

# Housing Management Service

**Eastlands Homes Partnership Limited**

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## Housing Association 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](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), 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 Association;
- 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.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its lead regulation staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the Housing Association's future business prospects.

## Summary

- 1 Eastlands Homes provides a 'good' housing service that has excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 Strategies supported by effective day-to-day working reflect a role that extends beyond that of a traditional housing association and which contributes significantly to the regeneration of the area. Customer focus and effective partnership working underpins delivery of these wider objectives.
- 3 The service has clear strengths leading to rising satisfaction among tenants and in positive perceptions of area partners. The commitment to tenants to achieve 100 per cent compliance with the Government's Decent Homes requirement by 2009 will be achieved a year ahead of time and two years ahead of the Government target of 2010. One hundred per cent of responsive repairs appointments made are being kept; over 85 per cent of repairs are completed at the first visit and proportions of responsive repairs as compared to planned works align closely with Audit Commission guidance.
- 4 The diversity of the area is changing rapidly and presenting new challenges for the association. Action plans based on up to date information target improvements and their delivery is closely monitored at operational and Board levels.
- 5 Eastlands acts strategically to tackle traditionally high levels of anti-social behaviour managing cross tenure services for neighbourhood nuisance and neighbourhood wardens. There is an effective balance between support and enforcement and a reasonable focus on diversionary and preventative initiatives.
- 6 Value for money is an evident feature of Eastlands work. Although costs are high they are appropriate to the operating circumstances and reflected in high quality outcomes that align closely with the commitments made to customers.
- 7 Some areas are relatively under-developed however. Service standards are currently lacking both in their coverage and in the extent of their monitoring. The average time taken to re-let void property although improving is below average in comparison with similar organisations and costs of repairs are high. Although recent improvements are evident, the collection of debt does not show a sustained trend of improvement.
- 8 Prospects for improvement are excellent. Improving outcomes demonstrate a clear focus upon the commitments made to customers and on improvements that they will benefit from, particularly in the management of Community Safety. Out of 15 indicators where measures are available and appropriate, 13 show an improving trend of performance.
- 9 Performance management is thorough, characterised by clear objectives, appropriate targets, expansive reports and effective accountability and challenge.

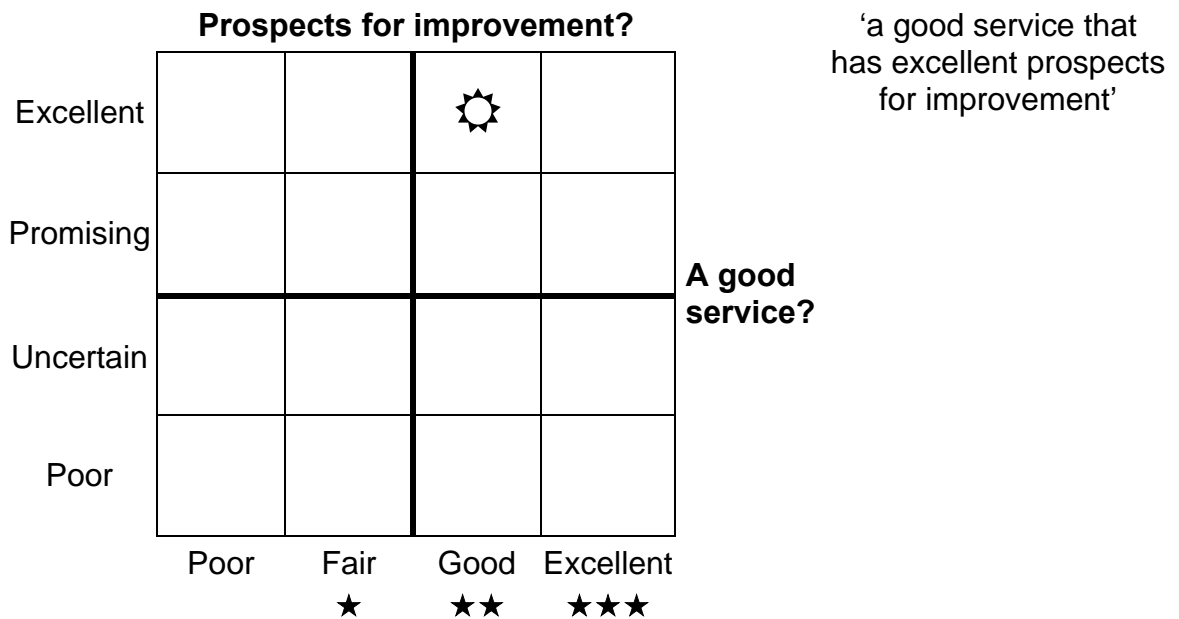
## 6 Housing Management Service | Summary

- 10 The Board of Management is strong, contributing to highly effective leadership, continuous improvement and effective challenge. Staff are highly motivated and display excellent customer focus. They are supported to deliver improving services by structured training and routine appraisal.
- 11 We are encouraged to note that areas of current service provision that we consider to be weaker are in the main already prioritised for improvement.

## Scoring the service

- 12 We have assessed Eastlands Homes Partnership Limited as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

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



Source: Audit Commission

- 13 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- the Eastline customer service centre provides a customer focused service that links well with operational teams;
  - customer focused values are evident throughout the organisation;
  - Eastlands seeks customer feedback and uses it to improve services;
  - customer involvement is strong and there are clear routes to engagement with the organisation;
  - there is a strong strategic framework backed by monitored action plans and targets relating to the delivery of equality and diversity;
  - the level of racially motivated incidents is monitored and reported upon monthly with responses and learning evidenced;

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

## 8 Housing Management Service | Scoring the service

- the stock investment programme has had a hugely beneficial impact on the local area. An investment of £54 million is transforming the areas in which the association operates;
- partnership working is effective and has brought benefits to Eastlands and to the community;
- Eastlands is on course to deliver its stock investment programme achieving Decent Homes compliance two years in advance of the Government target and a year ahead of the commitment made to tenants;
- Eastlands has contributed to area improvements including undertaking roofing, front boundary works and associated works to the value of £1.28 million, funded through grants secured in partnership with private sector housing;
- responsive repairs are undertaken to challenging timescales with performance comparing with the best performing associations nationally. High levels of satisfaction show that the responsive repairs service reflects customers needs well;
- a pilot 'House MOT' scheme prioritises visits to tenants who have not accessed the service for some time. This identifies any barriers to access and also avoids potential disrepair claims;
- the standard of properties available to let is high;
- gas servicing arrangements are effective and arrangements for no access are in line with best practice;
- the housing income management service is customer focused. The staff team are trained in debt counselling and advice and there are clear arrangements for access to specialist advice agencies;
- tenant vulnerability is considered when pursuing debt. The IT system enables officers to be alerted of any special needs or circumstances of tenants prior to taking action;
- Eastlands has a strong strategic commitment backed by practical approaches to managing anti-social behaviour (ASB) and wider crime and disorder; and
- domestic violence is responded to appropriately.

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

- the association has a customer service charter, but this is not comprehensive and not all standards are monitored;
- the average cost of repairs to vacant homes is high and, although improving significantly, the time taken to re-let homes is below the national average;
- performance on arrears collection despite recent improvement is below target;
- arrears procedures are not consistently followed with some actions taken later than appropriate;

- the effectiveness of debt advice services has not been thoroughly evaluated to ensure that tenants' needs are appropriately provided for;
- rechargeable repairs collection is poor reducing resources available for service improvement;
- complainant satisfaction has only recently been monitored on ASB; and
- activity based costs are not understood fully and used to inform service reviews.

**15** The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- key transfer promises are being delivered with service improvements demonstrating an evident focus on the areas that matter most to tenants;
- performance indicators demonstrate an overall trend of improvement;
- there is a structured and thorough approach to improvement including internal and external challenge, a developing quality management system and benchmarking. Action plans are SMART<sup>2</sup> and monitoring is effective;
- tenants play a key part in monitoring performance and encouraging continuous improvement; and
- the Board of Management bring a wide range of skills and clear commitment to regeneration and renewal in East Manchester.

**16** However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include:

- Eastlands has been slow to develop a strategic approach to value for money; and
- the true costs of some areas of service provision are not known.

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<sup>2</sup> SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound

## Recommendations

- 17 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Association shares the findings of this report with tenants and board members, and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. Associations forming part of a group structure should share the lessons and findings of the report amongst the wider group. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

#### *R1 Strengthen focus on customers by:*

- *completing the development of customer service standards and establishing effective measures and on-going review of their relevance;*
- *ensuring that straplines advertising the availability of translations reflect the community profile;*
- *ensuring that policies and procedures are informed by thorough knowledge of community impacts;*
- *introducing improved monitoring of the out of hours emergency repairs service;*
- *improving tenant liaison and complaint resolution relative to major repairs works so that outcomes are comparable with other areas of service; and*
- *publicising the void standard, gas servicing arrangements and adaptations service more fully.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services that are delivered to consistently high standards; and
- meeting tenants' access and communication needs more appropriately.

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

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

### **Recommendations**

#### *R2 Improve asset management by:*

- *developing more effective consideration of markets, demand and sustainability and using this to inform future asset planning;*
- *introducing appropriate targets for each stage of the re-letting process as well as comprehensive measurement to ensure improved re-letting performance; and*
- *introducing arrangements to more effectively manage the adaptations service including monitoring against agreed timescales and appropriately prioritising all adaptations based upon need.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved longer-term planning and matched investment;
- reduced void turnaround times; and
- an improved adaptations service for customers.

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

### **Recommendations**

#### *R3 Improve housing income management by:*

- *completing the planned review of the application of the Civil Justice Court Protocol and introducing revised guidance and monitoring to ensure that procedures are applied consistently;*
- *completing planned actions to disaggregate service charges from rent and to put in place arrangements for their equitable charging and recovery once the existing rent guarantee period has elapsed;*
- *targeting rechargeable repairs recovery and monitoring income to ensure significantly improved collection rates; and*
- *using available customer information to profile arrears cases, to target advice and to act pro-actively to help avoid debt.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved consistency in arrears actions;
- improved collection of all outstanding debt;
- equitable service charge recovery; and
- timely and tailored advice to help tenants manage their debt.

