Promoting Positive Practice
Audit Commission Housing Review: Part II
The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.
This part of the Audit Commission’s Housing Review promotes some of the positive practice found during inspections from 1 July 2001 to 30 June 2002. We have grouped the positive practice under the themes we developed for housing services provided by local authorities. These are:

- landlord services – including repairs and maintenance, estate management, tenancy enforcement, rent collection and tenant participation (Section 1);
- community housing services – including homelessness, housing advice and urban renewal (including private sector grants) (Section 2); and
- strategy and enabling – including housing needs assessment, liaison with housing associations and the provision of affordable housing through the planning system (Section 3).

Section 4 assesses the improvements that some authorities have made to their services after initial inspections.

This year our Annual Review is published in two parts. This second part complements the first, in which we offer an overview of the work of local authority housing services in the year and also review the work of the Commission itself, evaluating what we achieved over the 12 months, not just through inspection but more generally in seeking to drive improvements in the delivery of housing services. Hard copies of Part I are available free of charge from:

Audit Commission Publications,
PO Box 99,
Wetherby
LS23 7JA
Tel: 0800 502030

Copies of both parts of the Annual Review can be downloaded from our website: www.audit-commission.gov.uk

The Annual Review covers English and Welsh housing services.

The Audit Commission would like to thank Housing Quality Network for their assistance in preparing this part of our Annual Review.
Section 1: Landlord Services

EXHIBIT 1
Landlord services provided by local authorities
The key housing services delivered to local authority tenants and leaseholders.

Source: Audit Commission
A local authority’s landlord services are of critical importance to its tenants and leaseholders. These are outward-facing services that have a major influence on people’s quality of life. Under the Housing Inspectorate’s definition, landlord services encompass business planning, estate and tenant management, tenant participation, rent collection, lessee services, sheltered housing and repairs and maintenance (Exhibit 1).

The Government believes that local housing authorities should consider splitting their landlord function from their strategic and other housing functions. In England there are incentives to facilitate this, notably by encouraging councils to establish arm’s length management organisations (ALMOs) to carry out the landlord functions. We have played a major role in this Government initiative because the funds available for ALMOs to repair and improve their housing can only be released following a favourable inspection score. Since July 2002, ALMOs have needed to secure a good/2 star score for their service before they can access the funding on offer. For 2002/03 the Government has made £160 million available; and for 2003/04 £300 million will be available to bring the housing stock managed by ALMOs up to the ‘Decent Homes’ standard.

Local authority tenants have become increasingly concerned about antisocial and criminal behaviour on housing estates. Councils have responded by introducing a number of measures to combat behaviour of this kind. The positive practice here highlights some of the measures designed to address this growing problem.

Most of our reports in the year were on various aspects of the landlord function. Overall, the Review covers 182 published inspection reports. Of these, 121 were of housing management services. The distribution of these inspections across different local authority types is set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London boroughs</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan authorities</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitary authorities</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shire districts</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh unitaries</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>121</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 and exhibit 2 show how these services were scored for current delivery and prospects for improvement. Only just over one-fifth of services were judged as good or excellent. Two-thirds, however, were judged as having excellent prospects for improvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospects for Improvement</th>
<th>How good is the service?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>17%</strong></td>
<td><strong>61%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Housing Inspectorate*
Forty-seven inspections covered repairs and maintenance. These inspections looked at responsive repairs, planned maintenance and capital programming, performance management and procurement. Where applicable, inspectors also assessed the councils’ strategic plans to meet the Government’s Decent Homes targets. Relatively few (only 15 per cent) were judged as good/excellent. Indeed, no local housing authority delivered excellent repairs and maintenance services in the 12-month period. However, the prospects for improvement were relatively good, with 68 per cent judged as having promising/excellent prospects to deliver better services in future (Table 2 and Exhibit 3).

Table 2
Repairs and maintenance inspection scores: July 2001 to June 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospects for improvement</th>
<th>How good is the service?</th>
<th>Excellent Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Housing Inspectorate
Exhibit 3
Repairs and maintenance inspection reports: July 2001 to June 2002
Most of these services were judged as having promising prospects for improvement.

Source: Housing Inspectorate
Positive practice from inspection reports

We highlight here positive practice from our inspection reports. It is classified under the ‘key elements’ and criteria adopted by the Commission for evaluating housing services under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework.

During the year we published two reports that gained a 3 star/excellent rating. These were:
- Derby City Council – Housing Services and Sustainable Estates;
- Westminster City Council – Lessee Services and Home Ownership.

Derby was also rated as having ‘excellent prospects for improvement’, while Westminster’s prospects were ‘promising’.

Derby City Council
The key characteristic of this service can be summarised as ‘what the housing service does, it does well’. Service delivery is underpinned by:
- tenants and leaseholders being actively involved in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services;
- service standards that are set, delivered, monitored and publicised;
- committed, motivated and well-trained staff;
- priorities that are linked to overall corporate objectives and elected members who are committed to their delivery;
- policies influenced by up-to-date information on stock condition, customer satisfaction and best practice; and
- regularly commissioned research and partnership working with others that is regularly demonstrated.

Overall, landlord performance compares favourably with nearest neighbours and, mostly, is above the average for the group.

The inspection report highlighted specific features of Derby’s housing management service that demonstrated positive practice:
- Tenants and others are actively encouraged to monitor their satisfaction with services, and this is demonstrated through tenants and leaseholders undertaking their own reality checks.
- Access to services is through 15 local housing offices that publicise their opening times and out-of-hours and emergency contact details. They are wheelchair accessible and have toilets for disabled people. Induction loops and interpreting services are also available.
- Within a stigmatised neighbourhood, partnership working with the Police and the Youth Offending Team is focused on burglary reduction and other initiatives to curb youth crime. On the back of this initiative, levels of antisocial behaviour and crime fell by 20 per cent.
- Community Watch Patrols on certain estates enhance security with two-person teams operating from dedicated equipped and liveried transit vans, which carry mobile CCTV equipment.
- Effective partnership working with the Police has seen staff from both services sharing office accommodation and joint walkabouts on estates. This initiative has complemented the Community Watch Patrols.
- Faced with rising arrears, Derby commissioned research from the Centre for Housing Policy at York University, which identified significant underclaiming of benefits and led to the creation of a Mobile Advice Team. An estimated £59,000 of additional benefits is now being claimed annually by Council tenants.

Derby achieves 99 per cent performance on gas servicing as part of planned maintenance. The approach embraces both incentives and sanctions – the latter includes use of hazard strips across front doors where access cannot be negotiated.

In support of the national and corporate drive on energy efficiency, a roadshow trailer tours the City giving advice to households.

Tenants and leaseholders are empowered through deciding the allocation of £500,000 of capital expenditure on improvements to estates.

Advertising boards in front gardens mirror private sector ‘for sale’ signs to facilitate mutual exchanges of council homes.

**Westminster City Council**

Westminster’s best value review covered all statutory functions and activities relating to the Council’s leaseholder, right to buy and home ownership services.

