

Inspection report

December 2003



Inspection Report

The LHT Group

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Summary

The Housing Corporation, the Housing Inspectorate and the inspection

- 1 In September 2003, a team of inspectors from the Audit Commission visited The LHT Group, to assess both the services that the association gives to its tenants and other customers, and how the association is trying to improve those services for the future.
- 2 The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local and national services for the public. Within the Audit Commission the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of local authority housing departments, housing associations and other forms of social landlord. In inspecting housing associations we work closely with the Housing Corporation, the statutory body which regulates housing associations. Our findings are used by the Housing Corporation in assessing whether a housing association is well governed, well managed and financially viable.
- 3 Our inspectors spoke to tenants and staff at The LHT Group and to members of the association's Board of Management. We talked to the local authorities, contractors and other organisations that work closely with the association. We visited homes that it owns and manages. We looked in particular at how well the association performs in the following seven aspects of the service:
 - ◆ maintaining homes in good condition;
 - ◆ letting homes;
 - ◆ dealing with nuisance and anti social behaviour;
 - ◆ how the association ensures that its services are sensitive to the needs of the communities it serves, including black and minority ethnic communities;
 - ◆ involving tenants in the activities of the association and tenants' influence over service delivery;
 - ◆ how customers receive services, including how complaints are managed; and
 - ◆ income management.

What is The LHT Group association?

- 4 The LHT Group is a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) with two main subsidiaries, which are also RSLs. Liverpool Housing Trust (LHT) provides housing services to the majority of the stock, whilst Cobalt Housing Association was created to receive a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer from Liverpool City Council. The recently created Cobalt did not form part of this inspection, which focused on services provided by Liverpool Housing Trust and policy, strategy and support provided by the Group. Atrium City Living is an operational arm which deals with market renting.

Assessment of the service

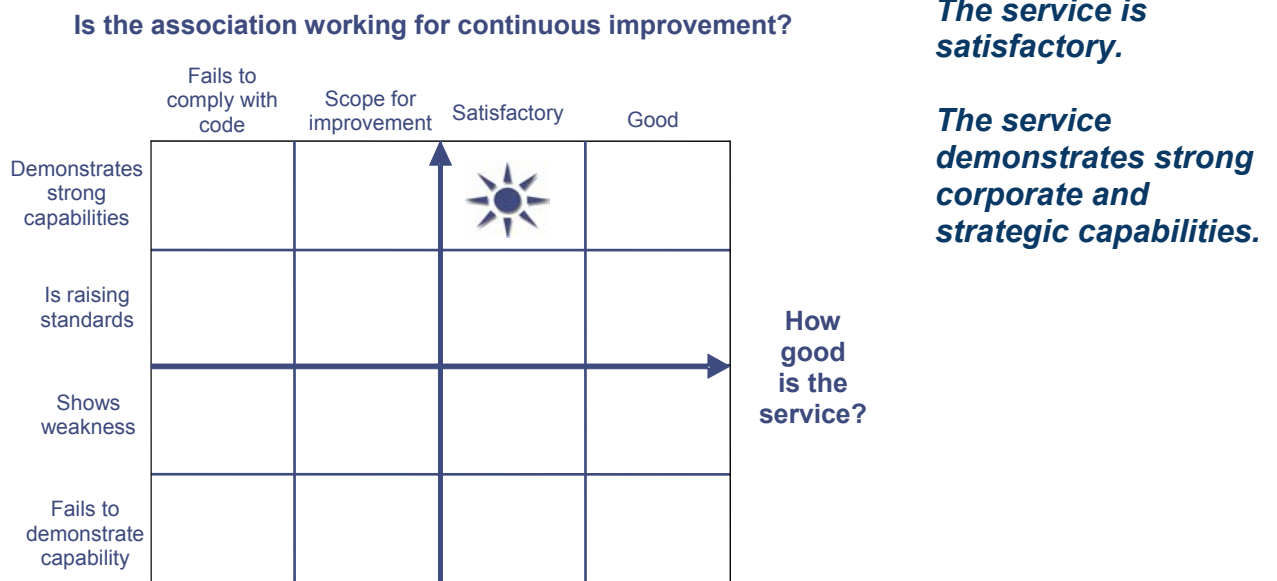
- 5 Our inspectors have assessed each service area that they inspected and have made an overall assessment for:
 - ◆ how good the association's services are; and

- ◆ whether the association is working for continuous improvement.

6 A more detailed explanation of the assessments can be found on the Housing Inspectorate website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

We have assessed LHT Group as providing a service that is satisfactory. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below. The assessment chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from failing to comply with the regulatory code (at the left-hand corner) to good (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

Assessment chart: The LHT Group - Inspection Report



The overall judgements

What we found

7 In our inspection we asked two key questions:

- ◆ how good is the service delivered to residents?

We found that the services provided were on whole **satisfactory**. We found good performance in some areas but weaknesses particularly in complaints handling and gas safety. Customer satisfaction has risen to reflect the changes that the association has made chiefly since the Housing Services Reorganisation in 2000. This report makes recommendations where we think action is needed, which for the most part the association has already recognised in its own self assessment and improvement work.

- ◆ Is the association working towards continuous improvement?

At LHT we found an organisation with a commitment to continuous improvement. It has a developed framework and a culture of performance management. This has arisen through a history of working with external consultants to apply and adapt the types of techniques available, so that it can work towards a framework that fits LHT as an organisation. Its focus on performance indicators is convincing and we found that it is taking targeted improvement seriously. In developing the Tenant 250 panel and by working with the Merseyside Community voice LHT has shown that it recognised the need to engage with a broad range of customers and the association has a history of regular surveys.

We found that the LHT Group has **strong corporate and strategic capabilities for delivering continuous improvement**.

What we found at The LHT Group?

8 This report includes sections on each of the inspected service areas. In each section there is a list of features of the service which we thought work well as well as areas for improvement. The full report should be read for the details of the inspection finding. The following are some of the main features of each service area.

Maintaining homes in good condition

- 9 The responsive repairs service works well and is being improved through a pilot scheme linking contractors into the IT system and making appointments. Good access to the service is provided through the Customer Service Centre and local offices. Performance is improving and targets increased to reflect this.
- 10 The main weaknesses in the repairs service relate to the monitoring and recording of gas safety certificates and the post inspection of void properties before lettings.
- 11 We found that there was scope for improvement in the repairs service.

Letting homes

- 12 LHT have developed marketing techniques for low demand properties and has set itself challenging targets for turning round voids. It supports a benefits advice agency and has strong links with other partners. Tenants have been consulted on the lettings policy.
- 13 We have concern about the level of nominations and that an audit trail of the lettings decisions is not being maintained. LHT need to make sure that Local

Authority approval is obtained for local lettings and that there is a procedure for staff.

- 14 Overall we found the lettings service to be satisfactory.

Dealing with nuisance and anti social behaviour

- 15 LHT respond quickly to cases of anti social behaviour and have used acceptable behaviour contracts successfully. Staff have control over small budgets which can be used for physical security measures. There are links to partner organisations and some pro-active work in the community.
- 16 The key performance indicator for this area dictates closure of cases within a month rather than resolution which was borne out by some of the case handling. The positive feature of quality checks of files was limited to general case handling and some of the letters to tenants should have been more informative. We think that LHT needs to review its approach to confidentiality.
- 17 Overall we found this service to be satisfactory.

Ensuring services are sensitive to the needs of communities

- 18 We think that equality and diversity is strength for the organisation and that the level of partnership working and initiatives is impressive. Monitoring and targets are in place and staff in the organisation has good awareness of the issues involved. Translation and interpretation are actively used.
- 19 We have raised a number of issues around the aids and adaptations service and would like to see more links at a business planning and strategic level. However, we accept that LHT have made annual budget commitments to fund adaptations which are above the average for RSL's.
- 20 There is potential for a good service in this area but we think at present the service is satisfactory.

Involving tenants in the activities of the association

- 21 LHT has a structure and budgets for formal resident involvement and involves tenants through District Committees etc. in policy and service review. It is working to broaden the types of involvement available in response to surveys and has formed a tenant's panel. Only 52 per cent of tenants expressed satisfaction with the opportunities for participation and satisfaction was lower amongst BME tenants. Whilst this is being actively developed some of the new approaches are in their early stages. For instance LHT has been a key player in the development of the Merseyside Community Voice (a panel of BME residents) but at present there is little evidence that the basic involvement structure has been adjusted to meet the needs of ethnic minorities.
- 22 We think that LHT need to work on making sure that residents are aware of opportunities for involvement and to continue to work to broaden the methods used to increase the levels of satisfaction. Having said this, we think that this service is at present satisfactory.

Services to customers

- 23 We think that the services to customers are well handled by the association. The service is monitored and benchmarked. Although much of this monitoring concentrates on the Customer Services Centre and should be broadened out to include all service areas and offices. Customer satisfaction levels are improving but are dependent on which of the three areas of operation the tenant lives in. Leaflets, newsletters and the performance report are all well presented and include translated flags.

- 24 The main are of weakness is the complaints system which, despite being developed over a number of years is not working properly. Tenants are reluctant to use it and the response times do not meet targets. Strengthening the approach to complaints should be a main focus for the organisation
- 25 We think the customer service overall is satisfactory.

Income Management

- 26 We think that the approach to arrears collection works well and is broadly sensitive to the customer. Targeting is used both at a Business plan level and at officer patch level. The performance indicators show improving performance but the success of the service is very dependent on social factors and other organisations such as the Housing Benefits service.
- 27 We think that future work on improving the service should involve users directly and widen the choices in rent payment method. There could be wider use of incentives and the estimation of arrears due to housing benefit could be improved.
- 28 We think the income management service is satisfactory.

Recommendations

- 29 The main recommendations made to the Board of Management at The LHT Group following our inspection are set out below. These should be read in conjunction with the detailed recommendations against each service area and comprise a summary for easy reference.
- ◆ Ensure tenants are kept informed at all stages of the repairs process, gather and use customer satisfaction information, clean up the monitoring database, include planned programmes on the responsive repair database and enhance the information gathered through post inspections.
 - ◆ Give contractors access to the voids database and ensure properties comply with the lettability standard through post inspections.
 - ◆ Improve gas safety monitoring and recording systems and follow up to no access.
 - ◆ Review the nominations process with the local authorities, ensure that there is an audit trail of lettings decisions, provide information to applicants on appeals against closed list decisions and make sure that new tenants are told about the complaints system at sign up.
 - ◆ Improve the security of sensitive information held on file and introduce procedures for local lettings.
 - ◆ Measure the cost of dealing with anti social behaviour and review the performance measure. Keep complainants informed about case progress and review the quality audits to include performance against the procedure. Publicise the associations ability to deal with fear of reprisal and look at the storage and release of confidential information. Introduce satisfaction monitoring.
 - ◆ Establish a Board level champion for equality and diversity and ensure that corporate documents such as the business plan include diversity as a key theme. Review some documents and action plans and increase the use of positive images in reception areas. Make sure that computer flags for alerting staff are up to date and used effectively. Emphasise the associations ability to combat harassment through case handling.

- ◆ Make sure that the service to applicants for aids and adaptations fulfils the associations stated objectives and that users are getting adequate information at all stages. Measure the service provision against published standards.
 - ◆ Continue to work to broaden and publicise the opportunities for tenant involvement and work to improve the levels of satisfaction with involvement. Involve tenants in the design of surveys and are consulted on changes to their homes and services.
 - ◆ Improve the complaints system and use it to improve services. Monitor against measurable service standards and carry out improvements to the North Office and make sure all staff complies with the service standards when dealing with complaints and anti social behaviour. Give users advice about busy call periods at the customer service centre.
 - ◆ Involve customers more in the review of income management. Take steps to rationalise the targets. Improve the way in which housing benefit arrears can be measured and look at broadening the payment methods.
- 30 We have asked The LHT Group to produce an action plan within three months to show how it intends to respond to these recommendations. The Housing Corporation keeps in regular contact with all the large housing associations that it regulates and will monitor and keep us in informed of the association's progress in working to deal with these issues.

The LHT Group response

The Board of LHT Group welcomes this inspection report and accepts its conclusions. Whilst the report identifies strong performance in many areas of service delivery and organisational culture, our focus is on those areas that need improvement.

An action plan is under construction and work has commenced on all major elements identified by the Inspection Team.

We found the inspection process both testing and rewarding, adding to our own review processes. We wish to extend our thanks to the Inspection Team for their thoroughness and fair approach.

Overall assessment of service

The inspection: terms of reference and coverage

- 31 We would like to thank the tenants, staff and board members of The LHT Group, particularly the staff who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously. The background information was particularly well presented and helpful.

A profile of The LHT Group

Role and history

- 32 The LHT Group is a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) with two main subsidiaries, which are also RSLs. Liverpool Housing Trust (LHT) provides housing services to the majority of the stock, whilst Cobalt Housing Association was created to receive a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer from Liverpool City Council. The recently created Cobalt did not form part of this inspection, which focused on services provided by Liverpool Housing Trust and policy, strategy and support provided by the Group. Atrium City Living is an operational arm which deals with market renting.
- 33 LHT was founded in 1965 in response to the homelessness crisis as portrayed in 'Cathy Come Home', by volunteers from the churches in the city, and became one of the associations supported by Shelter. It grew from a few homes in the 1960's, to several hundred properties in the early 1970's. LHT grew rapidly during 1970's by acquiring and improving private rented stock subject to compulsory purchase in Housing Action Areas, until it had some 3000 homes by 1979.
- 34 In 1989 LHT received 2,800 homes from Runcorn New Town. At the time it was the largest transfer that had taken place to an existing association. Not only did this increase LHT's size and area of operation it also brought new approaches to tenant participation.
- 35 The Trust currently has around 10,000 homes in Merseyside and Halton. Much of this stock is in the inner core of Liverpool which is subject to what has been described in a CURS report as a 'chaotic housing market'. The area has been identified as needing large scale demolition as the demand for homes in these areas has drastically reduced.