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

### **Recommendations**

*R4 Improve value for money by:*

- *developing knowledge of activity based costs and using this to inform service reviews and to refine ways of working;*
- *developing a comprehensive understanding of how costs compare;*
- *routinely reviewing service cost alongside service performance;*
- *improving the approach to procurement;*
- *revising service review methods to ensure that fundamental challenge is effective; and*
- *ensuring the delivery and on-going development of the value for money action plan.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved knowledge of the costs of service provision in key areas;
- increased economy, efficiency and effectiveness in key areas of service; and
- service reviews that deliver better outcomes for tenants.

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

- 18 We would like to thank the staff of Eastlands Homes Partnership Limited who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 19 to 23 February 2007

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 19 Eastlands Homes Partnership Limited (Eastlands) is a housing association formed in September 2003 following the partial stock transfer from Manchester City Council of almost 2800 homes in East Manchester.
- 20 Eastlands originally operated in the Beswick, Clayton and Openshaw wards in the New Deal for Communities area collectively known as the Beacons which covers a geographical area of six square miles with a population of approximately 20,000. Eastlands extended its boundaries in 2005 to encompass the Housing Market Renewal (HMR) area of New East Manchester which offers greater opportunities for development.
- 21 East Manchester has suffered from decades of industrial decline. At the commencement of the HMR activity in 2000 many areas were derelict and under used with large areas of vacant and degraded land. Of East Manchester's 1,100 hectares, approximately 30 per cent was vacant. The area's traditional manufacturing base had experienced a significant decline with a 60 per cent employment loss between 1975 and 1985; a 13 per cent population loss in the 1990s; a collapse in the housing market; 20 per cent vacant properties and negative equity. The area had a fragile economic base, low skills, high crime, poor health, poor community and retail facilities.
- 22 As a result of significant investment through the establishment of the New Deal for Communities (NDC), New East Manchester Limited and inward investment from the private sector, the area is experiencing significant improvement both physically and in the confidence of communities. Seventeen per cent of residents in 1999 felt their area was improving compared to 60 per cent in 2005<sup>4</sup>. Population is predicted to double over the next 10 to 15 years. Eastlands has strong demand for its homes with waiting lists improving since transfer and Right to Buy completions in excess of forecasts.
- 23 Population change is rapid particularly in terms of economic and inward migration. In 2001 the black and minority ethnic (BME) population amounted to 9.1 per cent of all residents in the area, the current estimate is 15 per cent (NDC Residents Survey July 2005<sup>5</sup>). There is a significant impact on the existing community with some tensions arising linked to the changing diversity of the area.
- 24 Although improvements have been made, tenants, partners and wider stakeholders continue to list community safety as a key priority for the area.

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<sup>4</sup> NDC Residents Survey, July 2005

<sup>5</sup> NDC Residents Survey, July 2005

## The Association

- 25 Eastlands is a charitable company and has two unregistered subsidiaries:
- Medlock Community Housing – an Industrial and Provident Society with charitable rules; and
  - Eastlands Regeneration Company – a non-charitable subsidiary set up to channel Housing Market Renewal funds towards addressing private housing sector issues.
- 26 Eastlands stock consists mainly of small estates built either during the 1920s/30s or 1960s/70s. There are two sheltered housing schemes. All of the stock that was transferred from Manchester City Council (MCC) is considered to be sustainable for the next 30 years.
- 27 The Board of Management comprises 15 members representing all areas of the community, four are Council nominees, six tenants and residents and five are independents. Sub-committees report to the main Board quarterly and comprise operations, resources and audit and risk Committees.

## The service

- 28 Eastlands has a total of 124 staff.
- 29 It has an executive management team of four and a senior management team of six. On transfer the profile comprised twenty-nine TUPE transfer staff whilst the management team was externally recruited. For the first 18 months the staff complement amounted to 46. This has increased to the current level with the introduction of the customer service centre (Eastline), estate action, neighbourhood warden and in-house repair teams.
- 30 Manchester City Council has assigned lead RSL status to four associations in East Manchester including Eastlands Homes, and a further three associations have been allocated 'support' status. These associations work more closely with the Council in respect of neighbourhood planning, development and neighbourhood management.
- 31 Budgets are:
- housing management, excluding employee costs; £1.38 million;
  - capital programme; £8.48 million;
  - responsive repairs; £700,000;
  - servicing and planned works; £632,000; and
  - void works; £714,000.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 32** Since the organisation was established in 2003 it has focused on meeting, and where possible, exceeding the promises made to customers at transfer of:
- delivering the investment programme of new kitchens, windows, doors, structural and environmental works;
  - delivering excellent services;
  - achieving the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) – ahead of the Government target of 2010; and
  - keeping annual rent increases down to inflation plus 50p.
- 33** The agreed objectives for the organisation are:
- to deliver quality services, which exceed customer expectations and provide best value;
  - to make a key contribution in partnership with others to improving the quality of life for individuals and communities in East Manchester;
  - to deliver a mutually acceptable financial plan, incorporating cost and income targets, to ensure the sustainability of Eastlands Homes as a vital member of the community;
  - to ensure the company is managed with integrity, transparency, honesty and with due regard to probity with the full involvement of all Board members;
  - to be a place where people are proud to work and feel supported and valued where staff feel empowered and own the services they deliver; and where diversity is valued; and
  - to contribute towards strong, cohesive communities by valuing diversity and promoting tolerance and racial equality.
- 34** The sustainability of the organisation, as a key player in the East Manchester area, is reviewed annually by the Board. The reduction in stock due to high levels of Right to Buy (RTB) sales over the first three years, the Efficiency Agenda, rent restructuring and the importance of maximising service quality to tenants has increased the focus on the sustainability of Eastlands Homes.
- 35** A business development plan for 2006-11 is now in place which sets out priorities for the sustainability of the organisation. This is supported by detailed assessments of cost, benefit and risk. The acquisition of properties is, however, considered to be the most effective way of increasing revenues.

- 36 Eastlands also intends to extend its activities in relation to neighbourhood management. Its experience of managing the cross tenure neighbour nuisance team, which is funded from a range of partners will be used to develop this aspect of its business further.

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

### Access and customer care

- 37 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Customer care is embedded throughout the organisation, services are accessible, designed around the needs of customers, and highly valued by those who use them. Telephone and reception services are of a high quality and supported by ICT to ensure enquiries are handled to a consistently high quality. Eastlands focus well upon outcomes for customers and use their feedback to target improvements in areas that matter most to them. There are however some weaknesses. The website is limited and not fully accessible, and customer standards were not developed for all areas at the time of inspection.
- 38 Customer focused values are evident throughout the organisation. The association has adopted the principle of 'world class customer service' which in turn is supported by a customer promise which sets standards for most areas of customer contact. The association promotes values such as respect, going the extra mile and staff empowerment and these are evident throughout the organisation. The behaviours of staff help to deliver a consistently high quality of customer service.
- 39 Responses to customer enquiries provided through the Eastline customer service centre are of a high quality. Staff are supported by clear procedures, training and customer relationship management software which means more than four out of five enquires are handled to a conclusion at the first point of contact. Where this is not possible there are clear arrangements for other teams to respond to enquiries within set timescales through internal service level agreements, and the association is able to monitor its own performance on this. Eastline provides an effective customer access service which links well with operational teams.
- 40 Staff are empowered to make decisions which place service to the customer ahead of strict adherence to procedure. For example, repairs team operatives can carry out additional work without a works order and each has a briefing pack which allows them to act as a gateway to other Eastlands services. Customers value the flexibility and responsiveness of staff.
- 41 Opening hours are convenient. The telephone service is available during weekdays between 8:00am and 5:30pm, and reception from 8:45am to 4:30pm. Repairs appointments are available on a Saturday morning and a Wednesday evening, and the rents team is available during similar times. Outside these times an out-of-hours service provides a response to emergency repairs and incidents of anti-social behaviour.

- 42 Information provided to customers is clear, accessible and easy to understand. The suite of customer leaflets was revised in 2006 with the customer information panel but does not include information on gas servicing. The repairs manual is particularly useful and carries information on landlord and tenant responsibilities as well as diagnostic diagrams. Customer surveys show that this is well used by customers.
- 43 Customer profiling information is comprehensive and used to tailor services according to customer vulnerabilities and information needs. Details, including access arrangements, disability, and the need for an interpreter are recorded. This information is shared throughout the organisation and allows the tailoring of services appropriately to meet the needs of individual customers.
- 44 There is effective learning from customers. A survey carried out in 2006 showed that, while 92 per cent were very or fairly satisfied, one in five customers said staff did not phone back when they should. Improvements were made as a result including service level agreements with other teams and the accelerated introduction of customer relationship management software. There is a regular programme of outbound satisfaction monitoring which is used to check whether service standards are maintained. Customers' views are being used to shape and improve services.
- 45 The approach to seeking customer feedback is comprehensive. Surveys cover ten main business areas and results are reported to an internal business improvement group (BIG) chaired by a senior manager. The BIG identifies areas for service improvement, compiles a log and monitors the effectiveness of these improvements. A recent example is the introduction of weekly inspections of void property gardens. The organisation learns from customers and regularly checks on the quality of its service.
- 46 Eastlands' compliments and complaints policy is clear and adequately publicised. The policy carries appropriate timescales which are generally met. The organisation has a positive approach to complaints which are welcomed, reported upon throughout the association and used as an opportunity for learning.
- 47 Customer involvement is strong and there are clear routes to engagement with the organisation. A leaflet outlines the range of ways customers can become involved and the association makes arrangements for transport or child care to help customers access events and meetings. The organisation is also using its customer profiling information to engage better with young people and with customers from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

- 48 The association has a customer service charter, but this is not comprehensive. Customer service standards for repairs and Eastline services are clear, as are generic service standards, but there are none detailed for other services such as income management or neighbourhood services. Although some standards are contained in individual service leaflets such as response times for dealing with anti-social behaviour, these are basic. The association is aware of this weakness and has drafted an appropriate customer service charter which it plans to circulate with its March 2007 newsletter. However, at the time of inspection, customers were unaware of the standards to expect when using some Eastlands services, and the association did not comprehensively monitor their quality.
- 49 The association's website is limited. It is not fully accessible and does not offer translation or large font facilities. It carries basic information and is not interactive, for example it is not possible to pay rent or to report a repair online. The association recognises these weaknesses and plans to upgrade the website during 2007. Currently, however, this weakness means customers must use other channels to access Eastlands services.
- 50 Monitoring arrangements for the out-of-hours contractor are not fully effective. While call answering performance statistics are provided on a monthly basis, they do not accurately distinguish between contractor performance and calls abandoned when receiving the introductory out-of-hours message. Although the association carries out satisfaction monitoring to give assurance on the quality of service provided, our reality checks showed the service is not always available to customers. The service is currently under review and new arrangements will be in place when the current contract ends in Jul 2007.