The inspectors highlighted several positive features of the service:

- Leaseholders valued assistance from frontline staff, giving a 92 per cent satisfaction rate to the Home Ownership Service.
- Queries were dealt with quickly, efficiently and accurately through tailored IT systems.
- A ‘Lessees Handbook’ and tailored leaflets and literature provided information to leaseholders.
- Proactive marketing by the Home Ownership Service was well regarded; an information pack containing financial advice was considered particularly useful.
- Home visits for vulnerable applicants, confidential interviews and links with other agencies that provided independent advice all contributed to high levels of customer care.
- Inspectors particularly commended the average 84 per cent success rate in processing Right to Buy applications within statutory time limits.
- A Lessees Mutual Exchange Scheme (designed in-house) facilitates moves without the need for the services of an estate agent.
- A freehold sales scheme helps Council lessees to buy the freehold of the blocks where they live; through this system, leaseholders can become responsible for managing their own homes.
- Speedy and effective billing procedures and clear arrangements for determining service charges have been developed.
- Service charges are robustly administered and collection rates are good.
- Flexible payment options help lessees to pay annual service charges and offer a variety of payment methods.
- A range of schemes help leaseholders to pay for major works.
- Extensive performance management information monitors performance against plans.

Other positive practice identified from a wide range of inspection reports follows. It is based on the framework developed under CPA.
Housing management and housing revenue account (HRA) business planning

Developing a well-informed and viable housing business plan

We commended the City of Westminster for its sound business planning framework, together with its strategic approach to identifying major works schemes using high-quality data. To maintain the quality of this information, the Council negotiated an ‘Alliancing Agreement’ to share information between contractors. At the time of the inspection six housing providers managed services for over 20,000 homes across 17 contract areas.

On the basis of the robust Business Plan and accurate stock data, Westminster identified a £61.7 million shortfall against its investment requirements and produced a sound case for bidding for additional funding under the Government’s ALMO programme.

Source: Housing Inspectorate report

Developing effective arrangements for tenant consultation and participation

Ipswich Borough Council’s commitment to customer choice and involvement was reflected in STATUS survey results showing that 85 per cent of tenants were either satisfied or very satisfied with the services that they received. The structure for tenant participation involves a range of area-based forums (chaired by a local councillor) with delegated budgets for estate improvements of £12,000 each. Representatives from each of the forums make up the Borough-wide tenant panel responsible for implementing the Authority’s Tenant Participation Compact (TPC). A free community-training programme for tenants and residents underpins this structure.

Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Councils’ tenant participation model was also commended. The Rochdale Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (ROFTRA) is an umbrella body covering 36 groups. It, and the numerous tenant groups, receive £145,000 each year to support their activities. This finance has helped ROFTRA to produce a business plan and develop its own website. ROFTRA produces information for new tenants and provides training opportunities for active tenant organisations.

Within a framework of an Authority-wide TPC, 11 estate-based compacts exist and seven others were being developed at the time of the inspection. A separate compact exists for black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, together with a Young People’s Compact. The Authority has encouraged tenant management and two Estate Management Boards have been set up together with a housing co-operative (covering the Clover Hall Estate).

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea’s Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) has 2,000 leaseholders and 7,500 tenants. Many of these leaseholders have bought from initial Right to Buy applicants. Section 20 notices advise leaseholders of the costs of works to the fabric of their properties. These notices can cause friction between leaseholders and their landlords. Extensive consultation arrangements at the TMO have resulted in the production of indicative charges when contracts are at a feasibility stage. In addition, close working arrangements with local estate agents have helped to develop the leaseholder service, which has borrowed extensively from best practice in the private sector.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Providing effective tenancy management

In many parts of the area covered by Mansfield District Council, there is high unemployment and social deprivation, and antisocial behaviour has been a prominent concern for tenants. A strategic partnership with the Police has been developed to promote community safety issues on estates. This has included an information-sharing protocol between the Police and the housing service. The Mansfield Partnership Against Crime involves the Police, housing, and education services, as well as the Youth Offending Team. The partnership has set a strategic framework for addressing criminal and antisocial behaviour on estates. The Authority’s successful mediation service is part-funded through the housing revenue account (HRA) and the Coalfield Regeneration Trust.

Westminster City Council’s published service standards include a commitment to accompany prospective tenants on all viewings. Staff explain that some minor repairs may be carried out after a new tenant has moved in. A comprehensive Welcome Pack is also given to all new tenants. The Council requires its housing management providers to visit all new tenants on three occasions in the first year of a tenancy (within three months, six months and with the third visit during the last month of the introductory tenancy). This requirement aims to ensure a smooth transition to a secure tenancy for the tenant.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Maximise the collection of rent due

Rochdale’s performance on rent collection was above the average for all metropolitan districts. The Council’s rent service seeks to ensure that tenants’ incomes are maximised (through assistance with benefit claims, for instance) but at the same time it is run to minimise arrears on the rent account. The Authority provides a variety of payment methods for tenants, including:

- cash collection from home;
- payment at 14 local housing offices;
- by cheque or standing order; and
- payment at a town centre office.

The Improvement Plan commits the Authority to extending methods of payment to direct debit and debit cards. A rigorous examination of the cost of transaction methods was carried out, which concluded that ‘door-to-door collection’ was by far the most expensive method. Having this information at hand allowed elected members and tenants to make clear decisions on the best methods for collecting rent.

In Rochdale’s multicultural setting, the determination to ‘combat poverty and social exclusion’ impressed our inspectors. Measures included:

- advice workshops and surgeries across communities, for example, at the Bangladeshi Association;
- bi-lingual staff and the cascading of basic language skills to other staff;
- benefit take-up campaigns and arrears action days with housing benefit officer support; and
- debt advice packs developed with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).
Inspectors commended Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council for the wide range of payment methods available to tenants, including cash offices, ‘swipecards’ at post offices, standing orders, direct debit and ‘easy pay’ cash machines at the large Chelmsley Wood Estate. The Council processes 98 per cent of new housing benefit claims within 14 days. New tenants are given a clear comprehensive ‘sign up’ pack containing wide-ranging information about rent payments and tenants rights and responsibilities. The Council was also commended for using the CAB for benefits advice. The CAB is directly funded by the Council. The rent collection service was judged cost-effective compared to other authorities.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Effective management of estates and their environments

Westminster City Council has a dedicated team to support community safety and it is pursuing a number of initiatives to reduce crime and nuisance. These have included an investment of £1 million each year to improve security on its estates and £200,000 annually for local initiatives to combat nuisance. The Council has an ambitious programme to continue its efforts over the coming years.

The Councils published standards state:

We take all reports seriously and have developed a wide range of initiatives to combat nuisance, harassment and antisocial behaviour.
We will respond to all calls about nuisance and antisocial behaviour within 20 minutes if the behaviour is occurring at the time, or within 24 hours of all other incidents.
We will remove offensive graffiti within 12 hours of it being reported and all other graffiti within 24 hours.
We will offer independent professional mediation in appropriate cases.

