

## Report for Resolution

**Report to** Cabinet  
13<sup>th</sup> July 2011  
**Report of** Director - Regeneration and Development  
**Subject** Housing Improvement Programme Phase 111

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### Purpose

To seek cabinet approval for Phase III of the housing improvement programme.

### Recommendations

1. The Housing Improvement programme, attached as appendix A, is adopted;
2. The housing improvement board continue for a further 12 months to monitor the delivery of Phase III of the housing improvement plan and to help develop the new approach to self regulation and tenant engagement;
3. The membership of the HIB to be an independent chair, audit commission representative, two tenant representatives (one from the CityWide board and two members (portfolio holder and minority group) and a representative(s) from an social landlord represented in the city and/or another local authority with a retained housing stock when required.

### Financial Consequences

All the financial implications arising from the improvement plan will be contained within existing budgetary allocations.

### Risk Assessment

A key task for the housing improvement board is to review the progress on the delivery of the improvement plan and the associated risk assessment. Therefore there is a regular assessment of both achievement and risk.

### Strategic Priority and Outcome/Service Priorities

The report helps to meet the strategic priority "Safe and healthy neighbourhoods – working in partnership with residents to create neighbourhoods where people feel secure, where the streets are clean and well maintained, where there is good quality housing and local amenities and where there are active local communities"

**Cabinet Member:** Councillor Macdonald - Housing

**Ward:** All

**Contact Officers**

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**Background Documents**

Future Membership of the Housing Improvement Board – Executive Report 28<sup>th</sup> July 2010

Housing Improvement: Progress Report – Executive Report 22 April 2009

**Report**

**Background**

1. As a result of an inspection of the housing landlord services in 2009 by the Audit Commission, the city council set out a Housing Improvement Plan to achieve a one star rating by April 2010 and two stars by April 2011.
2. An independently chaired housing improvement board was created to help guide the strategic direction of the improvement project and ensure effective monitoring of the outcomes of the programme. The board has acted as critical friend and advisor to the project team, providing vision, advice and challenge.
3. After the first year of the housing improvement plan, the Council invited the IDeA to undertake a peer review of the housing service. The review was held from the 8<sup>th</sup>-10th March 2010 and found significant progress had been made and the housing service was on track to achieve 2 stars by 2011
4. The review supported the continuation of the housing improvement board to build on the work from year 1. The focus of Phase II of the improvement plan was to seek to embed the performance culture across the service and, to establish a framework for engagement with tenants. Furthermore the emergence of the new housing regulatory body, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), provided increased focus on the role of the tenant in decision making.
5. Significant progress has been made with the improvement plan. Out of the 81 actions identified in Phase II, 67 have been completed, 9 are no longer applicable and 5 will to be carried forward to 2011/12. The housing service has re-aligned structures including changing the neighbourhood teams to reflect the new four area based neighbourhood model; implemented a performance management regime; and adopted the council's continuous improvement culture. The service has set our annual performance targets with tenant representatives; published performance outcomes and is increasing the ways tenants and leaseholders are engaged.
6. In recognition of the improvement made the council published the first annual report, which has been recorded as best practice by the TSA; and the service has won the Association of retained council housing award for excellence in

tenant participation.

7. To help provide an overall assessment of the improvement journey undertaken the council invited the Audit Commission to undertake an 'advice and assistance' exercise to provide a further independent assessment of the housing services progress against the original Audit Commission inspection in 2009. The report, which attached as an appendix B, was extremely positive and overall the strengths outweigh weakness. Trish Nixon, the lead advisor for this work said she was "extremely confident the council will continue to improve".

### **Continuous improvement: Phase III**

8. Following the corporate focus on customers, continuous service improvement and cost conscious, the service has adopted the concept of continuous improvement service plans to monitor and progress service improvements and address under performance. In this context a phase III improvement plan has been drafted and this is attached as appendix A to this report. This plan is based around the outcome of the 'advice and assistance' work and has identified the following six themes for improvement:
  - ❖ Access and customer care
  - ❖ Diversity
  - ❖ Resident involvement
  - ❖ Estate management
  - ❖ Value for money
  - ❖ Performance management
9. The main impact arising from the implementation of phase three of the housing improvement plan is that tenants should have a greater involvement in the key decisions that impact on their homes and local environment. The overall quality of service should improve as reflected in improved levels of customer satisfaction and, at the same time, the relationship between service cost/value should also improve.

### **Housing Improvement Board**

10. Although the housing service no longer requires the same detailed level of guidance and strategic direction, there is still an important role for the housing improvement board (HIB) as a critical friend and advisor. At this stage it would be premature to conclude the role of the HIB. Instead the preferred approach is to focus the work of the board on both the next phase of improvement work together with a requirement to develop an approach to meet the requirement of the TSA for local self-regulation together with an open and transparent review of the complaints and service development proposals. This developing role for the HIB would need to be set in the context of the need to develop the overall approach of the council to tenant participation.
11. The loss of Improvement East, Go-East, IDeA and Cambridge City council from

the membership of the board does mean that some changes are necessary. Therefore in terms of membership, in addition to the current membership of an independent chair; two council members (the portfolio holder and non leading group member); audit commission; and two tenant representatives; it would be appropriate to broaden the board; when relevant, to include advice from other service providers (i.e. a local social landlord and/or retained stock local authority representative).

12. This option would continue the independent challenge and sharing best practice. It would still require the goodwill and commitment of non council board members and would need to be developed alongside the work of other external groups that provide best practice and bench marking opportunities for the service e.g. Norfolk housing alliance; Arch and HQN.

