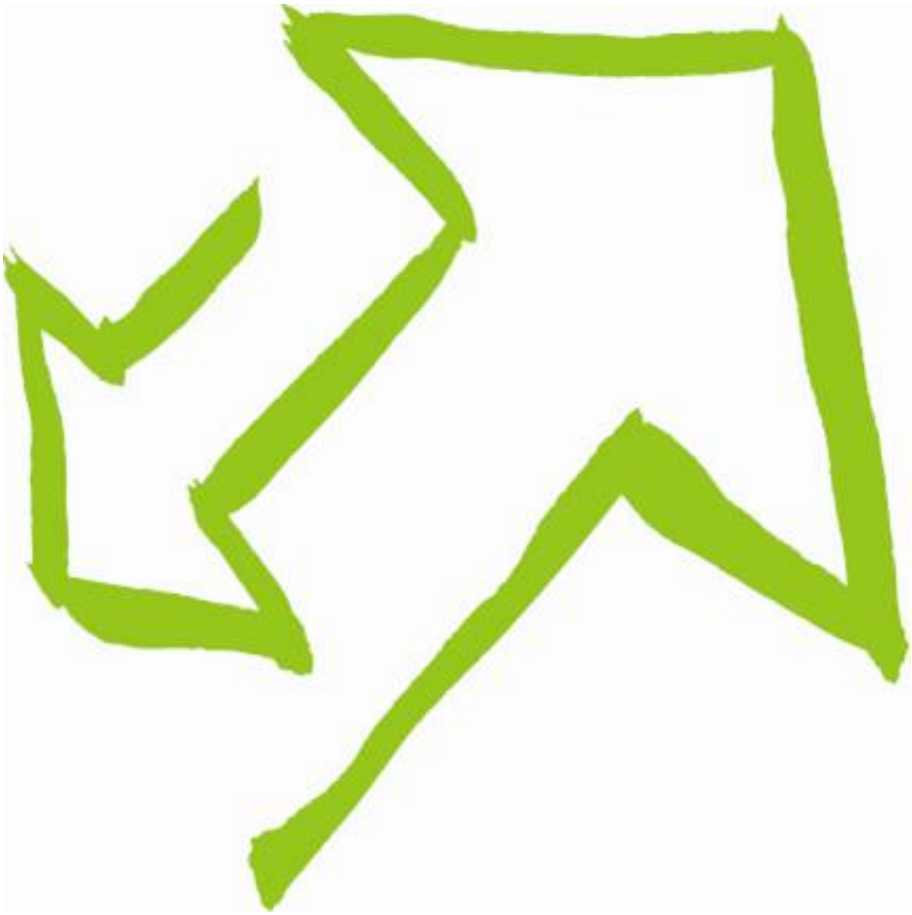
# Allocations and Lettings

Haringey London Borough Council

November 2008



audit commission

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# Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

# Summary

1 Haringey Council provides a poor allocations and lettings service, with promising prospects for improvement.

2 The service is not sufficiently customer-focused. It can be difficult to contact the service by phone, information including service standards is not clear or well publicised and while there are some good examples of consultation with users this remains an area for improvement. There are significant weaknesses in the Home Connection scheme and in dealing with applications for housing.

3 The service does not consistently measure its effectiveness among diverse groups and is not using ICT to tailor services to needs. Services to the increasing number of residents in temporary accommodation are poor. There are some weaknesses in the approach to working with private landlords and housing association partners and the service is not maximising the use of incentives to address under occupation. The approach to value for money within the service is under-developed.

4 The service can be easily accessed through the website and through four Customer Service Centres (CSCs). There is generally a good approach to using Equality Impact Assessments. The service, often through partnerships, is delivering positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups. There has been some good work to prevent homelessness, carry out occupancy checks and improve to the management of the housing register.

5 There is a clear and visible commitment to driving improvement from both senior councillors and senior managers. The service demonstrates an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness that is reflected in its future plans. The performance management, monitoring and reporting frameworks are all generally sound. The rate of improvement has increased recently, there is a good track record of responding to external recommendations and there have been some significant improvements for customers, although there remains more to do.

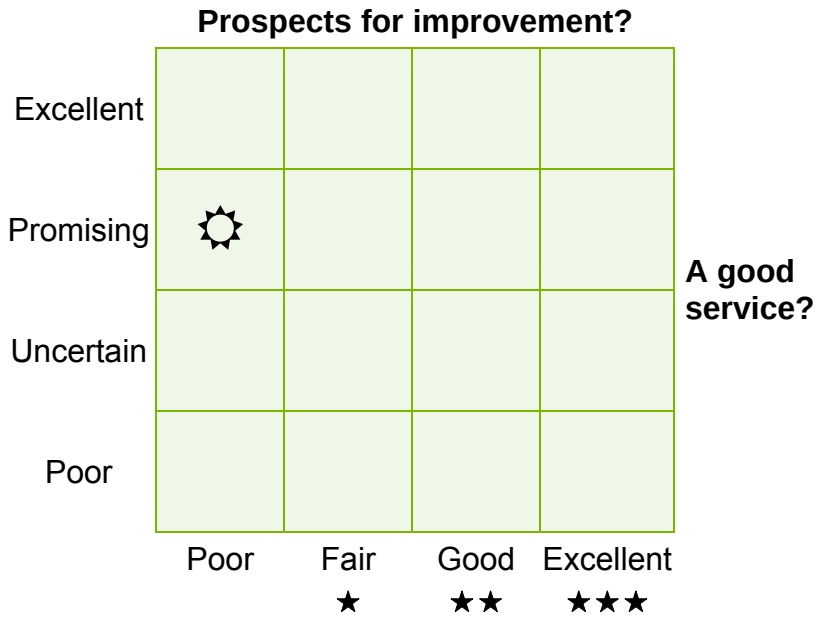
6 The Council has taken positive steps to address capacity issues. It has restructured and appointed a new Assistant Director with knowledge and experience of these services and of leading change. Other important posts have also been filled. The ICT systems are capable of supporting the service well.

7 However, staff capacity is reduced for example, by high levels of sickness absence and the service is not consistently learning from customer feedback. The track record is mixed. Overall improvement in performance indicators is mixed and progress in implementing service improvement recommendations and delivering targets in key strategies has not been consistent. Insufficient progress has been made in cross-cutting areas in particular customer access and value for money.

# Scoring the service

8 We have assessed Haringey London Borough Council as providing a 'poor', no-star allocations and lettings 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 chart[1]




'a poor service that has promising prospects for improvement'

Source: Audit Commission

9 We found the service to be poor because of the following weaknesses.

- The service is not sufficiently customer-focused. It can be difficult to contact the service by phone. Information is variable in quality, and service standards are not clear or well publicised.
- While there are some good examples of consultation with users this remains an area for improvement.
- The approach to value for money within the service is under-developed.
- The service does not consistently measure its effectiveness among diverse groups and is not using ICT to tailor services to needs.
- The service does not consistently measure its effectiveness among diverse groups.

[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.

- The operation of the Home Connection scheme is not currently efficient or customer-focused.
- Performance in dealing with applications for housing is weak and again not customer-focused.
- Services to residents in temporary accommodation are poor. Residents are not routinely kept informed of progress with their cases and most have not been offered help and options advice.
- The number of people in temporary accommodation has increased in the last three years and performance across a range of homelessness indictors is poor.
- The service is not maximising the use of incentives to address under occupation.
- There are some weaknesses in the approach to working with private landlords and housing association partners.

**10** However, there are some areas of strength. These include the following.

- The service is delivering, often through partnerships, positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups including vulnerable adults, homeless families, people requiring aids and adaptations and victims of domestic violence through the Hearthstone project.
- There is a good approach to completing Equality Impact Assessments although there are weaknesses in their application.
- The Council has invested in the service to support a stronger emphasis on prevention and the Preventions and Options team have carried out some good work to prevent homelessness.
- The Council has improved the management of the housing register through a re-registration process and revised its letting policy.
- The service can be easily accessed through the website and through four Customer Service Centres (CSCs) although some aspects of the customer experience of their use could be improved.
- There is a comprehensive system of occupancy checks that is making a positive impact in dealing with fraud and reducing the use of temporary accommodation.
- The strategic approach to working with partners is generally sound.
- The Council works well with private landlords on a day-to-day basis producing some good outcomes allowing people in housing need to access private sector housing.