Ashfield District Council had established the use of estate-agent-type advertising for immediate re-lets prior to the roll-out of choice-based lettings nationally. The Council improves empty properties in low demand areas to a higher standard than normal and advertises them in the local press. The Authority has undertaken follow-up surveys on all ‘new tenancies’ and uses the feedback it receives to influence service developments.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Delivering efficient and effective sheltered housing services, where provided

Relatively few Housing Inspectorate reports have specifically covered sheltered housing. Only two reports within the review period, at Hyndburn Borough Council and Tamworth Borough Council, delivered a good sheltered housing service. Both of these services were judged as having promising prospects for improvement.

In both cases the key elements were:

● high customer satisfaction ratings (about 95 per cent);
● well-motivated and trained staff;
● good procedure manuals to help staff to carry out their tasks;
● commitment from elected members to best value and improvement planning;
● robust and deliverable improvement plans developed using SMART targets; and
● effective working relations with health, social services and voluntary sector partners.

S – specific; M – measurable; A – agreed; R – realistic; T – timebound.
Hyndburn had previously provided an alarm service for some 1,200 older people, and while receiving very high levels of customer satisfaction, this was not deemed cost-effective. Also, the service could not operate to Association of Social Alarm Providers (ASAP) standards. The best value review resulted in the outsourcing of the 24-hour Control Centre and the consequent savings were re-invested to fulfil tenants’ request for increased warden presence. Current services were delivered to a high standard. Our inspectors also commented favourably on the Councils’ Asset Management Plan for its sheltered stock.

At Tamworth, in addition to high levels of satisfaction from customers and other stakeholders with both the sheltered housing and Home Link Service, the Authority had developed local performance indicators (PIs) for both services. The Council had given a ‘quality promise’ to fit Lifeline phones within five working days of referral.

The Review of the Community Alarm Service at Dacorum Borough Council, while not directly relating to the sheltered housing service, re-affirmed the Authority’s commitment to providing 24-hour re-assurance services to older people. But a comparison exercise found that the in-house service fell well below ASAP standards. Under the challenge element of best value, the contract for the service was tendered in 2001 and awarded to a private company specialising in community alarm services. The contract now complies with 96 out of the 97 ASAP Code of Practice requirements and has delivered a saving of 56 per cent on the previous year’s operating costs.
Repairs and maintenance

Setting a strategic long-term approach to maintaining decent and sustainable homes

Unsurprisingly, the development of a well-informed and viable Housing Business Plan has underpinned the City of Westminster’s ability to take a comprehensive approach to options for meeting the Government’s Decent Homes target. This helped the Authority to develop its bid for ALMO status.

Similarly, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea reviewed all its stock investment options, covering responsive repairs, planned maintenance and the capital programme. At the time of the inspection, the TMO was responsible for responsive and planned maintenance, and the Council for the capital programme. In these circumstances, co-operation and partnership between the local authority and the TMO is vital. Their joint working has allowed them to consider future stock options on a comprehensive basis. Following this exercise Kensington and Chelsea transferred the management of its housing stock to an ALMO in late 2002 and is included in Round 2 of the programme.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Engaging effectively with tenants about the maintenance of their homes

North Hertfordshire District Council enhanced its safety and security works in response to tenant concerns so that they constituted some 67 per cent of the housing capital and planned maintenance programmes. The work embraces door entry systems, neighbourhood improvement, and tenant security schemes. Tenants are offered choices on home security enhancements and there is a designated security standard for all Council homes. In addition, the Council invests significant resources in asbestos removal and gas appliance servicing.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Managing effective planned maintenance and capital investment programmes

A stock condition survey in November 2001 confirmed that St. Albans District Council was achieving its objective to ‘sustain a rolling programme of planned maintenance and improvements so as to maintain the stock in good condition, energy efficient and in a safe state of repair’. The survey found that:

- externally the properties were in good condition, reflecting constant investment over previous years; and
- an effective cyclical re-decoration programme had ensured that many external elements had not deteriorated ahead of normal life expectations

St. Albans is in the top quartile of district authorities for energy efficiency. All properties have modern gas central heating, virtually all are double-glazed and all tenants are given smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors. The SAP ratings of 59 are higher than those prevailing in owner-occupier properties in the district. Tenant satisfaction levels were high.

At Kensington and Chelsea, over-programming in the light of previous experience has helped to achieve delivery of the capital programme at approximately 96 per cent of planned expenditure. Our inspectors found that the quality of work was high, as was involvement by residents, who have been actively associated with managing capital projects for many years. In this local authority, tenant representatives serve on interviewing panels for consultant and contractor appointments, tenants associations are consulted on the design brief for contracts, and tenants associations are invited to comment on scheme proposals before they are considered by members.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

I The Standard Assessment Procedure for measuring the energy ratings of buildings.
At Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, a stock condition survey had been recently completed at the time of the inspection and tenants were surveyed about their priorities for repairs and improvements. The use of ‘tenant co-ordinators’ to liaise with the Council and contractors on major works has worked effectively. Tenants are able to influence the design of works and are presented with options where appropriate. This has resulted in extra investment on low-demand estates.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Running efficient and effective responsive repairs services

Bolton’s estate-based Mobile Repair Service provides a fast and effective service, which is highly regarded by tenants. Twenty teams operate Borough-wide. They are multi-skilled and work from vehicles with an imprest stock of materials, which match the needs of local housing areas. Individual teams are under the direct control of local estate managers. This service has been developed following feedback from tenants, who have helped to monitor and design the repairs and maintenance service over a number of years.

The London Borough of Croydon provides a ‘Green Repairs Guide’ to all tenants, making repairs reporting easier. The guide is linked to job/fax documentation used by the customer services teams to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the repair diagnosis process. This has contributed to a satisfaction level of over 86 per cent. PIs also show that over 99 per cent of appointments were kept in 1999/2000.

Pembrokeshire County Council demonstrates excellent performance in delivering responsive repairs to customers in a mainly rural area. The Authority offers a flexible and efficient appointment system on a ‘seven-day-a-week’ basis, accessed by freephone. Its planned maintenance programmes are driven by up-to-date stock condition information and it has installed hard-wired smoke alarms in all its properties.

South Bedfordshire District Council has introduced a computerised diagnostic package for repairs reporting at the Council’s reception desks. All repairs are undertaken by private contractors and where an appointment is missed without 24 hours’ notice, a compensation payment of £10 becomes due and is deducted from the contract payment.

At Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council inspectors found efficient use of ‘hand-held’ technology by housing repairs inspectors to input repair details while on site. The system also allowed staff to download repairs requests onto the mainframe for onward transmission to the repairs contractor. Positive practice included the use of a separate schedule of rates for empty properties. This replaced the day-to-day repair rates, which were significantly more expensive.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Improving performance management and procurement

The London Borough of Croydon has externalised its responsive repair contracts for four areas. In addition to fast-tracking the letting of empty properties, a contract has been placed with a separate organisation, which has resulted in 45 per cent of empty properties being available for letting within 48 hours. Estate caretakers oversee repairs and improvements to 75 per cent of the stock. They report the repairs and monitor progress to completion, particularly on communal areas. Caretakers also visit all new tenants to help them to settle into their new homes. During these visits they show tenants how to use their central heating systems (among other things).
The Borough of Poole has demonstrated that ‘getting the basics right’ is a fundamental building block for increasing customer satisfaction and confidence. The successful introduction of a repairs appointment system and improvements in the quality and speed of repairs, coupled with re-let times for empty properties at less than four weeks, have all contributed to improved services. During 2001/02, 98 per cent of urgent repairs and 96 per cent of all other repairs were completed within Government timescales. The emphasis on planned repairs (74 per cent planned; 26 per cent responsive) and the introduction of a partnering contract, all developed with customers’ representatives at the centre of the decision-making process, is evidence of positive practice.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Section 2: Community housing services

Exhibit 4
Community housing services provided by local authorities
Housing services that local authorities provide to the general population of an area, often those in the greatest need.

