

London Borough of
Brent

Housing Management Services

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Housing Best Value Inspection

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Best Value

The Government has placed a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to publish annual best value performance plans and review all their services every five years.

Authorities must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value to every review:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors)
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services
- ◆ **consulting** with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

Authorities must demonstrate to local people that they are achieving continuous improvement in all of their services. The Government has decided that each authority should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate, so that the public will know whether best value is being achieved. The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered
- ◆ enable the inspected body to see how well it is doing
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working on the ground
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

The Local Government Act 1999 requires all best value authorities to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way their functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. From 1st April 2000, best value authorities must prepare best value performance plans for each financial year and conduct best value reviews for all their functions over a five-year cycle. The Audit Commission is responsible for inspecting these reviews to determine whether authorities have complied with the requirements of the best value legislation and associated guidance.

This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ("the Commission") following an inspection by the Commission under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 ("the 1999 Act"). This report is issued by the Commission in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Contents

Best Value	2
Contents	3
Summary and Recommendations	4
Summary	4
Recommendations	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1 Profiling London Borough of Brent	8
Housing Management Services in London Borough of Brent	10
2 Findings: How Good Are the Services?	12
3 Findings: Are They Going to Improve?	35
Appendix	47

Summary and Recommendations

Summary

The Council

- 1 Brent is an outer London borough with many characteristics of inner London. It has a population of over 253,000 living in 103,284 homes. 10.6% are owned by the Council. Brent is one of the most culturally and racially diverse of all authorities in England & Wales with an ethnic majority of 50.5%. It has a Labour Council - 43 Labour, 19 Conservative, 4 Liberal Democrats councillors. Council housing rents are the highest in the country.

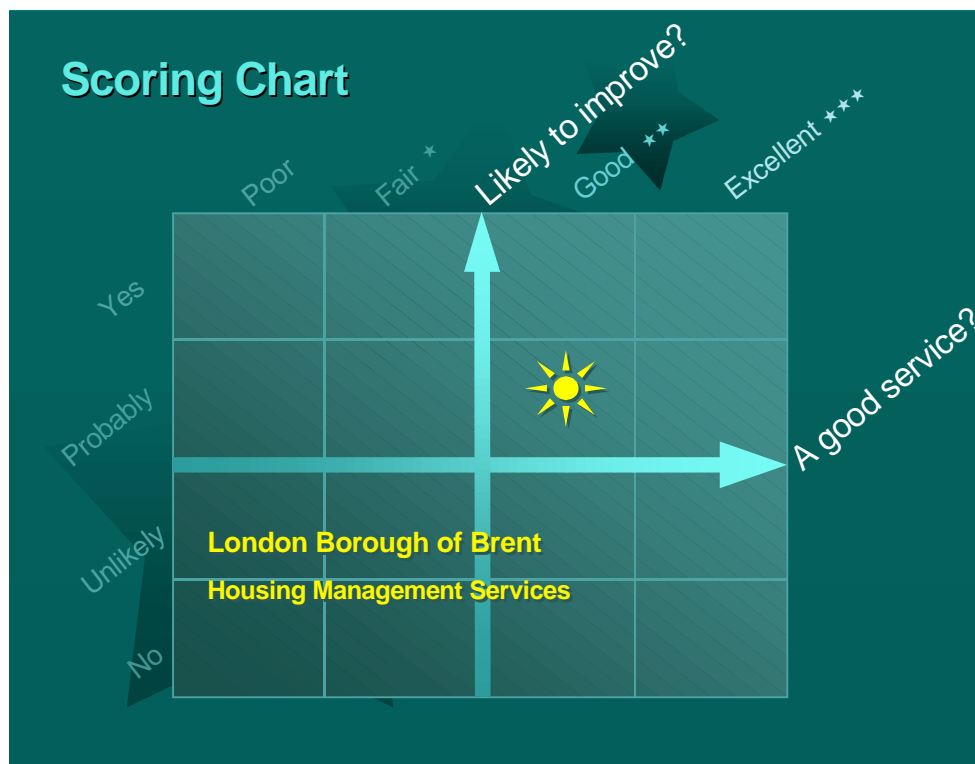
The Review

- 2 The Best Value review covered rent accounts and arrears recovery, tenancy management, tenant participation, estate management (building, grounds and cleaning of estate roads), responsive and programmed repairs and void management. The Housing service has 200 staff, of whom 151 work on the Housing Management Service. There was a Housing Revenue Account Budget of £98m in 2000-1.