**11** On balance, the service has promising prospects for improvement because of the following.

- There is a clear and visible commitment to driving improvement from both senior councillors and senior managers.
- The service demonstrates an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness that is reflected in its future plans.

- The performance management monitoring and reporting frameworks are all generally sound.
- The service has a good track record of responding to Audit Commission recommendations.
- The rate of improvement has increased recently and there have been some significant improvements that customers would recognise although there remains more to do in many areas.
- The Council has taken positive steps to address capacity issues at all levels within the service for example, through service restructuring and the appointment of a new Assistant Director with knowledge and experience of managing these services and leading change of this nature.
- Other important operational posts have also now been filled to help address weaknesses in the service.
- The ICT systems are capable of supporting the service well.

12 However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include the following.

- Staff capacity is reduced for example, by high levels of sickness absence and the high proportion of agency staff.
- The service is not consistently learning from customer feedback.
- Overall improvement in performance indicators is mixed and progress in implementing service improvement recommendations and delivering targets in key strategies has not been consistent.
- Insufficient progress has been made in cross-cutting areas in particular customer access and value for money.

# Recommendations

**13** In order to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs[2] and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

**Recommendation**

**R1** The Council should improve the customer focus of its service by:

- setting up systematic methods of keeping applicants informed of the progress of their cases, measuring satisfaction, and involving users in service improvement, including through the complaints procedure;
- updating information provided to service users, improving telephone access to the service, and reducing the time taken to book appointments;
- developing a proactive and holistic approach to preventions and options, linking outreach work carried out by the occupancy, preventions and options and housing management teams; and
- reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the Midlands, while being mindful of the individual wishes of temporary accommodation residents currently living there.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will be better able to identify and address areas of weakness in the lettings and allocations service;
- improved customer access to, and satisfaction with, the service;
- the service will be able to offer advice to applicants in the community, particularly those in temporary accommodation, linking this to support for vulnerable residents and occupancy checks; and
- the service will be able to offer a full range of support services, and applicants will be able to bid and attend viewings through the Home Connections service.

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

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

| Recommendation |
| --- |
| **R2** The Council should improve the choice-based letting service by:<br>• developing a more efficient and equitable bidding process by: filtering out ineligible bidders, encouraging those with low points to seek alternatives, identifying and supporting those who have not bid, particularly vulnerable applicants; and<br>• making the verification process more simple, flexible and user-friendly, and ensuring that reasonable efforts are made to contact priority bidders to view properties. |

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the service will have a lower volume of bidding, and will be able to focus on applicants with the highest needs; and
- the service will be geared towards the needs of applicants rather than to the requirements of the lettings process.

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

| Recommendation |
| --- |
| **R3** The Council should improve its use of resources by:<br>• maximising the supply of permanent accommodation by: closely monitoring nominations to housing associations, facilitating a balance between transfer and homeless applicants, developing a comprehensive under-occupation scheme and increasing outcomes from mobility schemes;<br>• building an analysis of risk into the budgeting process in regard to subsidy changes, and maximising rechargeable income; and<br>• improving data collection by ensuring that documentation is not lost, that data is input accurately onto IT systems and that information is consistent across different databases. |

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an increase in the supply of permanent housing for residents in housing need;
- a planned approach to maximising income, and to minimising reductions in income; sand; and
- more confidence in the planning process, including the lease end process, an enhanced ability to individually tailor services and higher customer satisfaction.

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

| Recommendation |
| --- |
| **R4** The Council should improve its approach to staffing by:<br>• taking steps to reduce the reliance on temporary and agency staff, and addressing high levels of sickness absence in the service; and<br>• developing and resourcing a training plan for staff, clearly linked to the aims of the service. |

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduced costs, and more staff capacity to achieve service aims; and
- liproved staff knowledge and skills.

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

**14** We would like to thank the staff of Haringey London Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 15 October to 19 October 2007

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

15 Haringey is a north London borough, with a population of 224,300. Haringey is the tenth most deprived borough in England. The average household income is £35,984 per annum, and the average house price is £327,804. Both figures are marginally below the London average. However, this average hides a wide range of incomes - for example, council tenant households have an average income of £10,823. About 60 per cent of the population of the borough cannot afford to purchase a property at lower quartile prices.

16 Thirty per cent of households are in the social rented sector. The Council's stock of 15,230 general needs properties is managed by an Arm's Length Management Organisation, Homes for Haringey. One in five households is in the private sector, substantially above the London average, while the owner occupied sector is smaller than the London average.

17 Nearly half the population are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. One in ten of the population are asylum seekers or refugees. The population demographic is changing. For example, there are increasing numbers of Polish migrants settling in the borough. Nearly one in five households contains at least one person with a designated special need.

18 The need for affordable and stable accommodation outstrips supply. There is a shortfall of 4,865 per annum in the provision of affordable housing[3]. Housing need particularly affects BME households, with 40 per cent of Black African and Asian households living in unsuitable accommodation. Overall, one in five households in the borough is overcrowded. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on Tottenham identified competition for housing as a key influence in social cohesion between different social groups.

19 In March 2007, there were 14,494 households on the housing register, with the following characteristics[4].

### Table 1 Requirements of households on the housing register

| Household requirement | Number of households |
|---|---|
| 1 bedroom | 6,231 |
| 2 bedroom | 5,045 |
| 3 or more bedrooms | 1,491 |

[3] Source: Housing Needs Survey 2005 Update
[4] Source: Housing Register statistics 2/3/07

## Table 2 Source of applicants on housing register

| Source | Number of households |
|---|---|
| General register | 8,319 |
| Tenant transfer | 1,490 |
| Homeless | 4,558 |

## Table 3 Average waiting time for applicants

| Number of bedrooms required | Average days waiting time |
|---|---|
| 1 bedroom | 767 |
| 2 bedrooms | 1,706 |
| 3 bedrooms | 2,214 |
| 4 or more bedrooms | 2,187 |

**20** It can be seen that there are substantial waiting times for accommodation, particularly for larger properties. Haringey has 5,861 households in temporary accommodation, the largest number in the country.

## Table 4 Households in temporary accommodation (Quarter 1 2007)

| Type of temporary accommodation | Numbers of households |
|---|---|
| Bed and breakfast | 83 |
| Annexes | 1,334 |
| Private sector leasing | 1,995 |
| Housing Association Leasing[5] (HALs) | 1,678 |
| Hostels | 309 |

**21** The government has set a target that councils reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation by 50 per cent by 2010. Haringey's target is to have less than 2,603 households in this type of accommodation. The largest part of this reduction will be in the HALs sector, which the Council aims to reduce to 300 units in 2010.

[5] This is temporary accommodation provided by Housing Associations. These are currently provided by four associations: Pathmeads, Circle 33, Newlon, Solon

### The Council

22 The Council has 57 members (30 Labour, 27 liberal Democrat) covering 19 wards. The Cabinet has nine members, including the Leader and the Cabinet member for housing. There is a system of scrutiny panels, overseen by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

23 The Audit Commission assessed Haringey as being a council that is improving well and demonstrating a three-star overall performance, under its Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

### The Allocations and Lettings service

24 There have been substantial changes in the structure of the housing service in the last two years. An Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) was set up in April 2006, and achieved two-star status in 2007. A new business unit, Strategic and Communal Housing Service (SCHS) is responsible for retained housing services, including allocations and homelessness. SCHS is located within the Urban Environment directorate, and has the equivalent of 150 full time staff (FTE).