Source: Audit Commission

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Community housing services are delivered primarily to residents who are not the tenants or lessees of the local council (Exhibit 4). Some of these services help people in housing need to secure accommodation through advice, the housing register or the homelessness service. Community housing services also help people living in poor private sector housing conditions through grant aid and other means.

During the year, 43 inspection reports assessed the community housing services delivered by the following types of local authorities.

- London boroughs: 8
- Metropolitan authorities: 3
- Unitary authorities: 3
- Shire districts: 25
- Welsh unitaries: 4
- Total: 43

Table 3 and exhibit 5 show that only 14 per cent of current services were deemed good/excellent. Once again, though, our inspectors found better prospects for improvement. Two-thirds of inspected services were judged as having at least promising prospects. Only one authority was judged as delivering an excellent community housing service (in this case, its homelessness and housing advice service).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Community housing services inspection scores: July 2001 to June 2002</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prospects for improvement</td>
<td>How good is the service?</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit 5</th>
<th>Community housing inspection reports: July 2001 to June 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most community housing services were judged as fair.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Housing Inspectorate
Most of the inspection reports published on this service area between July 2001 and June 2002 covered homelessness and housing advice functions, either alone or as part of a larger service area.

**Housing needs: homelessness and housing advice, housing register, allocations**

The inspections spanned a period when the Homelessness Act 2002 was debated, finally being passed into law in February 2002. Much of the new Act came into force in August 2002 and many authorities were preparing to implement the changes in statute. The key changes included:

- the introduction of new priority need groups;
- the requirement to carry out a review of homelessness services and resources and to prepare a Homelessness Strategy (by July 2003); and
- a new emphasis on preventing homelessness.

In addition, the Government set a target of ending the use of bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation for families with children, other than in emergencies, by March 2004. The B&B Unit within the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) began to work with the 42 authorities with the highest use of B&B and required them to produce B&B Reduction Action Plans. The scale of homelessness has continued to increase for many authorities, leading to greater use of temporary accommodation. Many authorities in London and the south east will find the requirement to tackle the use of B&B a significant challenge.

Single-tier and district councils in England were also preparing for the CPA that was set to focus on homelessness, particularly where stock had been transferred. The preparations for CPA, the focus on homelessness in the Beacon Status Initiative (Round 4), and the implementation of the Homelessness Act, put homelessness at the centre of the housing policy debate during the year under review.

The small number of 2 star/good ratings show that considerable improvement is needed in this field, if the Governments aims, as set out in *More Than a Roof*, are to be achieved. Derby’s inspection report covering all private sector housing responsibilities, including homelessness, falls just outside the period of the Annual Report (it was published in June 2001), but due to its 3 star/excellent rating with excellent prospects for improvement we have included it in our positive practice examples.

Many of the inspections of this service have been carried out in authorities that have transferred their housing stock. Some have contracted their homelessness and/or housing advice services to housing associations or other contractors, and in others the service remains with the council while the stock is managed externally.

Many authorities were also reviewing their allocations schemes during this period with a view to introducing choice-based lettings, as set out in the Housing Green Paper published in 2000. Our inspections came quite early in the development of many of these initiatives, and it was mostly too soon to evaluate the outcomes.

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I  [www.homelessness.odpm.gov.uk/homelessness](http://www.homelessness.odpm.gov.uk/homelessness)


IV  *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All*, DETR (now ODPM), April 2000.
Private sector functions: grants, enforcement and housing conditions

Very few of these services merited good or excellent ratings. The strengths of the 3 star/excellent Urban Renewal Service in Wigan are summarised here for comparison, although the report falls outside the review period. Many of the reports identify weaknesses: in particular, few authorities were administering either renovation grants or disabled facilities grants in an efficient manner that minimised the time taken to make assessments and decisions. Although information to the public was often of good quality, several authorities did not explain what the process would be or how decisions would be taken. Finally, there was a notable lack of strategic thinking on interventions to tackle conditions in the private sector, particularly for houses in multiple occupation.

Local authorities are expected to develop strategic approaches to improving conditions in the private sector, as well as administering grant systems efficiently and transparently. Their statutory duties to administer grants, including disabled facilities grants, are often complemented in the best authorities by services from partners, such as home improvement agencies. Here, there are usually good relationships with private landlords. Other partnerships are important in this area of work, notably with social services departments and occupational therapists. Effective liaison is crucial with private landlords and contractors taking on house repairs and improvements. In the enforcement arena, local authorities need to ensure that there is strong communication between their environmental health teams and housing advisers, and they must work effectively with lawyers and housing advisers.

Changes in the renovation grant system in both England and Wales came into force in April 2002. The changes had not been fully implemented during the year, with many authorities still developing new ways of setting priorities.

Positive practice from inspection reports

Headings in this section are taken from the criteria for CPA inspections. This review focuses primarily on the reports carrying 2 and 3 star ratings for each category. There are additional notes for positive aspects of work picked out by inspectors in 1 star reports, and pointers to indicate what led to 2 rather than 3 star ratings.

The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002.
Homelessness and housing advice

Providing an accessible and effective housing advice service

Herefordshire Council has overcome the difficulties of operating its homelessness and housing advice service in a sparsely populated rural district covering over 840 square miles. Users can access services through three area offices, and at two additional offices with an outreach/surgery arrangement at offices owned by Elgar Housing Association.

West Berkshire Council’s large area is also mainly rural, and providing advice across the whole area has proved challenging. One mechanism used to get over this is the Council’s website, which our inspectors thought contained a reasonable range of information about the housing register, homelessness and the points scheme. Surgery advice sessions were held, for example, on market day in one town, and the Council made good use of libraries to give advice and to direct people towards information in a range of leaflets. The Community Learning and Information Vehicle (CLIVe), established in partnership with the Council’s Education, Employment and Information Services, visits villages and towns over a three-weekly cycle.

Leicester City Council was commended for its efforts to respond to applicants whose first language was not English. As well as interpretation services provided by the corporate Community Language Unit, customers could get help from Refugee Action and Language Line to access the Council’s services. Arrangements were made in advance for interpreters at interviews. In addition, a number of frontline staff used a range of community languages to help people coming to the Housing Options Centre. The wide range of good quality advice leaflets is thorough and gives clear advice. Staff sent follow-up letters to all customers who had received general housing advice, confirming the advice given.

