal on one scheme where investment had been planned but which it no longer considers sustainable and this will shortly be submitted to the Council. A strategy is due for development during 2010/11 but there is currently no clarity about future investment plans for the stock and some customers continue to live in accommodation which is of poor quality.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

186 Last time strengths outweighed weaknesses. There was a sound approach to human resource management and a strong focus on training and development. Plans were in place to improve the diversity of the workforce and enhance local employment. ICT was well resourced, financial management and budget setting arrangements were strong and the approach to risk management was robust. Although sickness levels were high, WNWHL was taking a range of actions to reduce the problem. The strategic approach to procurement was weak, however, with a reliance on Council expertise and a failure to challenge it appropriately in a number of areas.

187 In this inspection we found that strengths still outweigh weaknesses. The ALMO has a strong financial position. Financial and risk management systems are sound and procurement plans are robust. The staffing structure and ICT strategy meets WNWHL's business needs and partnerships are used effectively to boost capacity. Although it has appropriate staff management systems in place, however, sickness absence levels remain high and board and staff profiles do not fully reflect that of the communities where the ALMO works. Its future beyond 2012/13 is also uncertain.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 188** The ALMO has a strong short-term financial position. It will balance its budget in 2009/10^I and receive sufficient funding from a 1 per cent increase in the management fee from 2010/11 to support spending until the end of the management agreement. It has sufficient reserves to cover borrowing charges, meet its pension scheme liabilities^{II} and allow some revenue funding to be redirected into enhancing the improvement programme, while retaining the £1 million reserve balance required by the Council. The ALMO is also awaiting the outcome of bids to the Council's housing subsidy fund towards clearing the backlog of adaptation requests^{III}, delivering enhanced accessibility works in sheltered schemes^{IV} and supporting more energy efficiency works on non-traditional properties^V in 2010/11. This means WNWHL can afford to continue to deliver and improve services until 2012/13.
- 189** Budget setting and financial management systems are robust. The ALMO uses a five year financial planning model, with regular re-forecasting and reporting to confirm the organisation's ongoing financial viability. Budgets are set on the basis of workshops and one-to-one sessions with budget holders, where baseline assumptions like inflation and overheads are discussed, along with risk issues and the need for efficiencies. Any expansion plans must be authorised by the board or senior management team before they can be included. Performance against budgets is discussed monthly between budget holders and finance staff. Outturn forecasts are also provided monthly against key budgets for the senior management team, the organisational health subcommittee and the board. In addition, there is a thorough half-year review of income and expenditure carried out by the finance team. This approach has helped ensure budgets are not overspent.
- 190** Risk management processes are sound. There is a 'bottom-up' approach to developing risk maps^{VI} and developing these into a risk register which is reviewed by the organisational health subcommittee every two months. These also feed into the Council's corporate system of quarterly monitoring. The ALMO's current approach has been developed since the summer of 2009, in conjunction with its insurers, because it recognised that its previous process was not well embedded at more junior levels. All board reports carry risk assessments and plans are in place to improve the board's understanding with risk workshops during 2010/11. Risk maps are regularly reviewed at team meetings and several key risks have recently been downgraded because they relate to performance issues where improvements have been made. These processes mean risk is being managed appropriately.

^I it set a £1.6 million deficit budget because it sets budgets on the basis of the management fee only and ignores the SCA windfall, which provides additional revenue income until 2011/12 and will generate a charge to cover the cost of previous borrowing from 2012/13 onwards

^{II} it has £6.7 million in reserve at the end of 2009/10, which will decrease to £2 million by the end of 2012/13