25 Strategic and Communal Housing Services comprises the following teams.

- Strategy and performance, which includes performance and quality, and partnerships.
- Housing need, which includes homelessness preventions and advice, allocations, the Vulnerable Adults Team and Hearthstone.
- Housing supply, which addresses development, management of temporary accommodation and liaison with landlords.
- Finance, which deals with resourcing and rent management.

26 Private sector housing is currently located within the enforcement business unit, but will be transferring into SCHS in late 2007.

# How good is the service?

## What has the service aimed to achieve?

27 The Sustainable Community Strategy sets out a vision for 'a place for diverse communities that people are proud to be part of'. Housing provision is aligned to the aim 'healthier people with a better quality of life'.

28 The vision of the housing service is 'to meet the borough's current and future housing needs, and by doing so, make a major contribution to social inclusion and the socio-economic well-being of Haringey'. The Council acknowledges the large number of people in temporary accommodation and in unsuitable housing conditions is a challenge to achieving this vision[6]. As at May 2006, there were 8,000 people under 16 years old in temporary accommodation. Therefore, the Council's lettings and allocations service plays a key role both in addressing individual need, and in promoting health, social cohesion and regeneration.

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

### Access and customer care

29 Access and customer care is an area of weakness for the service. The service can be easily accessed through the website and through four Customer Service Centres (CSCs) although some aspects of the customer experience of their use could be improved. Information is variable in quality, service standards are not clear or well publicised and it can be difficult to contact the service by phone. While there are some good examples of consultation with users this remains an area for improvement.

30 The Council is using its website to improve access to services. Haringey Council's website is easy to navigate, and is available in a number of community languages. The Council is taking steps to widen access to the internet (only 21 per cent of Haringey Council tenants have home access) through terminals at Customer Contact Centres and libraries. The 185 terminals located in libraries are well used, and library staff are available to offer help and advice. Internet bidding is used regularly by residents; three-quarters of successful bids are via the internet. Most key documents can be downloaded from the website, including the Home Connections leaflet. In addition, appointments with Preventions and Options officers can be made remotely although some applicants have to wait for more than three weeks for an appointment, and not all requests for an appointment are answered.

[6] Source: Haringey Council Plan

**31** Information provided through leaflets is of variable quality and accuracy. Some information is comprehensive and useful- for example the Home Connections booklet explains the bidding process clearly, and the lettings standard is translated into six languages, and has helpful photographs of acceptable standards. However, some information is not complete, clear or accurate. The Home Connections property advertising sheet at local offices has small print and is difficult to read. The successful bidders' feedback and updates are not consistently reported. Information provided to residents in temporary accommodation is limited and inaccurate; one contact detail is more than ten years out of date. Poor quality information will limit the ability of service users to access services.

**32** The Council's housing service has a compensation scheme for applicants who have received an inadequate service. This has paid out £3,345 since 2002. The scheme is not advertised, which may contribute to the lack of claims. This means that the current scheme does not reimburse users for service failure, or act as a financial incentive for service improvement.

**33** It can be difficult to contact by phone. Customers have experienced problems contacting the service. In response, the service has re-directed callers to Customer Service Centres. This has improved performance in terms of the proportion of calls answered, and speed of answering calls, but the service is not meeting targets. Enquiries about transfers are the second most common reason to contact the housing service; as a result of poor performance, service users are unable to obtain relevant information and advice.

**34** Positively, the service can be easily accessed through four Customer Service Centres (CSCs) but some aspects of the customer experience could be improved. The public access areas in the CSCs are pleasant and well maintained, with CCTV, play areas and private interview rooms. It is quick and easy to see the receptionist, and they are polite, helpful and able to answer straightforward requests. However, the customer experience could be improved. The operation of the ticketed queuing system is not clear to some users, there is no information on how to use computer terminals, or what they can be used for and some terminals in one office were out of order. The public telephone does not have a hood so potentially confidential conversations could be overheard. One office was closed at lunchtime, with no indication when it would reopen. Once referred on by the receptionist, service users wait for long periods to see more specialist officers in the CSC, and in practice are given conflicting advice - for example regarding the end of temporary accommodation leases.

**35** A number of residents seen were negative about the way they were treated at public offices. While we experienced generally professional and helpful attitudes towards service users, we also observed some unfriendly behaviour and raised voices towards callers at offices. As a result, people approaching the service at local offices may face long waits and an unsatisfactory outcome for their queries.

**36** There are problems with lost documentation and information. The Council's housing service requests that service users provide a range of information, but when this is handed in, it is frequently mislaid, causing delays and frustration among applicants.

37 Service standards are not clear or widely advertised. For example, the timescale to respond to housing register applicants is not clearly stated, and is different in a range of documents. Personal callers are not given specific dates by which their queries will be answered. Therefore, service users do not know whether the service they receive is satisfactory, or whether they should complain.

38 The Council does not manage the expectations of service users well. A number of policy documents acknowledge the high demand and low supply of social housing. A high level of points is needed to obtain social housing, and the majority of people on the register have no realistic chance of being rehoused through Home Connections. At present, 80 per cent of those registered have less than 600 points; the average points level for a successful bid is 750 points. There are two main mechanisms through which applicants can judge their chances of obtaining social housing - the points level of previous successful bidders and staff advice. In practice, staff are unable to provide specific advice on prospects for successful bids, and information on successful bids is not provided each week. This means that many of the 45,000 bids made each week are wasted, and applicants are not encouraged to consider more realistic options for permanent housing such as the private rented sector.

39 There are some good examples of consultation with users but this remains an area for improvement. At the time of inspection, residents in temporary accommodation had just received their first newsletter, together with a survey and an invitation to attend a focus group. Positively, the Council is conducting a survey of new tenants that includes questions about lettings. There are some examples of good practice in consulting users. For example, the consultation on the new lettings policy in 2006 involved a range of stakeholders, and led to changes in the policy. The service does not currently have an informed understanding of the views of service users

40 Haringey's allocations and lettings service responds to complaints in target times, but does not systematically learn from complaints. It is exceeding its 90 per cent target to respond to complaints and councillor enquiries within target times and replies are reasonably comprehensive. The replies explained how to take the complaint to the next stage but did not mention the council's compensation scheme or whether it applied. Residents can be reasonably confident that if they complain, it will be investigated properly, but will not know if they are entitled to compensation.

### Diversity

41 Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. The service is delivering, often in partnership, positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups including vulnerable adults, homeless families, people requiring aids and adaptations and victims of domestic violence through the Hearthstone project. There is a good approach to completing Equality Impact Assessments although there are weaknesses in their application. The service does not consistently measure its effectiveness among diverse groups and is not using ICT to help it tailor services to clients needs. Capacity issues mean that limited support is provided for vulnerable applicants.

42 The service is identifying and supporting people with complex needs. The Vulnerable Adults Team has been located on the Preventions and Option team since 2005. It provides an important multi-disciplinary focus for the Preventions and Options service. The Vulnerable Adults Team included generic workers, plus specialist officers from the childrens' service, Connexions and probation services. The team works closely with Haringey Advisory Group on Alcohol (HAGA) and the Drugs Advisory Service (DASH) and is co-located with the medical assessment team. About 40 cases are referred to the Vulnerable Adults Team each month. Examples were provided of effective joint working and of outreach work with ex-prisoners and people with mental health problems leaving hospital care. The co-location of specialist services means that the service can identify and support residents with multiple and complex needs.

43 The Council's domestic violence service is strong. A substantial number of housing applications are from victims of domestic violence. The service manages the Hearthstone project; this project is advertised widely, and provides a range of innovative services, including counselling, legal advice and family support. Clients are offered the option of emergency housing or security measures in their homes - the Sanctuary Scheme. This scheme has assisted 18 victims of domestic violence to remain securely in their homes in the last year. The Council is working closely with partners such as the Primary Care Trust to provide a freephone out-of-hours advice line. The Council is also providing additional resources for physical expansion and more staff for the Hearthstone service. The service provides strong support and prevents homelessness among victims of domestic violence.