The Housing Advice Service based in the Housing Options Centre in Derby was found to be comprehensive, professional and wide ranging, with plentiful supplies of informative leaflets and well-trained, highly committed and competent staff. Staff turnover appeared to be low and this helped officers to give high-quality advice. A number of other advice services in the city, some funded by the Council, helped to ensure that independent advice was available as well.

The City of Westminster provided its housing advice and homelessness services though a centre run by a private contractor, WMS Hayward. The advice centre for the Housing Assessment and Advice Service had been improved to make the centre more welcoming and child-friendly. Leaflets could be found in the ten languages most used locally, and a new queuing system had reduced waiting times.

Herefordshire Council had put in place comprehensive service standards for the housing advice and homelessness services. Users were consulted on the standards prior to their introduction.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Administering homelessness applications in an efficient, effective and sensitive manner and in line with the Code of Guidance

Arrangements for dealing with homeless people at Derby City Council’s Housing Options Centre were accessible and well resourced. Interview rooms allowed privacy for confidential exchanges; the centre was accessible for wheelchair users; and there were other facilities, such as a freephone line for people seeking private rented accommodation. Staff specialising in advising young people and people with care needs were based in the centre, and they worked constructively and sensitively with these clients. Decisions on homelessness applications were made rapidly and the average at the time of the inspection was eight days.
Herefordshire Council had produced comprehensive procedures on homelessness. A structured system tracked the progress of each application with formal monitoring by senior staff. The trail of decision making was easy to follow in files that had a complete record of actions and decisions, including the decision letter and all other appropriate correspondence. Homelessness staff were skilled, experienced, well motivated and very positive about the challenges to improve services in the best value review. Staff received regular training and updates on housing-related matters and annual appraisals as part of the Council’s annual staff review and development process. Staff valued the support that they received from managers.

Inspectors acknowledged Nottingham City Council’s excellent homelessness initiatives, some of which had received national acclaim. A wide range of homelessness services were based at the Housing Choice Centre, where a significant number of initiatives were targeted at BME customers. Although high numbers of households were placed in temporary accommodation, the Council had kept use of B&B low, and these short stays were in any case in high standard accommodation. There was a good range of temporary supported provision, and the Council had developed a range of resettlement support services. The Council offered good services in response to domestic violence, and inspectors praised the initiatives for tackling repeat homelessness. The Council was particularly commended for developing many effective partnerships with private landlords as well as voluntary agencies, and for making good use of resources to produce positive outcomes, particularly for rough sleepers and asylum seekers.

Prevention of homelessness is a key strand of Government policy. A number of authorities have developed initiatives on this. Worthing Borough Council was praised for effective liaison between officers for homelessness and environmental health, with speedy communication to tackle instances of illegal eviction and harassment. The Council also worked with local residents and agencies and a housing association to bring back into use two blocks of empty flats for use as temporary and permanent accommodation.

Having insufficient funds to access privately rented accommodation can act as a major barrier for young people, and others, to finding appropriate housing. A number of authorities have developed rent deposit schemes that prevent homelessness by increasing access to long-term accommodation. Derby City Council was praised for its Bond Bank, which has a good record of assisting people to gain tenancies in the private sector.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Ensure the availability of temporary accommodation of a suitable nature and location and supporting the needs of those placed in such accommodation

Minimising the use of B&B and other temporary accommodation is a key target for all local authorities. Despite considerable pressure from large numbers of applications from homeless people, Derby City Council kept the number of households in all types of temporary accommodation to a minimum. In 1999/2000, fewer than five households (on average) were in hostels and other temporary accommodation and the average stay in B&B was one week. This was achieved through leasing schemes with housing associations, efficient management of the Council’s temporary accommodation and a proactive and comprehensive approach to service delivery.

The London Borough of Barnet has a number of joint working arrangements to support its more vulnerable homeless applicants. The Council works with partners in all sectors to provide floating support to people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities, and vulnerable young people. Temporary and supported accommodation is provided for vulnerable young people and other groups, including people with complex needs, such as ex-offenders, older refugees, single homeless Irishmen, and people with HIV/AIDS. In addition, seven housing associations have signed an agreement to provide move-on accommodation for people in these groups. There are joint assessment panels for some groups, and the Council employs welfare officers to support vulnerable tenants in secure tenancies.
The City of Westminster was the highest user of B&B in England and Wales at the time of its inspection. It had taken a number of measures to reduce the costs of B&B and had set a series of challenging targets for reducing the use of, and length of stay in, B&B. The Council was planning to bring more permanent housing association homes into use and to increase the number of self-contained units for homeless applicants. The Council also aimed to ensure that it used good quality accommodation, and supported people staying in temporary accommodation. It had appointed an education liaison officer to track family placements in temporary accommodation and to liaise with schools; and had employed specialist staff for people with severe mental health problems. All movements within temporary accommodation of people with mental health needs were circulated weekly to health and social and community services staff. A team of health support workers ensured that homeless households had access to appropriate health services.

Derby City Council employs a young persons housing officer to advise and support homeless young people aged 16 – 24. The officer interviews all 16 and 17 year olds to see what support they would need to sustain a tenancy. There is a well-attended twice-weekly surgery open to any applicant, and a post-tenancy visit for all under 25s. The officer has a good understanding of the nature and causes of youth homelessness, and works closely and effectively with other agencies, including specialist housing providers, to offer a co-ordinated, positive, and caring service. The inspectors praised this important and effective element of an integrated homelessness service.

Worthing Borough Council and its neighbouring authorities are working together to improve standards in B&B and leased properties. This ensures that local authorities are not competing against each other for the same accommodation, and that they can together raise awareness of the particular issues faced by councils and residents on the English south coast.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Effectively administering the local registration scheme for housing

East Hampshire District Council (which has transferred its housing stock) maintains a joint housing register for applicants to housing associations in its area. Applicants felt that the form was easy to understand and to fill in, and they had received clear information about how the register worked. The IT system that supported the register was easy to use; an important factor when a number of different landlords are involved. The Council was also praised for the factsheet it gave to asylum seekers about local housing.

Providing information to housing register applicants, so that they can make informed choices for the future, is a key function of local housing authorities. Epping Forest District Council was praised for its regular newsletters to applicants, and also for estate agency-type adverts for mutual exchanges. These are widely displayed in the Council offices and were shortly to be placed on the Council’s website (at the time of the inspection).

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Allocating homes according to local allocation policies that, as a minimum, meet legal requirements

Local authorities have an important task in ensuring that applicants to their housing registers understand the system and are confident that their applications will be dealt with speedily and efficiently. The London Borough of Ealing was praised for the effective management of its housing register, and for dealing with nominations to other landlords efficiently. The medical assessments scheme had been restructured and the resulting improvements provided greater flexibility, as well as reduced costs. The Council’s choice-based lettings pilots for sheltered housing and on one estate appeared to have achieved service improvements and efficiencies.

Westminster City Council published a housing assessment and allocations policy document in December 2001. This brought together policies on homelessness, the housing register and tenant transfers in a clear and accessible way. The Council had also pursued a number of initiatives to increase the options for rehousing, including a choice-based lettings pilot led by Camden, the appointment of a dedicated choice and mobility officer, and participation in the LAWN (London Alliance West, North) project. These initiatives produced flexibility and choice, and better use of stock. In the pilot choice-based lettings scheme, more local applicants had been able to access housing in their preferred areas.