Context and performance

Key statistics at 31 March 2003

	Owned	Managed
General Needs Rented Housing	8028	8157
General Needs Sheltered Housing	277	277
Total General Needs Housing	8305	8434
General Needs Wheelchair Accessible	152	

Supported Sheltered Housing	68	68
Supported Rented Housing	871	190
Total Supported Housing	939	258
Supported Wheelchair Accessible	49	
Shared Ownership	70	71
Total Leased Housing	128	144
Staff/warden Accommodation	8	8
Local Authorities where own dwellings	6	

Location and areas of operation

- 36 LHT operates mainly in the City of Liverpool (5,300 homes) and the former New Town of Runcorn (2,500) with another 1,000 homes in other Merseyside Boroughs. The stock is 98 per cent rented and ranges from traditional terraced properties, to three-storey Georgian homes, new build developments and system built estates. LHT also provide 700 student spaces and 100 market rented apartments with another 100 under construction.
- 37 The association operates out of three main offices. Hanover Street in Liverpool is the head office and the centre for the South Liverpool team. The other two offices are in Liverpool North and Runcorn. The Runcorn office also houses the Customer Services Centre and the Rent Control Team.
- 38 LHT is in a stockswap initiative with Riverside, Community Seven, Housing Federation North and the Housing Corporation. They have also participated in the NRF Managing Change Project, which form part of the developing approach to asset management across inner city Liverpool. The stock swap was completed in September 2002.
- 39 LHT recognises that it operates in a rapidly changing market and has changed from a manager of a scarce housing resource to competing in a challenging market. Provision of housing in inner city areas also brings challenges of issues such as dealing with anti-social behaviour and households with low income levels.

Profile of tenants

From the LHT 2002 survey of tenants

Working full or part time	21%
Retired	27%
Household member with disability or long term sickness	52%
Single parent families	17%
Single person households	24%
Households over 60 years	26%

For new lettings from April 2002 to 2003

Working full or part time	15%
Retired	6.7%

People with disability	14.6%
Single parent families	26.4%
Single person households	43.4%
Households over 60 years	8.5%
Wholly or partly dependent on benefits	79.9%
BME lettings	10.3%

Performance indicators (PIs)

PIs for social housing-owned properties – general¹

Liverpool HT

General Needs Performance Indicators for the year to March 2003

Performance Indicator		2000/1	2001/2	2002/3	2002/3 National Mean Average	2002/3 Quartile Position	2002/3 Comparison Group Mean
Average weekly gross rent	£	49.74	51.47	54.89	59.90	2	52.47
Weekly cost of management	£	9.21	12.76	14.76	11.97		12.16
Weekly cost of repairs	£	12.42	12.64	14.65	16.01		12.91
Rent collection	%	90.63	91.18	92.79	94.28	4	93.92
Rent arrears	%	9.09	8.85	7.21	5.30	4	5.69
Rent written off	%	1.28	1.72	2.36	1.17	4	1.75
Rent lost due to vacant dwellings	%	6.39	8.25	9.30	2.10	4	2.73
Dwellings vacant and available to let	%	3.5	2.2	0.8	1.3	2	2.2
Dwellings vacant and not available to let	%	5.6	8.1	5.3	1.5	4	2.0
Re-let time	Weeks	9.5	9.8	8.4 ²	5.4	4	6.1
Tenancy Turnover	%	7.4	8.7	7.8	6.0		8.6

¹ Fields are comparative groups of associations. There are six such groups for general needs: four representing the Housing Corporation fields of registration (London, Central, South or North), one for all associations owning more than 5,000 properties and one for specialist providers of housing for older people. There are four supported housing groups, one for each field of registration.

² The figure excluding long term voids is 4.6 weeks.

Lettings to BME households (Old)	%	6.4	10.5	7.4	14.0		14.0
Lettings to BME households (New)	%			7.6	14.2		14.1
Average SAP rating		55.0	55.0	56.0	61.1	4	63.7
Failing Decent Homes Standard	%		38.8	29.1	23.0	3	21.8
Emergency repairs completed in target	%	93.0	96.0	97.5	95.2	2	96.2
Urgent repairs completed in target	%	89.0	94.0	97.5	91.9	1	94.4
Routine repairs completed in target	%	88.0	96.0	96.7	92.9	2	94.1
Appointments made and kept	%				93.4		93.3
Tenant Satisfaction overall	%	74	74	84	79	2	85
Tenant Satisfaction with participation	%	52	52	52	60	4	65

40 This shows Liverpool Housing Trust is in the 3rd quartile nationally.

Strategy and priorities

41 Since 2001, LHT's business plan has been built around eight strategic themes:

- ◆ Establishing strategies for specific area.
- ◆ Developing planned maintenance programmes.
- ◆ Establishing Cobalt and Atrium as subsidiaries.
- ◆ Pursuing Liverpool Central Buffer stock transfer and other growth opportunities.
- ◆ Continuing to improve customer service.
- ◆ Enhancing customer access to and satisfaction with our services and properties.
- ◆ Pursuing other appropriate development opportunities.
- ◆ Ensuring that the systems and processes are in place which reflect the values of the Group and ensure the viability of the Group and its subsidiaries.

Community Initiatives

42 The main specific themes in the 2003/4 plan are:

- ◆ Meeting the decent homes standard.
- ◆ Customer service, access and satisfaction.
- ◆ Supporting people.

- ◆ Regeneration Strategies for sustainable neighbourhoods.
- ◆ Complementary growth and stock rationalisation.
- ◆ Non core housing.

Structure and operation

- 43 The LHT Group provide the following services and support:
- ◆ **Financial Services** - Financial administration and control - Rent administration and control - Purchase and sales invoice processing - Financial document scanning - Treasury services - Financial and other statutory reporting - Group financial procedures
 - ◆ **Business Assurance** - Compliance – Risk management – Internal audit
 - ◆ **Human Resources** - Group personnel procedures - Advisory service and consultation
 - ◆ **Information Technology** - Server and network support - PC maintenance and support – Procurement – Helpdesk – Telecommunications – Development- Security
- 44 Liverpool Housing Trust provides services to tenants and manages homes in Merseyside and Runcorn. Staff in each of the three offices is divided into several project teams headed by Project Officers. The Project Officers report to the Housing Services Manager depending on where they are located. These managers report to the Head of Service and the Director. The main teams are responsible for:
- ◆ Tenancy management and rent
 - ◆ Lettings and voids
 - ◆ Environmental services
- 45 Other staff provide administration and support.
- 46 There are separate Property Services, Customer Services and Support Service (Supported Housing) divisions which report through the Director and Head of Service respectively.

How good is the service?

- 47 We looked at services provided by LHT from its three main bases, the head office located in Liverpool and covering the South Liverpool area, the North Liverpool office and the office in Runcorn. Our detailed findings about the quality of these services are found in sections in this report. This section deals with the general quality of the service overall.

Is the service shaped around its customers?

- 48 Tenants of LHT can access services either through calling the Customer Service Centre, located in Runcorn, by a local rate call, or by visiting local offices. The Customer Service Centre was set up in 1998 when surveys showed that most people wanted to contact by phone. We found the service centre to be well run and monitored. It is open from 8 am to 8 pm. when an emergency service for repairs run by another association takes over.
- 49 Tenants can call into local offices which are open between the hours of 9.00 am and 5.30 pm. The head office and the Runcorn office are both modern and centrally located. The North office is located close to the housing it serves and on a main shopping street, but it is in need of a facelift. The entrances to offices are accessible and apart from Runcorn which is a single story building have

internal lifts. LHT has carried out an audit under the Disability Discrimination Act and have diverted funds from the aids and adaptations budget to pay for access and internal mobility works. LHT has recently carried out a reception review which has identified some improvements.

- 50 The Group has produced a corporate suite of leaflets which are helpful and informative. The leaflets include language flags and some offer large print versions (although, ironically this advice is in small print). A regular newsletter called 'Highlights' is produced which we found to contain useful information on local issues, programmes such as planned repairs and articles on safety issues. The newsletter contains a statement that it is available in Braille and audio tape but this was not offered to our mystery shopper and the association needs to make sure this facility is available and used.
- 51 The association sends annual performance plans and reports to tenants which contain information about the association, its services and performance. LHT carry out regular customer satisfaction surveys and also have in place a Tenant Panel for consultation on reviews. It played a key role in the creation of Merseyside Community Voice, a panel of BME residents in Merseyside which will be used for consultation in the future.
- 52 We found that there is low awareness amongst tenants about the complaints system. It is not being effectively promoted at sign up and the system for managing complaints is not working properly. Responses were not hitting the targets set and staff were not updating the system. We found that tenants for their own reasons are reluctant to use the complaints system and think that this should be a main area for concentration for LHT in the near future.
- 53 Most repairs are requested through the call centre and the caller is told the level of priority of the repair. The association is piloting a new process with one contractor which includes an appointments system and written confirmation of repairs. It is planned to roll this out to the rest of the responsive repairs service.
- 54 The computer system will generate standard letters for most service areas. The association sends out regular rent statements and has a system which allows housing officers to override system generated decisions. A user defined screen is used to let officers know about special circumstance. We found that whilst this screen is used there is no system in place to make sure that the information is accurate or complete, or that staff took the right action.
- 55 The association has a commitment to equality and diversity shown by its employment of an advisor and the development of policies, procedures and action plans. We found that there is good understanding of the nature of minority groups and the issues affecting them. Lanaguageline, typetalk and interpretation services are in place. The use of Languageline is being monitored by number and duration of calls and there is a clear policy on its use. LHT has set targets for Board membership, lettings and employment in terms of disability and ethnicity and these areas are monitored. It has measured the customer satisfaction of BME tenants compared with general satisfaction and considered ways to address the lower levels revealed.
- 56 Tenants we spoke to commented on physical safety measures like alleygating and ID card slots that had been provided. Whilst they said that they felt reasonably safe and secure in their homes anti social behaviour and harassment were causing concern. This is borne out by the association's own surveys. We found that staff deal quickly with these cases but that they were not always keeping the tenants informed about what action is possible, what had been done and why cases had been closed. Also some physical measures had been refused without explanation or further help. LHT has developed a customer

satisfaction form for this service area and we felt that this should be used to improve the service. Quality checks are being done by project officers but these do not check compliance with the principles and timescales in the procedures but stick to general case handling. Although the association has a confidentiality policy which deals with the release of information to tenants, we found that the practices for storing information on tenancy files contained risks. Historical tenancy information is not archived; details of anti social behaviour are stored on the victims and perpetrators files. The association charge tenants a fee for the release of information following a written request. We would like to see the association review this practice to make sure it is legal and does not act as a disincentive to tenants.

Does the service provide quality homes that meet people's needs?

- 57 We thought that the responsive repair service works well. Performance has improved and the new pilot which allows contractor access to the IT system, appointments to be made and repair receipts issued, is a positive move forward for the association and its tenants. We found that LHT could be putting more emphasis on post inspections and tenants we spoke to said they would like to see more checks as they were not impressed by the performance of some contractors. In particular some said that snagging works had not been completed, for instance after electrical works.
- 58 Although we did not inspect the planned repairs service we found that information had been provided through the newsletter. The association is clearly faced by some quite challenging housing conditions. We saw properties due for demolition, large hard to maintain 'Victorian' flat conversions in Liverpool and deck access flats in Runcorn. When we spoke to tenants the level of satisfaction varied depending on the area in which they lived. The regeneration led nature of some investment means that some areas have received reinvestment and others have not. Tenants in the latter areas were not aware of any plans for improvements and to address these concerns it would be useful for the association to consult and inform tenants about its plans in areas not scheduled for works in the near future.
- 59 The letting standard for voids is minimal and whilst we found that the condition is basically satisfactory, some minor works are not completed and post inspections are not carried out.
- 60 Our main concern with the condition of properties relates to gas safety. We found that the monitoring systems do not allow the association to know the current position on gas safety and that the follow up to failure to gain access does not have definite timescales and is not checked. The associations own surveys have shown gas safety to be a high priority for tenants. This is confirmed by tenants we spoke to.

Does the service make best use of resources?

- 61 The published performance indicators show rising management costs over the last three years which LHT attribute to non core services such as regeneration. The value based management approach should make the association well placed to assess the cost of delivering services. We thought that the association would benefit from making assessments of cost when planning and reviewing services to ensure value for money is attained. Strategies for dealing with issues such as anti social behaviour should include assessment of the cost of delivery.
- 62 We found that the computer system is well used and particularly well developed for handling rent collection. Our assessment of income management concentrated on the customer end of the process but it is clear that LHT is conscious of the need to improve rent collection levels and had put in place

mechanisms such as targets to achieve this. The level of arrears is dependent on external factors such as the Housing Benefit Services in the areas they cover and the attitude of Courts, therefore confidence about the future success of LHT in reaching its target of being a top quartile performer is uncertain. However we felt a good balance between rigour and sensitivity had been achieved.

- 63 Performance monitoring is well developed, however as the association has recognised some of the measures need to be revised to reflect more accurately the actual success of the service. The association shows improved performance for repairs
- 64 We found a strong emphasis on staff training and recruitment for appropriate skills. The Customer Service Centre which is audited by Telebusiness has won a good practice award for recruitment.
- 65 Budgets are set for different services and were devolved to Project Officers and Housing Officers where appropriate. Staff we spoke to felt empowered to make decisions.

Overall assessment

- 66 We found that the services provided were on whole **satisfactory**. We found good performance in some areas but weaknesses particularly in complaints handling and gas safety. Customer satisfaction has risen to reflect the changes that the association has made chiefly since the Housing Services Reorganisation in 2000. This report makes recommendations where we think action is needed, which for the most part the association has already recognised in its own self assessment and improvement work.

Is The LHT Group working for continuous improvement?

- 67 The LHT Group has a strong track record in continuous improvement. In 1994/5 the association introduced Quality Management into the organisation through a firm of consultants. In 1995 Quality Improvement Teams were established from a cross section of staff, to review service areas. These teams were supported by trained Quality Advisors. The approach is based on data gathering, understanding the data and variations and from there developing new more efficient and effective procedures. It was found to be a time and resource intensive approach, the outcomes from which 'did not match the resources dedicated to the work or the expectations for those projects'.
- 68 In 1996 a tenants survey which showed that 72 per cent of tenants wanted contact by telephone, and to see housing officers on site more, this led to a revised approach. The new approach was called the Core Services Review and consisted of 'dedicated staff...seconded to the projects, analysing data, looking at best practice, running focus groups and looking at alternative ways of delivering our service.' By 1997/8 LHT was implementing a new approach to service delivery which moved from generic to specialist teams directed into areas such as:
- ◆ A new Customer Service Centre
 - ◆ An Extra Care Team
 - ◆ Specialist teams to tackle ASB, lettings and rents management
 - ◆ Area regeneration
 - ◆ Improved maintenance through partnering
- 69 In 2000 LHT started to work with a new firm of consultants on 'value based management' (VBM). They were the first RSL nationally to use this approach which is drawn from a private sector background. LHT found VBM to be similar

to its quality approach but that it focused on more on performance indicators and cash targets. The drive was to become more business like in an increasingly competitive environment. This approach has given a focus on 'disciplined' reporting of performance through a set of Key Performance Indicators. Managers report on performance and trends and link those trends to future actions.