## **Diversity**

- 51 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a comprehensive strategic framework in place backed by policies and closely monitored action plans. Diversity targets have been set for staff and for lettings as well as for comparative satisfaction of BME communities with services. The approach to equality and diversity covers a diverse range of groups. However, policies and strategies have not been developed following a clear evaluation of their potential impacts on all sections of the communities served and translated materials have not been reviewed in light of the changing community profile of the area. The aids and adaptations service is relatively under developed and fails to ensure timely and effective assistance for tenants with restricted mobility.
- 52 Planning for equality and diversity is central to the achievement of Eastlands' objectives. The equality and diversity action plan is overseen by the Board via a steering group chaired by the association's chief executive and the Board's vice chair is the nominated equality and diversity champion. This high level involvement clearly signposts the importance attached to these issues and encourages the delivery of action plans.

- 53 Eastlands has developed a comprehensive suite of equality and diversity policies with related action plans under an overarching strategy for stronger communities. This suite of policies places the achievement of cohesive communities at the centre of the association's corporate objectives. The policies recognise the increasing diversity within the areas of operation and some evidence of related community tensions. The suite of policies covers disability; race equality; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues; harassment, hate crimes and bullying; domestic violence; and employment issues. We saw evidence of activity in each area in accordance with action plans. This is a strong commitment to equality and diversity backed by continuing actions.
- 54 Diversity targets have been set for staff and for tenants to achieve proportions equivalent to the demographic make up of the area. 7.5 per cent of staff are from a BME background (compared to a local population of 9 per cent at the 2001 Census) and 4.13 per cent have a stated disability. Of 164 lettings in 2005/06, 64 (39 per cent) were to people from a BME background. Eastlands can demonstrate that it has pursued the targets set and as a result has promoted equal access to housing and employment opportunities.
- 55 Eastlands routinely monitors the diversity of those attending consultation and forum events. This information is used to improve participation of a wide range of people. They have targeted BME tenants with leaflets and personal visits to encourage their involvement. As a result BME representation is improving.
- 56 Eastlands has made equality and diversity requirements clear to contractors. All contractors are required to attend training which outlines Eastlands' stance and requirements. They are required to submit information about their approach to equality and diversity as part of their bids to carry out work or to join select lists. The impacts and their practical commitment and implementation of their own stated policies are monitored during regular contract meetings. The association is ensuring that their contractors' ways of working reflect their values on equality and diversity.
- 57 The association provides training for staff, Board members and residents groups on equality and diversity issues. Training has been provided for all front line staff on equality and diversity and these staff have also received training in using the translation service. This is leading to increased awareness of the range of customers' needs.
- 58 Support is available for tenants to assist them in maintaining their tenancy. Eastlands can access floating support services through the area casework panel (ACP) for those tenants who are vulnerable or require support to enable them to sustain their tenancy. Staff are familiar with the service and aware of how it can be accessed. This provision gives positive assistance to those in need.

- 59 Several practical examples demonstrate Eastlands's positive approach to diversity.
- Eastlands is a member of Stonewall. Its involvement has helped it to shape its action plan regarding lesbian, gay and bi-sexual issues.
  - Several front-line staff are currently attending intermediate training in sign language skills.
  - Lunchtime briefing sessions are held for staff. These are held monthly and cover specific issues of diversity and vulnerability, for example, mental health issues and physical disability.
  - Several staff have volunteered to work with children in local schools who need extra assistance to develop their reading skills.
  - Eastlands undertakes a 'house MOT' which is more fully covered in the stock and asset management section of this report. This has been prioritised to ensure that those who have not accessed services in the last year are visited. Eastlands uses this as an opportunity to ensure that any barriers to accessing services are understood and acted upon.
- 60 Eastlands monitors the satisfaction of BME tenants in comparison with the rest of the tenant population. It has recently been identified that BME tenants appear less satisfied with the repairs service. This is a recent trend and because of low sample numbers conclusions have to be reached cautiously. No analysis has yet been undertaken of underlying trends but it is positive that the narratives attached to the monthly reports identify that further work will be undertaken to understand the reasons for the difference in satisfaction. Eastlands seeks to ensure that its services meet with the satisfaction of all sectors of the communities it serves.
- 61 Racial harassment has increased significantly and Eastlands has responded well. In 2004/05 two incidents of racial harassment were recorded by the neighbour nuisance team, this increased to 20 during 2005/06. As a result, and in discussion with area police inspectors, adjustments to processes were agreed and longer term initiatives such as awareness raising and training events were arranged. So far in 2006/07 harassment has continued to rise with 55 cases reported in the year to date. Increasing racial harassment appears to be linked to the changing diversity in the area but Eastlands has ensured that its responses are suitable and co-ordinated well with key partners.
- 62 Eastlands has failed to consider fully access to opportunities within the organisation. Although gender issues are considered appropriately, it is a weakness that it does not measure and set targets for diversity at different levels of seniority within the structure. Opportunities are therefore missed to promote equal access and positive role models.
- 63 Eastlands has not undertaken impact assessments when formulating new policies. Although this is not a legal requirement it is an important way of ensuring that policies and strategies do not inadvertently disadvantage sectors of communities. Eastlands does intend to consult on its strategies, policies and action plans at the Manchester Minority Ethnic Residents Action Group that it co-chairs.

- 64 The straplines that inform tenants of the availability of translations may not be appropriate to the current population. These straplines were based upon the key communities present in 2003. The diversity of the population has changed significantly since and this has not been reflected in a review of the straplines. A review is however planned in June 2007. Some customers may not be aware of the availability of translation services and may as a result be disadvantaged through lack of knowledge.
- 65 The aids and adaptations service is insufficiently focussed upon reducing vulnerability caused by reduced mobility. Information about the service is insufficient to inform tenants of what priority will be attached to their application based upon their needs or how long they may expect to wait for assistance. Once accessed, the service is not well prioritised or monitored. Eastlands fails to ensure that the aids and adaptations service provides timely and effective assistance where required.

## **Stock Investment and Asset Management**

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

- 66 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The association's stock investment programme has had a hugely beneficial impact on the local area. A planned investment of £54 million is transforming the areas in which the association operates, and is being delivered to budget and ahead of time. Eastlands' customers are proud of the area in which they live, recognise the improvements made and appreciate the impact of Eastlands Homes. Despite some difficulties in managing complaints, satisfaction with the improvement programme is high. The asset strategy is well informed but decisions about investment linked to the sustainability of property and areas are not fully developed. Knowledge about the location of asbestos in properties and its related management is weak.
- 67 Partnership working is effective and has brought benefits to Eastlands and the community. Key contractors and suppliers, including the two main contractors providing stock investment works, are committed to ten principles underpinned by key performance indicators which are regularly monitored by a project team. This form of working has resulted in good relationships and demonstrable benefits such as shared IT systems and offices as well as partner involvement in community activities.
- 68 The association is on course to deliver its stock investment programme comfortably ahead of target. The initial promise was to deliver improvements by 2009. The programme was accelerated in 2005 and will be completed one year ahead of schedule. Partnering has provided flexibility in both the design and delivery of the programme. The partnership approach has in part allowed the acceleration of the programme and, through the project management agreement with a neighbouring ALMO, Northwards Homes Limited, has avoided redeploying excess capacity as a result of this acceleration.

- 69 The stock investment programme has delivered efficiency savings. Savings to the value of £1.77 million were delivered by April 2006, with a further £2.8 million forecast for the lifetime of the current improvement programme. This has been achieved through savings on fees, interest payments and economies of scale created by long-term procurement.
- 70 The association has considered the wider environment beyond the properties it manages. Through effective working with Manchester City Council, investment works have been carried out on 522 private sector properties including roofing, front boundary and associated works to the value of £1.28 million, funded through grants secured in partnership with private sector housing. This demonstrates a joined-up approach, is a good use of resources, as improvements are carried out at the same rates, and increases the impact of the investment programme.
- 71 The association has consulted effectively on its stock investment programme and shaped it around customers' needs. The original transfer agreement promised that tenants would benefit from at least one improvement within the first two years and this has been honoured. Tenant liaison officers are employed directly by the two main contractors and give the partnership project team greater ownership and accountability for customer satisfaction. Both the overall timing of the programme and choices of materials are fully consulted upon through open meetings, an improvement panel of tenants and individual consultation.
- 72 Customer satisfaction with the investment programme is high. Satisfaction with the product and with the service was 99 per cent in the quarter to the December 2006, based on questionnaires administered by contract partners which achieve a 100 per cent response rate. The project team considers feedback as a regular part of its meetings and uses it to improve the service. Eastlands also carries out its own follow up telephone survey and defects survey.
- 73 The association has agreed a standard for its investment works which exceeds the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS). The Eastlands 'DHS plus' standard includes environmental works and higher standard elements such as high security doors. Customers are aware of the standards to expect through open meetings, and short newsletters sent immediately before contracts start, although a specific leaflet would provide helpful additional information.
- 74 The association has a clear asset management strategy which provides a framework for its investment decisions. The association is starting to compile its investment programme beyond 2008 and its initial transfer promises. An investment panel of a cross-section of Eastlands customers is in place. The investment programme considers the wider needs of the community. Improvements to minimise anti-social behaviour (ASB) have taken place including alley-gating which has reduced the incidence of ASB and car crime.