^{III} £400,000

^{IV} £400,000

^V £700,000

^{VI} fourth tier managers begin the process and feed upwards

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 191** Future procurement plans are robust. The procurement strategy outlines the ALMO's ethos in relation to modern procurement methods and its commitment to customer involvement. It also contains a timetable for future procurement. WNWHL is in the process of procuring a contract for all improvements^I, adaptations, repairs and cyclical maintenance for the ten year period from April 2011. This is being done jointly with one of the city's other ALMOs to maximise economies of scale and will be worth £400 million over its lifetime. A review board has been set up to manage the process, consider the partnering options, oversee the procurement exercise and monitor risks and the Council^{II} is supportive of the approach. Customers are involved in the board and in each sub-group and have been particularly influential in developing standards and specifications. The ALMO's staff and customers have also been involved in writing the service specification for the Council's new city-wide grounds maintenance contract which is also due to begin in 2011. This means that the contracts which have the most impact on customer experiences of services in future should be procured on the basis not only of cost, but of the quality which customers require.
- 192** The ICT strategy meets the ALMO's business needs for the length of the management agreement. It reflects improvement plan priorities and includes: completing the implementation of the new gas servicing database; enhancing customer profiling by matching data from across ALMO and wider Council systems; implementation of various housing management software packages, followed by a workflow system; and the purchase of hand held technology for front line staff. This approach should ensure efficiency continues to improve in most service areas over the next two years.
- 193** There is evidence of partnerships being used to boost capacity. At a strategic level, the ALMO has a voice in a range of key partnerships, including the west and north west Leeds network partnerships, the west Leeds gateway regeneration board and the Leeds Bradford corridor partnership. Its chief executive also chairs the area partnership's senior executive network group which delivers area priority plans. The ALMO is a key player in the Leeds Housing Partnership, does a lot of practice-sharing with the city's other two ALMO's and will shortly begin strategic research with the primary care trust to explore the impact of tenancy turnover on community based health services. This approach has helped embed the ALMO in the local community.
- 194** The ALMO's structure meets its business needs. The organisation has carried out a series of management reviews in its operational divisions and is currently beginning a similar exercise in corporate services. Although these have been incremental and not resulted in significant levels of redundancy, most managers have had to reapply for posts which are different from those they previously held. These restructures have refocused the organisation on how front line services are best delivered to meet customer needs, have broken down silos in areas where performance has been weaker and have strengthened the skills base in high risk areas by creating new posts.

^I except heating

^{II} which will be the signatory to the contract, rather than the ALMOs

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 195** The approach to staff appraisal and development is systematic. Annual appraisals cover performance and training and development issues and are supported by regular one-to-one meetings. Progress in completing appraisals is centrally monitored and reported, with quality assurance provided by the human resources team. Training and development needs inform the training plan, with staff supported to undertake professional qualifications as well as general and specific job related training. Front line staff are positive about the range of easily accessed training opportunities available and the way in which training is supporting them to do their jobs. A pilot mentoring scheme for senior and middle managers with support provided by a three star ALMO is also proving popular and plans are in place for an accredited management development programme for middle managers in 2010/11^I. This approach is supporting the ALMO to build capacity at all levels in the organisation.
- 196** The findings of staff surveys are taken seriously and used to inform improvement. The 2007/08 staff survey, carried out soon after the merger, showed some mixed results with, for example, positive responses on the behaviour and standards expected of staff and on cohesion and diversity awareness. However, areas such as job satisfaction and leadership and direction were less positive. Specific issues identified were fed into service improvement plans and the issue of leadership was addressed through a leadership development programme in which 72 managers undertook modules including coaching, challenging and project management. 'Culture for change' workshops have given all staff the opportunity to shape and inform improvements. The results of the most recent staff survey were received shortly before this inspection and, although there is still work to do, they indicate improvement in key areas.
- 197** Sickness levels, however, are high. WNWHL has recognised this and implemented a range of initiatives, including close monitoring and reporting, return to work interviews, incentivising attendance through a bonus scheme and prize draws, tackling long term absence and use of an external agency. This resulted in sickness falling from 8.32 per cent in the first eleven months of 2008/09 to 7.27 per cent during the same period in 2009/10, but it remains high and cost the organisation over £400,000 in 2009/10.
- 198** Board and area panel profiles do not yet fully reflect the community which the ALMO serves. Women, people from BME communities and people aged 25-39 are under-represented at area panels. At board level, there is slightly better representation of younger people^{II} and women^{III} but there is an under-representation of people from BME communities^{IV}. This means that opportunities are being missed to ensure excluded groups have a voice at the most significant decision making bodies and to provide positive role models among the organisation's leaders.