## Housing Improvement Project Plan YEAR 3 2011/12

Project Sponsor: Jerry Massey Senior Responsible Owner: Tracy John  
 Project Manager: Anna Clarke  
 Updated: 25.05.2011

## Status Key

Completed
On target
Target may not be achieved
Target not achieved
No longer applicable

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communication
		<b>ACCESS AND CUSTOMER CARE</b>								
1	HIP2	Ensure that identified planned DDA works are carried out to the neighbourhood offices and other council buildings.	John Nuttall	Apr 2011	Mar 2012	Accommodation review to be completed as this will determine the office locations to be upgraded to meet DDA.				
2a		Agree challenging targets with customers for answering the telephones (including out of hours service).	Tina Bailey	Apr 2011	Oct 2011					
2b		Put arrangements in place to meet the target for answering telephones (including out of hours service).	Tina Bailey	Apr 2011	Oct 2011					
3	CSIP	Develop alternative ways to access services making better use of technology to improve choice for customers and make better use of resources.	Tina Bailey / Jane Allen	Apr 2011	Apr 2012					
4a	CSIP	Implement a consistent method to monitor customer satisfaction with services: * Implement standardised service	Sarah Loades	Apr 2011	Dec 2011		On target			

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communication
		based surveys * Implement replacement for STATUS (possibly Housemark STAR)								
4b	CSIP	Set-up a method to analyse customer satisfaction results to assess how well the service performs and identify how it can improve.	Sarah Loades	Oct 2011	Dec 2011		On target			
5		Provide clearer information to customers on how complaints are dealt with.	Tina Bunn	Apr 2011	April 2012		On target			
6	CSIP	Make better use of the mediation service through earlier referrals to help resolve antisocial behaviour cases before they escalate.	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
		<b>DIVERSITY</b>								
7	CSIP	Ensure the customer profiling information is comprehensive and covers all of the recognised diversity strands: * Revise monitoring form * Ensure IT in place to record data * Ensure variety of opportunities to collect the information	Anna Clarke	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
8a	CSIP	Develop a customer insight vision (strategy) so that customer profiling information can be used at a strategic level to assess any barriers to services.	Anna Clarke	Apr 2011	Oct 2011		On target			
8b	CSIP	Develop appropriate responses to any identified barriers to services.	Anna Clarke	Jan 2012	Mar 2012					

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communication
9	CSIP	Develop performance information and indicators that can effectively show the progress the council is making to meet its diversity objectives, particularly in terms of collecting information across all diversity strands.	Anna Clarke	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
		<b>RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT</b>								
10	HIP2 CSIP	Develop a succession plan for the tenants' talkback panel as currently managed by Plus 4 Market Research Ltd including a risk assessment.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Oct 2011		On target			
11a	CSIP	Carry out a robust resident involvement impact assessment.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
11b	CSIP	Use the resident involvement impact assessment to develop the service.	Sandra Franklin	Oct 2011	Nov 2011		On target			
12a	CSIP	Develop a strategic approach to tenant involvement to provide a framework for the service.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
12b	CSIP	Develop an implementation plan for the new framework.	Sandra Franklin	Oct 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
13	CSIP	Work with the NLA and the wider leaseholder base to improve services to meet their needs and requirements	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
14	CSIP	Develop and implement a communications plan to achieve a better information flow between involved tenants and the wider tenant base.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Aug 2011		On target			

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communication
15a	CSIP	Carry out a skills audit of involved tenants.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Jul 2011		On target			
15b	CSIP	Provide training to tenants to meet the gaps identified in the skills audit.	Sandra Franklin	Aug 2011	Oct 2011		On target			
15c	CSIP	Explore the opportunities to offer externally accredited qualifications to tenants.	Sandra Franklin	Apr 2011	Jul 2011		On target			
		<b>ESTATE MANAGEMENT</b>								
16	HIP2 CSIP	Carry out review of the anti social behaviour and tenant enforcement service, taking into account the recommendations from the tenants survey commissioned through Plus4, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ impact on service access and delivery</li> <li>○ Links to corporate ASB and out of hour's service.</li> </ul>	Tracy John	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
17	CSIP	Review the premises management service to ensure that that estates are consistently well maintained and meeting the required standards	Anna Clarke	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
18	CSIP	Develop the approach to contract monitoring arrangements to give tenants more influence and control over how estates are managed	Anna Clarke	Apr 2011	Jul 2011		On target			



Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communi cation
19	CSIP	Develop the approach to environmental improvements (previously known as AIM's) so that this becomes tenant led	Anna Clarke / Gary Atkins	Apr 2011	Sep 2011		On target			
		<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b>								
20	HIP2 CSIP	Review, revise and implement new leasehold management fee.	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Oct 2011		On target			
21	HIP2 CSIP	Review and revise service charges for sheltered housing services.	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Oct 2011	Subject to SP budget revisions. Cost info available but review to be incl in sheltered housing review.	On target			
22a	CSIP	Increase the level of information on the costs of services and compare these with other organisations and over time.	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
22b	CSIP	Use cost information to drive improvement, aiming to compare with the best housing organisations in achieving value for money.	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
23	CSIP	Enable tenants to help prioritise and agree budgets so that resources are targeted at their priorities	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Oct 2011		On target			
24	CSIP	Review the value for money strategy to set the framework and priorities for delivering value for money	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Jul 2011		On target			

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communi cation
25	CSIP	Maximise income by reducing former tenant arrears	Paul Sutton	Apr 2011	Mar 2012		On target			
		<b>PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT</b>								
26		Develop more outcome focused measures for improvement plans	Tracy John	Apr 2011	May 2011		Completed	May 2011	Definition of outcomes agreed at HMT service planning meeting. HIP3 and CSIP plans include recording of outcomes as part of completion process for each action. <b>Outcome:</b> <b>Improvement plans are now focused on outcomes and the Council and tenants are better able to assess the impact that improvements are having.</b>	HMT informed.
27		Enhance the performance management arrangements by ensuring that all areas of performance are looked at on a systematic basis to support the current exceptions reporting	Tracy John	Apr 2011	May 2011		Completed	May 2011	Annual report and target setting process take into account performance across the service. Monthly reminders to access performance information to be sent to managers. <b>Outcome: Managers routinely review all performance indicators and this gives assurance to</b>	

Ref	Links to other plans	Audit Commission recommendation	Responsible officer	Start	Deadline	Reason for revised timescale	Current Status	Actual Finish Date	Outcomes & links to evidence	Communication
									the Council and tenants that all services are performing well and that any areas for improvement are identified.	