- 75 Investment has aimed to provide lasting benefits to the community beyond investment in physical improvements. Eastlands' two main partners employ local labour, and its own repairs team has recruited apprentices. Targets for training places and the employment of local labour are in place. Thirty four training places were provided by the end of year three of the improvement programme, which exceeded the target of 30, and 22 per cent of the workforce were recruited from within a three mile radius, slightly less than the 25 per cent target. The partnership has provided valuable skills and jobs for the community.
- 76 Cyclical maintenance programmes are in place. The scope of cyclical maintenance is narrow because many elements are carried out through the improvement programme. Cyclical maintenance is focused on external painting and rear fencing. There are appropriate arrangements for servicing installations including adaptations, lifts and door entry systems.
- 77 The association does not fully minimise the risk of investing in unsustainable properties. Although it maintains a comprehensive attributes database, which interfaces with responsive repairs records, it does not match this with issues which may affect sustainability such as property demand or crime, although these are recorded elsewhere. While the risk present is currently small, as its local knowledge is good, and demand is currently high, if the association is to expand it needs to maintain comprehensive systems to measure and maintain sustainability.
- 78 The management of the customer-facing aspects of the improvement programme has had some unintended negative consequences. Tenant liaison officers are employed by the two main partnering contractors, but customer feedback suggests not enough emphasis is placed upon explaining the impact of whole-house improvements or explaining the availability of respite or temporary rehousing. Some customers feel 'abandoned' by Eastlands during the early part of the improvement programme. The association has responded positively to this feedback and will review tenant liaison processes before the next phase of improvements starts in 2008.
- 79 Complaints about the investment programme are high and accounted for 18 of 35 complaints received in quarter two of 2006/07. Initial complaints are directed to contractors, and some customers find the response is not always to the standard they have come to expect from Eastlands. The contractors were originally given longer timescales to respond to complaints than provided for in the Eastlands standard, and although this has been rectified, initial responses have not always been timely or adequately dealt with the subject of the complaint. Eastlands has however, learned from this experience and has improved complaint resolution arrangements and monitoring.
- 80 Elements of planned and cyclical maintenance have not been procured in line with the association's procurement policy. Elements such as the painting programme and a small fencing programme are carried out by the in-house team. Although prices have been compared against schedule of rates prices from other contractors, the association has not market tested these services.

- 81 Arrangements for recording and sharing the location of asbestos are under-developed. A survey is underway on properties in the New Deal for Communities area which will then be cloned, but this is not due for completion until March 2007. Details on other properties will not be complete for another 12 months at the earliest. Contractors are given a single printed sheet indicating the possible locations of asbestos. Individual tenants are told about the location of asbestos, but given the relatively few surveys carried out to date, there is a possibility that some tenants with asbestos in their homes are unaware of its presence.

### **Responsive repairs**

- 82 The responsive repairs service is an area of significant strength. There is strong performance in a number of areas including the proportion of repairs completed within target, the number of appointments made and kept and the level of repairs carried out right first time. The service is accessible and flexible, the appointments system is customer-friendly, and customer satisfaction is high.
- 83 Eastlands has taken effective steps to fundamentally improve the repairs service. Following a best value review which used feedback from the residents' forum, residents' conference and satisfaction data, the decision was taken in 2005 to move the repairs team in-house, and terminate the previous contract with Manchester City Council. The service works well with Eastline, the association's customer service centre which was also moved in-house at the same time.
- 84 Customers receive high quality information which helps them make best use of the service. An informative repairs handbook is provided to all tenants which clearly sets out both the landlord's and tenant's repairing obligations. The handbook includes diagnostic diagrams which are also used by Eastline call operators. This helps the accurate ordering of repairs and increases the likelihood of repairs being completed 'right first time'.
- 85 It is easy for customers to report repairs. Eastline processes repair requests efficiently. Eastline and the repairs service provide a highly integrated service. Variations are low and in October 2006 were 2 per cent by volume of repairs and 6 per cent by value. There is effective training and information sharing which means Eastline is able to provide key information to customers at their first point of contact, and the repairs team delivers the promised service.
- 86 Repairs are completed within promised timescales. In 2005/06 performance in all three priority categories was among the best performers nationally and has continued to improve. The association sets stretching targets for itself and aims to complete emergency repairs within three hours, urgent repairs within five working days and routine repairs within ten working days. Customers' repairs requests are responded to promptly.

**Table 1 Repair performance (% repairs completed on time)**

Period Category	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07 (January 2007)	Position compared with others nationally (2005/06)
Emergency	98.7	99.6	100	Top
Urgent	92.1	97.9	100	Top
Routine	92.0	98.2	99.8	Top

*Housing Corporation Performance Indicators/Eastlands performance reports*

- 87** The service is largely available when customers want it. Appointments are offered at the first point of contact. They are organised on two-hour slots, and appointments are available during Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings. Although not publicised, appointments can also be offered during other evenings. The majority of appointments are kept (100 per cent in January 2007) and customers can rely upon promises of appointments being honoured. This flexible approach has brought other benefits, and the level of jobs cancelled because of no access is low at 3.1 per cent (January 2007).
- 88** Repairs are carried out effectively by the in-house repairs team. Repairs staff are empowered to work flexibly in response to customer needs. All operatives have received multi-skill training to NVQ level two, reducing the need for multiple visits for a single job and increasing the likelihood of two jobs for separate trades being done on one appointment. Operatives also have the ability to complete additional repairs not originally reported if requested by the tenant.
- 89** The repairs service measures performance which matters to customers and acts upon this. The level of 'right first time' repairs is measured as is the level of repairs completed by one tradesperson where previously two or more were needed. The number of jobs completed on the first visit was 85.8 per cent in January 2007. Although this is below the association's internal target of 90 per cent, this represents an efficient use of resources and minimum disruption to customers.
- 90** The proportion of repairs carried out on an emergency or urgent basis is in line with good practice. In October 2006, 29 per cent of repairs were carried out in these categories, compared to the recommended level of 30 per cent or below. The association monitors this performance on a monthly basis and this helps ensure the resources of its in-house team are used effectively.

- 91 Customer satisfaction is high. The responsive repair service has responded well to customer feedback and has well-embedded, customer focused methods, supported by extensive measurement of satisfaction. Customer satisfaction in the year to date is 94 per cent and customer feedback is used to improve services including the initial decision to bring the repairs team in-house, provide multi-skill training and to equip operatives with information packs so that they can act as a gateway to other services. In line with Eastlands' customer promise repairs staff go the extra mile and treat customers and their homes with respect.
- 92 Customers are involved in the review and design of services. A review of the service carried out in 2005 took the fundamental decision to bring the repairs team in house. A repairs panel of tenants and Eastlands officers was set up in 2006, and although attendance has been low, tenants have received performance reports, interviewed potential new gas contractors and approved the specification of new materials.
- 93 Positively, the responsive repairs service has tried to understand the reasons why some tenants do not use it. Eastlands has piloted a 'house MOT' survey through which staff visit tenants who have not reported any repairs for 12 months in order to assess whether there are any barriers to access and to assess the state of repair of the property. This shows a pro-active approach in understanding customer needs and in avoiding potential higher value repairs at a later date.
- 94 There have been some attempts to prove the value for money of the in-house repairs team. The schedule of rates has been benchmarked against the National Housing Federation schedule of rates, initially via an external consultant and then updated via a benchmarking club. According to this exercise, schedule of rates costs are below average for the region.

### **Empty home (void) repairs**

- 95 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The performance in re-letting homes compares unfavourably with other providers and the average cost of void repairs is high. Eastlands is improving its processes in an effort to improve performance although sustained improvement is not yet evident. Wider area initiatives seek to address falling demand and have so far been effective. Although the void standard is high and adherence to it is consistent, information for customers is lacking as are some aspects of customer satisfaction measurement.
- 96 The standard of properties available to let is high. Eastlands has adopted a stretching standard for empty properties in conjunction with customers and delivers consistently against this standard. The in-house team and contractors are clear on the standard to be achieved and customers have clear expectations on the standard of property they can expect.

- 97 Voids performance compares unfavourably with other providers. The average cost of void repairs is high at £2,700 per property and the 40 days to make an empty property available to let means that performance is below average when compared with associations nationally. While performance has gradually improved over the last three years, the organisation recognises that further improvement is needed. An action plan was recently put in place, but has yet to realise any sustained improvement.
- 98 The association has identified some of the factors preventing the quick turn-round of properties. A voids management group aims to improve cross team working and has introduced improvements to procedures including a 'fast track' process whereby void repairs are carried out during the notice period before an existing tenant moves out and arrangements for prospective tenants to view properties while work is in progress. These initiatives are new however, and there is as yet little sustained impact on void times.
- 99 The voids team has improved its flexibility. Twenty operatives have received multi-skill training. In addition, electricians have received training in patch plastering as the organisation of different trades was identified as a cause of delays. Improvements in processes are yet to bring about a substantial reduction in void times, but early signs are encouraging. Void times reduced to 27 days in February, although it is too early to judge whether this improvement will be maintained.
- 100 The voids team has arrangements to supplement its capacity, although these are not applied consistently. While the majority of voids work is carried out in-house, the association has arrangements with three contractors to carry out work where the capacity of the in-house team is reduced. The association has been able to secure rates which compare well to others, while not guaranteeing volumes of work to the contractors. There is however no 'soft' testing to compare the process performance of the repairs team against these contractors. As a result the association may be missing an opportunity to effectively use other providers to improve the cost and turn-round times of void properties.
- 101 The association takes effective steps to identify and address the issue of potentially difficult to let properties. With Manchester City Council an annual exercise is undertaken to identify areas where demand is an issue. The association has taken a series of proactive actions since 2003 in four main areas in East Manchester. Approaches including open days, environmental improvements and targeting by neighbourhood wardens have been largely successful. The association and its partners are working closely to maintain the sustainability of East Manchester.
- 102 The voids standard is not adequately publicised to customers. Eastlands does not have a leaflet detailing the standard for applicants. While those offered a property are given an information sheet covering the lettable standard, sharing this earlier in the process would help raise customer awareness and manage their expectations.

### Gas servicing

- 103 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Gas servicing practices are thorough with few properties where servicing is outstanding. Eastlands ensures that service arrangements are convenient for tenants with options for evening or Saturday morning appointments. Prompt and appropriate enforcement actions are used where there are access difficulties. The quality of gas servicing and installations is separately audited. However, weaker aspects are the lack of customer satisfaction monitoring, weak programming resulting in large numbers of installations having outstanding services for short periods and limited publicity of the importance of gas servicing.
- 104 Performance in completing services is satisfactory. The number of outstanding certificates in February 2007 was 61, (2.2 per cent). Of these, the majority were outstanding for only a short period. The longest outstanding certificate is for six months and appropriate actions are in place for all long-standing cases.
- 105 There are clear escalation processes in cases of no access. The association has moved away from serving notices seeking possession to securing injunctions in line with best practice. Thirteen injunctions have been secured to date in 2006/07 and actions are taken promptly where problems of access are identified.
- 106 The recording of gas servicing is satisfactory. Records are held on a stand-alone database which is capable of interrogation. The contractor informs Eastlands promptly when new certificates are issued and the database is kept up to date. Although there were minor issues of the mis-filing of certificates, the association's record keeping ensures it is fully informed of the progress of gas servicing and reports its performance accurately.
- 107 Gas servicing appointments are convenient and shaped around the needs of customers. Access arrangements are made directly by the contractor who offers weekend and evening appointments. Vulnerable tenants are identified and specific arrangements made to provide assistance. Customers have a wide choice of access arrangements.
- 108 Independent audit checks are made on the servicing of gas installations. A 10 per cent check is carried out to give the association assurance of the quality of servicing arrangements. The checks are detailed and highlight common issues with specific appliances or engineers. The reports provide adequate quality assurance while highlighting any training needs among engineers.
- 109 Eastlands makes full use of opportunities when contacting tenants over other matters to make appointments for gas servicing. For example, outstanding gas servicing is flagged to Eastline staff who can make appointments with the gas contractor. Similarly, estate wardens can make appointments directly with the contractor. This minimises the need for further escalation where initial access has not been possible.