- 70 LHT has used the EFQM model to drive the framework for its business. Specifically it has entered the independently assessed, North West Quality Awards competition on three occasions. The written submissions were based on this model and led to winning the award in 2002, after winning sub-categories for 'leadership' and 'contribution to local communities' on previous submissions. LHT used criticisms on previous submissions to work for improvement.
- 71 By 2002 LHT realised that whilst VBM had strengthened its approach there was a need to reemphasise its continuous improvement process by paying more attention to general consultation and involvement. To do this it introduced a number of activities to improve information to customers and to promote participation:
- ◆ A 3 year Best Value performance plan
 - ◆ An annual performance plan to all tenants
 - ◆ Updates on progress through newsletters
 - ◆ Promotion of new policies and procedures to tenants
 - ◆ The creation of a Tenant Panel
 - ◆ Questionnaires seeking tenants views for projects
 - ◆ Focus Groups to test new proposals
 - ◆ Committee and Tenant Association involvement and the use of critical friends
 - ◆ A best value steering group.
- 72 These were in place by the time of the inspection.

Are there formal and widely used internal processes for driving continuous improvements?

- 73 We found in LHT a culture of continuous improvement which had evolved over a number of years, as detailed above. The way in which it had evolved had reflected business needs, customer views and also the changing environment. Whilst the theme of quality management had been retained, we found it interesting that the approach to continuous improvement itself had developed in its own cycle of improvement.
- 74 The 2003/4 Business Plan states six key themes for the organisation which mention improvements or put them in the context of for example, the need to build sustainable communities. However there is no specific reference to the continuous improvement regime itself. Having said this, LHT has through its applications for quality awards been more explicit in previous years.
- 75 Whilst each historical approach had its strengths LHT had recognised the need to adapt to reflect the priorities for a social landlord. For instance the key cash based performance indicators from VBM had been supplemented with customer and people measures.
- 76 The KPI groups and champions work on monitoring against targets and setting targets. LHT is working on improved data collection through a data warehouse project. Benchmarking of services is evident in many areas for example the

Customer Services Centre is benchmarked against external providers (some private sector) and mystery shopping is used to check the use of voice mail.

- 77 We found positive examples of the use of external consultants and an engagement of staff from all levels. For instance LHT is now working on corporate culture with a new consultant to 'develop our network of activities and partnerships'. Staff have been involved in a series of service self assessments to look for weaknesses and act on them.
- 78 The creation of a Best Value Steering Group and a programme of Best Value reviews have given further structure to the approach. The completed reviews that we saw (for example the reception review) were convincing in that they picked up on the issues that we thought were important. The Best Value Steering group includes tenant representatives from different areas.
- 79 LHT has recognised that investment in staff is an important feature of improvement. It invests time in meetings to inform staff and welcomes staff views through a rewards scheme. There has been recognition that recruitment of staff with appropriate skills is important for the organisation. Training and staff appraisal techniques are used. A recent work life balance survey by Barony Consultants reported that 75 percent of staff felt that LHT took training seriously. We found that staff are empowered to make decisions and changes, and that LHT is interested in what staff can tell them about how the services are working and willing to use this information at a practical level. The use of 'quick and easy' score cards for self assessment by the KPI groups is a good example of the practical application of improvement techniques.
- 80 LHT has recognised the need to strengthen tenant engagement and have worked on creating the 'Tenant 250' Panel and have currently nearly 500 people who are willing to participate. This resource has been piloted in a number of reviews. Where it is working with partners on regeneration e.g. Kirkdale it has used the wider community involvement to consult. It has been a key player in developing the Merseyside Community Voice, a panel of BME residents across Merseyside, to allow consultation with ethnic minorities. The existing governance and tenant participation structure allows for some consultation on policy reviews and the Board are involved on strategic level. Whilst we found that this is an area that LHT needs to work on and would like to see a broader range of tenants actually engaged on review teams, we found that LHT had recognised the issue themselves and is making progress.
- 81 LHT has compared its approach to the Housing Corporation's Discussion paper 'Continuous Improvement for Housing Associations.'
- 82 LHT has also piloted the ISO9001 process for the responsive repairs service earlier in 2003 and has been awarded the standard.
- 83 LHT has Investors in People Accreditation.
- 84 Other activities include the development of a good practice guide with Riverside Housing on 'Stockswops' and work on the 'Putting Neighbourhoods First Project' a Neighbourhood Renewal Fund project also with Riverside Housing.

Is it using feedback from residents and other stakeholders to critically examine and improve services?

- 85 LHT has used regular customer satisfaction surveys to inform service reviews. Surveys took place in 1996, 1999, 2000, and 2002. As part of the August 2002 survey LHT asked both tenants and staff about the priorities for improvement. 59 forms were completed by staff and 791 tenant returns were received. The top five areas from this survey were:

- ◆ Responding to repairs
- ◆ Dealing with harassment
- ◆ Servicing gas appliances
- ◆ Managing ASB
- ◆ Dealing with complaints

- 86 LHT can demonstrate that it has looked at all these areas, especially repairs review and new policies and procedures for harassment. However the findings of this inspection show that there are still improvements to be made in monitoring the gas safety service, the handling of harassment and antisocial behaviour cases and managing complaints.
- 87 We found that a failure to use complaints to stimulate service improvement is a major weakness in LHT's approach. We would like to see the encouragement of contact and for LHT to deal with low customer awareness and reluctance to use the complaints system.
- 88 Since April 2002 LHT has used Tenant 250 panel members for consultation either through focus groups or email. It has looked at repairs, voids, antisocial behaviour and planned works so far and has a programme of reviews in place from September 2003.
- 89 As mentioned above, LHT has used external consultants widely to help review services and to bring new perspectives. Benchmarking occurs through published performance information and through the membership of groups such as the North West Best Value Forum. LHT has used mystery shopping for the Customer Services Centre and the use of voice mail, some mystery shopping has been carried out by another social landlord.

Does it have a track record of setting ambitious targets and achieving them?

- 90 Target setting through the Key Performance Indicator reporting is a main feature of the association's improvement approach. We found examples of increased targets in response to changing circumstances, such as lettings to BME applicants. The performance monitoring reports based on the process, customer and people measures is presented in a graphical form which colour codes where the targets are being achieved. KPI champions and groups serve as a focus for this process. Performance is accompanied by textual commentary on reduced performance.
- 91 The published performance indicators show improved performance in some areas in particular for responsive repairs and increased overall tenant satisfaction.
- 92 Whilst being bottom quartile performers in a number of indicators it has to be recognised that LHT operate in some difficult areas where major changes to stock profiles are planned under the joint asset management approach being developed in Liverpool. For instance the number of properties available for letting that are vacant has reduced whilst those not available for letting remains high.
- 93 Target setting is more a feature of business sensitive measures. For instance Tenant Participation targets have only recently been set. In most of the areas the inspection looked at we saw that targets were being revised annually to improve performance. Staff generally said that these targets had been set in consultation with them and were realistic. We found some areas where performance had not met targets consistently, for instance in responding to complaints and some targets were not as 'stretching' as others when compared to industry standards.

For some services such as rent collection, the working targets were not derived from the business plan targets.

- 94 Overall we found that the use of targets is a feature of LHT's working both at a corporate and day to day level. That the targets were clear, reviewed and increased annually and being met in a number of areas.

Overall assessment

- 95 At LHT we found an organisation with a commitment to continuous improvement. It has a developed framework and a culture of performance management. This has arisen through a history of working with external consultants to apply and adapt the types of techniques available, so that it can work towards a framework that fits LHT as an organisation. Its focus on performance indicators is convincing and we found that it is taking targeted improvement seriously. In developing the Tenant 250 panel and by working with the Merseyside Community voice LHT has shown that it recognised the need to engage with a broad range of customers and the association has a history of regular surveys.
- 96 We found that the LHT Group has strong corporate and strategic capabilities for delivering continuous improvement.

Review of service areas

Maintaining homes in good condition

(Responsive Repairs, Gas Servicing and Voids)

Key features of the service

Description

- 97 The inspection looked at responsive repairs, gas servicing and handling voids. Planned works and asset management were not part of the inspection because of other regulatory activity.

Planning

- 98 LHT has gained the ISO 9001 award for its responsive and void repairs service. This award involves internal audits of the service to ensure compliance with procedures and reporting non conformity.
- 99 LHT has a policy and procedure for responsive repairs and an empty property repairs policy and procedure both of which were revised in July 2003. Its annual gas servicing policy was revised in July 2003 and has within it a procedure for gaining access that has some time scales. The later stages of this procedure need to be revised in line with the recommendations in this report.
- 100 The service standards for the repair service are set out in the tenants' handbook and there is a ten point customer charter for the repairs service.
- 101 There is a code of practice guidance which sets out how contractors should treat tenants and what the association expects from the contractors it uses.
- 102 The priorities for responsive repairs and contractor performance reported by the association for the year 2002/03 are set out below. The association's business plan reports the average of the three categories as 97.33 per cent for 2002/03 and has set itself a target of 98 per cent for 2003/04:
- ◆ Emergency (four hours) – 97.53 per cent
 - ◆ Urgent (three working days) – 97.34 per cent
 - ◆ Routine (ten working days) – 97.13 per cent

- 103 Budgets are set mainly from historical data on the cost of the service over the last financial year.

Delivery

- 104 Most repairs are reported through the Customer Service Centre. Repairs can be reported at this centre between 8am and 8pm Monday to Friday.
- 105 There is an out of hours repairs service provided through Riverside Housing Association who inform the association of calls received and actioned by e-mail the following morning.
- 106 The association operate a Schedule of Rates (SOR) for the responsive and void maintenance repairs that has been compiled through consultation with staff and is based on composite rates.
- 107 Pre-inspections are carried out for 'major' works or if the repairs cannot be adequately identified or quantified.
- 108 Emergency repairs constitute approximately 25 per cent of the total number of repairs completed by the association.
- 109 There is a clear audit trail for the processing of orders and payment of invoices within the repairs service for both responsive and void repairs.

Consultation and involvement

- 110 One in six of tenants reporting a repair are consulted through the 'repairs watch' where they are telephoned to provide feedback on the service. Feedback on repairs is also gained from the Tenant 250 group and there is also tenant representation on the maintenance sub-committee.
- 111 The association has bi-monthly and annual performance meetings with each of its major contractors to discuss issues that are current and provides the opportunity for contractors to feedback to LHT on areas where changes can be made.
- 112 LHT has formed tenant service review panels that first met in March 2003 to discuss the repairs service. They are formed from ten tenants together with staff, contractors and a 'critical' friend.

Monitoring and review

- 113 The association is a member of the Checkmate benchmarking club with whom they measure and monitor the level of service received by tenants. LHT has also been a member of the NORHAG benchmarking group since 1998.
- 114 Monitoring information on LHT repairs are presented to Board meetings on a quarterly basis together with reports to the maintenance sub-committee. Tenant satisfaction with the service in 2002/03 showed that 91 per cent were satisfied. The average cost of a repair in the same period was £56.48 with an average of 3.44 repairs per property.

Equality and Diversity

- 115 Tenants with hearing difficulties use a BT service 'Typetalk' to communicate with the call centre staff. Language Line is also used to hold 3 way conversations with customers where first language is not English.
- 116 The association does not have any BME contractors however it does use 'construction line' contractors and in its annual review of contractors this year it is asking contractors to feedback on the number of BME operatives and staff contractors employ.

- 117 All contractors are asked for their equal opportunities policy or are required sign up to LHT's policy before being put on the select list of contractors.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 118 The standard of service to tenants has improved with the introduction of the Customer Service Centre (CSC). It has piloted an appointment system and given its contractors restricted access to the repairs data base to provide real time updates of repair requests and completion dates together with information updates. LHT provide support for these contractors with an IT helpdesk to sort out difficulties they may experience. The data is transferred via an ISDN line also provided by LHT. The contractors used are generally small local contractors who need this technology support. The service is generally well received by tenants however some believe the service has seen some decline in recently.
- 119 The standard of voids provided for letting are to a minimum standard set down by the association. Our inspection of properties ready for letting revealed some minor works outstanding. There is a strong working relationship between the marketing and allocations team and that of property services who meet regularly to discuss progress and areas of difficulty.
- 120 The area of gas servicing is one that lacks clear monitoring and has a number of outstanding gas safety certificates that date back two years without access to check the appliances. The association needs to improve this part of the service.
- 121 We felt that there were positive features in the delivery of repairs but that some of these were in the pilot phase and did not benefit all customers. The main weakness was in gas safety.
- 122 Overall the inspection team's assessment of the association in this service area is that it has scope for improvement.

What works well?

- ◆ There is a strong commitment to liaison and collaboration between teams in delivering services.
- ◆ The association supports staff on continuous professional development through external and internal training courses including day release.
- ◆ The pilot appointment system has been effectively managed and it is proposed that the service will be adopted with all contractors on responsive repairs by mid November 2003.
- ◆ Where pre-inspection visits are necessary there is an appointment system where the customer service centre has access to the building inspectors' electronic diaries.
- ◆ Contractors are assessed annually as to their suitability to remain on the select list of contractors and tenants are involved in this review process.
- ◆ The association has developed its own bespoke SOR's with composite items and is continuing to review these through consultation with contractors.
- ◆ Gas servicing information and letters to tenants are sent out with a language flag for tenants whose first language is not English.

Positive practice

The association has established contractor interfaces with its own repairs data base for the provision of its responsive repairs service. LHT provided contractors with IT equipment and the software to interface with their own data base. Access is limited to ensure the security of tenant

information. Contractors have been trained by the association in the use of the data base and they also have access to an IT help desk for support. The interface allows contractors to receive works orders in real time and also to input completion dates that update the associations own data base in real time.