YEAR 5

Monitoring of HIP	Access and customer care	Diversity	Resident involvement	Estate management	Value for money	Performance management	Total actions for each status
Date reviewed: 25 May 2011							
Completed	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
On target	8	4	10	4	7	0	33
Target may not be achieved	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Target not achieved	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No longer applicable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total actions in each work stream	8	4	10	4	7	2	35

# **Landlord Services**

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**Norwich City Council**

**Income management, resident involvement and  
tenancy and estate management**

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# Summary

## Introduction

**1** Norwich City Council has invited the Audit Commission's Advisory Services to carry out a piece of work to identify strengths and weaknesses in its rate and extent of service improvement, and to identify any areas for further improvement. This follows from the 2009 housing inspection which assessed that the council was providing a 'poor' service which had uncertain prospects for improvement.

**2** The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively to achieve high quality local and national services for the public. Our Advisory Service team provide high quality, specialised services aimed at driving improvements and assisting in service development. We commit to creating improvement that citizens and service users notice. Our approach uses a variety of tools and techniques to best suit the needs of our clients.

## Background

**3** Norwich is the largest conurbation in Norfolk. It has a population of around 132,000 people and, as a growth point, its population is set to increase. It acts as a regional hub for employment, education and leisure activities, and the demographic of the city shows a higher than average proportion of young people aged between 16 and 29, along with single person and lone parent households. Black and minority ethnic communities make up 6.8 per cent of the population (compared with 11.3 per cent in England), and between 2001 and 2007 there were an additional 8,900 international migrants across Norwich, with about one third from Poland.

**4** There are just over 60,000 homes in Norwich of which 27 per cent (15,928) are owned by the council, which makes it the largest stock holder in the city and beyond. Housing is a significant council service.

**5** Norwich is the second most deprived out of 48 local authority districts in the region, and the 62nd nationally. A third of all children in Norwich live in income deprived households and Norwich has the highest proportion of housing benefit recipients and council tax recipients of all local authorities in the Eastern region.

**6** To improve landlord services Norwich set up a Housing Improvement Board in 2009, independently chaired and attended by staff, residents and representatives of other agencies (including GO East and the Audit Commission). The Board sought to identify barriers to improvement and to work with the council to deliver improvements to services.

## Approach to this piece of work

**7** The objective of this work is to examine with senior officers, staff within the Council, councillors and tenant representatives progress on key recommendations made in the previous inspection of the housing service; identify any specific areas of continuing weakness; identify changes required to achieve improvement; and make recommendations where practicable for the prioritisation of work.

**8** The work makes appropriate reference to established standards relating to access and customer care, diversity and value for money, as well as the specific services relating to income management, resident involvement and tenancy and estate management. The work also considers how far improvements can be sustained.

**9** As part of the review, the following areas have been assessed.

- Progress against previous improvement plans and recommendations.
- Quality of action plans to ensure that they enable the council to deliver services to the expected standards and are sustainable;
- Current performance of the housing income management, tenancy and estate management services and resident involvement; and
- How well the performance management systems in place enable improvement to be embedded and sustained.

**10** The work is not scored, but strengths and weaknesses are clearly highlighted.

## Main conclusions

**11** The Council has made significant progress to improve the service over the last two years. Good progress has been made in delivering the improvement plans and implementing the recommendations from the housing inspection in 2009. Although there is some way to go, in general, services for tenants have improved.

**12** Tenants are actively influencing the services they receive. They are benefiting from good customer care, useful information about services and have agreed the service standards they can expect. There is effective support for vulnerable tenants and services are tailored to meet individual needs.

**13** The Council performs well in collecting the rent and tenants in arrears have easy access to debt advice. There is a strong approach to anti-social behaviour, with good partnership working and cases handled well. A greater emphasis on value for money has led to efficiencies in the service and making better use of the money available.

**14** There are areas that the Council needs to focus on to deliver further improvement. Telephone calls take too long to be answered, customer satisfaction information is not informing how services can improve, customer profile information is not comprehensive making it difficult for the Council to show that services are delivered fairly and more work is needed with tenants to show the difference their involvement makes.



**15** Engagement with leaseholders requires development so that they can influence services that matter to them. The appearance and maintenance of estates is inconsistent with a number not meeting the required standards. The costs of delivering services do not compare favourably to other organisations and more work is needed to understand and address this.

**16** The Council is well placed to continue to improve services. There is strong leadership at Member and senior officer level to drive the service forward and staff are professional and motivated, committed to delivering the best services they can. The Council knows what it needs to do, improvement plans tackle areas of weakness, and the Council's track record gives confidence that these will be delivered as planned. Performance is well managed and the capacity to deliver improved services has been enhanced by better working across the Council and also with partners.

## Recommendations

**17** To assist the Council improve its housing services Audit Commission's Advisory Services makes the following recommendations and suggest that the timeline for delivering each of these is discussed and agreed with tenants.