- 110** Some of the limitations of current contract arrangements are recognised, and a new contractor has been appointed on an initial 12 month basis from April 2007. The contract sum at £300,000 includes provision for replacements to the value of £30,000, and offers better value for money than the current contract. There are additional benefits from the new contract including the monitoring of tenant satisfaction and sharing of life cycles of gas installations to more accurately inform replacement programmes.
- 111** Programming of gas servicing can be improved. First contact is made with customers only three weeks before the expiry of the current certificate, meaning a significant proportion of properties have no certificates for short periods after the expiry of the previous certificate. Of 61 certificates outstanding in February 2007, 47 (77 per cent) were outstanding for eight weeks or less. A new gas servicing contract to commence in April 2007 provides for the access process to start four weeks prior to the expiry date, however Eastlands also proposes to identify customers who regularly delay access and address them earlier in the process.
- 112** Customer satisfaction with gas servicing arrangements is not monitored. The service has no direct feedback on the effectiveness of its communication or access arrangements or the convenience of appointments. With the appointment of a new servicing contractor on April 2007, Eastlands feedback forms will be left with customers.
- 113** Publicity about the importance of gas safety could be improved. Articles are included in the tenant newsletter every six months, but the association has not used other media such as its website or rent statements to reinforce the importance of allowing access for regular servicing and it does not have its own gas safety leaflet. Following feedback from this inspection, Eastlands will carry an information sheet in its welcome packs for new tenants. At the current time some customers are not fully aware of the importance of arranging access for servicing.

### **Adaptations**

- 114** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. There is no clear responsibility for the adaptation service or its further development. Information for customers is limited and the extent of their satisfaction with adaptations received is not known. Eastlands undertake minor adaptations promptly.
- 115** The quality of information available to customers is mixed. While there is a leaflet, it does not explain the responsibilities of Eastlands and the City Council adaptation service, Manchester Equipment and Adaptation Partnership (MEAP). Referral routes for disabled adaptations are unclear, and promotion of the availability of adaptations through the newsletter, website or liaison with GPs is absent. Some tenants may be unaware of the availability of adaptation services or how to access them.
- 116** It is unclear where in the organisation the aids and adaptations service sits. There are no clear lines of responsibility and no-one taking an overview of the service offered to vulnerable customers. The association recognises this and will put in place clear procedures to ensure the service meets the needs of customers.

- 117 There is little customer feedback on the design and efficiency of the service. For minor works, the standard satisfaction form for responsive repairs is used. Adaptation work is not analysed separately, and the current satisfaction forms lack key information such as a customer's disability. The association recognises this weakness and plans to recruit a customer panel member to help re-launch the adaptations service within Eastlands to coincide with the new service level agreement (SLA) with MEAP.
- 118 Communication over the progress of adaptation work once it is referred to MEAP is weak. Eastlands is largely unaware of the progress of individual adaptations and has to refer customers to MEAP. There is little evidence of managing the MEAP service to secure management information or day to day liaison which would benefit customers.
- 119 Eastlands does not ensure that the aids and adaptation service meets customers' needs. Monitoring of performance is limited. Application and completion dates are known but not reported with other performance information. Prioritisation of adaptations is by date order and not by needs assessment. Customers may not receive timely and effective assistance when needed.
- 120 Minor adaptations are carried out quickly. Eastlands carries out minor adaptations to a value of £500 and gives these works the same priority as responsive repairs with the result that adaptations are usually carried out within 10 days. In the first nine months of the financial year 2006/07, the association carried out minor works to the value of £8,200, although this is probably an under-estimate as many are not distinguished from responsive repairs. It is positive that the volume of minor adaptations is not limited to a separate budget.
- 121 Adequate funding is in place to ensure major adaptations are carried out. The association's budget is significantly assisted by MEAP who undertake all Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) work at no cost to Eastlands. MEAP completed 28 adaptations between April 2006 and January 2007 and the longest waiting time was ten months. There is a clear service level agreement in place with MEAP. While this is not actively monitored, Eastlands is taking a positive role, alongside other Manchester housing associations.
- 122 There is some evidence of flexibility which can be positive, but can also lead to a differential service. There is discretion for example in completing works in-house over the value of £500, and one example of completing a ramp which would usually be referred to MEAP. While this has helped some individuals, there are potentially vulnerable customers who are not aware of the flexibility of Eastlands' policies and who do not make the right contacts or ask the right questions.
- 123 Opportunities are taken to make best use of vacant properties with adaptations. The IT system can identify these and the allocations team immediately informs MEAP to enable them to identify an eligible applicant for housing. If this is not possible, adaptations will be removed into storage until they are able to be reused.

## Housing Income Management

- 124** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Customers information needs have been well reflected in standard letters and in information leaflets. There is a range of customer focused arrangements to assist tenants to pay their rent for example through convenient payment options and through the availability of advice and assistance. Target setting is well structured and there is routine monitoring of actions. However, there are examples of inconsistent application of the arrears procedures. Arrears collection is below target and, in the case rechargeable repairs, is poor. Eastlands has not evaluated the effectiveness of advice services and fails to use available customer information to target resources or advice proactively.
- 125** Access to services and to information has been thoughtfully considered. The staff team are trained in debt counselling and are able to verify Housing Benefit (HB) claims; letters relating to formal actions are hand delivered increasing opportunities for personal contact; evening and Saturday morning appointments are offered; and there are a reasonable range of payment methods although it is a weakness that payment over the internet is not possible. Customers can benefit from a range of services that have been designed around their needs.
- 126** Rent statements are provided quarterly and on demand. Statements are reasonably clear and rent and any related costs such as court costs are separately identified. Arrangements are in place to separately identify service charges from the 2007/08 financial year. Opportunities are taken to include general information, for example, advertising fun and feedback days in a narrative box on the statement. The delivery of the statements is staggered over a week to ensure that customer service standards can still be met given a known increase in queries. Tenants are well informed about the status of their rent account.
- 127** There are several opportunities for tenants to access advice or assistance with rent payment or general money advice. Housing Benefit advice surgeries are held in the office quarterly enabling customers to access help locally. A general money advice surgery is held weekly. Tenants are able to access specialist advice conveniently.
- 128** Eastlands has developed a corporate debt policy and has recently improved related processes. Tenant recharges are now collected by the housing income management team as are former tenant arrears. This improves the association's ability to ensure that debt chasing is proportionate and does not impose unreasonable burdens on individuals.
- 129** It is positive that Eastlands has signed up to and implemented the Civil Justice Court Protocol. This aims to assist tenants who are in arrears to sustain their tenancy wherever possible by encouraging early intervention, advice, assistance and voluntary agreements to pay. This recognises that pursuing formal action has considerable further costs and impacts for individuals, the organisation and for communities. There have been a total of five evictions this year compared to 18 in the previous year; however, rent arrears have increased over the period.

- 130 Targets are appropriately applied. Targets that originate from a consideration of past performance and comparison with others inform the financial plan. There is a service target of four per cent in place for arrears collection as a percentage of rent receivable. This is appropriately broken down and applied at patch level. Monitoring against these patch targets is thoroughly undertaken. Officers are assisted to prioritise their work by weekly system generated prompts of defaulted actions. These processes support arrears collection.
- 131 Tenant vulnerability is considered. The IT system enables officers to be alerted of any special needs or circumstances of tenants prior to taking action. The rents officers are able to react sensitively based upon customer needs.
- 132 Some information is lacking, however. Although letters are written in plain English and agreed by the rents panel, they do not consistently signpost the availability of advice. The availability of letters in other formats is not signposted by straplines or larger print. This was attended to during the inspection week and letters adjusted. Previous to this there may have been cases where tenants were unaware of assistance available to them or may have had difficulty in understanding important information.
- 133 No service standards are in place for this area of service. General customer service standards apply regarding correspondence but there is an absence of commitments to customers on information, advice and assistance. Tenants in arrears do not know what services they can expect and to what standard.
- 134 The application of the Civil Justice Court Protocol has contributed to inconsistency in arrears collection activity. Although procedures are in place, there are examples of actions that do not demonstrate close adherence to them. Our file checks found some actions that were taken much later than the procedures require and another where a notice of seeking possession had been served where an existing Court Order was in place. Some actions are not appropriately checked resulting in a failure to maximise collection for the association or to provide early encouragement to pay and assistance for tenants.
- 135 Current year performance on arrears collection shows a worsening performance. In January 2007, arrears as a percentage of rent receivable were 5.7 per cent. At the same time last year arrears totalled 4.9 per cent. Despite efforts to reduce this debt through close monitoring and targeted efforts rent arrears continue to pose significant challenges.
- 136 Eastlands does not know how effective debt advice services are. The service is provided by the Manchester City Council Advice Service but there is no service level agreement in place to ensure that the needs of tenants are well met. Although outcomes are measured for particular initiatives such as the Housing Benefit advice surgeries, this has not been the case for routinely provided services. The outcomes for tenants are not measured or targeted which means that Eastlands does not know whether the advice that tenants are signposted to meets their needs adequately or whether alternative or additional services are required.

- 137 Performance in collection of rechargeable repairs is poor. Against an outstanding debt of almost £131,000 since transfer a total of £4,000 has been collected. This points to an ineffective approach which has reduced the resource available for service improvement.
- 138 Clear rent accounts are not incentivised. This is an initiative that has become common practice and its absence is a missed opportunity to encourage tenants to pay their rent. Eastlands has recognised this weakness and has plans in place to introduce an incentive scheme in the coming year.
- 139 Eastlands does not use available information to strategically plan the income management service. There is an opportunity to combine customer profile information with rent arrears cases to identify which groups are most likely to need advice and then to target that advice proactively. This is a missed opportunity to plan for service provision and to measure the impact of support, advice and enforcement services.