Seeking to maximise housing choice

High-quality and up-to-date information is essential if potential tenants are to access the widest housing choice. Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council was praised for its approach to information provision. Allocations policies were clear and easy to understand, and information to customers was managed well. Every area housing office had a file containing the ‘top 20’ leaflets for customers. The leaflets, available for customers to take away with them, were kept up to date across all 17 offices. The Council planned to open two housing property shops in partnership with local housing associations and an estate agent. These outlets were to have longer opening hours than in other parts of the Council, similar to shop opening hours. This was part of the move to combat low demand, alongside the introduction of choice-based lettings for 25 per cent of the Council’s stock.

Source: Housing Inspectorate report

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Private sector housing

Setting a long-term strategic approach to improving living conditions in the private sector

Derby City Council has actively promoted the importance of home maintenance. It has produced a booklet in partnership with a local builders merchant and the Derbyshire Building Society, giving practical advice about all aspects of maintenance and repairs. This is handed out to people applying for grants and to those whose properties have been improved through Group Repair Schemes. Derby has developed considerable expertise with projects of this kind. High-quality specifications are in place and the schemes are far more cost-effective than individual repair schemes. This efficient use of resources meant that a larger number of properties in the private sector could be brought up to standard. The Council has also helped to set up the Disabled Persons Housing Service, which provides specialist help and advice, as well as helping disabled people to arrange improvements to their homes.

A number of schemes in Westminster were designed to bring private sector empty properties back into use and to improve physical conditions in others. There was an active Compulsory Purchase Order programme, a private sector lettings scheme, grants targeted on empty properties and support for the local home improvement agency (HIA). In addition, the Council held an annual advice fair for over 600 landlords, with workshops and information about various schemes for improving properties in Westminster. A three-year Houses in Multiple Occupation Programme targets more than 1,200 large properties each year in an effort to persuade landlords to improve living conditions for their tenants.

Derbyshire Dales District Council was commended for its engagement with the health sector to identify housing improvements that could lead to health gains in local communities. The ‘Farm Out’ project, led by the High Peaks and Dales Primary Care Group (PCG), was beginning to look at the health and quality of life of farmers. A public health nurse was employed to identify vulnerable people living in poor conditions. Inspectors thought that this project had the potential to be replicated in deprived rural communities across the country.

Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council was praised for its targeted approach to area renewal based on good quality stock condition data collected by external consultants. Surveys carried out in 1996 and 2000 had been used to monitor the impact of the Council’s interventions in urban renewal, and to identify the stock in poorest condition that needed to be tackled in future years. The surveys provided not only hard data about the impact of Council initiatives on stock condition, but also information about other issues, such as the visual quality of the environment and the socio-economic factors that affect sustainability. There were strong links with other aspects of the Council’s work, such as community safety and the Local Agenda 21 strategy. The block improvement schemes had made a considerable impact on the quality of life for residents. The Council had also developed a strong relationship with the contractors registered on its list to carry out works on private properties. The Council oversaw the monitoring of contractor performance and gauged customer satisfaction with completed work. Council-backed training programmes kept contractors informed about the latest initiatives in urban renewal. Residents had set the standards for the service so that the Council’s area renewal work had a strong customer focus.

Poor housing conditions are frequently linked to poor health. There has been a great deal of interest in identifying direct links between the two, and in how improvements in housing can benefit those with the poorest health. Powys County Council worked closely with Powys Health Alliance. Joint planning of part of a private sector stock condition survey meant that information could be collected to inform both agencies about how housing investment could be steered towards tackling poor housing conditions and poor health at the same time.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Engaging effectively with residents and landlords about their properties

East Hampshire set up a Joint Tenants Panel, even though the Council no longer owned any housing stock. The Panel decided and set performance targets to monitor housing associations working in the local authority area. The Panel set stretching targets – for instance that 100 per cent of emergency repairs should be carried out within 24 hours. There was also a strong culture of community involvement in the area, led by the Council, which carried out yearly MORI surveys measuring tenant satisfaction and held annual housing consultation days for tenants and others. Inspectors observed good communication with other agencies, whose views and ideas were fed into the Authority’s housing strategy. This included genuine feedback from housing associations on sensitive issues through the Registered Social Landlord (RSL) Development Liaison Group.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Manage loans and grant budgets effectively

East Cambridgeshire Council worked well with the local care and repair service, which delivered a large part of the grants programme, including disabled facilities grants. The Council worked particularly closely with Care and Repair on joint efforts to help older and disabled people to access funds for energy efficiency and safety. Demand for renovation grants and disabled facilities grants invariably exceeds the supply of funds available. Potential applicants are often deterred from seeking grant aid because of the assessment of their financial circumstances. It is in the interests of both the applicant and the local authority for the householder to know the likely cost of associated work as soon as possible. Powys County Council carried out the financial assessment at the beginning of the application process. This helped to prevent applicants spending unnecessary time on the waiting list, only to be later refused a grant on financial grounds.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

Delivering an effective enforcement approach

Blackpool Borough Council established a Landlords’ Forum approximately two years before the inspection of their housing service. The Forum meets bi-monthly and is used by the Council to inform and consult with landlords. The Forum has set up a steering group chaired by a landlord to develop a voluntary landlord accreditation scheme.

Wigan had taken a proactive approach on issues linked to empty homes, houses in multiple occupation and the private rented sector in general. The Council adopted a new private sector housing strategy in 1997. This resulted in much higher demand for the Urban Renewal Service. The Council maintained efficiency by adopting new processes and procedures as external conditions changed. Clear enforcement policies had been published, so that residents and owners could see that the Council intended to target those properties in poorest condition and those that posed a threat to neighbouring properties and the viability of neighbourhoods as a whole.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Section 3: Strategy and enabling

Exhibit 6
Strategic and enabling housing services provided by local authorities
These services underpin the framework for the delivery of all local authority services.

All local authority housing services need to be guided by an overarching strategy that shows that the council has a clear understanding of housing needs and how those needs can be met. This strategic role is linked to the enabling function, which recognises that an authority cannot, on its own, meet all housing needs in a local community (Exhibit 6). In effect, councils need to work in partnership with other bodies (such as private developers and housing associations) to meet those needs.

Only 18 reports on the strategic and enabling role were published in the year. These inspections were undertaken in the following types of authority:

- London boroughs: 0
- Metropolitan authorities: 2
- Unitary authorities: 3
- Shire districts: 13
- Welsh unitaries: 0
- Total: 18

Table 4 and exhibit 7 shows the scores for these inspected services. Because of the small number of inspections, it is not possible to provide a meaningful breakdown by type of local authority.
Table 4
Strategy and enabling inspection scores: July 2001 to June 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospects for improvement</th>
<th>How good is the service?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 7
Strategy and enabling inspection reports: July 2001 to June 2002

There were no excellent strategy and enabling inspections scores. Prospects for improvement were mainly uncertain or promising.