### Recommendation

**R1** Strengthen customer care by:

- agreeing challenging but realistic targets with customers for answering the telephones and putting arrangements in place to meet these;
- developing alternative ways to access services making better use of technology to improve choice for customers and make better use of resources;
- consistently monitoring customer satisfaction with services and using this to assess how well the service performs and how it can improve;
- providing clearer information on how complaints are dealt with and increasing the number that are dealt with in the published timescales; and
- making better use of the mediation service through earlier referrals to help resolve anti-social behaviour cases before they escalate.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will have their calls answered promptly and will be clear about the service they can expect;
- customers will have more ways to access services and in ways that suit them;
- services will be developed to respond to customer feedback; and
- some tenants may be able to sort out anti-social behaviour issues more easily.

## Recommendation

### **R2** Strengthen the approach to diversity by:

- ensuring the customer profile information is comprehensive and covering all of the recognised diversity strands;
- using the customer profile information at a strategic level to assess any barriers to services and to develop appropriate responses; and
- developing performance information and indicators that can effectively show the progress the Council is making to meet its diversity objectives.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will be better able to meet the diverse needs of its customers based on good quality information and assessment of services; and
- the Council will be able to show that it is delivering its services fairly to all people and to track the progress it is making;

## Recommendation

### **R3** Strengthen resident involvement by:

- carrying out a robust resident involvement impact assessment and using this to develop the service;
- developing a strategic approach to tenant involvement to provide a framework for the service;
- working with the Norwich Leaseholder Association and the wider leaseholder base to improve services to meet their needs and requirements;
- improving and developing mechanisms to achieve a better information flow between involved tenants and the wider tenant base; and
- carrying out skills audits of involved tenants and providing training to meet gaps and exploring the opportunities to offer externally accredited qualifications.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will understand what works well and tenants will clearly see the difference their involvement makes;
- leaseholders will be better able to influence services that affect them;
- more tenants will understand how their views influence services; and
- training will be geared to meet tenant needs and will help support tenants to access other opportunities such as employment or voluntary work outside of the tenant involvement structure.

## Recommendation

### **R4** Strengthen estate services by:

- ensuring that estates are consistently well maintained and meeting the required standards;
- developing the approach to estate walkabouts and estate monitoring arrangements to give tenants more influence and control over how estates are managed; and
- developing the approach to environmental improvements so that this becomes tenant led.

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The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- estate services will better reflect tenant priorities and be responsive to their requirements.

## Recommendation

### **R5** Strengthen value for money by:

- increasing the level of information on the costs of services, comparing these with others and over time, and using this to drive improvement, aiming to compare with the best housing organisations in achieving value for money;
- enabling tenants to help prioritise and agree budgets so that resources are targeted at their priorities;
- reviewing the value for money strategy to set the framework and priorities for delivering value for money; and
- maximising income by reducing former tenant arrears.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- tenants will receive and be assured that the services they receive represent value for money;
- tenants can ensure that money is spent on the things that matter most to them; and
- income from all sources will be maximised.

## Recommendation

### **R6** Strengthen performance management by:

- developing more outcome focused measures for improvement plans; and
- enhancing the performance management arrangements by ensuring that all areas of performance are looked at on a systematic basis to support the current exception reporting.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council and tenants will better able to assess the impact its improvements are having; and
- the Council and tenants are assured that all services are performing well and that any improvements needed are identified.

# Detailed report

## Access and customer care

**18** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

**19** There are a number of strengths.

- Staff are customer focused and committed to providing good quality services. Front line staff are knowledgeable and well trained with over 82 per cent of enquiries dealt with at the first point of customer contact.
- Customer views have been listened to in deciding office and telephone opening hours, along with an analysis of office usage. The effectiveness of the access arrangements is kept under review through regular customer feedback and changed if necessary. For example, some specialised officers for particular services have been introduced into the contact centre with customers directed towards these. This is helping to reduce the number of avoidable contacts by dealing fully with the enquiry, such as completing and processing, where possible, housing benefit claims.
- There is good quality information for customers which is considered by a tenant publications group for content and design, and to award the 'Tenant Tick' of approval. The website is easy to use and provides a range of information. There are arrangements to access information in different languages and formats through the county wide INTRAN scheme and core documents carry straplines in the three main community languages.
- Service standards have been developed and agreed with tenants and monitored as part of the performance management system. This shows that most standards are being met.
- Complaints are generally well handled with customers receiving clear and appropriate responses. Complaints are analysed to draw out lessons learned to feed into service improvements.
- The housing service was awarded the Customer Service Excellence Award in 2010 recognising the improved level of customer service and care that is now offered.

**20** There are a number of weaknesses.

- Customers wait too long for telephone calls to be answered. Targets for the service are not challenging, set at answering 50 per cent of calls in 20 seconds and the remainder in two minutes, and these are not being met. Only 45 per cent of calls for the housing service were answered in 50 seconds, the average waiting time was just under two minutes and 16 per cent of calls were abandoned during the period October to December 2010. Some customers wait up to ten minutes for their call to be answered which offers a poor level of service. As a result almost 10 per cent of customers regard the service as poor.

- Alternative ways of accessing services are not fully developed. Although some on line services such as rent payment are offered, other services such as the reporting of estate issues are limited. Text messaging is used on occasions but this is not an automated approach to make it an easy way of contact with customers. Without these additional forms of access customer choice is limited and resources for front line services are not targeted to best effect.
- Customer satisfaction information to assess the effectiveness of services is under developed. There is no consistent approach to gathering satisfaction data at each point of contact with customers. A standard satisfaction survey form has been developed but is not yet used across all services. Low response rates from the surveys that are carried out hinder their usefulness, and although results are fed back to teams there does not seem a systematic process for this.
- Overall satisfaction with the landlord service was 61 per cent in 2009. Although other survey work shows satisfaction for various service areas to be considerably higher, it is difficult to assess how well the housing service is viewed by its customers.
- Some aspects of dealing with complaints require improvement. Only 80 per cent of complaints are dealt with in the service standard of 15 days, published information about the process is not comprehensive and there is no ongoing customer satisfaction surveys to show what complainants think of the service.