## **Tenancy and Estate Management**

- 140 This is a strong area with strengths significantly outweighing weaknesses. Eastlands works in an area with high levels of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) and clearly understands that its success is dependant upon contributing to safer communities. Policies and practical working in partnership with other stakeholders demonstrate Eastlands' commitment to long-term reduction in ASB. Management of the cross tenure neighbour nuisance and neighbourhood warden teams ensures that the association is an active partner in community regeneration. Activity is monitored closely and a range of options that balance support and enforcement are used to provide remedies. However, specific service standards are lacking in this area as is the monitoring of complainant satisfaction and subsequent learning.
- 141 There is a coherent strategic framework for community safety. Policies cover nuisance and ASB, domestic violence, racial harassment, harassment of people with disabilities and of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. Procedures underpin the policies and assist staff to respond correctly to complainants.
- 142 Eastlands' strong strategic commitment is backed by practical approaches to managing ASB and wider crime and disorder. They are the lead RSL managing both the neighbourhood wardens and neighbourhood nuisance teams, both of which provide services for other housing providers, including the private sector, across the wider East Manchester area. Eastlands has thoroughly reviewed the provision of these services and ways of working to ensure that they meet the needs of local communities. The teams provide practical options for dealing with ASB and by managing the services Eastlands Homes is taking an active role in ensuring their continuance and effective operation.

- 143 Eastlands promote their stance on ASB well. The tenancy agreement and tenants' handbook make their position clear and this is reinforced by routine newsletter articles as well as a regular update from the neighbour nuisance team which advises tenants both of their rights and responsibilities as well as the team's successes in responding to ASB. These approaches are likely to improve tenant confidence in reporting ASB.
- 144 Multi agency arrangements are well developed. Fortnightly local tasking meetings (LTMs) and area casework panels (ACPs) gather the key area stakeholders with a role to play in managing ASB. Through these meetings actions are co-ordinated across a range of teams with Eastlands taking a key role because of their management of the cross-sector neighbour nuisance team and the neighbourhood warden service. Area approaches are well established and operate effectively.
- 145 Incidents of ASB are handled well and practical solutions are sought. Low level cases are dealt with by housing officers who use a case management system to structure their handling of each case; actions are recorded in a separate hard copy file as well as on an Excel based spreadsheet. More complex, serious or repeat cases are referred to the neighbourhood nuisance team which provides specialist input and access to wider area stakeholders, for example, the Police, other housing providers, the neighbourhood warden service or specialist support agencies to combine efforts and to provide co-ordinated responses. This is a highly effective way of responding to ASB.
- 146 Actions in response to ASB are monitored closely. There is a high level of ASB in the area with on average 82 new cases reported each month in 2006/07, 73 of which were considered complex. Low level nuisance, complex cases and racially motivated incidents are separately recorded with an appropriate range of options such as warnings, notices, injunctions, acceptable behaviour contracts (ABCs), anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), injunctions and mediation available. Between April 2006 and January 2007 23 ABCs were served, 20 pre-ASBO warnings, six injunctions and five tenancy demotions were enforced. The Executive Management Team (EMT), the Senior Management Team (SMT), the operations committee and the Board consider performance and activity monthly. Of 729 cases in the current year 574 have been closed. High levels of nuisance and ASB are responded to and effective remedies are sought.
- 147 Enforcement action is balanced with a wide range of diversionary and proactive initiatives. These are co-ordinated through the multi agency meetings with projects covering youth intervention; family support work including drug abuse; domestic violence; sexual awareness; intense support for ASB offenders and families; anger management initiatives; and work in local schools. Eastlands also sponsors a local youth football team Eastlands FC. These initiatives are targeted towards areas, groups and individuals and provide both assistive interventions and opportunities for involvement in community initiatives.

- 148** Support is available for both victims and perpetrators of ASB. Housing Officers can access specialist teams, for example, the neighbour nuisance team or neighbourhood wardens to assist and can and often do refer cases through to co-ordinating groups such as the area casework panel, which includes area partners and specialist agencies, for victim or perpetrator support. These agencies agree the need for support and agree lead/ key workers who will manage individual packages of support. This is a considered and appropriate response.
- 149** Eastlands responds suitably to cases of domestic violence. Effective arrangements with specialist agencies have been developed at local tasking meetings (LTMs). Eastlands promotes its stance in a good quality leaflet and front line staff are well aware of how they should access appropriate help. Those who suffer abuse can be certain of a sensitive and appropriate response from the association.
- 150** Eastlands has signed up to the Respect Standard. The association has assessed itself against the standard and established areas where further work is necessary. Actions have been planned and included in the association's 'master lists' of improvement initiatives. Eastlands is seeking to improve and to contribute fully to the reduction of ASB.
- 151** Service standards are not specified in this area. Tenants are not advised of the responses they can expect and what standards apply where they report ASB. Access to support, agreeing remedies, or timescales for monitoring are all areas that would benefit from having clear standards agreed and published. The absence of these specific standards has been recognised however, and Eastlands has worked with tenants to agree a new customer service charter which is due to be launched at the start of the 2007/08 financial year. Currently, however, tenants do not know what they can expect from the service or how long they should expect to wait for a response.
- 152** Complainant satisfaction has not been routinely gauged. Eastlands has only just begun to measure whether those who have complained of ASB have been satisfied with the organisation's response. Positively, a number of intended actions and further evaluation have already been prompted from the 23 responses received in January 2007. The lack of comprehensive satisfaction assessment and evaluation is a missed opportunity to learn and to improve.
- 153** Mediation services have not been evaluated fully. A fixed fee contract with the City Council provides for up to five cases each year whether or not the service is used. In the current year mediation has been used twice which means that it is a costly option. Because the effectiveness and value of this arrangement has not been examined to date, Eastlands cannot be certain that mediation provides an effective and appropriate alternative for parties in disagreement.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 154 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. Eastlands operates in an area with significant challenges and has a remit that extends beyond traditional housing management encompassing wider regeneration responsibilities. Costs are high but are proportionate to high level outcomes. The consideration of economies is evident throughout the organisation and, in implementing key service improvements, for example, providing the in-house repairs team. This has focussed on customers priorities and has achieved improved outcomes. Activity based costs have not informed service reviews to date which has limited Eastlands's ability to consider fundamental change. The expansion of the service if achieved is likely to introduce cost efficiencies, however plans for growth are not formalised. Although Eastlands has demonstrated some attention to higher cost services it may need to consider more fundamental change if growth is not achieved.

### How do costs compare?

- 155 Operating costs are high when compared with others. According to the Housing Corporation's Operating Cost Index (OCI), Eastlands has one of the highest operating costs nationally, however when major repair costs are excluded, Eastlands's operating costs are below average nationally.
- 156 Eastlands' weekly operating cost per general needs property in 2005/06 was £99.76, which places the association among the worst performing organisations nationally. A large proportion of operational costs is taken up by the investment programme, and the association calculates its costs will decrease to £62 by 2007/08 when the first phase of the programme is completed. This will place it below average nationally.
- 157 The association has not fully developed the benchmarking of its services. It is only now beginning to use information from a national benchmarking service and other benchmarking groups to identify and challenge areas of high cost. Early analysis of benchmarking data identifies income management, lettings and voids as high cost areas. The association has also joined a further benchmarking club to compare data on support and administration costs which it recognises are high, but comparative data was only made available recently and Eastlands has not had the opportunity to analyse it yet. The association will however be in a strong position to analyse costs in the near future.

### How is value for money managed?

- 158 Eastlands has a clear value for money strategy and action plan. Although these have only recently been developed there is a reasonable understanding of value for money issues throughout the organisation. Managers are supported by timely budget information, financial training is provided to staff through the staff conference and Board reports carry standard sections on value for money and risk. The importance of value for money is recognised throughout the association.

- 159** Eastlands has reviewed services formerly provided by the Council and made significant decisions. Reviews are prioritised on cost and customer impact and, to date, have included customer enquiry handling, responsive repairs and community safety. The reviews have resulted in the formation of Eastline, an in-house repairs team and a community safety team covering East Manchester. Each has resulted in costs savings and increases in quality. Service level agreements (SLAs) have been retained with the City Council where cost effective covering services such as payroll and grounds maintenance. A review of all SLAs will be completed by March 2007. The association has shown its ability to challenge services provided by others and the capacity to bring services in-house where those services are not cost effective.
- 160** The association has focused on value for money and outcomes for customers and delivered a number of examples of improved value for money:
- Partnership working within investment programme has delivered efficiency savings and allowed the delivery of the programme a year earlier than planned;
  - the introduction of an in-house repairs team has reduced cost and increased customer satisfaction;
  - the establishment of Eastline at reduced cost and increased flexibility;
  - bringing NICEIC electrical certification in-house by training and equipping Eastline electricians has reduced costs by an average of £42,000 a year and is starting to reduce void turn-round times; and
  - the implementation of a tax strategy which has achieved corporation tax savings of £750,000.
- 161** Savings have been achieved through partnering. Strategic partners share office space and IT systems, they also share sub-contractors. Reducing the programme by a year has also produced preliminary cost savings and consultancy fee savings. These have been re-invested into the programme to provide additional projects agreed by Board such as the energy efficiency programme.
- 162** Eastlands has also used external funding to maximise its own resources and the impact of its activities.
- It has secured private grant funding to carry out some investment programme works on private properties to tie in with improvements to its own properties.
  - It has match-funded environmental improvements carried out by Groundworks to open areas within its estates.
  - It has introduced the post of regeneration officer to access external grants and funding. The post is expected to become self-financing in 2007/08.
  - Grant funding has been secured to support cavity wall and loft insulation works.