Only 28 per cent of the services were rated as good, while none were excellent. However, exactly one-half were judged to have promising prospects for improvement. Ten of the inspected authorities had little or no stock left after transfer. Two of these (20 per cent) were graded as good, while the rest were fair. In contrast, three out of eight (38 per cent) of those with stock were graded as good but, given the small numbers involved, this difference must be treated with caution. Crucially, the good authorities that have transferred their stock (East Hampshire and Eastleigh, both in 1996) display many positive and innovative service features.

These 18 inspections represented only 10 per cent of the reports we published during the year, in spite of the importance of this aspect of the housing role. Even transfer authorities usually had an inspection of community services rather than of the strategic/enabling function. Authorities may not have reviewed this function because of their reliance on Government Office assessments of their housing investment programmes as a measure of performance on strategy/enabling.

The absence of a balanced local market can undermine local authority efforts to, for instance, improve private stock condition or meet the need for key-worker housing. In particular, an over supply of social housing undermines the efforts of local landlords to provide decent homes that meet tenants’ needs. Conversely, a shortage can mean that social housing is only available as tenure of last resort, thereby undermining local efforts to support more balanced communities.
Developing a viable housing strategy requires an understanding of local housing markets and their current deficiencies. Councils need to understand the range of local circumstances that might prevail, monitoring turnover, house prices, demography, migration and employment patterns. They need to identify areas where early action with local partners could mitigate such trends. Focused use of renovation grants and support to housing associations can often help.

Councils then must work with others to achieve their local objectives. Sometimes councils focus too much on their landlord role and underestimate the potential contribution from developers, private landlords and the community at large. Some councils are much more successful than others in obtaining value from Section 106 planning agreements, for instance.

The strategy must also focus on the needs of black and minority ethnic communities, either through further support for improving substandard private rented or owner-occupied housing, or through equal and fair access to social housing services.

The strategy must address the needs of the chronically sick and disabled, together with those older residents that need support. This work will culminate in strategies for supporting people in their own homes. One vital way of supporting people in their own homes is to develop a local home energy and conservation strategy.

All of these elements were touched on during the course of the year’s inspections. Our analysis is categorised in accordance with the Commission’s statement of the key aspects of service delivery in support of our approach to CPA.

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Creating a well-informed and viable housing strategy

The Welland Partnership has been established by five local authorities – Rutland County Council, Harborough District Council, Melton Borough Council, East Northampton District Council and South Kesteven District Council – to serve the needs of a rural sub-region of the East Midlands that has many common issues of housing need and service delivery. The partnership area is wholly rural and served by a number of market towns. They see the partnership as an appropriate way to develop joint working across local authority boundaries and to raise awareness of the issues for the sub-region and rural areas in general. The partnership has produced a Housing Strategy, with a number of joint action points, of which three of the main ones are:

- the study of housing markets within the Welland Partnership area;
- a common understanding of the social housing that the Partnership will aim to achieve through the planning system; and
- a development programme of new affordable homes through the allocation of Social Housing Grant to the Welland Partnership area.

There is a high level of consistency between the Housing Strategy and the draft Community Strategy in Doncaster Metropolitan Council. The first takes as its starting point the overall corporate vision for the Authority. It then spells out how those objectives can be met in a housing context. Targets are clear and challenging. For instance the strategy states:

*We will spend at least half of the money available for housing in the most deprived areas to improve homes and the environment and support other regeneration work.*

Similarly, the Community Strategy draws out the links between housing and the achievement of corporate goals:

*If people have a warm, comfortable and secure home they are able to think about working, training and positive involvement.*
Doncaster also has an imaginative approach to linking housing improvements with the achievement of non-housing goals. Targets for pupils achieving key stage 4 in education have been linked with the need for warm homes in good condition. By successfully dovetailing housing goals into the wider corporate agenda, the housing service is well placed to argue for additional resources.

East Cambridgeshire District Council collects housing needs information as part of a rolling programme of village (community) appraisals undertaken by its Economic and Community Development Team. Survey work has also been carried out by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). These studies are useful in identifying development opportunities.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

### Delivering the housing strategy

Liverpool City Council has established a Strategic Housing Partnership, which brings together the seven major social housing providers in the City and acts as a formal sub-group of the ‘Liverpool First’ regeneration partnership. Its role is to assist in developing the Housing Strategy for the City and assessing neighbourhood renewal and management options. Government Office and Housing Corporation representatives attend meetings. Initial concerns from smaller housing associations that their voice would not be heard have been addressed, and there are plans to strengthen their contribution further by establishing an online chat room and hosting periodic open meetings to discuss strategic direction.

Blackpool Borough Council has developed the Integrated Neighbourhood Initiative, which is an area-based approach to housing renewal. It brings together a number of partners and attracts funding from registered social landlords, the health authority and the ‘Civilising Cities’ programme.

The ‘Choices Steering Group’ of tenants, officers and councillors in Gloucester City Council used theatre (through a play performed by tenants and officers) to explain the various options for the future of its homes. Meetings of the Steering Group were video-recorded so that other people could watch the debate unfold.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

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As part of the housing strategy, seek to match the supply of appropriate housing with local need

Eastleigh Borough Council has embraced the principles of neighbourhood renewal in the proposed redevelopment of an 11.5 hectare decommissioned industrial site. Redevelopment is likely to be over a four-year period and extensive public consultation took place about the housing, office and open space proposals. Through negotiations the Council intends to create a balanced community of private and social housing. Affordable housing is likely to represent 20 per cent of the properties, and the intention is that these will be pepper-potted throughout the site.

Brentwood Borough Council has a limited supply of land for development and site values are high. It successfully used a Section 106 Agreement to deliver 80 new social housing homes on a prestigious site alongside private houses for sale. Those already built have an attractive appearance and the social housing is well integrated within the development.

Pembrokeshire County Council decided to extend its care and other facilities at an existing residential care site. A housing association is working with the Council to redevelop the original and an adjacent site for sheltered housing and an extra-care scheme with an EMI (Elderly Mentally Infirm) unit. The whole site is to become a ‘care village’ developed in partnership with the local NHS Trust and designed to deliver progressive levels of care to meet changing needs.
Between April 1996 and March 2001, 1,154 new homes were built in East Hampshire District Council, of which 511 (44 per cent) were for social housing. This is more than double the 18 per cent average for councils in the south east. Key factors behind this development programme include:

- devoting the total proceeds from stock transfer to housing association developments;
- incentivising the most effective associations with extra grant;
- encouraging positive relationships between the Council’s planners and local housing associations; and
- a sustained effort to find suitable development sites in predominantly rural areas.

Inspectors drew attention to the high quality of social housing and its positive impact on surrounding areas. East Hampshire District Council actively works with neighbouring Councils to maximise the availability of social housing (for example, the Council has a stake in a development at Waterlooville in Havant).

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports

**Establish effective strategic planning arrangements for supported housing services**

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea developed a matrix for matching need with support in housing schemes. All supported housing in the Royal Borough is assessed on a scale of one to five, where one represents the lowest level of support and five the highest. Applicants are also rated on a one to five scale, with one representing the highest level of need. The Resettlement Team provides the main gateway to supported housing and is the main point at which needs are assessed. It is multi-disciplinary and consists of staff from occupational therapy, nursing, mental health and substance abuse backgrounds.