## Diversity

**21** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

**22** There are a number of strengths.

- There are sound arrangements for the collection and updating of some customer profiling information. This has increased to 100, 96 and 82 per cent respectively for gender, age and ethnicity.
- Customer profile information, although limited, is used effectively to tailor services to meet individual needs. Staff use the information routinely to ensure they are meeting needs and there are a number of examples where letters are sent out in different formats and visits made to customers where written correspondence is not suitable.
- Diversity is increasingly embedded as a way of working in the organisation. There is strong leadership by senior managers on the Sponsorship Equalities Group, supported by diversity training developed to meet the Council's particular needs. This has resulted in staff showing a good understanding of, and commitment to, identifying and meeting the diverse needs of customers.

- Equality impact assessments (EIAs) are being well used to identify diverse needs and develop arrangements to meet these. Housing has carried out EIAs for its key service areas as part of the Council's three-year programme and impact assesses all new policies and procedures as a matter of course. The EIAs have resulted in action plans that are reviewed and reported annually. Changes to better meet diverse needs have resulted, for example, in arranging for housing applicants with mental health problems to be seen at an agency support centre where they feel more comfortable, rather than at the City Hall.
- The Council complies with the HREC<sup>i</sup> Code of Practice in Rented Housing. A thorough assessment against the code has been carried out and scrutinised externally by the Norfolk Race Equality Council. An action plan is in place to further improve and to support the Council's wider objective to reach the achieving criteria of the Local Government Equality Standard.
- The Council works corporately to engage with a range of communities and community of interest groups across Norwich, allowing the housing service to access these more easily. The housing service also works directly with different groups including young people and people from different faiths. For example, working with a local Mosque the housing service developed a 'dos and don'ts' for staff visiting Muslim households.
- There is a strong approach to dealing with domestic abuse and hate crime. Partnership working is effective, there is joint working to monitor and decide actions on cases and victims receive a good level of support.

**23** There are a number of weaknesses.

- Customer profile information is not comprehensive. More work is needed to understand disability; currently 4 per cent of tenants say they have a disability. Information on sexual orientation and religion is not being collected at all, although there are plans to gather this. Housing has set a target to have 100 per cent information across all strands in the next two years.
- Profile information is not being used strategically to monitor and assess services, and inform service delivery. Limited customer profiling information has hindered analysis as part of EIAs, an assessment of access to services and any barriers to take up, and to show that services are being delivered fairly.
- Monitoring of services by diverse strands is inconsistent. Monitoring information is captured in satisfaction surveys and also in cases of anti-social behaviour and in cases with the family's intervention unit but it is not captured for most other services. In the absence of comprehensive profile information, more extensive monitoring of services could provide assurance that service are delivered fairly.

<sup>i</sup> Human Rights and Equality Committee (formerly the Commission for Racial Equality).

- There are no diversity performance indicators for the housing service which makes it difficult to judge the progress made in improving services to meet diverse needs.

## Income management

**24** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**25** There are a number of strengths.

- Performance in collecting the rent is strong with the arrears as a percentage of the income to be collected at 1.87 per cent, which is amongst the top 25 per cent of comparable social landlords.
- A number of payment options are offered to customers. Take up of payment methods is monitored and shows Pay Point to be the most popular. Payment by direct debit, which is the most cost effective way of collecting the rent, is increasing and is now at 23 per cent and telephone and internet payments are also increasing.
- There is a good understanding of the reasons for arrears. These are grouped into common causes allowing actions to be more effectively targeted. This has included effectively tackling housing benefit delays and improving debt advice.
- A strong preventative approach to arrears management is in place. All new tenants are contacted within the first week of their tenancy. Young people are offered tenancy awareness sessions which have proved successful in keeping arrears down, a strong working relationship with the housing benefit service is ensuring claims are processed quickly, and there is an emphasis on face to face contact. An effective court mediation service is reducing the number of cases going to court. The number of evictions has also reduced.
- Good information is available for customers about managing money and easy access to money and debt advice. The Money Advice Team provides a speedy response to tenants in debt and there are referral arrangements to other agencies when appropriate. Customers using the Money Advice Service report high levels of satisfaction.
- Policies and procedures are comprehensive and cases are managed in accordance with these. There is close monitoring of cases to ensure that the correct actions are being taken. This is resulting in a consistent service for tenants.
- Service charges for tenants and leaseholders for estate services are based on the cost of delivering the service, and are apportioned across those who receive it.

**26** There are some weaknesses.

- The former tenant debt is high and is not reducing. The arrangements for tackling former tenant arrears have been strengthened but this is not yet resulting in improved performance. Only 15 per cent of the arrears has been collected in 2010/11.
- Although satisfaction monitoring is in place for cases referred to the Money Advice Team, there is no satisfaction monitoring for arrears management cases.