- 163 The association has challenged its high costs on an operational level by introducing zero-based budgeting. Service managers are challenged to justify costs. These justifications and benchmarking data will be considered by Board when setting budgets for 2007/08.
- 164 Planned annual efficiency savings have been achieved. Savings of £1.54 million and £1.77 million were achieved in 2004/05 and 2005/06 respectively, with £1.64 million forecast for 2006/07. However, the majority of savings are non-cashable, and the level of cashable gains is £324,000.
- 165 While the organisation has made savings, some have been eroded by high Right to Buy (RTB) sales when analysed by cost per property. RTB sales have exceeded 200 since transfer. Management costs per property are forecast to decrease to £62 by 2007/08 when a substantial part of the investment programme is completed, but expected to increase again to £68 by 2009/10. Future scenarios assume the number of units of accommodation remaining the same after 2007 which, based on past RTB sales may be unrealistic. The organisation is planning further stock transfers in the area and has calculated that transfers will increase economies through scale.
- 166 The association has a 30 year business plan which demonstrates its long-term viability. Through its additional activities Eastlands plays a major role in the regeneration of East Manchester, and these costs are supported by arrangements such as the VAT shelter and 100 per cent retention of RTB receipts. The organisation has however, challenged itself to reduce its costs to allow for further investment in front line services and this is positive.
- 167 Higher cost areas have not been robustly challenged. Although there is evidence that the Board has challenged high costs and is aware of the need to address these areas, it has only very recently constructed a formal work plan to achieve this. A review of structures is scheduled to take place in 2007/08. While Eastlands has made some fundamental decisions in the past, it needs to continue to do so in order to address the prospect of further increases in its operating costs.
- 168 The understanding and use of activity based costs is under-developed. Costs of services within Eastline have been analysed and show the service to provide services of a higher quality and better value than previously. The value for money of the in-house repairs team is judged through productivity targets and benchmarking against the National Housing Federation schedule of rates which also shows costs to be competitive. However, some service areas are not open to similar challenge and in areas such as income collection or estate management, activity costings are not developed. This leaves the association in a weak position when considering reviews of its service.
- 169 Plans for achieving efficiencies in high cost areas are uncertain. The association is to bid for the transfer of additional properties, and if this is achieved its unit costs will reduce. However, the association faces a further challenge of a reducing stock because of high right to buy sales. Whilst the association has a work plan to analyse high costs, it is unproven how it will make difficult decisions necessary to reduce its costs.

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

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

- 170** This is an area of strength for the organisation. The commitments made to tenants are very clearly prioritised with performance outcomes showing strong improvement. The concerns of tenants are taken seriously with key decisions such as the creation of an in-house responsive repairs team, and the creation of Eastline, the customer service centre, made in direct response. Outcomes show that these initiatives are improving customers' satisfaction. Value considerations have underpinned key service decisions but there has been only limited examination of the full costs of service provision.
- 171** The promises made to customers at the time of the transfer have been clearly focused upon and either met or exceeded. These were:
- achieving the Decent Homes target ahead of the Government target of 2010; and delivering the investment programme of five customer priorities which were: new kitchens, windows, doors and environmental works. This will be achieved one year ahead of the transfer promise. Partnering on the capital programme has achieved improved value for money with efficiency savings re-invested to bring forward the completion date. This has reduced the effects of inflation in the building services sector and ensured that customers receive the benefits of the improvements sooner;
  - delivering excellent services. Bringing the responsive repairs service in-house has resulted in improved services and customer satisfaction. Satisfaction with the repairs service increased to 98 per cent in October 2006 from 90.1 per cent in March 2005. Monitoring of customers' satisfaction has informed improvements and in key areas indicate that services have improved; and
  - keeping annual rent increases in the first five years down to inflation plus 50 pence.
- 172** Eastlands has introduced improvements in areas that benefit customers. The effects of improvements have been measured and routinely challenged in comparison to the original objectives for improvement and commitments made to tenants. For example:
- introducing the estate action team directly tackling residents' concerns about litter and environmental conditions and complementing the community safety and estate initiatives; and
  - responding to evidence of disaffection among youths and their involvement in ASB by introducing a youth involvement worker to improve their engagement.

## 40 Housing Management Service | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 173 Eastlands has delivered planned efficiencies and re-invested them to improve services for customers. Annual efficiency commitments were exceeded in the first two years of operation and Eastlands are on target to achieve the 2006/07 target of £1.64 million. In the main these savings have been used to bring forward the Decent Homes investment programme but have also funded some environmental works with improvements to fencing being undertaken.
- 174 Performance outcomes over the last three years are mixed but in the main show an improving trend. Appendix one illustrates that five indicators compare well, achieving high performance when compared with a group of similar housing associations in the region. Eight are in the average range and three show comparatively low performance. Out of 15 indicators where measures are available and appropriate, 13 show an improving trend of performance.
- 175 Performance has improved in some key customer facing areas. Responsive repairs performance has improved significantly with the creation of the in-house service and improved performance controls; appointments are offered to all customers and at the time of inspection 100 per cent of appointments made were kept; significantly more homes now meet the Decent Homes standard (78 per cent ) and improvements in energy efficiency in homes have been impressive. This is delivering benefits that customers will experience.
- 176 However, challenges remain. Current tenant arrears as a percentage of rent receivable increased slightly in each of the previous two years, and although this is an area where improvements are being made, performance has tracked above a target of four per cent throughout the current year. At the time of inspection performance was 5.7 per cent.
- 177 Eastlands does not understand the true costs of some areas of service provision. Although it is known that operating costs are over twice the national median, there has been no examination of activity based costs and limited analysis of capacity or effective use of resources. Work is currently underway and more is planned in this area encouraged by the value for money strategy which is a positive indication. At present however, there may be areas where the use of resources is not at its optimum or where costs may indicate that other options for provision of services need to be explored.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 178 This is a strong area for the organisation with drivers for improvement significantly outweighing barriers. The objectives at the time of transfer are reviewed routinely and developed to ensure that they remain relevant. Leadership is highly effective; vision, strategies and plans are inclusive and well understood. Performance management systems build upon comprehensive performance information. Targets aim for continuous improvement and comparisons with others are used to challenge the service to improve. Throughout the organisation performance evaluation is used to structure improvements that customers will notice. Tenants are well engaged in ensuring the delivery of improvements through formal involvement and those who are not formally involved are informed of progress in regular newsletter updates. Some recent policies have not been fully embedded and although Eastlands does review its services routinely, more fundamental aspects of review are less evident.
- 179 The organisation's business plan sets clear objectives for the future of the service that align with the priorities of customers and the regeneration priorities in East Manchester. The objectives are detailed in paragraph 33 of this report. Those which specifically focus on outcomes for customers are:
- delivering quality services which exceed customer expectations. The Board have been firmly focused upon maximising service quality for tenants. This is evidenced in the wide range of performance indicators, challenging targets and improvement initiatives;
  - to improve the quality of life for individuals and communities. The association has managed the community safety team which is funded by a range of partners and incorporates the first cross tenure nuisance team in the country. Eastlands plan to develop and to extend this aspect of its business further; and
  - achieving long-term sustainability through controlling costs, improving efficiencies and through achieving growth to replace the asset base that is being eroded by RTB sales. The sustainability of the organisation as a key partner in the East Manchester area is reviewed annually by the Board. Key factors considered are the reduction in stock as growing confidence leads to increasing RTB sales; delivery of efficiencies and rent restructuring and the rent guarantee. A business development plan has been constructed. This is supported by detailed assessment of costs, benefits and risks.

## 42 Housing Management Service | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 180** There is clear evidence of effective leadership. Vision, aims and priorities are robustly developed and clearly communicated. Staff, representatives, the Board and wider stakeholders are thoroughly and thoughtfully engaged in business and service planning. The planning cycle spans a six month period incorporating, tenant feedback, staff, member and resident conferences, reviews of the Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry (KLOEs), zero-based budgeting, away days for senior teams incorporating risk assessment, service planning and actions monitoring. Eastlands applies the Investors in Excellence framework to shape its approach to continuous improvement. This is a comprehensive approach that ensures that staff, members and residents understand plans and are central to both the planning and delivery of continuous improvement.
- 181** Plans and strategies that support the business plan are thorough. The 30 year financial plan has been comprehensively reviewed since transfer in conjunction with consultants and considered and agreed by the Board. This is monitored together with loan covenants on a quarterly basis. The value for money strategy and procurement strategy are informed by routine mid year reviews of budgets. Key strategies such as the suite of Community Safety Strategies and the Equality and Diversity Strategy together with related action plans translate strong vision into deliverable objectives. These make clear what the organisation intends to achieve now and in the future.
- 182** Service and action plans are detailed and robust. Alongside addressing national priorities these include stretching targets for improvement that are based on delivery of improved and sustainable outcomes for tenants. Plans have detailed and measurable short, medium and longer term milestones.
- 183** Action plans are SMART<sup>6</sup> and helpfully are compiled in 'master lists' that list all the necessary actions and timescales. We were encouraged to note that these plans covered the key weaknesses identified in this report. Traffic light indicators assist progress monitoring and updates are reported on a formal cycle to key groups including the Executive Management Team (EMT), appropriate sub-committees and the Board. This is an effective approach both in implementing actions as well as ensuring appropriate accountability for progress.
- 184** The Board and managers demonstrate effective and appropriate challenge. Performance information provides detail on costs and quality of provision which enables them to challenge progress and to encourage continuous improvement. We saw this most effectively demonstrated in the setting of challenging targets and in the evidence of discussions at sub-committees.
- 185** There is a thorough approach to performance measurement and reporting. Reports have been continually refined and developed by the EMT and the Board. There is an appropriate mix of key and local performance indicators that help to inform a thorough understanding of performance. The suite of reports enable performance to be robustly evaluated and the need for improvements to be identified.

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<sup>6</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound

- 186** Thorough evaluation of performance information is evident throughout the organisation. Monthly and quarterly performance reports inform discussions of the EMT and the senior management team (SMT). These teams meet on consecutive days to discuss performance, challenge improvement and to ensure that delivery plans are appropriately adjusted. There is a very clear cascade process for the consideration of performance indicators with focus upon particular departments and service and action plans. Progress is considered alongside a mid-year review of budgets which ensures that initiatives are appropriately resourced. This approach increases the likelihood of improvements being delivered.
- 187** Eastlands has a well developed approach to identifying improvements through using feedback and comparing outcomes with others. There is a structured approach to improvement which includes consideration of internal prompts for change such as performance against targets and customer feedback or service failures as well as external considerations including regional and national perspectives, peer group benchmarking, regulatory and audit prompts and wider stakeholder feedback. Performance reports compare outcomes to relevant benchmarks, for example, a national benchmarking service; professional groups such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development; consultant reports and local peer/benchmarking groups with neighbouring associations. This is a thorough approach that improves challenge and is likely to ensure that outcomes compare well in the sector.
- 188** The association uses internal and external audit proactively to improve. The EMT agrees with the audit and risk committee the programme of internal audits based upon the risk register, corporate objectives and known areas for improvement. Responses to these audits is thorough with evidence of appropriate actions being taken.
- 189** The performance indicator (PI) systems validation is another area where prompt and effective follow up to recommendations is evident resulting in the 2006 validation report identifying fully compliant systems with no recommendations. This is a robust approach to ensuring through internal controls that performance measures are reliable and enable accurate evaluation of outcomes and the need to improve.
- 190** Tenants in panels and on the tenant forum routinely consider performance information and this is shared more widely with those who are not formally involved. Tenant representatives have been trained and encouraged to interrogate performance information and to seek improvement. Several are represented on wider area groups related to the regeneration of the area and therefore, are well placed to both link into and to encourage improvement. The challenge provided is healthy and responded to well by officers. The associations newsletter for tenants is circulated quarterly with a separate newsletter 'Eastspeak' circulated six monthly by the tenants forum being a tenant to tenant communication. Both routinely feature updates on performance and tenants are encouraged to feedback their views or to become formally involved. Tenants are effectively engaged in the improvement of the services they receive.