The Supporting People co-ordinator at Eastleigh Borough Council provides a link between different agencies in the Borough and ensures that effort and resources are not wasted. The Council’s work to provide supported housing is proving successful in several areas, including a mixed-use scheme incorporating flats for people with visual impairment and the development of a new women’s refuge.

Through joint working, East Cambridgeshire District Council is able to influence, access and participate in policy development and initiatives in a variety of different fields, and use these to identify housing needs for the district. The Council has a floating support scheme for mental health and is facilitating a development scheme for people with learning difficulties.

Tamworth Borough Council is a member of the local Health Improvement Programme, ‘Falls Prevention Group’, which is looking at ways to prevent injuries and hospital admissions by reducing the number of falls among older people (particularly in and around the home). Details of Homelink users who activate their alarms following a fall at home are passed on to this group, so that action can be taken to prevent further injuries.

Powys County Council has introduced a ‘Safe, Warm and Secure’ scheme. It encourages health practitioners to refer home owners to the Council for financial assistance to fund urgent areas of work designed to combat the effects of cold, improve safety in and around the home and reduce the risk of crime by installing basic security measures.

Source: Housing Inspectorate reports
Section 4: Inspection and the improvement of housing services

The inspection process can generate real improvements in housing services. This is clearly demonstrated when we have re-inspected services where quite significant weaknesses had been identified initially. Here we present two examples, which show the improvements made by two housing services following their first inspections.

London Borough of Harrow – renovation grant service

The Renovation Grant Service at Harrow is managed by the Housing and Environmental Health Division of the Social Services Department. In 1999/2000, 237 grants were completed with a total value of £1.4 million. Our inspectors raised a number of concerns when they first evaluated Harrow’s Renovation Grant Service. These were:

- the time taken to process grants was excessive and even the target was outside the legal maximum of 6 months;
- there were significant delays for people applying for renovation grants and attempting to access the services of the ‘Staying Put’ team;
- there was an underspend on the grants budget, with insufficient measures in place to prevent this from recurring;
- approximately 80 per cent of grants had their value revised upwards after approval; and
- significant areas of overlap existed between the Grants and ‘Staying Put’ teams, which both adopted rigid roles and responsibilities.

A re-inspection was undertaken and the subsequent report was published in September 2002. Table 5 shows the results of the two inspections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Date of report publication</th>
<th>Current service</th>
<th>Prospects for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial inspection</td>
<td>July 2001</td>
<td>1 star/fair service</td>
<td>Will not improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up inspection</td>
<td>September 2002</td>
<td>2 star/good service</td>
<td>Promising prospects for improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Housing Inspectorate
The follow-up inspection for the London Borough of Harrow highlighted the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations from initial inspection report</th>
<th>Progress recorded at time of subsequent inspection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reset targets to ensure that they are both within legal limits and are challenging for all stages of the grant process, from initial enquiry to final payment.</td>
<td>There has been a clear improvement in performance times and clear, challenging targets have been set for each stage of the grants process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set challenging targets for the time a person has to wait for an initial visit and for the proportion of grants that have their value revised.</td>
<td>There has been significant improvement in target times, including those for disallowed facilities grants, which have seen grant processing times fall from 21 weeks in 2000/01 to 6 weeks in 2001/02.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider working with the Builders Forum to establish an approved builders list.</td>
<td>An approved list of builders has been set up and made available to applicants. The Builders Forum is now an annual event and a quality mark approved builders scheme was due to be implemented during 2002.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconsider the integration of the Grants and Staying Put teams to reduce bureaucracy.</td>
<td>Greater integration has taken place, with joint staff meetings and the sharing of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit the service’s aims and objectives and its range of business plans and service handbooks to ensure that they are clear and easily understood by the public.</td>
<td>All leaflets and service plans have been reviewed and there is a clear improvement in overall strategy to address private sector housing issues in Harrow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase the involvement of residents, builders and other stakeholders in designing the service.</td>
<td>Focus groups and client group meetings have been established and will continue to form part of the Council’s private sector renewal strategy.</td>
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</table>
Harrow has also introduced a number of other service improvements. These include:

- revisions to the original improvement plan with no significant slippage in the implementation timetable;
- the implementation of a clear strategy for handling current financial pressures and rigorous financial monitoring;
- the implementation of outcome-based performance management systems, both for staff (in terms of performance and development) and for the grants process;
- the introduction of a clear system to target grants, taking into account Council priorities and individual need;
- the greater involvement of applicants and others in the grants process; and
- the establishment of a handy-person scheme within the ‘Staying Put’ project.

Stockport metropolitan council – housing allocations

Stockports allocations service was initially inspected in September 2000, when it was rated as poor, though our inspectors judged that it would probably improve. It was re-inspected in November 2001.

The key concerns of our inspectors in September 2000 were:

- no BME monitoring and non-compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Code of Guidance for rented housing;
- no clear service standards or targets;
- too much member involvement in prioritising individual applications;
- little involvement of customers in shaping the system;
- no common housing register with local housing associations;
- poor overall performance against relevant indicators;
- inadequate monitoring systems; and
- unclear roles and responsibilities for staff involved in allocations.

Stockport responded positively and revised the service improvement plan to incorporate the recommendations of our inspectors. The Council provided bi-monthly reports on progress in implementing the plan.

On re-inspection, we recorded the following:

On customer focus:

- the introduction of a Customer Service Charter which set clear service standards;
- a dramatic change in customer perceptions about involvement and information provided;
- a visible complaints procedure had been set up; and
- a complete review of the Tenant Participation Compact and the involvement of the Tenants Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) before introducing a revised choice-based system for allocating council housing in Stockport.

On access to services:

- compliance with the CRE Code of Practice was evident – and a diversity officer had been appointed and an equality statement adopted;
- the introduction of ‘Home Choice’ – a direct-access model of allocations which was readily accessible and publicised widely, including on the internet; there was an impressive level of interest and take-up for available accommodation;
- all registration arrangements for new and transfer applicants had been centralised, leading to consistency in policies and practices; and
accompanied viewing had been introduced, leading to a rise in acceptance rates on empty properties from 50 per cent to 95 per cent.

On performance management:
- member involvement in prioritising individual applications had ceased;
- monitoring systems were in place to ensure compliance with agreed policies and practices; and
- an integrated housing management IT system was due for installation in 2002.

Our inspectors found that ‘the quality of the allocation service has improved beyond recognition’ and believed it now delivered a ‘1 star/fair service,’ with excellent prospects for improvement.

In both case studies, substantial improvements had taken place since the initial inspections and both authorities were demonstrating good or excellent prospects for further progress. The first inspection results had galvanised both authorities to look at how their services could be improved. The prospect of re-inspection helped to focus the authorities on driving through their service improvements by a given date.

When the Inspectorate works in this way with local housing authorities, there is one clear winner: those people using the Council’s housing services.
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