44 SCHS has productive links with the Supporting People team. The SP team provide funding for a range of support services for homeless residents. In 2006/07, floating support was provided to 708 homeless families and over a thousand single homeless people.

45 The housing service workforce reflects the diversity of the local community. As at March 2007, 55 per cent of staff were from BME communities, and 9 per cent had a disability. This indicates the Council uses the full range of skills in the local population.

46 The Aids and Adaptations service has enabled a substantial number of people to stay in their homes. In 2006/07, the Council completed 240 major adaptations, plus 116 adaptations funded through the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). In addition, the Aids and Adaptations service has made assessments, supplied equipment and carried out works within target times. This has helped residents maintain independence, and has also reduced pressures on the lettings and allocations service.

47 The Council has a good approach to completing Equality Impact Assessments although there are weaknesses in their application. The Council has completed Equality Impact assessments (EIAs) on different aspects of the service, including the re-registration process and choice based lettings. There is a useful corporate guide and template to complete these assessments. Some of the assessments have utilised relevant data; for example, the EIA covering re-registration shows that BME communities have not been disadvantaged by the process. However, the assessments are not always fully comprehensive or accurate. For example, the issue of vulnerability is mentioned but not included in the action plan for re-registration, and the assessment incorrectly states that the Council monitors ethnicity against quality of letting. In addition, stakeholders are not always involved in developing assessments.

48 The service is not using ICT to help it tailor services to clients needs. Although the OHMs[7] system has a facility to register and flag people who have disabilities, or who are potentially vulnerable or violent, in practice this is not used systematically by staff. Data is not entered on the system, and staff are not clear about how they can access and use the information provided. As a result, some potentially vulnerable service users do not receive the support they need.

49 The service does not consistently measure the effectiveness of its lettings and allocations service to diverse groups. There is no user satisfaction measurement for the homelessness assessment service or income recovery teams. In addition, the Home Connections feedback form does not ask age, gender, disability or sexual orientation and has different ethnic definitions from the HFH welcome visit form. This makes it harder to compare and learn from different sources.

50 Capacity issues mean that limited support is provided for vulnerable applicants. A number of policy documents identify the need to support vulnerable people in temporary accommodation, and help them bid successfully for properties through Home Connections. However, there are limited resources to identify such households, and to offer practical support in the biddings process. As a result, people in housing need may not obtain the accommodation they need.

51 SCHS does not consistently ensure that its suppliers comply with the diversity agenda. While equalities is a standing item on meetings with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), it has little in place to ensure that other suppliers of services, such as private landlords who supply temporary accommodation, comply with the Council's Equal Opportunities Policy. This may lead to people not receiving services which meet their needs.

### Dealing with homelessness

52 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council has invested in the service to support a stronger emphasis on prevention but this is not yet leading to consistently positive outcomes. The service carries out some good work to prevent homelessness and increase the supply of accommodation but services to residents in temporary accommodation are poor. Residents are not routinely kept informed of progress with their cases and most have not been offered help and options advice. The number of people in temporary accommodation has increased in the last three years and performance across a range of homelessness indictors, including length of stay in all forms of temporary accommodation is poor.

53 The number of people in temporary accommodation has increased in the last three years. The Government has set a target that councils reduce their use of temporary accommodation by 2010. Haringey's use of temporary accommodation has increased since this target was set in December 2004. By October 2007, the Council's use of temporary accommodation had increased by 208 households since the baseline was set. The Council's lettings and allocations service does not have a robust plan setting out targets to reduce temporary accommodation and the activities that will contribute to this reduction. This means that there can be reduced confidence that the Council can achieve the 2010 target.

[7] OHMs is a computer database system used by a number of local authorities

**54** Residents in temporary accommodation are not routinely kept informed of progress with their cases. Residents in temporary accommodation are unsure of the responsibilities of managers and generally dissatisfied with the service offered. Their main concerns are that they are not kept informed of the progress of their case, managers frequently change, and that it is difficult to contact their manager. They also complain of missed appointments, an issue identified in the Council's documentation and confirmed in a reality check.

**55** Part of the problem is the range of housing managers' duties. Each manager has a patch on average of 180 leased properties, and 120 hostel units. They also liaise with landlords on behalf of the Council and service users. In addition, they act as 'informal' contact for residents of emergency accommodation, as the service is not confident that emergency accommodation agents used can fully address the needs of residents. The Council's housing service expects housing managers to inform residents of their options, but there is no evidence that this happens in a systematic way.

**56** The Council has invested in the service to support a stronger emphasis on prevention but this is not yet leading to consistently positive outcomes. At the time of the inspection both long-term residents in temporary accommodation and recent tenants confirmed that they had not been interviewed regarding their options while in temporary accommodation. In addition, when leases come to an end, the lettings section should receive six month's notice from the Housing Supply Group. In practice, due to the high volume of lease ends, and shortage of staff, the lettings section is only given four month's notice. At this stage, residents are given extra points and encouraged to bid for permanent housing, but no advice is given about their options. As a result, many residents find themselves back in emergency temporary accommodation at the end of their lease. This revolving door process means that the use of temporary accommodation is maintained, and has a negative impact on the health and social integration of homeless households[8].

**57** The Council is not providing sufficient support for households placed outside the borough. Around 90 households have been placed in temporary accommodation in the Midlands. Although they have a designated housing manager in the temporary accommodations team, it is unclear how advice and support can be offered in any practical way. Given the tight schedules for bidding through Home Connections, there is no realistic possibility that these residents can view properties. People living in temporary accommodation in the Midlands do not receive monetary assistance to travel; in one example, a resident was required by the Council to attend an interview in London but arrived to find the office closed. The placement of households in the Midlands means therefore that service users are separated from support networks, and receive limited advice and support from the service.

**58** The Council is responsible for many internal repairs for privately leased properties, and agents responsible for repairs in emergency accommodation; this is outlined in the recent newsletter. However, residents feel that repairs issues are not resolved through officer visits, and that they are passed between the Council and their agents.

[8] The links between health, homelessness and temporary accommodation are set out in a number of pieces of research; see for example, data provided by the London Health Obervatory

**59** Residents in hostels are positive about the service they receive from hostel managers. The Council's housing service has initiated surgeries in half the 34 hostels. The Audit Commission Supported Housing report of 2006 recommended that steps be taken to ensure move-on of hostel residents to permanent accommodation. As a result, the Council has set aside a quota of 100 properties per year. Halfway through 2007/08 six months, the Council has completed 37 move-on transfers, slightly behind target. However, improving the supply of move on accommodation has helped the Council align its services more closely to those who need support.

**60** The service does carry out some good work to prevent homelessness that is leading to some positive outcomes. Applicants approaching the Council attend a preventions interview, which sets out a range of housing options. For example, family license termination is a major contributor to homelessness in the borough, and many young people approach the Council for housing following family conflict. In these cases, Preventions and Options officers provide a range of options to the young person. They contact the parents of the applicant immediately, and home visitors may call on the family. The service also uses a mediation service to attempt to resolve family disputes among its 16 and 17 year old clients. In the last year performance in preventing homelessness has improved and the Council believe that 900 cases of homelessness will be prevented by the end of the year. However, some areas for improvement remain. For example, the visiting process is used to verify details rather than resolve the situation, and only 12 cases of 'homeless at home'[9] have been completed.

**61** The service is effective in the provision of new homes with housing association partners. Haringey is in the top 25 per cent performers in terms of the development of housing association homes. It is also in the top five nationally for development of affordable homes. This means that the Council is working well with its association partners to provide more affordable homes.

**62** Performance for temporary accommodation is, however, limited. Rent collection rates and costs are on target for the year, but the average length of stay in both Bed and Breakfast and hostels is in bottom 25 per cent of London councils. This means that people are spending extended periods of time in temporary accommodation which will impact negatively on their health and well-being.

**63** The Council aims to reduce the level of temporary accommodation by encouraging landlords to convert leases to Assured Shorthold Tenancies. This process has started, albeit on a small scale.