Key findings and recommendations for responsive repairs

Issues	Recommendations
Responsive repairs	
<p>Customers reporting repairs through the customer service centre are given confirmation of the repair priority and appointments can be made for the contractor engaged in the repairs pilot. However the association do not send out repairs receipts. The 'repair watch' telephone customer satisfaction survey is carried out by the service centre but not every repair customer is monitored for satisfaction levels.</p>	<p>Ensure customers are kept informed at all stages of the repairs process and make sure that customer satisfaction monitoring is sufficient to monitor and improve the service. References should be made to Housing Corporation guidance and Circulars on the right to repair.</p>
<p>The responsive repairs data base is interrogated for works orders that had not been completed and were out of date. The report produced revealed that a number of orders had not been progressed to a conclusion. These incomplete works orders on the system interfere with the effective monitoring of orders nearing completion.</p>	<p>Clean up the data base in order to allow the effective monitoring of repairs orders on the system.</p>
<p>Planned maintenance programmes are not being entered on the responsive repair database. This does not allow staff to identify properties in the planned programme or those subject to defects liability.</p>	<p>Ensure staff operating the responsive repair system has adequate information on planned and completed repair schemes.</p>
<p>Post inspections are randomly selected through the repairs data base against a target of 10 per cent. The information returned from this process to monitor the quality of the repairs received from contractors is minimal. Feedback from tenants indicated that they believe the quality of repairs carried out is diminishing.</p>	<p>Collect qualitative data from the post inspection process that can enable the association to more effectively monitor the quality work received from contractors.</p>
Voids	
<p>The majority of contractors delivering the void service do not have access to the association's database. This practice is proving effective in delivering responsive repairs.</p>	<p>Take steps to ensure that contractors dealing with voids have the same access to computer systems as the responsive repairs contractors.</p>
<p>We found that the condition of void properties which were ready to let did not comply with the lettability standard. Minor works were outstanding which could have been picked up</p>	<p>Ensure properties comply with the lettability standard and carry out post inspections following preparatory works.</p>

through post inspections. Tenants we spoke to said that the condition of their homes when they moved in was lower than they expected. The association's minimum standard for voids also requires contractors to install two air fresheners in each property and this is not evident to all properties visited.	
Gas servicing	
Gas servicing is not effectively monitored. Reports used to monitor outstanding repairs do not show due dates or last service date. They cannot be used to identify properties that are over due for a safety check.	Effectively monitor the gas service contract to ensure that the annual service of gas equipment is carried out.
Gas certificates returned by the contractor are not being completed to show the full address of the property serviced.	Ensure the contractor enters the full address on the gas safety certificate.
The association has a procedure for ensuring access is gained to properties however this is not being adhered to.	Ensure the access procedure for carrying out gas servicing is adhered to.
The access procedure lacks timescales for the action by the housing officer to gain access.	Ensure the access procedure has timescales for all stages of the process and that officers comply.
The repairs data base has the capability of flagging up properties that have outstanding gas servicing when the property data base is opened to input a repair order. The flag is known as a UDC on this system and is part of the access procedures. However, these UDC are not always input or updated or acted on.	Ensure that a UDC is input against properties when a gas service is outstanding and that the information is updated and used.
The filing system used to store and track gas safety certificates is based on invoice number rather than property address. We thought that this leaves the system open to error and made it hard to check the certificates against the monitoring system. The gas safety certificates for the year 2002-03 had not been filed in the Runcorn office and were loosely stacked, out of sequence, on open shelving that could result in their loss.	Review the process of filing gas safety certificates to ensure they can be easily traced.

Letting homes

Key features of the service

Description

123 The lettings service is provided through the marketing and allocations teams located in each of the three area offices, North Liverpool, South Liverpool and Runcorn. These teams are responsible for letting properties in their districts so that that applicant know who is dealing with their application. Members of these

teams also work closely with the void repairs teams which are part of Property Services.

Planning

- 124 The association has a policy and procedure for marketing and lettings that was last updated in November 2002. The policy clearly sets out how it will allocate properties and the level of information required in a lettings application. Its transfer policy and procedure was updated in May 2003 in response to changing tenant's circumstances. There are also policies and procedures for accompanied viewings dated April 2003 and a suspension policy dated February 2003.
- 125 In an effort to turn round properties faster the association has a 'back to back' lettings policy that was updated in June 2003. This policy aims to allow a fast turn round on properties that require a minimum amount of work. This process is dependant upon the tenant in residence giving notice and allowing the prospective tenant to visit the home with a housing officer, prior to termination of the tenancy agreement.
- 126 The association has a void property marketing strategy dated April 2003. It has used a number of marketing tools to improve the lettings of its homes, including advertisements in local shops, working with the BBC, and placing advertisements on its web site. It has also introduced a void enhancement policy dated April 2001 giving housing officers a budget enabling them to offer tenants additional work including the provision of carpets or blinds.

Delivery

- 127 LHT is working with the local authority on the Wirral to offer a choice based lettings (CBL) process and has been involved in a CBL pilot with Liverpool City Council in the Dingle area.
- 128 Applications can be obtained by visiting a local office or phoning the Customer Service Centre (CSC). The application pack provides information on available properties in the areas requested and shows the anticipated waiting time.
- 129 The association has nomination agreements in place with the local authorities in the areas in which it operates, however most allocations are made through the formal application process. Transfers are also allowed to meet the changing needs of its tenants and also in cases where they are affected by anti social behaviour and want to move away from the problem.
- 130 LHT allocate properties outside of the Choice Based Lettings areas on the basis of three 'streams'. These are housing need, social need and economic need. Once assessed applicants are placed on the waiting list in date order. Properties are offered to people on the waiting list according to date order, with priority given according to need for those on the same date. Medical circumstances and overcrowding can be taken into account to increase the priority. The waiting list is reviewed in June and December by asking applicants to confirm in writing that they wish to remain on the list.
- 131 There is a procedure for closing lists. Closed lists are reviewed in October and April which may result in the list being reopened. This only applies in areas of high demand and these areas are reviewed annually. Current closed lists are shown on information sent to applicants, which also states that applicants can appeal the decision.
- 132 The association has a local lettings policy in the Phoenix Park Estate in Liverpool. The estate has suffered from anti social behaviour and the local lettings approach

combined with starter tenancies is aimed at combating this problem. Starter tenancies are reviewed after twelve months and converted to assured tenancies.

- 133 Applications for housing require two references one of whom should be the current landlord. Police checks are also carried out where appropriate and LHT has protocols in place with local constabularies.
- 134 Accompanied viewings are carried out on all offers of housing and security is in place to ensure the safety of staff. The sign up of new tenants has a set procedure and the sign up pack includes a copy of the tenants' handbook together with a number of leaflets.
- 135 A home visit is carried out by the allocations team on the day the tenant moves in and a follow up visit is carried out by tenancy management four weeks later.

Consultation and involvement

- 136 Revisions to the allocations policy have been taken to tenants groups for consultation and the results fed into the revised policy.
- 137 All new LHT tenants are asked to complete a satisfaction survey, returned in a post paid envelope provided. Tenants are also offered entry into a prize draw for returning the survey form. Patterns of responses are monitored and used in reviewing the service.
- 138 Exit surveys are carried out and if LHT has some control over the reason for the tenant leaving they will attempt to retain the tenancy.

Monitoring and review

- 139 The number of properties let on first offer is also monitored and a target is set for allocations staff. Success in achieving performance targets generally is acknowledged.
- 140 The nomination agreements with local authorities are recorded and monitored monthly at area level.
- 141 Performance information is presented to district committees on a monthly basis and the Board on a quarterly basis.

Equality and Diversity

- 142 Assistance is provided to help people complete application forms and a translation service is also available through the University in Liverpool. A language flag telling applicants about translation service is set out on a sheet supplied with the application.
- 143 Targets for letting homes to BME families are set in line with census information.
- 144 In some schemes LHT will consult the BME residents when a flat becomes available to see if they know anyone who may be interested in the accommodation.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 145 The marketing and allocations team work effectively with property services in turning void properties around. The association has tried a number of new approaches to advertising including working with the BBC on local radio. LHT fund and work closely with an agency providing benefits advice called the RAISE team, who are located in the association's north office.
- 146 The association has a record of setting challenging targets and achieving them. The average turn round time of relets has been reduced to 3.5 weeks and is in

the top quartile for performance. The process of back to back lettings is challenging to staff and somewhat dependant on the outgoing tenant allowing the association to take prospective tenants around their home before they leave and carrying out minor repairs with the tenant in occupation. The teams dealing with voids in maintenance and allocations are meeting weekly to discuss progress, resolve issues and identify properties suitable for back to back letting. There is a strong cohesion between the teams and the boundaries between them are loose providing a flexible working arrangement.

147 The inspection team's assessment of service in the area is that it is **satisfactory**.

What works well?

- ◆ Tenant responses to consultation on the revised Policy and Procedures were recorded and changes were introduced resulting from that consultation.
- ◆ A number of effective marketing tools have been tried and tested including working with the BBC and using its web site.
- ◆ Local companies when known to be looking for expansion are contacted to make them aware of the housing available for workers moving into the area.
- ◆ Housing officers have access to a void enhancement budget enabling them to meet the needs and requirements of new tenants when letting a property.
- ◆ Tenants get a 'welcome card' when they move into their new home.
- ◆ Staff security is monitored while they are on home visits.
- ◆ LHT work well with other agencies providing accommodation for people with support needs. The work with 'Keyring' is particularly effective in the North area.
- ◆ A single housing officer is responsible for the allocation and relet process that ensures any issues raised by the tenant are known to the officer who dealt with the property.
- ◆ LHT is trying to get 'back to back' letting and have a target of 250 per year that is proving challenging.
- ◆ There are effective levels of communication between the teams in marketing and allocations, property services and tenancy management.
- ◆ RAISE provide HB advice for applicants and is most effective in the north area where the RAISE team are based.

Key findings and recommendations for lettings.

Issues	Recommendations
The level of lettings through nominations agreements for 2002/3 is 5.8 per cent. Local authorities expressed concerns about the number of properties being offered.	Discuss the level of nominations with LA representatives. Take steps to increase the number of properties offered to an acceptable level in the light of nomination agreements.
The allocation decision is not effectively recorded. The list of suitable applicants is not printed off the database and kept on the property file or retained electronically.	Ensure there is an audit trail of the allocations process.
Information to applicant says that they can appeal against a decision to close a list but does not tell them how to appeal or what the mechanism is.	Provide information to applicants on the mechanism for appealing against the decision to close a list.

The procedure for telling the tenants about complaints procedure at sign up is not followed.	Ensure the sign up procedure is followed and that the complaints procedure is explained to the incoming tenant.
Keys to gated alleys are not provided to new tenants.	Where possible provide new tenants with a copy of the alley gate key when access to their property is through a locked alley gate.
Tenancy files often contain details of the previous tenant with personal letters regarding arrears.	Ensure that information concerning previous tenants is retained separately in the property file to ensure the security of such data.
The certificates of recorded delivery for Notices Seeking Possession (NoSP's) are kept loose in the open folders and could easily be lost.	Ensure that certificates proving letters are sent are retained securely.
The association provided us with draft area profiles. These did not include much detail about local services and amenities.	Provide new tenants with local information that can enable them to access local services and service providers.
Application forms are not available in languages other than English.	Consider translation needs for the application form.
There is no procedure for operating local letting policies.	Introduce a procedure for operating local lettings policies.

Dealing with nuisance and anti social behaviour

Key features of the service

Description

148 In 2001 the association restructured its Housing Officers into semi-generic teams. The Rents and Tenancy Management teams headed by Project Officers took responsibility for dealing with anti social behaviour and nuisance. Each office has a team of six to eight officers.

Planning

149 The Nuisance and Antisocial Behaviour policy was updated in May 2003, this gives a history and policy background, references to relevant legislation, equality and diversity issues, a list of definitions, complementary policies, tools for managing cases, performance monitoring and continuous improvement and has a procedure guide with a flow chart.

150 The supporting policies deal with Suspension (updated February 2003), Domestic Violence (updated May 2003), Racial Harassment (June 2003) and Mediation (updated June 2003).

151 LHT also have a confidentiality policy which contains a section on releasing information to tenants. This was last updated in October 2002.

Delivery

152 The staff and tenants we spoke to said that the majority of incidents that were reported related to youth, street disturbance, drugs and crime. The first quarter performance monitoring for 2003 reports that 65 per cent of all cases relate to youth nuisance. There is also an issue of noise nuisance in converted older

properties. The remainder of cases fell into the general neighbour nuisance category. In some areas LHT is involved in specific projects where they work with partners to create diversionary activities for younger people and there are plans for interactive presentations in schools. Partnership working is a strong aspect of the association's approach in all three areas.

- 153 Tenancy agreements include standard clauses for nuisance and antisocial behaviour. The association can use Ground 14a for domestic violence.
- 154 Housing Officers receive cases either by telephone, letter or in person. Correspondence and records are kept on the house files of both the complainant and perpetrator. A nuisance report form is used which records the basic details of the complaint and there are other standard forms such as incident diaries which can be used. We looked at files in each office and found that all cases had a quick response, that the nuisance report form is widely used but that there is a tendency for cases to be closed before it is clear that they had been resolved, that plans of action were not always agreed with the complainant and that letters did not always explain why no action is possible. Although LHT has developed a nuisance monitoring form for customer satisfaction it was not in use at the time of inspection.
- 155 Housing Officers are responsible for responding to cases but will involve the Project Officer if formal action is being considered. Eviction requires Board approval. The Project Officers also carry out 10 per cent quality checks of case files each month. We found that this useful practice could be strengthened by including checks against service standards and timescales in the procedure document.
- 156 Training was given to Housing Officers when the duties were reassigned in 2001 and the semi-generic style of working makes it easier to link antisocial behaviour to general tenancy management and arrears.
- 157 The association has not yet considered the use of Antisocial Behaviour Orders but has had success in using Acceptable Behaviour Contracts in eight cases in the North Area.
- 158 Starter Tenancies have been in use in Pheonix Park, which has its own Local Lettings Policy, as part of the conditions under which the stock was transferred from the Local Authority. The use of Starter Tenancies has been recently extended to Garston. References are sought and kept on the tenancy file.
- 159 LHT has devolved budgets for Project Officers and Housing Officers which can be used for physical measures to help victims of antisocial behaviour, such as the installation of CCTV.
- 160 LHT has it own and has access to equipment such as noise monitoring equipment. A Housing Officer in Runcorn has written a guide for its use. They also have cameras and Dictaphones available to customers.
- 161 LHT is involved in Crime and Disorder partnerships such as City Safe in Liverpool and also use and support local mediation services.

Consultation and involvement

- 162 There is a range of leaflets available for tenants which they receive at sign up. These include 'Action against Antisocial Behaviour' (July 2003), 'LHT's approach to dealing with Antisocial Behaviour' (July 2003) and 'Supporting victims of Antisocial behaviour' (July 2003).
- 163 LHT has benchmarked their procedure against other providers.
- 164 The association also uses articles in the newsletter to highlight issues.

- 165 LHT has only just started measuring customer satisfaction with the service and no information was available at the time of our inspection. Our discussions with tenants showed that antisocial behaviour is a concern to tenants who wanted the association to be more proactive and give more information.

Monitoring and review

- 166 Incidents of anti social behaviour are measured on a monthly basis. LHT is looking at using the Orchard system to do this but at present the monitoring relies mostly on manual returns from the Housing Officers. The monitoring looks at different categories of cases across the patch areas.
- 167 There is a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) champion and group for this service area, the KPI being the percentage of cases resolved within one month. The current performance for June 2003 was 86 per cent (target 85 per cent). Local issues can be fed into the group.
- 168 LHT intend to use the Tenant 250 group for consultation on policy and performance and whilst they also intend to have customers on the KPI group this has not happened.