## Resident involvement

27 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

28 There are a number of strengths.

- Tenants have a range of ways to be involved. There is a clear framework with formal group structures for tenants and leaseholders, including seven active tenant and resident associations. In addition, a range of other options allows tenants to be involved at a level that suits them. These consist of the 1,200 tenant and leaseholder talkback panel used for surveys and focus groups, tenant inspectors, involvement in estate walkabouts and mystery shoppers. Proactive work by the tenant involvement team means that events and road shows are regularly held to encourage more tenants to be involved or simply give their views on services they receive.
- The number of tenants involved has significantly increased. Strengthening of the formal involvement structure by allowing co-opted members to join the Citywide Board has led to more tenants joining. The sub groups that sit below the Citywide Board have widened their membership and are able to look in detail at areas that affect services, such as performance and the changes to the housing revenue account. In addition to the Talk Back panel there is a database of about 400 tenants and leaseholders who have expressed an interest in some sort of involvement, and are available to be called on for various activities.
- There are many examples of how tenants have influenced services. Sheltered housing tenants were active in the new laundry contract, and helped develop policies such as the return from hospital service and day care arrangements. A project team of tenants and staff developed the annual report and there was a joint approach to developing the local offers. Other areas of influence include published information, developing service standards and a range of policies and procedures, with changes introduced such as offering appointments outside normal working hours.
- Tenant capacity for involvement is supported by training. A programme developed with the Norfolk Adult Education Service and a Registered Provider partner covers a range of topics including chairing skills, assertiveness, action planning, and Equality and Diversity. There is also informal training through job shadowing council staff, open days, attending staff meetings and opportunities to attend external events.
- The Council is actively seeking to involve a wide range of tenants and leaseholders to be more representative of its customer base. Customer profile information and monitoring information collected at appropriate events is used to identify any issues and to target activities to increase representation. For example, the road shows were held in areas which would encourage engagement from families and younger people, including tower blocks and shopping centres. The Talk Back panel was recruited so as to reflect the demographic make up of residents.

- Involved tenants believe that the Council listens to their views and that they are able to influence services and make a difference. Feedback on the difference that tenant involvement can make is given to tenants through the 'better because of what you have told us' leaflet, and information in the tenants' newsletter and annual report.

**29** There are a number of weaknesses.

- Some of the resident involvement activities are relatively recent so it is too early for outcomes that tenants would notice. For example, although tenant inspector and mystery shopping exercises have started the findings from these activities have not yet fed into service improvement.
- Assessing the impact that tenant involvement has is not fully developed. Although there has been an impact assessment there has not been a breakdown of the various activities to show what works well, what value is achieved across a range of criteria, what the cost is and how well the activity represents value for money. This would clearly demonstrate to the Council and tenants the difference that tenant involvement makes.
- The strategic approach to tenant involvement is under developed. The tenants compact is now dated and although there is no longer a requirement to have a compact, a strategic framework is needed to drive the service forward. The recent review of tenant involvement provides a platform to achieve this.
- Although work is in progress, there has been limited assessment to show whether involved tenants are representative of the diverse make up of tenants and to strategically target where there are gaps.
- Information flow between tenants involved in various activities and to the wider tenant base is not sufficiently developed. Although mechanisms are in place to achieve this and there is reporting back in the tenants' newsletter, it is clear that some tenants, including those who are involved, are not aware of how they are influencing services.
- The relationship between the Council and the Norwich Leaseholder Association (NLA) is difficult and there is limited confidence within the group about the Council's commitment to engage with them. The Council is keen to work positively with the NLA but the current relationship makes it hard to progress issues and move forward in a meaningful way. This has left the leaseholder group feeling unable to influence services that affect them.
- Training for tenants needs to be further developed. There has not been a skills audit of involved tenants so that training can be targeted to meet needs, and there are not opportunities for tenants to take part in training which could lead to externally accredited qualifications.

## Tenancy management

**30** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**31** There are a number of strengths.

- Tenancy audits are used effectively to support the approach to tenancy management. These were initially targeted at properties where there had been no contact for some time but are now on a rolling programme, with some reactive visits. Positive outcomes have been achieved including identifying and helping vulnerable tenants, picking up some child protection issues, and finding and recovering four properties that had been illegally sub let.
- There is a good range of support for tenants to help them sustain their tenancies. The family intervention unit provides intensive support to families, and support for other households is readily available including specialist support where needed. Support needs are identified for new tenants and support put in place. Outcomes are positive with 97 per cent of tenancies sustained in the first year and 96 per cent of vulnerable households referred for ongoing support, have been helped to maintain their tenancies.
- There is a strong approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB). It is easy for tenants to report ASB on a 24 hour basis. Neighbourhood wardens provide a quick response and deal with the majority of cases. Cases that cannot be resolved quickly are dealt with by housing officers, and there is a specialised team, ABATE, for serious cases requiring legal action. Cases are closely monitored to ensure they are dealt with in accordance with policies and procedures and that a consistent service is offered to tenants.
- The Council uses a range of ways to tackle ASB based on prevention activities and enforcement action. Mediation is available and there are a number of diversionary activities for young people. Where action is needed to enforce tenancy conditions, measures are used ranging from acceptable behaviour contracts to legal action, and eviction as a final resort. Reduction in the level of ASB is monitored as one of the key performance indicators requested by tenants.
- There is good partnership working with the Police and other agencies to tackle ASB. At an operational level there is joint working on cases with the more serious cases monitored through a multi-agency group and actions agreed. At a strategic level information on ASB incidents is brought together and discussed with actions targeted accordingly. This has led to the use of dispersal orders and diversionary activities in particular areas, and the development of longer term multi-agency working to improve the quality of life on some estates.

**32** There are some weaknesses.

- Performance information to show the overall effectiveness of the approach to is not comprehensive. Although individual cases are closely monitored more general information about the service for example the numbers of cases open and closed, those dealt with within the response times and the types of action taken is not readily available. Without this type of information the different categories of ASB, trends, workload issues and overall performance is hard to judge and hinders identifying service improvements.
- The benefits from mediation are not being maximised. Referrals are not always made early enough, with some made directly from the abate team and none from the warden service. Early referrals offer a better chance of success for the parties involved which also means the service offers better value for money.
- Customer satisfaction with ASB is not comprehensively gathered. Cases dealt with by the ABATE team are sent surveys but the response rate is low. This means that customer feedback is not informing service improvement.