**64** Housing Associations currently supply 1,678 units of temporary accommodation through the Housing Association Lettings Scheme (HALs) to the Council. The Council's internal audit report notes that there are problems in monitoring these units: invoices are not paid in time, associations do not provide information promptly and the Council cannot confirm that these temporary accommodation units are of adequate quality and managed well. The Council's housing service is appointing a Contract Manager to address these issues, but at present, it cannot be fully confident that occupants of HALs are receiving a good quality service.

[9] The Council offers additional points to applicants if they stay in their homes rather than presenting themselves as homeless- this is known as the 'homeless at home' initiative.

### Under occupation and occupancy checks

**65** As well as offering preventions and options advice, the Council can reduce the use of temporary accommodation by addressing under occupation of social housing, and checking the occupancy to leased properties.

**66** The service is not maximising the use of incentives to address under occupation. Some incentives are offered to encourage people to move from large accommodation. However, the maximum incentive of £2,000 is paid to those who move to one-bedroom accommodation, and not necessarily to people releasing larger units. This means that someone releasing a two-bedroom unit may receive a greater sum than someone moving from a four-bedroom unit, even though the latter could release a chain of moves for residents. A leaflet advertises the scheme, but the information provided is not comprehensive.

**67** There is currently no systematic way of identifying and targeting under occupying households, nor any cost analysis to balance incentives against outcomes. For example, successions of tenancy may be a source of under occupied property, but they are not identified. In one file case, a resident moving from a four-bedroom to a one-bedroom house was given points and advised to apply through Home Connections. The points level awarded in the current lettings policy are insufficient for this household to obtain a one-bedroom flat[10]. This means that the Council is not maximising the use of its stock, and that resources are not being directed effectively to address housing need.

**68** There is a comprehensive system of occupancy checks that is making a positive impact in dealing with fraud and reducing the use of temporary accommodation. SCHS introduced a system of occupancy checks in June 2007. To date, the occupancy team has visited 235 occupants in temporary accommodation, who have not been in contact for some time. In 25 cases, this has led to discharge of duty. The occupancy team has also identified 127 Section 193 cases[11] where residents in temporary accommodation might convert their temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation. Of this group, 15 have recently had their temporary tenancies converted, and 50 are awaiting conversion.

**69** There remain some areas for improvement in the service's approach to occupancy checks. There is a lack of guidance on dealing with nationality and eligibility issues and no system of photographing residents when they move into temporary accommodation. Not all team members have been trained in validating documentation nor do they have direct access to a commonly-used IT system designed to identify fraud, although this can be accessed through the team leader.

[10] The current points for under occupation are 500 points for 3 bedrooms, and current successful bidding for one-bedroom properties is between 600 and 1,500 points. The new lettings policy, which commences January 2008, will award higher points for under occupation

[11] Section 193 properties refer to low demand council properties used as temporary accommodation

### The housing register

70 Haringey's management of the housing register is an area of weakness. The operation of the Home Connection scheme is not currently efficient or customer-focused. Performance in dealing with applications is weak and again not customer-focused. However, the Council has improved the management of the housing register through a re-registration process and revised its letting policy.

71 The operation of the Home Connection scheme is not currently efficient or customer-focused. The scheme operates by advertising homes on the website on Wednesdays and through the CSCs each Thursday. Applicants then must bid for properties by Monday. On Tuesdays, the five applicants with the highest level of points are selected and contacted; on Wednesday properties are viewed and offers are made after the details of the applicants are verified. Over 4,300 bids are received each week, while only up to 20 properties are advertised. Many of these bids come from people with no chance of success and there is no filtering of ineligible bids. This wastes time for staff and customers.

72 When applicants with high priority cannot be contacted by telephone, allocations lettings officers move on to the next applicant. There is no system of leaving messages or using alternative methods such as texting; as a consequence, 40 per cent of applicants miss their chance to be offered housing. Not all information about the service clearly emphasises the importance of maintaining up-to-date contact details, and applicants whose details are wrong are not informed. Service users find it difficult to update their contact details, and have to provide information several times before records are amended. This contact system results in residents with high needs missing the opportunity for rehousing.

73 In some areas the Council's policies and their application are not clear. For example, the Council's policy states that some people are ineligible for housing by virtue of 'unacceptable behaviour'. Examples include rent arrears or anti-social behaviour. However, some staff are unclear about the level of rent arrears that is allowable within the system. In addition, the high level of arrears (up to £1,500) allowable does not act as an incentive for many to reduce them. In addition, some staff are not clear about the implications for applicants of refusing offers. In terms of antisocial behaviour, the current lettings policy implies a blanket exclusion policy, which is not allowed within current legislation. Other documents state that antisocial applicants will not be housed near older people. The lack of clarity means that service users may be unclear about their rights and responsibilities, and staff may not treat applicants equitably.

74 The verification process causes delays in the lettings process and frustration among applicants. Points are verified after the property is viewed; it is not uncommon for points to be amended with the result that applicants accept the property but the offer is subsequently withdrawn. The verification interview only takes place on Thursday and Friday; if the appointment is missed, the next available slot is a week later, extending the void period. There is a standard form informing people which documents are required for verification, but the form is unclear as to whether all the listed forms are required, or some of them. The housing application form states that documents are required, but does not state what these are. All these factors lead to an inflexible service, costly in staff time and rental loss.

**75** The Council's performance in dealing with applications is weak and its approach is not customer-focused. The Council is failing to meet its target to process applications in 14 days. The average time to process applications is currently 86 days while in one case, it took, 8 months to point an applicant. Other weaknesses include:

- acknowledgement slips and requests for language translations are not always acted upon;
- conflicting and contradictory information is sent to some applicants about their priority;
- the standard letter does not outline an appeals procedure, or recommend action for those who are about to be made homeless;
- there is lack of clarity about whether applicants living with their families should be awarded points for shared facilities;
- there is no written procedure for pointing applicants, or for management transfers; and
- OHMs data is unreliable. Information is sometimes entered into the computer system inaccurately, and service users find it difficult to have incorrect information amended. In addition, problems are caused by lost documentation.

**76** This means that there can be only limited confidence among applicants that their cases are processed accurately, and that their circumstances are fully considered.

**77** The Council cannot state with confidence that lettings policy is achieving its stated aims - that is, to address overcrowding and to offer choice. Ninety-three per cent of successful bids are homeless or in temporary accommodation[12]. Only 7 per cent of successful bids are from the transfer list, against a target of 50 per cent. This means that overcrowded households may not benefit from the revised lettings system. It also means that the service is missing the opportunity to set up transfer chains[13].

**78** The Council needs to do more to promote the Home Connection scheme to applicants. Two-thirds of people on the housing register have not bid through Home Connections, and a third of those with maximum points have not bid. This means that the system is encouraging multiple bids from those with little chance of success, but is not supporting potentially vulnerable and needy applicants who have not used the system.

**79** The second stated aim of the system is to offer choice. However, the proportion of allocations outside the Home Connections system is high. The proportion of lettings through direct lettings, although reduced, does not meet targets. Two-thirds of these direct allocations are to people whose temporary accommodation leases are ending. This means that the direct allocations system is increasingly geared towards managing temporary accommodation, rather than dealing with exceptional transfer cases.

[12] July 2007 figures
[13] A transfer chain refers to an offer of accommodation which sets up a chain of moves. For example, a tenant moving to a three-bedroom property will vacate a two-bedroom property. The person moving to this two-bedroom property will release a one-bedroom property.

80 There are weaknesses in case management. We found that some forms for management transfers were not always completed or were inaccurate. It was also difficult to read some of the documents and identify clearly who had made decisions. In addition, there are sometimes unexplained delays between, for example, incidents of harassment and the completion of the management transfer form.