Equality and Diversity

- 169 Dealing with racial harassment is covered under the Equality and Diversity section of this report.
- 170 The ethnicity, disability and age of complainants and perpetrators are recorded on the Nuisance Report.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 171 We found that the association has developed policies and procedures for dealing with anti social behaviour and there is a quick response to complaints. Equipment and resources are available to deal with this issue and staff were aware of its importance. We thought that quality audits by Project Officers are a good idea which needs to be developed.
- 172 The performance indicator measurement gives emphasis to the closure of cases rather than effective response and tenants we spoke to would like to see more pro-active intervention from the association.
- 173 The association is engaged in partnership working and with projects dealing with preventative measures as part of regeneration activities.
- 174 We think that LHT need to review its approach to confidentiality and improve the level of data available for its strategic thinking, however we thought overall that the service provided is **satisfactory**.

What works well?

- ◆ Policy and procedure in place and based on current legislation.
- ◆ 10 per cent quality check carried out by Project Officers on a monthly basis.
- ◆ Has own equipment for monitoring noise etc.
- ◆ Project officer and Housing Officer budgets for physical environmental measures.
- ◆ Use of acceptable behaviour contracts and house agreements for groups of sharers
- ◆ Mediation services made available.

- ◆ KPI developed and monitored.
- ◆ Use of starter tenancies in conjunction with local lettings.
- ◆ Benchmarked procedure against other RSLs
- ◆ Cases responded to quickly.
- ◆ Staff aware of issues and working in some fairly difficult areas
- ◆ Good positive work being done in neighbourhoods e.g. Kirkdale
- ◆ Good links at a local level with community police etc.
- ◆ Willingness to offer compensation for failure in service without a request.

Positive practice

"LHT is developing a range of new approaches to deal with youth disorder. In conjunction with the Police they have developed Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) which are signed by the young person who has been causing the problem, their parents, the Police, Liverpool Anti Social Behaviour Unit and LHT. The contract sets out a range of behaviours that the youth will refrain from.

LHT has also tried to engage the youth more by working jointly with the Police to provide local soccer camps and other activities to produce a constructive relationship".

Key findings and recommendations for dealing with anti social behaviour

Issues	Recommendations
Whilst the association has well developed policies for dealing with anti social behaviour and related issues it has not measured the cost of dealing with antisocial behaviour or its geographic distribution by case type.	Include the measurement of cost and geographic distribution within the strategy for dealing with antisocial behaviour.
We found that cases were dealt with quickly but that complainants were not always told why cases were closed. Similarly the association did not agree action plans with tenants.	Take steps to ensure that complainants are involved and informed about the progress of cases.
The performance target of closing cases within one month does not measure the number of cases resolved or the quality of case handling.	Revise the key performance indicator for monitoring case handling.
The Project Officer quality audits are limited to general case handling rather than compliance with procedure and timescales. Many of the cases we looked at were dealt with over the telephone whilst the procedure states a face to face meeting. The timescales for acknowledgement and full reply were not being adhered to. In some cases the complainant had not been told the case had been closed.	Review the quality audits to include performance against the procedure, including timescales, face to face meetings and closure of cases.
We found that tenants expressed a fear of retaliation on reporting incidents of antisocial behaviour. Although the association had the ability to act to preserve confidentiality this has	Publicise the association's ability to deal with anonymous reporting.

not been publicised.	
Details of complaints are kept on the general tenancy files of both the victim and the perpetrator. The association has a confidentiality policy which deals with the release of information to tenants. The procedure involves a written request, a file trawl by a senior officer and a £10 fee for photocopying. We found cases where personal details had been discussed by a housing officer.	<p>Review the associations approach to confidentiality.</p> <p>Take legal advice on the procedure for the release of information.</p>
LHT has developed a customer satisfaction form for use with antisocial behaviour cases but it had not been introduced at the time of the inspection.	Give priority to the introduction of customer satisfaction monitoring.

Ensuring that services are sensitive to the needs of communities

Key features of the service

Planning

- 175 The association has in place a number of policies which deal with equality and diversity issues:
- ◆ Working for Equality policy (January 2003)
 - ◆ Black and other Minorities Housing and Recruitment strategy (January 2003)
 - ◆ Group Equality and Diversity Policy (November 2002)
 - ◆ Group Equal Opportunities Statement (November 2002)
 - ◆ Racial Harassment Policy and Procedure (June 2003)
 - ◆ Domestic Violence Policy and Procedure (May 2003)
- 176 The Black and other minorities strategy incorporates current legislation, research and in particular the findings of the Race and Housing Challenge Report, demonstrating that the strategic thinking of the organisation has been informed by current thinking and awareness.
- 177 The Group Equal Opportunities Statement is a statement of principles in terms of employment and partners and does not mention customers.
- 178 The policies are supported by action plans:
- ◆ Equality and diversity action plan 2003/4 (May 2003)
 - ◆ Race equality action plan 2003/4 (May 2003)
- 179 The Race equality action plan is cross referenced to the Equality and diversity action plan.
- 180 LHT Group have employed an Equality Advisor within the Business Assurance Team. Her role is to advise on issues, to lead on policy development and to monitor compliance. Operational compliance is the responsibility of operational managers and staff.
- 181 There are equality and diversity, racial harassment and domestic violence working groups which the Equality Advisor attends.

182 The association does not have an equality and diversity champion on the Board.

Delivery

183 The association's approach to race issues is in the context of Merseyside which has 4.5 per cent BME population, with 8 per cent in Liverpool itself and 2 per cent in Halton (Runcorn). LHT has also recognised the presence of 'invisible' minority groups such as Irish, travellers and refugees.

184 LHT has developed close working with Liverpool City Council on the BME Strategy and have also worked with the Health Authority Primary Health Care Trust. Information on ethnic and other minorities is drawn from the 2001 Census data, internal statistics and regeneration activities. In particular Liverpool has Somali and Yemeni communities and whilst the association is working with them, specific information is not always available.

185 There is a Somali Working Group originally an Action Research PSS Gateway Project in Liverpool 8. This has used interpreters to sit with Housing Officers for repairs surgeries and to promote awareness of housing options and housing conditions. This is to be rolled out to the Yemeni community.

186 LHT recognised from its own tenants' survey that BME customers are less satisfied with services than others. This is a general issue in Liverpool and the Equality Advisor acts as Project Officer for Merseyside Community Voice a panel of around 500 BME residents from all sectors which has been recently developed as a sounding board.

187 Internal statistics include lettings monitoring through a modified version of the CORE form. LHT plans to move to the traditional form with an additional sheet. Recruitment is also monitored against targets.

188 All new staff and those who have not attended in the last five years receive mandatory Equal Opportunities training. There is also in-house Cultural Awareness training available for appropriate staff and this training includes dealing with domestic violence and harassment.

189 LHT and particularly its Customer Service Centre use Languageline and Typetalk to give access. Although many associations use family members for translation this is actively discouraged in LHT because of issues such as domestic violence. The corporate set of leaflets all have translation 'flags'.

190 The Racial and Domestic Violence procedures contain guidance on handling cases and targets for response. They are handled by area teams and separately filed at the offices. The cases are subject to 100 per cent quality check by Project Officers. We looked at the current and recent cases and found that although a response is made to all cases, the targets of 48 hour acknowledgement and 10 day for a full reply were not being adhered to or monitored by the quality checks. The context of most of the case handling is a request for transfer, which although properly considered tended to deflect from other measures which might be used by the association to support the victim or deal with the harassment. This links to the association's own finding that transfer requests are at a higher level from BME tenants and that they are rejected more often.

Consultation and involvement

191 Consultation takes place through specific focus groups such as the Young Disabled Group, through working with local BME communities, Best Value Groups and District Committees. Merseyside Community Voice has been developed in recognition of the need for improved dialogue with BME residents.

- 192 The association’s customer surveys have included questions on equality and diversity issues and tested BME customer satisfaction with satisfaction generally.
- 193 The Equality Advisor represents housing organisations on a large number of external groups and takes an active role in partnership activities.

Monitoring and review

- 194 Policy is reviewed either annually or every two years and there is a working group to carry out reviews. Policy changes are fed through ‘Team Listening’ meetings, tenant representatives and the Board.
- 195 Officers report to the Housing Services Committee on equal opportunities performance annually. Some key results from the May 2003 report are as follows:

	Target	Performance
Percentage BME staff*	8.0%	6.7%
Percentage disabled staff*	5.0%	2.6%
Liverpool BME lettings	7.6%	11.1%
Halton BME lettings	1.6%	2.4%
Wirral BME lettings	2%	6.3%
Knowsley and St. Helens BME lettings	2%, 1.4%	0%

* staff levels by pay bands are also monitored.

- ◆ Targets for this period were defined at double the 1991 census data. Since then the 2001 census data has shown changes in the profile of residents and the targets have been revised up to double the census data plus one per cent for lettings.
- ◆ Under-performance identified in the report is translated into actions in the Equality and Diversity action plan such as the revision of targets.
- ◆ The report also covered other areas of activity such as the breakdown of Board membership by ethnicity, age, gender and disability; staffing by gender; data on waiting lists; transfers; changes in demography from 2001 census; lettings to disabled people and other information; harassment cases; the outcome of harassment cases; evictions by ethnicity; ethnicity of tenant support referrals; ethnicity of benefits advice referrals; number of calls to Languageline and duration.
- ◆ There is evidence of this information being actively used. For example the staff self assessment recognised the need for action on the higher than average rejection of BME transfer requests and have set a target of investigation by lettings project officers by September 2003.

- 196 Tenant satisfaction levels were reported as follows:

	BME	Non BME
Satisfied with overall services	51%	70%

Problem solving	65%	81%
Rent value for money	56%	71%
Participation	39%	54%

- 197 The action plan includes for a Best Value steering group to look at this issue.
- 198 Cases of racial harassment are monitored externally through Merseyside Racial Harassment Prevention Unit – ‘Turning the Tide against Racism’ inter agency monitoring form. Domestic Violence is similarly monitored anonymously through ‘The Worst Kept Secret’.
- 199 Service performance has been benchmarked against national performance using CORE data and against a number of Merseyside based associations.

Aids and Adaptations

Description

- 200 The service is delivered by the Extra Care Team based at Hanover Street.

Planning

- 201 The association has spent on average, between the years 2000 – 2003, £222,000 per annum on disabled adaptations.
- 202 There is a five year programme and budget.

Delivery

- 203 A leaflet ‘Adaptations’ describes the service and the service standards.
- 204 Tenants requiring major aids and adaptations are visited by property services staff to assess what is required. Some tenants receiving minor works are visited.

Consultation and involvement

- 205 We saw evidence of use of a standard form used to demonstrate that the tenant had been shown how to use equipment but only for bath lifts, not for any other kind of equipment. The form is a good idea because it is signed by both the tenant and officer. But this form is not always used as is indicated by the result of the postal satisfaction survey (August 2001 – March 2002) as 25 per cent of respondents said they did not know if “the adaptations process was fully explained to me”. This is further evidence by the fact that 26 per cent of those surveyed said they were having problems with the adaptations installed in their homes.
- 206 Although LHT has a Board member with experience of living with a disability there is no wider consultation of users of the aids and adaptations service.
- 207 A new questionnaire on the draft adaptations policy and procedure had been sent to 15 tenants, from the tenant 250 panel, which had used the service. Sent out mid-August the survey is being followed up by home visits as there is no interest in forming a focus group.

Monitoring and review

- 208 Tenants receive post-inspection visits following major adaptations.
- 209 In the past the Customer Service Centre has carried out satisfaction surveys on minor aids and adaptations but the latest one took place between August 2001

and March 2002. Of 57 people surveyed 91 per cent were happy with the completed adaptations.

- 210 The service standard says the satisfaction surveys will take place every six months but none has taken place over the last year.

Equality and Diversity

- 211 The referral form used by the association for logging requests for aids and adaptations has an ethnic monitoring section at the back but nothing is done with this data. This is recognised in the associations self assessment.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 212 We found that LHT had devoted resources to equality and diversity issues. There is strong emphasis on partnership working and a sound knowledge of the context in which the association operates. Monitoring is clear and had been used to revise targets in the light of demographic changes. Translation is available on written material and through Languageline.
- 213 However the aids and adaptations service showed some weaknesses and there is insufficient evidence of positive results for tenants.
- 214 Overall it is found that the service is **satisfactory**.

What works well?

- ◆ Policy informed by Race and Housing Challenge Report and legislation
- ◆ Action plans which reflect performance and identified issues for equality and race
- ◆ Member of COFEM
- ◆ Member of asylum seeker and refugee research project steering group
- ◆ Range of training available for staff
- ◆ Detailed analysis of customer surveys by ethnicity and disability
- ◆ Critical self assessment carried out by staff group on equality and diversity performance
- ◆ Equality and Diversity advisor role
- ◆ Strong staff awareness of issues
- ◆ Training in diversity and cultural awareness
- ◆ Strong partnership element to work
- ◆ Use of Languageline and typetalk
- ◆ Language flags on leaflets
- ◆ Merseyside Community Voice

Aids and adaptations

- ◆ Experienced and knowledgeable staff.
- ◆ Staff within the organisation told us they receive a good service from the Extra Care Team.
- ◆ Tenants' needs are assessed by the Occupational Therapist who works for the association, so ensuring a prompt assessment.

- ◆ Clear eligibility criteria for granting disabled adaptations and definition of an adaptation.
- ◆ Good information about tenants, through the extra care tenants list, level of investment in adaptations and impact on tenants.
- ◆ Recognised by HoDis (National Disabled Person Housing Services) as delivering the service according to best practice.

Positive practice

"In partnership with other local RSLs, LAs and BME organisations, LHT has led in setting up a panel for BME residents in the Merseyside area.

The panel will be made up of 600 volunteers who will be asked to give their opinion on a variety of housing related issues. The panel will encourage BME residents to participate in feedback and research exercises, whilst also building up a profile of ethnic minority residents and agencies within the region.

The Housing Corporation awarded an Innovation and Good Practice grant to help its creation".

Key findings and recommendations for ensuring services are sensitive to the needs of communities.