## Estate management

**33** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

**34** There are a number of strengths.

- Investment in estates has led to improvements in some areas in response to tenant concerns. Work has been carried out in consultation with residents affected, with some schemes tenant led, to improve lighting, landscaping of communal gardens, opening up 'hidden areas', gates and security doors. Close working with the Police has helped address crime and security concerns, and in one area savings of £3,000 have been achieved through reduced flytipping.
- Arrangements for managing estates have been strengthened. There are programmes of estate walkabouts involving partners, officers from different council departments and residents. Tenant estate auditors are now inspecting estates and scoring them, and contract monitoring officers assess how well the grounds maintenance and other estate services perform.
- Flytipping on estates is being effectively tackled. A rapid response team is able to respond quickly to remove rubbish and has a proactive approach to visiting 'hot spot' areas and removing any rubbish before it is reported.

- Some estates benefit from the premises management service which provides caretaking services to maintain areas and keep them free of litter. A particular benefit of this service is the help offered to vulnerable tenants in identifying their needs and working with other agencies to meet these.
- There is an effective scheme to help vulnerable tenants cope with their gardens. The scheme is run by a social enterprise and helps over 200 tenants.

### 35 There are a number of weaknesses.

- The appearance and maintenance of estates is inconsistent so that not all provide a clean and litter free environment, with well maintained grounds. A number of tenants and leaseholders reported that they are not satisfied with the service, and while some areas are well maintained and providing a pleasant environment to live, they can point to a number of areas that are not. The assessments made by the tenant auditors so far show that about a quarter of estates are not meeting the required standards. This would suggest that although the estate management arrangements have been strengthened they are not yet fully effective.
- Estate management lacks a strong customer focus. Tenants are not involved in estate services contract monitoring meetings which would allow the Council and contractor see things from a customer perspective. Not all estate walkabouts are well attended by tenants, and feedback on the actions taking place is patchy and not widely promoted. As a result tenants have expressed their concerns about the effectiveness of estate walkabouts, although new arrangements are being introduced to tackle these concerns.
- The approach to estate and environmental improvements is largely reactive in response to issues raised. Although detailed consultation on particular schemes takes place, there is no strategic approach which involves tenants. This could be achieved by giving responsibility for the budget to tenants and involving them in developing a tenant led bidding process, agreeing the criteria for bids, and prioritising and agreeing bids. This would increase tenant involvement in ensuring that resources are targeted at their priorities.
- There have been no recent satisfaction surveys of the premises management service making it difficult to judge its effectiveness and how estates covered by the service compare to those that are not.

## Value for money

**36** There is a balance of strengths and weakness in this area.

**37** There are a number of strengths.

- There is a general understanding of the costs of housing services and how these compare to others. High cost areas such as income management are being examined and compared in more detail so that the service, which is high performing, can be robustly assessed for value for money. The Council has also identified where its corporate costs are high such as IT and overheads and is targeting these areas for action.
- There is a clear focus on value for money in the organisation and staff show good awareness. Some working practices have changed to improve value for money such as reducing paperwork, sending letters by email and using text messaging to remind tenants about appointments. There has also been a focus on raising awareness among tenants with promotional material, and reporting what has been achieved, in the tenants' newsletters and the annual report. Performance indicators to assess progress have been agreed, although are not yet monitored.
- Efficiencies have been delivered increasing resources to set against savings and to invest back into services. A lean review of the housing benefit service identified considerable efficiencies whilst improving outcomes for customers, with claims now processed quickly. Similarly a review of voids has helped to realise efficiencies and reduce rental loss.
- Procurement is leading to savings and efficiencies. The estate services contracts let in April 2010 delivered savings of £1.3 million. Some of this was needed for budget savings but some is being invested into service improvements, such as improving re-cycling on estates and the introduction of food recycling.
- The Council is taking action to maximise its own income through arrears recovery, increasing garage rental income, re-negotiating the commission on the water rate collection service and pro-actively tackling tenancy fraud.
- The Council has had some success in obtaining external investment to provide services such as funding for the Family Intervention Unit. Added value is also obtained through work with partners to deliver services such as ASB and to share activities such as training events.

**38** There are a number of weaknesses.

- The costs of delivering most services do not compare favourably with others, falling into the lower 50 per cent of comparable organisations.
- There is limited information on the more detailed costs of delivering services, and benchmarking of services is not comprehensive and driving improvement. For example, although the costs of estate services are known this information has not been benchmarked to show comparative costs and to help support improvement.

- Tenants are not actively involved in agreeing and prioritising budgets to meet the priorities they have identified. However, the housing revenue account sub group, and the training provided for tenants in this group, provides a platform for this in future.
- The value for money strategy is due for review and now limited in providing the framework for value for money and the priorities to be achieved.

# Prospects for Improvement

## What is the track record in delivering improvement?

**39** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**40** There are a number of strengths.

- Good progress has been made against improvement plans. Of the 81 actions in the year two housing improvement plan 60 have been completed, 9 are on target, 1 may miss the target and 4 may not be achieved. Eight actions are no longer applicable. Progress has also been made in delivering the service improvement plans, resulting in improved service delivery for tenants.
- There are a number of improvements that tenants would notice and benefit from. These include:
  - improved customer care and enquiries properly dealt with;
  - a better response to meeting the needs of vulnerable customers and a much higher level of customer profile information;
  - a wide range of opportunities for tenants to become involved; and
  - good quality and informative leaflets and service standards agreed with tenants across all key services.
- Although tenants have a number of concerns with services they generally feel that these are improving and that their involvement is making a difference. They have confidence that because of the changes so far further improvements will be made.
- The culture of the organisation has changed to one that is customer focused, performance orientated and with a greater emphasis on achieving value for money.
- The Council can show that improvements have been delivered in value for money. For example, overall management costs have reduced slightly and have been held below the average for the Eastern region. Similarly the loss of income from empty properties has improved from £885,000 in 2009/10 to £711,000 in 2010/11.
- Arrears performance has improved. The percentage of rent collected has increased and is now in the top 25 per cent of organisations, and the arrears as a percentage of the income to be collected is reducing standing at 1.87 per cent at the end of December 2010.