81 The Council has reacted to a previous inspection to improve two aspects of the service. A previous inspection criticised the Council because its register and lettings policy had not been updated for a substantial period. The Council has now completed both tasks. Following a thorough consultation process, a new lettings policy was adopted in 2007. However, the policy has been subject to substantial changes, and a revised policy will come into effect in January 2008. This revised lettings policy addresses some of the problems with the current one - for example; it increases the points for under occupation, and is more accurate regarding exclusions. There are, however, still some anomalies. For example, the revised lettings policy does not refer to single homeless people.

82 The Council has improved the robustness of the housing register. In 2007, the Council had the first of what it intends to be an annual review of the register. In the first review since 2001, the Council removed approximately 15,000 from the register. Some of these have now been re-registered as the Council audits non-responses, and 63 re-registration forms are received each week by the Council. Together with the recent Housing Needs Survey, the updated housing register means that the Council can more accurately predict the demand for homes.

### Offering choice and working with partners

83 Currently, in partnership working there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The strategic approach to working with partners is generally sound. Positively, the Council has nomination agreements in place with housing association partners but some important aspects of its monitoring arrangements could be improved. The Council works well with private landlords on a day-to-day basis producing some good outcomes but has had limited ongoing strategic engagement with them over the last two years. Longer void periods have led to delays in securing permanent housing for those in need.

84 Positively, the Council has nomination agreements in place with housing association partners but some important aspects of its monitoring arrangements could be improved. Housing Associations own and manage 12,738 permanent homes in Haringey; over half of these are owned by five associations. The Council has taken steps to maximise the supply of affordable homes by updating the nominations agreement[14]. The Council has agreed monitoring arrangements with its partner housing associations. Information on voids and lettings is provided to the Council on a quarterly basis. Although some checks are in place arrangements to ensure that nominations are in the right place and of the right quality remain an area for improvement.

[14] Council are required to have a nominations agreement with Housing Associations in their areas. The agreement outlines for example the proportion of vacant properties the association must offer to the council

**85** The Council's relationship with Housing Associations is formalised through a number of groups. At a strategic level, there is a well attended Housing Associations Forum. At a more operational level, the lettings subgroup examines allocations issues. The latter group has not met regularly over the last two years. This meant that until recently issues that were important to a number of Housing Associations such as the sharing of information about antisocial behaviour or vulnerable or potentially violent nominees had not been successfully resolved as quickly as they should have been.

**86** However, the Council does work effectively with associations at an operational level. Housing Associations report that nominations are generally accurate, and they are provided within target timescales.

**87** Work with private landlords is leading to good outcomes allowing people in housing need to access private sector housing. Haringey has a relatively large private rented sector, and the Council has procured a significant number of units for use as temporary accommodation. SCHS has developed a number of schemes to encourage private renting. Following a successful pilot of an Accredited Lettings Scheme[15] (ALS), it was fully introduced in 2007. The Council has also set up the Landlord Direct Lettings Scheme (LDLS). This offers incentives to landlords who wish to manage their own properties, including a dedicated housing benefits officer. The schemes are advertised through a range of attractive and comprehensive leaflets, and on local minority ethnic community radio networks.

**88** The Council has set a target that these private letting initiatives supply 30 extra units of accommodation per month. This is below the original target of 60 per month[16], and presently it is achieving 22 per month. This is, however, on an upward trend, and our contact with the Housing Supply Group showed that staff are efficient and well informed about these schemes.

**89** The Council funds some smaller scale initiatives. For example, 'invest to save' resources are used to prevent homelessness through rent deposits. The Council also uses these resources to underwrite potential overpayment claims, which may threaten tenancies.

**90** The Council works well with private landlords on a day-to-day basis but has had limited ongoing strategic engagement with them over the last two years. Private landlords are keen to work with the Council, and the Landlord Forum held in October 2007 attracted 90 landlords. Private sector officers have regular meetings with the 26 local lettings agents who supply 1,700 units of emergency accommodation. Officers regularly meet lettings agents who operate the Accredited Lettings Scheme. However, the recent Landlord Forum was the first for a long period, and there is little evidence that the Council has worked strategically with landlords for some time, limiting the sector's effectiveness.

[15] The ALS is an initiative in which the Council manages property on behalf of private landlords. Landlords are encouraged to participate through pre-screening of tenants, and the provision of rent deposits and rent in advance
[16] Homelessness strategy 2003-08

**91** The Council and ALMO have maintained a generally productive relationship, but performance in terms of void periods is poor. The average re-let time for empty properties is 38.7 days[17], against 29 days in 2006/07. Some of this is caused by delays in the verification process; as a result, the Council is losing income and applicants have to wait longer for permanent housing.

**92** Over the last 18 months, there has been a significant decline in the number of moves completed through mobility schemes and mutual exchanges. As a result, more pressure is placed on the housing register.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

**93** Overall, weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The service does not demonstrate a robust system to ensure value for money in the lettings and allocations service, acknowledging that a systematic approach to value for money is 'under development' in the service.

### How do costs compare?

**94** A focus on value for money is not embedded throughout the housing service. There is a system of business and pre-business planning, and these include sections on value for money, efficiency and risk. However, the 2007-2010 Business Plan acknowledges that 'an approach to dealing with value for money issues is under development'. There is a lack of reported performance data, and limited comparative information to inform policy in this area.

**95** Although the income recovery team has done some limited comparative work with services at three other similar London boroughs, managers do not have a clear understanding of costs in their service. As a result, the service is unable to demonstrate value for money against measures of cost, performance and perception.

### How is value for money managed?

**96** The Council has generated substantial income over the last three years through the expansion of temporary accommodation. However, it is unclear how the lettings and allocations service, and the vulnerable people it serves, have benefited from this additional income. The Council pays an average of £236.00 per week to landlords of private properties, and receives an average of £355.32 per week in rental income from these properties. This generated a net income of £8.48 million in 2006/07. This surplus income is used in part to support council services, and as a reserve against future subsidy changes rather than being reinvested in housing service improvement.

**97** The subsidy system will change in 2009, which means that this source of income will be removed. Potential risks attached to the change in subsidy regime are acknowledged in the medium term financial strategy, the pre-business plan and the business plan, but there are no specific plans in place to identify the scale of the subsidy reduction, or build this into budgets. This means that the service could face unplanned reductions in budgets over the next two years.

[17] Year to date September 2007

98 There are weaknesses in the controls in place to effectively manage claims from landlords for damage to their property. Over half of the 246 properties handed back to landlords in 2006/07 were subject to a claim for damages. The average settlement agreed was £1,928.63. There are 120 cases where the landlord has either refused to settle, or are expected to make a claim. Decisions on dilapidation payments to landlords are taken by surveyors outside the housing service. Costs under £3,000 are settled without any further checks; those over £3,000 are monitored by a manager in the temporary accommodation team. The cost of dilapidations is met from the homelessness budget. The budget is not managed to full effect, with no targets or benchmarks to guide officers; therefore, the Council cannot demonstrate value for money. As the number of private sector lease ends increase over the next two years, the sums paid out will increase substantially.

99 A system to recover rechargeable costs from landlords has only recently been introduced. In addition, there are no systems in place to charge damages to temporary accommodation residents. The Council pays significant sums each year to Homes for Haringey to repair temporary accommodation, but since 2003, the computer system has not facilitated recovery of these sums from landlords. Although the system has recently been adjusted to address this issue, it is likely that much of the monies paid out will not be recovered. This means that there is a loss of resources available to improve services.

100 The housing service has a high number of temporary and agency staff. As well as the impact on service, this is an additional cost to the Council in terms of wages and training.

101 There has, however, been investment in initiatives which both add value and provide value for money. These include:

- floating support offered through Key Support, HARTs and Sixty Plus have prevented eviction in 200 cases, saving an estimated £260,000[18];
- the Preventions and Options service has spent £150,000 from the £562,000 corporate 'spend to save' budget. It has calculated that it costs £1,200 per intervention, and this represents a cost-effective way of reducing homelessness; and
- the Empty Properties office is presently conducting a street survey of registered empty properties, drawn from Council Tax and Housing Register records. Forty-five properties, previously registered as empty have been confirmed as occupied, resulting in £64,427 additional Council Tax.