Issues	Recommendations
An important theme in the association's approach to equality and diversity is the business case. However it is disappointing to find that the 2003/4 Business Plan does not address this issue. Proposed large scale demolitions in some areas of Liverpool will impact on BME communities as will other strategic factors. Whilst there is leadership on diversity amongst group and LHT staff there is no champion on the Board.	Consider the advantages of establishing a Board champion for equality and diversity and take steps to ensure that corporate documents such as the business plan include diversity as a key theme.
The Group Equal Opportunities Statement deals with employees and partners but not customers.	Review the statement to include customer issues.
The corporate suite of leaflets contains language flags and are well presented. The annual report and other publications contain positive images of diversity. We found that the office reception areas did not make much use of positive images. As the association has increased its targets for new BME customers it is important that encouraging messages are given to potential tenants.	Review the use of positive images in reception areas and generally.
We found evidence of performance monitoring and survey results about services feeding into action plans. Staff self assessments have also identified a number of factors that are making an impact on access to lettings and housing management. The action planning focussed on raising more challenging targets in the light of changing demography. We felt that it would be better to tie all activity through	Coordinate activity in response to monitoring, review and self assessment through a single action plan.

the action plan.	
Whilst equal opportunities training are mandatory, cultural awareness training is selectively given. Staff said they would like this training to be universal.	Consider universal compulsory cultural awareness for staff.
<p>'User defined characteristic' UDC screens are used to tell staff about tenants with particular needs. At present there is no method for ensuring this information is up to date or that all information from other sources is used to make sure it is complete.</p> <p>NB. This screen is used for other alerts such as the need for gas servicing and the same point applies.</p>	Take steps to ensure that the information on UDC screens is up to date and complete.
Harassment cases focussed on transfer applications rather than actions to deal with the harassment. The association's policy and procedure contains a number of actions to deal with harassment. But our checks found that transfer was used overwhelmingly.	Ensure that case handling follows procedure.

Key findings and recommendations for Equality & Diversity – disabled aids and adaptations

Issues	Recommendations
Prioritising requests	
<p>There is a backlog of 160 applications for aids and adaptations. In the past the association has been prepared to fund all requests for aids and adaptations. However, both this year's budget and last year's budget have been reduced. The reason for this year's reduction is to pay for works to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. The result is that applicants have been told as early as May 2003 that they will have to wait a year before the association can consider their case.</p> <p>The 1999 tenants' survey recognized that 55 per cent of households were either disabled or had a disabled person within the home. This has increased from 44 per cent in 1996 so the trend is for a growing demand for this service.</p>	Explore and offer a range of options to tenants, to ensure that applicants for aids and adaptations "remain independent within their local community" and that the home is "suitable to their needs".
Customer Services	
<p>Satisfaction survey results indicate that 25 per cent of those receiving aids and adaptations do not know how to use them properly.</p> <p>File checks revealed that the tenant is not always kept up to date with their application.</p>	Ensure that customers are given adequate information at all stages of delivery.

<p>Letters do not advise the tenant when the work will be done and could be more informative.</p> <p>The leaflet about the 'ACCESS' service is not available in reception areas in any office.</p>	
<p>Performance Monitoring</p>	
<p>Staff delivering the service are not advised by other departments of the actual date of completion of the works. That means that the association cannot measure whether or not it is meeting the service standards in the 'Adaptations' leaflet supplied to tenants.</p> <p>The last customer satisfaction survey was carried out in March 2002. There is no evidence that the results of the last satisfaction survey had been used to improve the service.</p>	<p>Measure performance against the existing service standard and use the information to improve the service for tenants.</p>

Involving tenants in the activities of the association

Key features of the service

Description

215 The service is delivered by the Community Initiatives Team who deals with general needs tenants.

Planning

216 In 2001 LHT reviewed its Tenant Participation service and wrote a new tenant participation policy. The policy was developed in partnership with Tenant Committee Members and was subject to a critique by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service before it was adopted in 2002. It is scheduled for review in 2004.

217 In the 2002 survey tenants were asked to rate a number of LHT services in terms of what they felt should be a priority for review. The review of the tenant involvement strategy was in the bottom four priorities.

218 The Community Initiatives Team has a detailed action plan for delivery its objectives.

219 The budget for tenant participation is divided into two elements, staff costs and project costs. In 2002/03 project costs were £140,981 for Runcorn and £52,700 for Liverpool. Staff costs in 2002/03 were £220,451. The budget is held by the Housing Services Manager North.

220 The formal tenant involvement structure includes tenants at District Committee level, on the Housing Services Committee and on the RSL and Group Boards. These bodies have oversight of policies and procedures.

221 A Community Initiatives steering group met for the first time in July 2003 to which all 24 members of the District Committees are invited for the first 12 months. Staff from property services, housing management and allocations is also involved. The purpose of the group is to review the associations approach to resident involvement.

- 222 Previously there had been a Tenant Participation Action Group attended by six members of the District Committees. This group produced the comprehensive District Committees Members Handbook.
- 223 There are plans to establish area panels. The one for the North area has already met but no meetings have yet been held for the South and Runcorn areas and the idea of area panels is still being discussed with District Committee members at the time of the visit. The purpose of establishing area panels as well as having District Committees is to widen the number of tenants who are involved in commenting on changes to services.
- 224 A review exercise took place in July 2003 on tenant participation for supported housing but no timescales have yet been set for implementing the objectives.
- 225 There is a programme of consultation events running from September 2002 - March 2004.

Delivery

- 226 Tenants from established residents associations are represented on the two District Committees, Runcorn (10 tenants) and Liverpool (12 tenants), on the Housing Services Committee (6), LHT's Board (4) and the group's Board (2).
- 227 There are 20 active residents groups in Liverpool, 13 in the North area and 6 in the South, and 3 in Runcorn based on the largest estates.
- 228 The majority of the residents groups are a mixture of tenants and owner occupiers. Membership is not limited to LHT residents, with the exception of two groups. There are standard terms of reference and model constitutions for these groups.
- 229 Community Initiatives Team officers attend some of the residents' groups meetings and provide a range of support depending on the needs of the group. Service level agreements specifying the support that will be given to each group had been agreed by the Community Initiatives Steering Group but had not been implemented at the time of the inspection visit.
- 230 Residents associations can receive £150 per annum to cover costs and officers hold an annual audit meeting with each group where training needs are also identified.
- 231 The 'Penny for your thoughts' initiative, which invited tenants to comment on the service provided by LHT and which is sent out with a covering letter to all tenants in Liverpool and Runcorn in April 2003. The letter advised residents that a tenants panel is being established and included a stamped addressed envelope for those who wished to express an interest. Prizes of £20 and £10 are offered to encourage people to participate. At the point of our visit 495 people had responded. A further letter was sent out in July 2003 to find out from those 495 who expressed an interest how they wanted to be consulted. A statement offering language translations in large print were sent out with the letter.
- 232 The Tenants Panel is the association's response to the findings of the latest tenants' survey. The results of the survey showed that 67 per cent of tenants said they would prefer to be consulted by letter, 36 per cent by newsletter, 22 per cent by door to door knocking and 20 per cent by questionnaire. Only 5 per cent wanted to attend discussion groups, 8 per cent were prepared to attend local meetings and 11 per cent said they should be consulted through the residents associations. Tenant Panel members are offered a range of consultation mechanisms and have been given a code of conduct. It is planned that information on the new tenants' panel would be included in sign up packs for new tenants but this was not taking place at the time of our visit.

- 233 LHT work in partnership with umbrella groups to improve local services e.g. Kirkdale Neighbourhood Council and the SRB funded Pathways Partnership Groups at Stanley/Anfield and Garston/Speke.
- 234 There are four tenant managed co-operatives and one co-operative which is an RSL within LHT. There is an Estate Management Board within the LHT group but it does not manage the housing association's properties.
- 235 Tenants' conferences are held which are open to all tenants.

Consultation and involvement

- 236 Tenants are involved at a local level when refurbishment works are being carried out to their estates. For instance a face to face local survey was used on the Phoenix Park estate to seek residents' views on facilities, anti-social behaviour, the local community office, the residents association and gauge peoples interest in becoming more involved.
- 237 Tenant 250 Panel members have already been asked to comment on services through consultation via email, postal and telephone surveys and meetings.
- 238 A survey offering a £40 music voucher as a prize draw was used to sound out young peoples views on community activities. Forty one questionnaires were completed.

Monitoring and review

- 239 The association carries out bi-annual satisfaction surveys. Both the 2000 and 2002 surveys demonstrated that only 52 per cent of residents are satisfied with opportunities to be involved but only 6 per cent said they were dissatisfied with arrangements to participate. In 2002 there was a wide variation between the three area offices; South registered a 40 per cent satisfaction, North 52 per cent and Runcorn 60 per cent. An average score for the housing association sector is 62 per cent so LHT is well under the national average. The association carries out bi-annual satisfaction surveys.
- 240 A new target has been introduced for 2003/04 which is that there should be 100 per cent tenant membership of the District Committees. At present there is a full complement on the Liverpool Committee but not at Runcorn.
- 241 At the request of tenants the original target of 100 tenant panel members was increased to 250. This target has already been exceeded as there have been 495 expressions of interest and some of these tenants have already been involved in consultation exercises.
- 242 In Liverpool members of the District Committee attend the Maintenance Sub-Committee and are involved in the annual appraisal of contractors.
- 243 A staff member Chairs the Partners in Participation group, attended by tenant participation staff from RSLs in Liverpool. PiP acts as a forum for sharing best practice, benchmarking and for developing training for staff and tenants.

Equality and Diversity

- 244 The Community Initiatives Team have secured £20,000 to expand opportunities for involvement through a BME panel.
- 245 Information about the 'Merseyside Community Voice' initiation designed to attract people from minority communities to be part of a special group, has been sent to all LHT's residents groups and other community organisations with whom they have links.
- 246 There is a Tenant Support Charter, for residents of supported housing, which includes a section on 'Having your Say'.

247 There is no formal strategy for engaging with customers from BME communities or ensuring that service is accessible to disabled customers.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 248 The Community Initiatives Team at LHT provide a comprehensive service to existing residents groups and support a wide range of community initiatives. This work is underpinned by a substantial budget and dedicated staff.
- 249 We recognise that LHT has already identified the need to widen the range of mechanisms for engaging residents and the wider community in the areas where the RSL provides homes. We would encourage LHT to continue to develop initiatives that will enable a greater number of tenants to be consulted on the services it provides. We suggest that LHT will need to continue to promote these initiatives to tenants and staff to ensure that everybody is aware of them.
- 250 LHT needs to ensure that in engaging with its customers that it is seen to be actively listening and acting on feedback from tenants. It also needs to address the issue of establishing regular dialogue with people from BME communities as it has not yet achieved this. LHT should ensure that people living in its more dispersed stock also have the same opportunities to participate as those in the conurbations.
- 251 Overall the resident involvement is **satisfactory**.

What works well?

- ◆ LHT has experienced and knowledgeable staff who have received appropriate training.
- ◆ There is a formal structure for resident involvement including a number of active groups.
- ◆ District committee members are made up of tenants who are paid expenses and receive training and attend conferences.
- ◆ Tenants are involved in service review panels and are consulted on leaflets and new policies.
- ◆ Budgets are available for community initiatives. For example £11,950 worth of community awards were given by the District Committees in 2002/3.
- ◆ The Bernie Evans Award of £1000 per year (maximum £3000) is given to promote further education for tenants.
- ◆ LHT support local groups financially, for example a grant was given to the Futures Coffee Shop.
- ◆ Tenants are involved in contractor appraisal.
- ◆ A variety of consultation and information mechanisms are used in regeneration and refurbishment projects.
- ◆ LHT provide information on activities through the newsletter.

Key findings and recommendations for resident involvement

Issues	Recommendations
Existing Structures	
Only 52 per cent of tenants satisfied with opportunities for involvement in 2000 and	With tenants build on the work already started to widen the opportunities for tenants to

2002 surveys. We acknowledge that reviewing tenant participation strategy featured as one of the lowest priorities for tenants.	influence over the way services are delivered. Take steps to improve customer satisfaction with opportunities for participation.
Involvement mechanisms	
The majority of people we spoke did not have a good awareness of the opportunities for formal participation offered by LHT. Not all staff were aware of the new initiatives for involving residents.	Ensure that both tenants and staff are clear about the opportunities for involvement and consultation and how they can be accessed. Ensure staff are well briefed and fully equipped to deliver new mechanisms
Tenants Influence	
Some staff thought tenants felt informed but not consulted and at one focus group tenants said when LHT send questionnaires they feel they are only ticking boxes and there fore they are just answering questions the association want to ask. A few tenants thought that consultation could be improved and this is summed up by one tenant who said, “Overall, I feel that LHT are a good landlord. However, they could improve the service by more consultation when changing or altering where I live.” Tenants at sheltered schemes felt that the association had not listened to them.	Involve residents in deciding what questions are asked in surveys and in the design of other involvement mechanism and the way these opportunities are presented to tenants. Ensure that tenants are fully consulted about work to their homes and other changes to services in a timely manner.
Being Inclusive	
There is no evidence that the delivery of resident involvement is adjusted to meet the needs of those from ethnic minorities, vulnerable people and those living in outlying areas.	Ensure that opportunities for resident involvement are inclusive.

Services to customers

Key features of the service

Description

- 252 The service is delivered by the Customer Service Centre and the reception staff in the Runcorn office and two offices in Liverpool, which are open during between 9 am - 5.30 pm
- 253 The 2002 satisfaction survey showed that 77 per cent of residents contact the association by telephone and 67 per cent of these calls are about repairs.
- 254 Of those tenants who prefer to visit offices 29 per cent do so to speak to someone face to face and another 29 per cent because it is close to where they live.

Planning

- 255 A major review of customer services took place in 1997 informed by the results of the 1996 tenants' satisfaction survey. This led to the creation of the Customer Service Centre and the Extra Care Team.
- 256 LHT has service standards which are published in the Customer charter. The charter was updated in July 2003 and covers a range of services. It does not however, tell customers about targets for telephone answering or how long they will have to wait for an appointment. A target of 10 days for replying to letters is given. There is also a lack of cross referencing to the service standards for repairs target times and complaints response.
- 257 The Business Plan for 2003/04 features new increased targets for customer services to reflect tenants wishes;
- ◆ 75 per cent of calls received by the call centre to be answered in the target time,
 - ◆ 75 per cent of callers to be greeted by an accurate voice mail message,
 - ◆ A maximum of 55 per cent of callers get a voice mail instead of an actual person,
 - ◆ A maximum of 30 per cent of calls taken by the customer service centre to be passed to other teams for action.
- 258 Plans were progressing to update the North's reception area to meet the standards of the other two offices. Staff had been consulted on these plans.

Delivery

- 259 The Customer Service Centre target is to answer 75 per cent of all calls in 20 seconds or 5 rings. In 2002/03 70 per cent of calls were answered within target.
- 260 LHT does not have a target for lost calls but does benchmark its performance with nine other RSLs. For July to December 2002 it lost 7 per cent of calls compared to 11.6 per cent for the comparison group, putting them in the top three.
- 261 The number for the Customer Service Centre is charged at a local rate but not all the tenants we spoke to understood this. The call centre telephone number is promoted through fridge magnets.
- 262 There are specialist teams within the Customer Service Centre, which callers can select by choosing the relevant number on the keypad and a system for placing calls with other team members if the lines are busy. The team achieved their target of not more than 30 per cent of calls being passed on to other departments, by a rate of 25 per cent.
- 263 There is a wide range of leaflets which have recently been updated. These are easy to read and informative.
- 264 According to the results of the 2002 survey only 12 per cent of tenants visit the website and use the email address. Only 30 per cent know there is a website. Development of the website is not a priority for tenants according to the results of the 2002 survey. However the association launched a new website in the summer of 2003.
- 265 Tenants can phone through repairs from the free phone in reception which is used by 3 per cent of tenants.