^I £12,900 funding contribution from business link, with the ALMO paying £8,600

^{II} 17 per cent are under 40

^{III} who make up 42 per cent

^{IV} 8 per cent

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 199** Although the staff profile more closely reflects the community, the ALMO does not monitor or report progress against targets in a robust way. Positively, where targets have been set and monitoring is comprehensive, it is able to demonstrate that some excluded groups are fairly represented. For example, 8.2 per cent of employees consider themselves to have a disability¹ and 16.23 per cent are from BME communities. Also, among the top 5 per cent of earners, 46.67 per cent are female and 13.33 per cent are from BME communities. There are no disabled people among its top earners, however, and the organisation has only very recently begun collecting data about the faith or sexual orientation of employees so it does not know whether these aspects of its workforce are diverse and has not set targets to address any imbalances.
- 200** It is unlikely that the Council will be able to afford to maintain decency or to deliver an aspirational level of improvements above the Decent Homes Standard after 2011 under any of the potential stock retention options. It has begun a third stock option appraisal which has cross party support and the ALMO is represented on its project board. This has reviewed stock condition data and done some financial modelling, but was waiting for clarity at the time of this inspection about future housing revenue account (HRA) and other potential funding options. It is unlikely that government policy will allow the Council to increase rents to fund improvements in future and borrowing to fund improvements would require significant long term planning and prioritisation by local politicians. The retention of some form of ALMO model after 2013 remains an option but there is still no clarity about the ALMO's medium and longer-term future as the managing agent for this stock.

¹ December 2009

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator (BVPI reference)	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 (unaudited)
63 Average SAP rating	65.4 (LWH) 63.8 (LNWH)	67.2	67.7	
66a Percentage rent collected	96.68 (LWH) 96.94 (LNWH)	96.81	96.63	96.85
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	7.44 (LWH) 6.96 (LNWH)	6.76	7.51	6.65
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	36.35 (LWH) 13.57 (LNWH)	22.99	20.43	17.8
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.46 (LWH) 0.24 (LNWH)	0.3	0.42	0.26
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	83 (LWH) 70 (LNWH)	77.4	No survey	77.5
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with opportunities for participation	51 (LWH) 57 (LNWH)	73.6	No survey	69.4
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	45.74 (LWH) 42 (LNWH)	41.29 (LWH) 29.75 (LNWH)	25.33	18.7
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	9.63 (LWH) 10.69 (LNWH)	14	6.63	
212 Average relet time (days)	24.1 (LWH) 27.21 (LNWH)	30.4 (new def)	36.49	44.24

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Table 1 Recommendations of previous inspection, published in January 2009

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Improve the approach to gas servicing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing the current approach with consideration of best practice and efficiency; • ensuring information on tenant vulnerability or access requirements is provided to contractors prior to the initial appointment; • developing a process to ensure up-to-date gas servicing information is incorporated into the housing management system; • locating gas servicing certificates in a way which makes them easily accessible; • introducing a comprehensive system to monitor customer satisfaction; • investigating the resources required to enable tenancy enforcement officers to take over no access cases earlier in the process; • identifying persistent no- access tenants and take proactive steps to improve access rates; • improving contract monitoring arrangements; and • developing a regular board report which incorporates progress with no access cases, and outcomes from quality assurance checks. 	<p>Done</p>
<p>Review, with the Council, customers and the other Leeds ALMOs, the weaknesses in city wide policies identified in this report. Particularly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • its reliance on leasing schemes for central heating replacement; • pooling of service charges; • management of leaseholds; and • the operation of the lettings policy. <p>These processes should include robust research into customer requirements, consider good practice from elsewhere and involve impact and value for money assessments.</p>	<p>Not complete. Although the work on leaseholds is complete, work is still ongoing on other issues. Service charges have been calculated but the Council has not yet de-pooled charges for customers. The Council has not yet established an alternative to leasing of heating systems. Although some changes have been implemented in Lettings, these have not yet successfully addressed excessive refusal levels.</p>