102 The income recovery team provides good value for money in collecting rent from occupants of temporary accommodation. At 97.65 per cent of rent roll (2006/07), rent recovery is high, and the team has a low staff: resident ratio compared to benchmarked services.

[18] These are voluntary sector floating support schemes, funded through the Supporting Housing service. HARTs focuses on families, Key Support on 16-17 year olds and Sixty Plus on older residents.

**103** In terms of controlling and reducing expenditure, the Housing Supply Group monitors market rents and area reference rents, and this information is used to maintain temporary accommodation rents 10 per cent below market levels. The service also uses the Bed and Breakfast Information Exchange (BABIE) to monitor bed and breakfast costs and keep costs down. As a result, the service is meeting its targets to control average costs of private sector and nightly rented accommodation.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

104 This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are in balance. There have been some significant improvements that customers would recognise although there remains more to do in many areas. Positively, the rate of improvement has increased recently with steps made to address a number of issues raised in reports and by this inspection. The service has a good track record of responding to Audit Commission recommendations. Overall improvement in performance indicators is mixed and progress in implementing service improvement recommendations and delivering targets in key strategies has not been consistent. Insufficient progress has been made in cross-cutting areas in particular customer access and value for money.

105 The service has a good track record of responding to Audit Commission recommendations. A previous Audit Commission report identified a number of key weaknesses in the lettings and allocations service. To address these weaknesses, the service has made some significant changes in the last year:

- a choice based lettings service, Home Connections, has replaced the previous complex mixture of choice, fast track lettings and direct lettings;
- a new nominations and partnering agreement has been concluded with Housing Associations;
- SCHS has carried out a re-registration exercise to update the housing register;
- a new lettings policy has been introduced; and
- the housing advice and homelessness service has been merged to form the Preventions and Options service.

106 Progress in implementing service improvement recommendations arising from a series of internal and external reports and delivering targets in key strategies has not been consistent. In some cases, actions arising from these reports have not been undertaken; for example, a number of actions recommended for the Housing Supply Group have been delayed. In addition, a number of important targets set out in the Homelessness Strategy 2003-2008 have not been achieved. These include developing a landlord training scheme and starting a 'temporary to permanent' initiative[19]. Other targets, such as providing a newsletter and consulting residents in temporary accommodation, have only partially, and very recently, been addressed.

[19] Only 18 temporary to permanent transfers have been achieved against an annual target of 100 set out in the 2003/08 Housing Strategy

**107** There have been some significant improvements that customers would recognise although there remains more to do in many areas, as follows.

- Home Connection is simpler than the previous complex mixture of allocation schemes, and has led to a rise in the proportion of properties accepted by applicants. However, the operation of the Home Connection scheme is not currently efficient or customer-focused, and a significant proportion of allocations are direct lettings, bypassing the choice-based lettings system.
- The new nominations agreement sets out the expectations of the Council clearly. However, some important aspects of its monitoring arrangements could be improved.
- The re-registration process removed 15,000 applicants from the register. Positive steps were taken to identify and support vulnerable applicants. However, there remains a risk that some vulnerable applicants may have been removed in error.
- The new lettings policy was informed by a comprehensive consultation exercise. The policy reflects national and local priorities, and engaged with important diversity issues. However, some issues were not included, and the pointing system has not fully delivered the aims of the policy. A revised lettings policy is due to be fully introduced in January 2008.
- The Council has invested in the Preventions and Options service to support a stronger emphasis on prevention but this is not yet leading to consistently positive outcomes.

**108** The Council is currently undertaking the Phase 2 Lettings Project, the aim of which is to build on the changes above. The aims of this phase include: interviewing non-bidders in the Home Connections process, an options paper on out-of-London moves and comprehensive monitoring of the nominations process.

**109** Positively, the rate of improvement has increased recently with steps made to address a number of issues raised in reports and by this inspection. For example:

- a new lettings policy was agreed in July 2007, and will be fully implemented in January 2008;
- officers have started the process of verifying the details of the top pointed 250 applicants. This will save time verifying details when offers are made. Following the inspection, a more flexible system of verification was introduced;
- a user survey has recently been posted, and residents in temporary accommodation invited to participate in a series of focus groups;
- a meeting of the Lettings Sub-Group during the period of the inspection adopted an information sharing protocol; and
- the service has responded quickly in a number of areas to improve the service for customers for example, it changed its approach to the Home Connections scheme by reducing the number of bids and increasing the number of days on which properties can be viewed.

110 Overall improvement in performance indicators is mixed. In May 2007, 8 of the 15 top-line management targets were green, and seven red[20]. In terms of housing advice, an increased number of households have received housing advice which has resolved their situation. However, the number of households who are re-presenting as homeless within two years of initial contact has increased, and is above the London average. The number of households in temporary accommodation increased in 2006/07, albeit at a slower rate than previously.

111 There has been a significant decline in the number of applicants accepted as homeless. The overall number of applications fell from 576 in Quarter 1 2006 to 186 in Quarter 1 2007. The proportion of applicants accepted as homeless has fallen by 53 per cent in the last year. The acceptance rate per 1,000 population is 1.1 per 1,000 households. Although still slightly above London average for acceptances, the reduced level of acceptances has contributed to the recent reduction in the use of temporary accommodation. This recent reduction in temporary accommodation provides an opportunity for more effective management of this accommodation.

112 Haringey's use of temporary accommodation has increased by over 60 per cent between 2002 and 2007, although usage peaked at 5,909 households at the end of 2006/07. In Quarter 3 2007, the total number of households in temporary accommodation fell to 5,415[21].

113 In terms of housing supply, the average time to re-let empty properties has increased by eight days, and the average length of time spent in hostel accommodation was longer in 2007/08. On the other hand, the number of private sector vacant dwellings brought into use met the target of 100 in 2006/07.

114 The Council has reduced the number of empty private sector properties from 3,093 in 2002 to 1,961 in 2007. Homes empty for more than six months have fallen at a faster rate, from 2,075 to 1,001 in the same period. The number returned to occupation fell between 2005/06 and 2006/07, but continue to meet targets. This reduction increases the amount of housing in the borough available for people in housing need. However, the housing service has noted that a cut in resources, from £3 million in 2006/07 to £0.5 million in 2007/08 will affect these programmes.

115 Insufficient progress has been made in cross-cutting areas in particular customer access and value for money Customer access and in particular the provision of information, consultation with users and access by telephone remain areas for improvement. A systematic approach to value for money is still developing and while the service is delivering positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups there remain some weaknesses in its approach to equality and diversity.

[20] Green light- achieving year-to-date targets: red light- not achieving year-to-date targets
[21] Data provided by LB Haringey subsequent to inspection

## How well does the service manage performance?

**116** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a clear and visible commitment to driving improvement from both senior councillors and senior managers. The service demonstrates an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness that is reflected in its future plans. The performance management framework is sound and generally performance monitoring and reporting is also sound. However, the service is not consistently learning from customer feedback to improve performance.

**117** There is a clear and visible commitment to driving improvement from both senior councillors and senior managers. The Leader of the Council has explicitly identified this service as a key priority for the Council. There is also a new impetus and focus to drive improvement from senior managers following the successful work to support the ALMO achieving two-star status in 2007. Both councillors and senior managers have expressed a commitment to provide resources to the service. This gives confidence that improvements will be delivered in the short term.

**118** Performance monitoring and reporting arrangements are generally sound. Performance monitoring arrangements have been discussed and developed with managers. Detailed performance information is provided to each manager with 16 key items of performance information reported to Senior Management Team each month. Performance reports including the choice and presentation of data was recently improved to reflect current priorities. For example, the percentage of agency staff is now included each month. However, there are some areas for improvement. There are weaknesses in the systems to ensure reliable and accurate information. For example, as at July 2007, Home Connection had 17,000 applicants, but the housing register had 13,000[22]. Positively, the Council is currently undertaking a data-cleansing exercise to address this issue. In addition, there are no targets set for the mediation service in terms of timescales and outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to assess the success of this service.