Consultation and involvement

- 266 The results of the 2002 tenants' survey show that 84 per cent are satisfied with the overall performance of the association – this has improved on 74 per cent rating in the 2000 survey. However, there is wide variation between districts; Runcorn, which scored 91 per cent, North office with 82 per cent and South, which has the most challenging operating context, scoring 77 per cent.
- 267 84 per cent of residents think that staff are polite and helpful according to the 2002 survey, with 79 per cent saying staff were able to deal with their problem and 68 per cent satisfied with the overall outcome. These results were supported by the outcome of our contact with tenants.
- 268 A feature on the Customer Service Centre was included in the 2002 edition of the 'Highlights' magazine which included a section on frequently asked questions and requested residents for feedback on the call centre.
- 269 Tenants have been consulted on the quality of the newsletter via a tear off free post slip attached to the summer edition of the 'Highlights' newsletter.
- 270 The Customer Services Centre regularly use mini surveys to consult on current issues.
- 271 A review of the reception areas in all three offices included a consultation exercise with users.

Monitoring and review

- 272 The association has a mutual arrangement with another RSL to carry out mystery shopping exercises of the Customer Service Centre. The results of the latest survey show that the service is improving. In October 2002 of the ten mystery shopping calls, five were rated as excellent, two as good and three satisfactory, similar results were achieved in July 2003.
- 273 LHT belong to a national RSL benchmarking group and attend the Merseyside Call Centre forum which includes private sector firms.
- 274 Customer satisfaction is measured through bi-annual and local surveys and also through telephone surveys carried out by the Customer Service Centre.
- 275 The Customer Service Centre has sophisticated IT software for monitoring not only performance against target, which was achieved in 2002/03, but the volume of calls including the number lost.
- 276 The Customer Service Centre team have weekly meetings to review performance.

Equality and Diversity

- 277 From our observations and other checks we found that reception staff are able to deliver a service that is sensitive to the needs of customers.
- 278 The IT system can help Customer Service Centre staff identify tenants with language or other special needs.
- 279 The Language Line translation service is available in the reception areas of all three offices.
- 280 A copy of the newsletter 'Highlights' was produced in another language in 2002.
- 281 Leaflets have language flags on them and are offered in other formats but when one of our mystery shoppers asked for a leaflet in audio format we were told it is not available. Also, the leaflets are offered in large print but the statement giving this information is in a very small font. However, the data in the leaflets themselves is well presented and in 14 font.

- 282 The association is aware, from its own self assessment, that tenants with special needs, e.g. visually impairment, are not given a service that is tailored to their needs.
- 283 The magazines promote positive images but more emphasis could be placed on this in reception areas.

Dealing with Complaints

Description

- 284 LHT's definition of a complaint is "A customers' expression of dissatisfaction with any aspect of service provision, delivery, LHT policy or member of staff"
- 285 Complaints are categorised in the complaints policy into different types. They are:
- ◆ Right to repair
 - ◆ Complaints leading to third party claims
 - ◆ General complaints
 - ◆ Complaints against contractor or staff

Planning

- 286 The Resolutions Policy was developed from early 2000 to June 2002 by the Runcorn Housing Services Manager. During this time, the system was refined and a computerised system using Event Manager within the Orchard Management System.
- 287 In 2001, the system was piloted for six months in the South District Repairs section. The complaints system was launched across the Trust in June 2002 and reviewed from this date until its official introduction in April 2003. Tenants were informed of the new procedure through the summer 2002 newsletter.
- 288 The Resolutions Policy & Procedure is dated November 2002 and includes guidance notes to staff on using the complaints system, guidance on compensation and guidance to Band 7 officers who are responsible for monthly reporting to the "Complaints champion"
- 289 The policy and procedures have been sent to the Tenant District committees for information. Consultation with the Tenants 250 Panel is planned as part of the review to take place in November 2003.
- 290 The complaints process follows three stages, each stage has set timescales for response:
- 1 Stage one – Complaint's are allocated to a designated housing officer who will investigate and respond within 14 working days.
 - 2 Stage two – The appropriate Head of Service will review the complaint and respond within 7 working days.
 - 3 Stage Three – A Director or Director's Panel will investigate the complaint. The Panel will be made up of a Director plus two Housing Service Committee tenant members. The investigation will be completed within 28 working days.
- 291 The leaflet "Making a complaint" advertises that complainants may contact the Ombudsman if the complaint is unresolved.
- 292 The leaflet provides the Customer Service Centre phone number for making a complaint but does not provide an address for written complaints.

- 293 Complainants have twenty days to respond to each stage of the complaint before the Trust considers the complaint to be closed. Tenants are not advised of this timescale in the literature on the complaints system.
- 294 The leaflet does not offer any support agencies or give the contact details of the Tenants panel for complainants.
- 295 Between January and April 2003, Customer Service staff received training on the new system and training was given to officers on system use. Over 40 staff received this training.

Delivery

- 296 Customers can make a complaint verbally to any member of staff, via the Customer Service Centre or in writing. The leaflet indicates complaints are to be made through the Customer Service Centre but does not tell customers that other ways to complain are available. Complaints can be taken by email but no email address is given.
- 297 There is no complaints form and there is no facility for asking complainants how they would like to see the complaint resolved.
- 298 Complaints resolved at the point of contact by the Customer Service Centre are not recorded.
- 299 Complaints are logged by the Customer Service Centre in the Orchard system, using Event Manager, which generates a complaint number. The Customer Service Centre allocates a designated officer and alerts them by e-mail that a complaint has been logged on the system. The system works in real time and although the policy indicates the Customer Service Centre will contact relevant managers to ensure the various response times are met, the onus is on the staff member responsible for the complaint to adhere to the timescales, update the system as required and keep copies of all correspondence on house files.
- 300 From the initial launch of the system in June 2002 until its official launch in April 2003, 49 complaints were recorded.
- 301 Since the official launch of the complaints system in April 2003, 72 complaints have been received and are broken down as follows:
- ◆ Runcorn – 11
 - ◆ South – 31
 - ◆ North – 30
- 302 Since the complaints system was introduced, all have been resolved at Stage One.
- 303 Since April 2003 the complaint categories are as follows:
- 1 Day to day repairs – 56 per cent
 - 2 Complaints about a Contractor – 14.4 per cent
 - 3 Planned/Cyclical repairs – 2 per cent
 - 4 Environmental Services – 10.3 per cent
 - 5 Customer Service Centre – 2 per cent
 - 6 Housing Services – 1 per cent
 - 7 Adaptations – 1 per cent
 - 8 Rents and Tenancy Management – 10.3 per cent

9 Marketing and Lettings – 3 per cent

Consultation and involvement

- 304 District committees were informed of the proposals and pilots. They also received copies of the reports on the new system.
- 305 Contractors were sent questionnaires on the complaints procedure to ensure they were aware of the new procedure and to comment on the process and procedures i.e. easy to follow and understand.

Monitoring and review

- 306 Designated Officers in each office produce monthly exception reports which detail:
- ◆ Numbers of complaints logged
 - ◆ Numbers resolved and outstanding
 - ◆ Numbers not yet beyond acknowledgement stage
 - ◆ Numbers of cases that have been active for 28 days
 - ◆ Individual complaint progress
- 307 The monthly exception reports are passed to the Complaints champion who liaises and chases outstanding action on each case.
- 308 Performance reporting is produced every quarter for Board – this details the resolution of Customer Service complaints in target times. The target set is 100 per cent resolution of complaints within the specified target times. Performance for the first quarter (April – June 2003) was:
- ◆ April – 100 per cent
 - ◆ May – 80 per cent
 - ◆ June – 55 per cent
 - ◆ The drop in performance is attributed to the complaints monitoring system not being followed and updated.
- 309 To date issues relating to customer care for contractors and additional training on complaints handling by Customer Service Centre operators have been identified by the Complaints Champion.

Equality and Diversity

- 310 Language line is available and the complaints leaflet has translation available in 6 different languages. The form also offers the information on audio tape, large print and Braille.
- 311 Complainants are encouraged to telephone complaints to the Customer Service Centre to assist customers who have difficulty writing or who cannot communicate in English.
- 312 The computer system can record ethnicity of complainants but at present complainants are not asked their ethnic origin.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 313 Liverpool Housing Trust are providing a customer focussed service that is sensitive to the needs of residents. Residents said staff were polite and helpful. The service is accessible, responsive and informative. The recommendations we have made are in part already being addressed by the association and we have

every confidence that LHT will continue to improve the service to all its customers.

- 314 LHT should consider how its service standards can be enhanced to include more measurable outcomes and needs to measure the service against all service standards not just the customer service centre.
- 315 The handling of complaints had scope for improvement but the overall judgement is that customer services are **satisfactory**.

What works well in customer services?

- ◆ Staff were customer orientated and had received appropriate training. There is a 4 week induction programme for the call centre staff. Additional training is regularly provided for the Customer Service Centre team through monthly team meetings.
- ◆ There is close liaison with other departments in the organisation. In addition service level agreement is being drawn up with the repairs section. Agreements with rents and marketing are scheduled for March 2004.
- ◆ The majority of tenants like the newsletter and think it is informative and well presented. From the first returns from the newsletter survey it is particularly successful with older tenants.
- ◆ The Performance Report is designed to be accessible to tenants. It has language flags about translation on the back page. Large print and Braille versions offered. It has good layout and use of colour. Includes performance against targets.
- ◆ Reception staff will signpost customers to other providers if waiting lists are closed.
- ◆ The Customer Service Centre provides an 8am - 8pm service.
- ◆ Reception areas are welcoming and provide range of information.
- ◆ Front desks in Liverpool South and Runcorn are equipped to deal with people with disabilities or language difficulties and provide a friendly and efficient service having relevant experience and have received appropriate training. (The Liverpool North reception is under review and improvements are planned.)
- ◆ A duty officer service is provided to deal with more complex queries.
- ◆ LHT is prepared to provide information in other formats and have done so.
- ◆ Standard letters are clear, informative and in appropriate tone.
- ◆ A credit union office is located in the reception area of North office.
- ◆ The Tenants Handbook is well presented and informative.

What works well in complaints?

- ◆ Guidelines for staff on compensation for service failures
- ◆ Early analysis of complaints is picking up emerging themes such as customer care training for contractors
- ◆ Complaint champion is a specific manager who has overall responsibility for complaints handling and reporting
- ◆ The Trust consulted contractors on the complaints procedure.

Key findings and recommendations for services to customers

Issues	Recommendations
Service Standards	
<p>The association has service standards for many aspects of the service but no specific measures are included in the Customer Charter leaflet.</p> <p>There are different standards relating to different parts of the service such as complaints and repairs. Staff are uncertain as to which standard takes priority.</p>	<p>Publish the measurable elements of the service standards. Ensure all staff are aware of them and monitor performance.</p>
Reception areas	
<p>Generally these are an acceptable standard but would be even better if the following issues were addressed;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - need better signposting of disabled toilets and induction loops - Consider the provision of a loop system in interview rooms and panic buttons in the South and North offices - The suggestion boxes are not well signposted - Provide clearer messages about service standards e.g. that it is the associations intention to delight the customer 	<p>Complete the planned works to the North office and consider how reception areas could be further improved to meet the needs of the customer.</p> <p>Consider enhancing the external appearance of the North Office to make it more welcoming for customers.</p>
Customer Service Centre	
<p>There are busy times when a high percentage of calls are not answered and customers give up holding on, because it is perceived as being expensive.</p>	<p>Consider how to promote the local rate to residents and advice to residents about the call centres busy periods.</p>
Responsive Service	
<p>Although the majority of tenants we spoke to said that they received a good service a number of them had had negative experience e.g. finding that some staff did not give a satisfactory response when contacted by the tenant particularly when making complaints or reporting incidents of anti-social behaviour.</p>	<p>Ensure that staff dealing with antisocial behaviour and complaints complies with customer service standards.</p>

Key findings and recommendations for complaints

Issues	Recommendations
Complaints resolved by Customer Service	Take steps to ensure all complaints are

Operators are not recorded.	recorded.
<p>The complaints leaflet does not provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an address or basic form for written complaints and how the customer would like to see the complaint resolved - a contact name - details of how long the tenant has to respond to each stage of a complaint before the Trust considers the complaint be closed - any details of tenants groups or panels that may be able to offer support to the complainant 	<p>Whilst it is acknowledged the Trust is keen for customers to complain in any format and to make it as easy as possible, it should, as part of the review, consider how to introduce additional measures to ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - customers are able to provide a complaint on writing or on a basic form - that a named contact is used who should not be responsible for service provision - customers are aware of support that can be offered through tenant groups or other agencies
Mystery shopping highlighted that customer service operators are not aware of how the complaints information can be provided in different formats.	Take steps to ensure customer service operators are aware and can provide details of how to access the complaints information in a different format such as Braille, audio tape etc.
The complaints system on Orchard relies heavily on staff updating the system to meet timescales and ensuring both the system has relevant information input and relevant copies of correspondence are placed on house files.	Consider how to ensure staff take ownership of complaints and maintain both the Event Manager and house files.
Front line staff and tenants have not been involved in the development and implementation of the customer complaints policy and procedure.	Ensure both front line staff and tenants are involved in the review of the complaints system.
Complaints statistics and emerging themes are not reported to customers.	Take steps to ensure customers are kept informed on levels of complaints, progress against targets and issues arising, including complaints leading to policy changes.
Responses to complainants do not provide information on how to escalate to the next stage.	Ensure responses clearly state how to progress a complaint.
Although the complaints system can record ethnicity of complainants the Trust does not currently ask customers their ethnic origin when they receive a complaint.	Consider how to incorporate the ethnic origin of complainants to ensure the complaints system is accessible and to assist in monitoring themes/issues of complaints
The complaints policy guidelines on categories of complaints have been superseded.	Amend the policy to reflect the changes in how complaints are categorised.

Income Management

Key features of the service

Description

- 316 The collection of rent income for the association is the responsibility of Rents and Tenancy Management Teams located in each of the three offices in Liverpool South, Liverpool North and Runcorn. Each of these teams are managed by a Project Officer and comprise from six to eight Housing Officers, who are also responsible for other tenancy management issues such as dealing with anti social behaviour.
- 317 A Rent Action Group is responsible for continuous improvement in relation to rent collection and includes staff from across the association. This group is headed by the Key Performance Indicator Champion for Rents who is the Housing Services Manager for Liverpool South.
- 318 Rent payments are processed through the Group's Rent Control Team which deals with cash and electronic payments. Because of tenant's desire to pay in cash in Runcorn a secure payment desk has been retained at this office, which is staffed by the Rent Control Team located there. In the other areas most payments are made through standing order or via a rent payment card at the post office. LHT recognise the need to broaden the range of payment methods and were at the time of the inspection in the process of a review, with a commitment to enhance the payment methods by the end of the financial year.