#### **44 Housing Management Service | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?**

- 191** There is a well developed approach to risk. This is part of the business planning process with risks broken down to department and service levels and their management reflected in service plans that are monitored by appropriate sub-committees. Risks are thoroughly identified and risk management is thorough.
- 192** Some improvement initiatives have not been fully embedded. There has been a significant increase in improvement projects in advance of inspection and new strategies, policies and related ways of working have not always been thoroughly supported. Because of the number of improvement initiatives and the short time in which they have been introduced it is perhaps inevitable that some support, for example training for staff, will lag behind but the effect in some cases is that staff feel unable to fully contribute to some improvement initiatives.
- 193** The association has sought to mainstream reviews of services as opposed to formulating a rigid plan for best value type reviews. This approach is assisted by a project review methodology which adds a helpful framework. Although effective as process and systems reviews there is limited evidence that fundamental reviews have been undertaken which consider such areas as outsourcing provision. The absence of this aspect in reviews may be a limiting factor to the extent of continuous improvement of services and value.

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

- 194** Drivers for improvement outweigh barriers. Eastlands has a committed and capable staff team and effective leadership. Training for staff and members is well focused on improving outcomes for customers. Specific training recognises the vital contribution of middle managers and team leaders many of whom are assisted with structured learning and development. IT is well managed and supportive. Eastlands Homes is a valued partner in the area's regeneration. Some training is not thoroughly evaluated to ensure that the greatest benefits are achieved.
- 195** Staff and Board members show evident focus on the priorities for customers and know how they contribute to their delivery. Mechanisms used in business planning help to establish clear roles and responsibilities for all. Sub-Committee and Board working assists in promoting detailed discussion and attention to key priorities. The addition of Board member champions in key areas of diversity demonstrates continuing commitment to active leadership.
- 196** Specialist teams are supported to provide a customer focused service. There are several examples of training that promote joined up working and shared responsibilities, for example Eastline staff have attended training with repairs operatives. Similarly, housing management, neighbour nuisance and neighbourhood warden teams have been jointly trained. Void management and business improvement groups deliberately target cross departmental working. Eastlands recognise the potential for poor communication between departments and teams and actively encourage shared focus on improved outcomes for customers.

- 197** There is an improving culture that will support the delivery of value for money. Staff, tenant representatives and Board members have attended training events on value for money and the 2005 staff conference had this as a central theme. Workshops at the 2006 conference continued the theme. There is a detailed value for money action plan with a group overseeing its implementation. There are several examples of value approaches that are well supported by staff, for example, in the housing income section evening visits and Saturday morning appointments have been introduced because tenants welcomed the extended hours and the success rate of visits improved significantly.
- 198** Eastlands has an up to date procurement strategy and action plan. This has shaped the procurement of major works contracts but has to date been used only in a limited way to procure other goods and services. The framework is however, in place and the action plan details clear future intentions aimed at maximising efficiencies.
- 199** The organisation is implementing a quality management system. The implementation is in phases with the first phase of updating policies and procedures completed together with making them available on the organisation's intranet. This will ensure appropriate document control and further improve the availability of up to date guidance for staff.
- 200** The association has provided training in response to business needs and has been successful in gaining funding to offset its costs. One successful example is the provision of multi-skill training to repairs team operatives which has trained 20 tradespeople to NVQ level two. The association has attracted funding of £36,000 through the Learning and Skills Council towards this training. Key staff have gained valuable skills at little cost to customers
- 201** Training helps staff to deliver improvement. All managers receive specific training in project planning and delivery. Eastlands has adopted the Institute of Leadership and Line Management as its standard for managers with eleven officers currently being trained. This recognises the critical importance of middle managers in delivering improvement. More generally all staff have access to a networked 'learning zone' which is routinely updated with good practice and learning from other organisations. This is particularly helpful given the range and scale of improvement initiatives.
- 202** However, training is not consistently evaluated. There are no clear links between training outcomes and business objectives and no clear evaluation of value for money apart from the global benchmarking of training costs against Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) figures. The association has invested substantially in training, but cannot show clearly whether all training has delivered benefits to the organisation.
- 203** An appraisal scheme is in place and has been reviewed over the last year. Appraisers are supported by training and clear objectives are set for appraisees based on team and business plan objectives. Staff are assisted to contribute to the delivery of shared objectives.

**46** Housing Management Service | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 204** Staff sickness is benchmarked and targeted for improvement. Although staff sickness has increased from a total of 1.6 per cent of days lost in 2005/06 to 2.8 per cent in January 2007 this is set against a benchmark comparison from the CIPD of 4 per cent. Although sickness levels are increasing, Eastlands measures performance closely and is taking action to address the trend.
- 205** The association recognises that its employment profile does not reflect the composition of the community it serves. It has carried out a recruitment review which was challenging in its scope and has led to process improvements including the drafting of improved person specifications and the composition of interview panels. The review however was only recently completed, and the target of 13 per cent BME representation of staff by April 2007 is unlikely to be achieved.
- 206** IT supports staff to undertake their work and is regularly assessed for improvement. A corporate database is used and supported with necessary upgrades, for example, the income management module is being revised to improve the collection of non-rent recharges. Performance of the system is targeted and reported upon in terms of system downtime and the resolution of support requests. Staff are assisted to carry out their work in an efficient manner.
- 207** Eastlands Homes is a valued and highly effective partner in wider area regeneration. Links with the regeneration agency New East Manchester Ltd are strong with Eastlands considered to be a proactive lead RSL. It has progressed the debate on the changing diversity of the area to ensure that all partners co-ordinate their planning and responses. Initiatives such as their management of the neighbour nuisance, the street warden and environment teams have contributed significantly to the rise in confidence among residents in the area.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

208 This report shows how Eastlands Homes compares with a comparison group of Housing Associations based in the North West with stock ownership up to 5,000 units.

Performance Indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06 Comparison Group Mean	2005/06 Comparison Group Median*	2005/06 Quartile Position in Comparison Group*
<b>General needs rent</b>						
Average GN weekly gross rent	£54.74	£54.75	£57.00	£58.34	£58.06	1
General needs voids and lettings						
GN re-let time	-	64 days	66 days	48 days	38 days	3
Vacant and available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	1.1%	0.8%	0.9%	0.8%	1
Vacant and not available GN (self-cont'd) stock	-	0.1%	0.7%	2.0%	0.7%	3
GN lettings to BME tenants	-	38.4%	39.4%	8.6%	-	-
Asset condition						
Average SAP rating	59.2	65	74	68	67	2
Failing decent homes standard	100.0%	82.9%	43.7%	16.2%	8.1%	4
Repairs performance						
Emergency repairs completed in target	-	98.7%	99.6%	96.6%	97.8%	1
Urgent repairs completed in target	-	92.1%	97.9%	94.7%	95.1%	1
Routine repairs completed in target	-	92.0%	98.2%	94.8%	96.1%	1
Appointments made that were kept	-	92.7%	90.6%	88.5%	95.1%	3

48 Housing Management Service | Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2005/206 Comparison Group Mean	2005/06 Comparison Group Median*	2005/06 Quartile Position in Comparison Group*
<b>Service to tenants</b>						
Tenant satisfaction overall	-	83%	83%	85%	85%	3
Tenant satisfaction with participation	-	69%	69%	69%	69%	2
General needs FPI						
Weekly Operating Cost per GN unit	-	£105.19	£99.76	£50.62	£45.38	4
GN Operating Cost as a percentage of Turnover	-	195.7%	178.0%	87.6%	79.0%	4
Weekly investment per GN unit	-	£110.85	£109.32	£34.61	-	-
Rent Collected for GN	-	100.5%	99.9%	98.8%	98.8%	2
Rent lost due to GN Voids	-	2.4%	1.9%	1.8%	1.4%	3
Current tenant rent arrears at year end for GN	-	6.8%	6.9%	5.8%	5.8%	3

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site, and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - the Business Plan;
  - the Business Development Plan;
  - service and team improvement plans;
  - service leaflets and standards;
  - service policies and procedures;
  - tenants handbook;
  - tenancy agreement;
  - customer satisfaction surveys and results;
  - performance reports to Board, EMT Team and SMT;
  - tenants' newsletters; and
  - publicly available performance reports.

## Appendix 3 – 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:
  - observing housing management activity;
  - observing repairs call handling;
  - visits to improved homes;
  - visits to vacant properties which were ready to let;
  - file checks for rent arrears, anti-social behaviour and customer complaints;
  - telephone surveys of a small sample of tenants who had used the service;
  - focus group meetings with staff and tenants;
  - meeting with representatives of the board; and
  - interviews with staff at all levels.

## Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

### **Improvement Programme Awareness**

- 2 Customer facing staff are equipped with Information Packs that include regularly updated details of the programme of major improvements. This benefits Eastlands Homes' void and responsive repairs teams, enabling informed decisions to be taken in prioritising work, particularly in void properties. This is a simple and effective way of improving customer service by ensuring clarity, reducing duplication, lost time and adds value for money to the service.

### **The House 'MOT'**

- 3 The House MOT will be undertaken in all homes but it specifically targets customers who have not accessed services within a 12 month period. This ensures that potentially vulnerable customers are visited and their needs assessed, as well as undertaking a condition survey, identifying any adaptations required, assessing health and safety and other tenancy issues. The MOT results are recorded in Property Attributes and proactively managed through the customer relationship management (CRM) system. The MOT is monitored within the performance management framework.

### **Increasing the diversity of residents involved**

- 4 Personal visits were made to black and minority ethnic (BME) residents resulting in a sustained increase in the number of BME residents involved. The residents forum has developed its own action plan for increasing diversity as a result of training. Diversity and age is monitored at all involvement events and used to determine involvement initiatives. Eastlands Homes employs a youth involvement officer who has established 'Dream' (reward) Schemes and a Youth Forum. The Chair of the Youth Forum has been co opted onto one of Eastlands' committees.