**119** The performance management framework is also sound. Individual managers report to the management team if their performance is at variance with targets. High-level arrangements include senior managers reporting to the portfolio holder weekly, and to the Chief Executive Management Board. A six-weekly report to the Leader details performance against 18 national and local indicators. This system encourages ownership of targets and accountability for performance among managers.

**120** There is a sound process linking service aims to staff performance. Staff have annual appraisals, which are explicitly linked to business plan and wider Council aims and include personal development plans. However, not all staff have well developed and SMART targets- in some cases they are very detailed, in others, not. Although not fully comprehensive, the performance management system does provide an effective tool linking strategic objectives to individual and team performance. As a result, the service can identify and respond to weak performance.

[22] Home Connections data analysis report December 2006-July 2007

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

**121** The service demonstrates an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness that is reflected in its future plans. The service has used internal and external reports to challenge its service delivery and identify areas for improvement. The service's future plans are generally SMART and importantly demonstrate a high degree of self-awareness about its strengths and weaknesses. While progress to date has been mixed these plans do address many of the key weaknesses identified in this report for example, addressing weaknesses in the lettings process.

**122** The service is not consistently collecting and analysing customer feedback to improve performance. While the service now responds quickly to complaints it has acknowledged that it is not maximising the opportunities to garner learning. To address this the Senior Management Team recently adopted a 'learning from complaints protocol'. In addition while there are some good examples of consultation with users, the service does not currently have an informed understanding of the views of service users. Service related data is also collected from a range of sources but importantly key information and trends are not analysed. For example, data shows that nearly all appeals against offers of accommodation came from Black and Minority Ethnic applicants. This is a potentially significant piece of information, but has not been identified or reflected upon. These weaknesses mean that the service may be missing opportunities to improve the service.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

**123** The Council has taken positive steps to address capacity issues at all levels within the service. The Council restructured the service and appointed a new Assistant Director with knowledge and experience of managing these services and leading change of this nature. Other important posts have also now been filled to help address weaknesses in the service. The ICT systems are capable of supporting the service well. However, staff capacity is reduced by high levels of sickness absence and the high proportion of agency staff. This means that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.

**124** The Council has taken positive steps to address capacity issues at all levels within the service. The restructuring of the allocations and lettings service which took place in 2005 has focussed resources to address service weaknesses and has made some positive impact. Importantly, a new Assistant Director has been appointed who provides knowledge and experience of managing these services and leading change of this nature. Other important posts have also now been filled to help address weaknesses in the service for example, supporting vulnerable applicants to bid through the Home Connections scheme. The Council is also appointing a Contracts Manager to improve the management of the Housing Association Lettings Scheme (HALs). Additional external resources have been secured to fund two officers to work with tenants and property owners to convert leased properties to Assured Shorthold Tenancies. In addition, a successful £100,000 bid has been made with the Council's North London partners to develop a sub-regional under occupation scheme.

**125** The service has 150 Full Time Equivalent staff. Compared with similar organisations, it is well staffed, and other resources, such as those provided through Supporting People are adequate. This means that the service has resources to achieve its aims. However, these resources are not deployed effectively. A large amount of resources are used to verify documentation and validate claims for housing, rather than prevent homelessness.

**126** Sickness and absence within the service is high. On average, each staff member is absent for 18 days per year, and this rises to more than 27 days in the income team. This is substantially higher than the rest of the Council and comparable organisations. The Council has a robust procedure for dealing with illness and absence; however, there is currently little evidence yet of targeted work to address the issue, such as requiring management staff to attend training. This means that the organisation is not maximising service delivery and value for money.

**127** The service has a high proportion of agency staff. Concerted action over the last six months has reduced the percentage of agency staff from 29 per cent to 24 per cent of staff, but the figure remains high. As a result of the high turnover of staff, there is a lack on continuity for customers and other stakeholders such as Housing Associations. In addition, the Council has to invest in induction and training for staff who may only stay for a short amount of time.

**128** There is a mixed picture regarding investment in staff training. A part time legal officer in the validations team has provided a series of internal training sessions on different aspects of housing law, and some individual training profiles show ongoing staff investment. However, there is no systematic identification of training needs, nor a plan to address gaps in training, such as validating documentation and mediation. This means that there is limited alignment between training and the aims of the organisation.

**129** The Council has as yet not fully identified and made plans for potential losses of subsidy income. The Council has generated substantial income over the last three years through the expansion of temporary accommodation. Potential risks attached to the change in subsidy regime are acknowledged in the medium term financial strategy, the pre-business plan and the business plan, but there are no specific plans in place to identify the scale of the subsidy reduction, or build this into budgets. This means that the service could face unplanned reductions in budgets over the next two years.

**130** The ICT systems are capable of supporting the service well. In line with our earlier criticisms of how the system is used, managers acknowledge that ICT could probably deliver far more than they currently ask of it, and the Council is improving systems. The allocations and lettings service is moving to paperless filing. The Council was in the middle of scanning case papers onto the ICT system during the inspection and aims to complete the exercise by the end of November 2007. This will give all staff immediate access to case records at any office, helping to ensure people are dealt with quickly and consistently.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

| | 2005/06 | London average 2005/06[23] | 2006/07[24] | Target 2006/07 | 2007/08 YTD July | Target 2007/08 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of households for whom advice solved their situation (BVPI 213) | 381 | | 380 | 400 | 900 | 500 |
| % change in number of families placed in TA (BVPI 203*[25]) | 7.36 | 1.87 | 5.66 | 1 | | |
| Number households in TA (HS203ii*) | | | | 5709 | | |
| Proportion families re-presenting as homeless within 2 years (BVPI 214*) | 1.55% | 0.95% | 2.3% | 8% | | |
| Average length of stay in hostel (BVPI 183b) | 67.41 | 17.57 | 61.83 | 18 | 82.37 | 60 |
| Average time relet council property (BVPI 212) | 29 | 35 | | 27 | 38.7[26] | 27 |
| Number households rehoused- Moving Out of London HS1* | 54 | | | 60 | | |
| Number under occupied tenancies moving to suitable accommodation (HS 2)* | 98 | | | 60 | | |

[23] PI benchmarking
[24] This column taken from hard copy
[25] * means that the indicator was deleted from the basket of headline indicators
[26] YTD September 2007

| | 2005/06 | London average 2005/06[27] | 2006/07[28] | Target 2006/07 | 2007/08 YTD July | Target 2007/08 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empty private sector dwellings returned to occ. (BVPI 64) | 414 | 257 | 101 | 100 | 111 | 100 |
| Proportion rent collected for all TA | 96.27% | | 97.65 | 95 | 96.28 | 96 |
| Cost per PSL lease | | | 904.67 | 842.24 | 891.40 | 907 |
| Cost per nightly rented accom. | | | 41.23 | 40.20 | 41.11 | 42.20 |
| % telephone calls answered within 15 seconds | 51 | | | 77 | 45.23 | 79 |
| % telephone calls answered | 59 | | | 85 | 47.34 | 84 |

## Additional PIs for 2007/08

| | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | Target 2006/07 | 2007/08 YTD | Target 2007/08 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| % Member's enquiries answered on time | | 68 | | 95 | 90 |
| % Stage 1 complaints in time | | 63 | | 95 | 90 |

[27] PI benchmarking
[28] This column taken from hard copy

# Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:

- interviews and focus groups with staff and managers at all levels;
- mystery shopping to public access offices;
- a focus group with residents of temporary accommodation;
- telephone interviews with applicants on the housing register;
- interviews with Councillors, including the Lead Member for Housing and the Leader of the Council;
- observation and shadowing of interviews;
- file reviews;
- telephone interviews with Housing Associations;
- shadowing of occupancy checks; and
- visit to Hearthstone Domestic Violence service.

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