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Strengthen performance management arrangements within the organisation, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritising the development of the local performance frameworks to ensure all key gaps are filled with particular focus on ASB, leaseholders and supported housing; • establishing systems for the monitoring and reporting of service standard compliance as agreed with customers; • addressing the issues in the calculation of repairs KPIs; • implementing systems to check for inaccuracies or anomalies in PI calculation; • ensuring outcome measures are in place for each service area; • ensuring that all strategies are accompanied by SMART3 action plans which focus on the key priority areas, and establish a process to monitor strategy delivery; and • developing systems to formally evaluate and report the successes and outcomes of pilots, plans and strategies. 	<p>Done</p>
<p>Review with customers the weaknesses in accessibility identified within the report and address them including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing a review of customer service access preferences including opening times, locations and repairs appointment times; • improving complaints handling quality and response times; • prioritising the collection of customer profile information and ensure systems are in place to maintain the information collected; and • ensuring Contact Centre response times and abandonment rates reduce. 	<p>Not complete. Although successful action has been taken to address most of these issues, the access review did not take sufficient account of customer preferences</p>
<p>Improve performance and service quality in key areas by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improving case management of antisocial behaviour cases including the introduction of quality controls and monitoring arrangements to ensure service standards are being met; • reviewing the approach to domestic violence, hate crime and harassment to ensure it meets the needs of WNWHL customers; • reviewing the approach to current and former tenants arrears to identify further ways to improve collection rates; • reviewing the approach to the setting of service charges to ensure customers are involved and these accurately reflect services received; • developing a robust letting procedure which gives clear guidance on each stage of the process; • developing a procurement strategy which clearly outlines WNWHL's ethos in relation to modern procurement methods, its stance on customer involvement and contains a timetable for future procurement; and • prioritising a review of the procurement of non asset management goods and services focusing on the areas of highest spend. 	<p>Not complete. Although successful action has been taken to address most of these issues, there has been minimal customer input on the issue of service charges.</p>

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>Review, with customer, these recommendations and all the other weaknesses identified in the report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• consider them in light of good practice from elsewhere;• carry out impact and value for money assessments on potential solutions;• develop prioritised action plans to address them; and• monitor the impact of delivery in terms of outcomes.	Done

AC inspection report January 2009

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 Before and during this inspection, we reviewed a range of relevant documents, including a number which the ALMO felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.
- 2 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 the quality of the service being delivered in practice. They included: observation of a board meeting; customer, staff, board member and partner interviews; file checks; visits to various neighbourhoods and housing schemes; and mystery shopping of service access points. We also interviewed key figures from the Council.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Complaints review panel

- 1 Bi-monthly review panel meetings allow customers to oversee performance in dealing with complaints. Contractors and representatives from key service delivery teams attend these meetings, which review 'learning from complaint' forms to identify opportunities to improve services. The panel also adjudicates on complaints that have reached stage 3 of the process, allowing complainants to put their cases directly to their peers.

Environmental partnership

- 2 West North West Homes Leeds has worked with the charity Groundwork Trust to deliver community environmental and youth engagement projects. This has involved extensive customer consultation, provided job opportunities as part of the 'future jobs fund' and implemented schemes which require less maintenance, reducing carbon emissions. It has also supported projects for young people which give them a pride in their neighbourhoods, including 'junior warden' and 'dreamscheme' initiatives.

Safeguarding

- 3 West North West Homes Leeds has provided 'alerter' training for staff and contractors which has enabled them to identify safeguarding issues for both adults and children. A clear and straightforward procedure for referrals to its tenancy support team is in place and the team is responsible for referring cases on to the Council. It then monitors the performance of the Council in addressing the issue. This means that staff and contractors understand what safeguarding issues to look for during their normal working day, have an easy way to report their concerns and can be confident that appropriate action will be taken.

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