**41** There are some weaknesses.

- There are some services that are improving at a slower rate, with limited impact to date in addressing some diversity and estate services issues.
- Limited satisfaction data across a range of services that can be compared over time makes it difficult to show trends, whether there is sustained improvement and where improvement needs to be targeted.



- The lack of some cost information over time makes it difficult to show sustained improvement in value for money with most services remaining in the median or lower quartiles when compared to others.

## How well does the service manage performance?

**42** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**43** There are a number of strengths.

- There is a clear improvement planning framework. Priorities from the corporate plan cascade through service plans to team and individual objectives and actions. The housing service has a strategic priority plan with the Housing Blueprint sitting alongside this, with continuous service improvement plans to deliver the strategic priorities. These plans also capture all the actions in the overarching housing improvement plan developed from the recommendations of the previous housing inspection.
- Improvements plans are effectively monitored. The housing improvement plan is monitored by fortnightly meetings of the housing improvement project team and regular meetings of the Housing Improvement Board. Continuous service improvement plans are managed through the performance management framework. As a result, improvement actions are being delivered as planned.
- The improvement plans are addressing areas of weakness in the service. Some key improvements planned for this year include:
  - a new telephony system to improve telephone answering offering quicker and better usability, automated text messaging and enhanced performance information;
  - improving the website to offer more transactions on line, provide web links to contractors and improve the information available;
  - introducing patch based customer profiling to strategically identify issues in different areas of the City and allow a more targeted approach to delivering services through the neighbourhood structure; and
  - developing estate walkabouts into a city wide approach with a wider neighbourhood remit and the ability to make decisions quickly in response to concerns.
- There is a sound performance framework with a hierarchy of performance indicators which are scrutinised at different levels in the organisation. There is a monthly exception report produced for formal reporting through the organisational structure, with commentary to explain the performance. Performance pit stops are used to address areas of concern. The Portfolio Holder meets with the Heads of Service to discuss performance on a monthly basis. Performance is well managed as a result of this framework.

- Tenants are actively involved in monitoring performance. A performance score card has been agreed with tenants and contains the ten performance indicators that are of most importance to them. The performance sub group of the tenants' Citywide Board scrutinises this performance and can ask to look at any other areas where there may be concerns.
- Performance management is supported by ASPIRE which allows interrogation of performance at a number of levels within the strategic priorities for the service. This allows managers to have easy access to information, be able to drill down to understand the reasons for performance, allow performance to be compared to others and to be profiled against the diversity strands.
- The Council is self aware, open to challenge and keen to learn from itself and others. For example, it introduced the performance score card approach after seeing it work successfully elsewhere.

#### 44 There are some weaknesses.

- Improvement plans have been task focused in order to deliver improvements and would now benefit from being more outcomes focused. This would allow the Council to better assess the impact that the improvement actions are having on services.
- Although the exception reporting arrangements work well this can mean that some areas of service are not regularly looked at. Performance management could be enhanced by a system that looks at a particular service area in detail on a rolling programme, perhaps by the performance sub group or any future tenant scrutiny group.
- Some performance information is not readily available. For example, limited customer profile information makes it difficult to show how well services are meeting diverse needs. Although ASB cases are closely performance managed on an individual basis, more strategic information to assess the overall effectiveness of the approach is limited.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

#### 45 Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

#### 46 There are a number of strengths.

- Capacity and skills have been increased to deliver improved services. New skills have been brought in, restructuring has aligned the housing teams within the Council's overall neighbourhood structure and changes made to make better use of existing staff. For example, housing management patches have been reduced in size by increasing the number of patches from 17 to 24 to give officers more time to deal with issues on their estates. This is providing a stronger platform to meet the Council's priorities and deliver improvement.
- Members and senior managers provide strong leadership and support for the housing service. The Council is committed to continuing to improve the housing service and this is recognised throughout the organisation.

- Corporate working is adding to the capacity of the housing service. Joint working across council services and teams has significantly improved, with the development of shared objectives and initiatives involving officers from a number of services.
  - Housing staff have an increased understanding of each others work and how responsibilities are shared. Resident involvement is increasingly seen as everyone's responsibility and not just reliant on the tenant involvement team. This means increasing capacity for involvement activities such as the road shows and other community events.
  - Partnership working across a number of service areas and external funding to help provide services is increasing the capacity to deliver improved services.
  - Staff are professional, motivated and capable. They are well informed and well managed and clear about what they need to achieve. Staff and team meetings start with what has been achieved so that successes can be celebrated and learning can be shared. This has resulted in a culture of staff wanting to deliver the best services they can to their customers.
  - Staff feel well supported by training. There is a range of opportunities for training from informal learning through job shadowing to obtaining externally accredited qualifications. Staff report that as result of training they feel more confident and better equipped to carry out their jobs and improve services.
- 47** There are few weaknesses in this area.
- Funding levels remain uncertain in the current economic environment which may impact on the Council's capacity to develop and sustain improvements.
  - IT systems are not always supporting the efficient and effective delivery of services.

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