Planning

- 319 The association operates under various policies which relate to the collection of rent. The Rent Arrears Policy and Procedures (last updated January 2002), the Rent Convergence Plan (last updated March 2003), the Former Tenant Arrears Policy (last updated June 2003), Rent Control Process, the Verification Policy and Procedure (last updated April 2003) and the Service Charge Policy (last updated August 2002). These policies arose following a service review which was completed in January 2002 and lead to the formation of the Rent Action Group.
- 320 The focus for the association is to improve performance in what it sees as an increasingly difficult environment. To address the need to improve performance a Rent Income Improvement Plan had been developed. The aim of LHT is to be in the top quartile of performers by 2006.
- 321 LHT Performance Indicators show improving performance in rent collected and arrears over the last three years.

		2000/1	2001/2	2002/3
Rent collection	%	90.63	91.18	92.79
Rent arrears	%	9.09	8.85	7.21
Rent written off	%	1.28	1.72	2.36

- 322 However this performance leaves them in the bottom quartile for all three indicators and the level of rent written off is rising. Performance in the first half of 2003 shows improvement and the business plan target was met in September.

Delivery

- 323 LHT use the Orchard computer system to manage rent collection and to deal with arrears cases. This system updates within three days of electronic money transfers and can provide accurate weekly reports on the status of rent accounts. LHT has seen the need for more flexible reporting and have a data warehouse project looking at this issue.

- 324 It is the responsibility of the Housing Officers working on a patch basis (known as an Orchard Leaf) to monitor and action cases falling into arrears. The system will highlight these cases and request a response. The Housing Officer may 'recommend' – which accepts the next step in the standard procedure, 'override' – which leads to alternative action, or 'disregard' – which leads to no action. If the system trigger is followed then a standard letter is generated or for a longer running case there is a prompt for preparing Court action. The system distinguishes between the different payment methods e.g. Four weekly Housing Benefit, which should prevent arrears letters going out before payment is due.
- 325 Tenants can pay their rent either through a standing order, through the post office using a rent card or in cash.
- 326 The system also includes a 'user defined characteristic' screen, which can identify any particular circumstances, from vulnerable tenants to the need for a gas safety inspection. The Housing Officer must first look at this screen before being able to access a particular rent account record. We found that this is used but that there is no way of ensuring the information is up to date or complete.
- 327 The system can generate standard reports on cases and action decisions. Project Officers monitor activity and in particular will discuss cases where the standard action has been overridden. Project Officers also attend Court for serious cases. The procedure allows for face to face interviews before formal action is progressed. LHT report that in some areas the Courts are becoming increasingly reluctant to grant possession and will give multiple suspensions.
- 328 Housing Officers have patch cash targets for reducing arrears which are based on a 10 per cent reduction from the previous year. Although these targets are viewed as important by managers and staff, they are not rigidly applied. Individual officer performance is shared in and between teams in the spirit of friendly competition.
- 329 Staff are aware of the contextual issues which may affect the tenant's ability to pay rent. We found that the approach to rent collection is a good balance between firmness and sensitivity to individual cases. The tenants we spoke to also thought that LHT had a positive approach to collecting arrears, although we found that it is possible for a new tenant to receive standard letters very soon after starting a tenancy and that some tenants were sensitive to receiving standard letters when outstanding rent had occurred because of minor informalities. Action on new tenants experiencing Housing Benefits delays are suspended if LHT is carrying out the verification.
- 330 LHT send tenants quarterly rent statements.
- 331 LHT has established liaison with the local benefits services in Liverpool, Halton and Knowlsey and has been verifying housing benefit claims since July 2003. RAISE which is an independent benefits advice agency located in the North Liverpool Office is funded by LHT and used for referring appropriate cases, at around 600 a year, through a service level agreement.
- 332 Service charges are identified separately at sign up through the tenancy agreement and collected as a single pot of income, except for Supporting People. Consultation on changes in service charges occur through the Environmental Services Teams and are identified in the annual rent increase letters which give 28 days notice of the increases occurring on the first Monday in each financial year.
- 333 The standard letters notifying tenants of the rent increase include a series of frequently asked questions which centre around benefit claimants. They do not

however give information on right to appeal to the Rent Assessment Committee. There is a different letter for those who pay support charges.

- 334 LHT do not operate rent free weeks. In Pheonix Park they have piloted a reward prize draw for those who have up to date rent accounts.
- 335 The association let some 50 to 60 garages in Runcorn and income from these is dealt with separately. It does not collect water rates or other service charges.
- 336 LHT provide a rent collection service for Cathedral Mansion Co-op.
- 337 LHT is looking at methods to improve on the collection of Former Tenants' Arrears through three pilots. The Runcorn office is putting a dedicated Housing Officer on this work; Liverpool North and the South office are using an agency to trace.
- 338 LHT has produced 'Your Rent Account', 'Housing Benefit', 'Setting our Rent' and 'Rent Arrears' which are part of the standard suite of leaflets which are given to new tenants at sign up.

Consultation and involvement

- 339 Staff are informed about arrears issues and performance through the 'Team Listening' meetings, Team Briefings and there are copies of policies and procedures on the shared Trust drive.
- 340 The Rent Action Group draws on staff from across the Group but does not include any tenants or stakeholders.
- 341 Although LHT quote 69 per cent of tenants being happy that the rent was value for money they have not as yet used customer involvement or consultation in reviewing its approach.
- 342 Performance is benchmarked through the Norhag Group.
- 343 Policy and procedure changes are presented to District Committees for comment.
- 344 A performance plan goes to all tenants annually as does the annual report.
- 345 The newsletter has been used to publicise rent payment as an issue but except in particular areas the association has not publicise successful intervention.
- 346 LHT consulted tenants five year ago on payment methods as art of office relocation. The retention of cash payment facilities at Runcorn resulted.

Monitoring and review

- 347 Housing officers receive weekly reports on cases, Project Officers and managers receive patch and officer performance information. Arrears 'bands' showing the length and amount of cases is part of monthly monitoring.
- 348 The Housing Services Committee receive quarterly reports including rent collection levels, arrears days and the levels of current and former tenants' arrears.
- 349 The Rent Action Group and the rent Champion are responsible for leading on reviews.
- 350 Individual and team targets are set through staff appraisal meetings and are based on 10 per cent reduction in last year's performance. Although monitoring is generally in terms of arrears weeks, individual targets are cash targets.
- 351 The KPI target forms part of the association wide monitoring and is a Business Plan target.

- 352 The distinction of Housing Benefit arrears from other arrears is being done through a monthly manual exercise.
- 353 The Rent Possession Sub Committee receives reports on individual cases but the numbers of possession orders, evictions and abandonment's do not form part of routine monitoring.

Equality and Diversity

- 354 The leaflets all include translated messages.
- 355 The UDC 'user defined characteristics' screen can be used to identify vulnerable tenants.

Key findings

Summary of overall performance in this service area

- 356 We found that LHT had recognised the importance of rent collection both to its business needs and the needs of its customers. Whilst the system is rigorous officers are able to deal with cases in a sensitive way. The UDC screen should enable them to identify vulnerable present, although as is mentioned elsewhere in this report there is no mechanism for making sure that this is up to date or complete.
- 357 Overall we found that this service is **satisfactory**.

What works well?

- ◆ KPI monitoring and targets for arrears at all levels.
- ◆ 'Competitive' edge through comparing performance between officers and teams.
- ◆ Staff well trained at induction and in arrears procedure.
- ◆ Orchard system a good tool for actions and gives up to date picture on rent accounts.
- ◆ UDC 'user defined characteristics' screen useful tool for identifying vulnerable tenants.
- ◆ HB verification pilots taking place.
- ◆ 'Raise' support agency available and collocated with association staff.
- ◆ Semi-generic working of Rents and Tenancy Management Team allows links between ASB/Arrears e.g. Dealing with Starter tenancies.

Key findings and recommendations for Income Management

Issues	Recommendations
Although the association has reviewed its procedures and carried out benchmarking against other service providers it has not included tenants or stakeholders on review groups.	Include users and stakeholders in review groups.
The association has set targets and implemented improvements; actual performance does not meet its own targets. Individual and team targets are not derived from the Business Plan targets.	Take steps to rationalize targets.

<p>The level of arrears due to housing benefit is derived from a monthly manual exercise by housing officers.</p>	<p>Look at ways to improve data handling so that housing benefit arrears can be more easily identified.</p>
<p>Staff and tenants have identified that the range of payment methods is limited. It is thought that increasing the range of payment methods would improve the service for customer and help to reduce the level of arrears. The association has begun to look at alternative methods.</p>	<p>Give priority to broadening the range of payment methods.</p>
<p>Despite the system overrides it is possible for the first contact with new tenants to be an arrears letter. Also tenants may receive a standard arrears letter when the payment has been held up through a minor error.</p>	<p>Consider introducing a contact letter for use with new tenants and where consistent payers have missed a payment.</p>
<p>LHT has used reward incentives to encourage tenants to clear arrears in Pheonix Park but have not rolled out this approach to tenants generally.</p>	<p>Consider a wider use of incentive schemes.</p>

Appendices

The inspection team

John Cox	Inspection Manager
Gemma Foren	Inspector
Lee Banfield	Inspector (Technical)
Pat Donnelly	Tenant Inspector
Darren Mobey	Programme Manager
Robert Palin	Inspection Officer

Number of person days on site

44

The inspection process

The inspection team carried out the following activities as part of the inspection

- ◆ Tenants focus groups
- ◆ Door knocking exercises
- ◆ Mystery Shopping
- ◆ System checks
- ◆ File checks
- ◆ Contractor questionnaires
- ◆ Local Authority questionnaires

Meetings were held with:

- ◆ Staff
- ◆ Tenants groups
- ◆ Tenant Board Members

Reference documents

General:

- ◆ The associations self-assessment submission prior to inspection
- ◆ Business plan
- ◆ Annual report to tenants
- ◆ Tenant satisfaction survey (where there is one within the last three years)

Service area documents:

- ◆ Maintaining homes in good condition:
 - ◆ Annual report 2001/02
 - ◆ Repairs service ISO 9001 accreditation report to the maintenance sub-committee March 2003
 - ◆ Responsive repairs policy and procedure dated July 2003
 - ◆ Empty property repairs policy and procedure 2003

- ◆ Annual gas servicing policy dated July 2003
- ◆ Project plan for property services 2000/01
- ◆ Responsive repairs KPI charts
- ◆ Void repairs KPI charts
- ◆ Gas servicing KPI charts
- ◆ Contractor code of practice
- ◆ Matrix for assessing contractors
- ◆ Staffing structure
- ◆ Self assessment feedback from LHT
- ◆ Example of the minutes from monthly meetings with contractors
- ◆ Copy of the post inspection pro-forma
- ◆ Report on two stage tendering for voids contracts dated 18th February 2002
- ◆ Maintenance sub-committee report dated March 2003 for benchmarking
- ◆ Checkmate 2002 benchmarking analysis
- ◆ Projects for all report to the maintenance sub-committee 25th April 2003
- ◆ Procurement procedures and model for routine repairs (2001)
- ◆ Proposed goodwill policy
- ◆ Tenant service review panel results to maintenance sub-committee dated 25th April 2003
- ◆ Tenant service review panel on occupational voids standards 10th July 2003
- ◆ Letting homes:
 - ◆ Self assessment
 - ◆ Information folder and background documents
 - ◆ Lettings policy and procedure
 - ◆ Monitoring information
 - ◆ Tenancy files
 - ◆ Local lettings correspondence
 - ◆ Void process material
- ◆ Dealing with nuisance and anti social behaviour:
 - ◆ Context statement
 - ◆ Nuisance and anti social behaviour policy
 - ◆ Suspension policy
 - ◆ Domestic violence policy and procedure
 - ◆ KPI charts
 - ◆ Benchmarking information
 - ◆ Tenancy files
 - ◆ Harassment files

- ◆ Involving tenants in influencing service delivery:
 - ◆ Self assessment - TP
 - ◆ New tenant survey letter – sign up pack
 - ◆ Postcard & prepaid return slip – Penny for your thoughts
 - ◆ Highlights magazines
 - ◆ LHT Community Initiatives Strategy – Draft
 - ◆ LHT inspection consultation forms (107)
 - ◆ Tenants questionnaire & door knocking results (70)
 - ◆ Tenants focus groups (3)
 - ◆ Staff focus groups (1)
 - ◆ Staff interviews
 - ◆ Observation at tenants meeting
- ◆ Ensuring that services are sensitive to the needs of communities:
 - ◆ Contextual statement
 - ◆ Group Equal Opportunities Statement
 - ◆ Group Equality and Diversity Policy
 - ◆ BME Housing and recruitment strategy
 - ◆ Working for equality policy
 - ◆ Equal Opportunities – a brief guide to legal requirements
 - ◆ Equality and Diversity Action Plan
 - ◆ Race Equality Action Plan
 - ◆ Racial Harassment Policy
 - ◆ Self assessments
 - ◆ Partnership projects
- ◆ Services to customers:
 - ◆ Satisfaction survey 2002
 - ◆ 81 responses to the newsletter survey
 - ◆ Equality and Diversity Self Assessment
 - ◆ Customer Care Self Assessment
 - ◆ PI's 2003/04 Business Plan
 - ◆ Performance Report 2002/03
 - ◆ Sign up pack with leaflets
 - ◆ Tenants Handbook
 - ◆ Highlights 2001/2002
 - ◆ Highlights 2002 summer & winter - Separate Runcorn & Liverpool editions inc. calander for 2003
 - ◆ Flyers for skip days
 - ◆ Local newsletters - 2001 & 2002
 - ◆ St Domingo tenant newsletter

- ◆ Performance report 2001/02
- ◆ Tenants questionnaire & door knocking results (70)
- ◆ Mystery Shopping - Complaints
- ◆ CSC Team Meeting
- ◆ Staff interviews
- ◆ Staff focus groups x 3
- ◆ Tenant focus groups x 3
- ◆ Observation in reception
- ◆ Review of information by Tenant Inspector
- ◆ Selection of standard letters reviewed
- ◆ LHT inspection consultation forms
- ◆ Income Management
 - ◆ Policy and procedure
 - ◆ System checks
 - ◆ Improvement groups papers
 - ◆ Monitoring information
 - ◆ Self assessment
 - ◆ Monitoring information
 - ◆ Other ackground documents

Glossary of terms

BME – Black and minority ethnic

Void – empty house

SOR – schedule of rates