The Scoring

- 3 We have assessed Brent Housing Management as providing a **good 2 star** service which is **likely to improve**. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and outlined below.¹

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



- 4 We believe that the service provided is a good 2 star service because Brent offers a range of good housing services for its tenants and leaseholders. Its services displayed many positive features including:
- ◆ It is one of the best boroughs in London at collecting its rent - tenants' available income is maximised by pro-actively checking Housing Benefit take-up.
 - ◆ Tenant satisfaction with the repair service is high. Brent carries out repairs more quickly, and with a higher percentage of appointments, than the London average.
 - ◆ Brent is one of the top 25% of London councils at re-letting its empty homes quickly.
 - ◆ Brent tries to visit all elderly and 'vulnerable' tenants every six months and carry out checks to deter and detect unauthorised occupation.
 - ◆ The general cleanliness of the estate grounds and buildings is good.
 - ◆ Brent has good relations with its tenant and leaseholder representatives. It supports a wide range of residents' organisations to encourage residents to take an active part in Council decision-making.

- 5 However, a number of aspects require further attention:
- ◆ service standards, and remedies for failure, are not clearly communicated to customers;
 - ◆ several local performance targets have not been met – responses to letters, complaints and telephone calls and
 - ◆ there is no consistent method for measuring customer satisfaction with the service. Brent cannot demonstrate that it provides an equitable service to all its residents;
- 6 We concluded that the service will probably improve because:
- ◆ The Best Value Review group used the experience and advice of tenants, leaseholders, members and staff to examine the service and scope a realistic improvement plan. Contractors and consultants also contributed to the review.
 - ◆ An action plan has been agreed which addresses the main issues identified, and which includes targets to take performance into the top quartile.
 - ◆ Members, staff and tenants' representatives generally support the plan, and implementation has started.
 - ◆ Residents are involved in contract development and letting, and performance monitoring via Area Housing Boards.
 - ◆ Brent is already improving performance in, for example, completing repairs more quickly, collecting rent, responding to complaints.
 - ◆ Housing is represented on the current corporate Customer Services, and Revenue and Benefits reviews, which will impact upon the Housing front-line service.
- 7 However, there were also a number of barriers to improvement in the overall service, and which Brent should bear in mind for future reviews:
- ◆ The review was hindered by the appointment of consultants to consider future stock options just two months after the review started.
 - ◆ The review did not include representation from outside the Council and did not cover either tenant participation or estate management in depth.
 - ◆ There is no consideration of costs or savings generated by the action plan, and it contains no standards against which the implementation of the recommendations can be measured.

Recommendations

- 8 If authorities are to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, under best value, they need inspection reports that offer practical pointers toward improvement.
- 9 As a result of the lack of consistency in service provision and monitoring, and problems evidenced with the Best Value Review we recommend that the Council adopts the following recommendations:
- ◆ Advise customers of the specific service standards they can expect in all service areas and publicise remedies available for service failures – including financial compensation.
 - ◆ Develop a consistent approach to find out what customers think of services, in such a way that Brent can demonstrate that it provides equitable services.
 - ◆ Evaluate, with a review to extending to other contracts, the good practice demonstrated in the pilots for: (a) incentives for good contract performance, (b) combined building and grounds maintenance contract and (c) the estate roads' cleaning.
 - ◆ Keep tenants informed of progress of works held in the abeyance list, both individually and through their representative groups.
 - ◆ Ensure that customers access to services is not complicated as a result of the current restructuring.
 - ◆ Ensure Best Value Reviews and action plans include cost and savings implications and standards against which progress towards top quartile performance can be measured.
 - ◆ Ensure full consideration of all areas of the identified service.
 - ◆ Set programme for review, updating and progress reporting of action plan for customers and members.
- 10 We intend to carry out a further 'light touch' inspection in November 2001 to focus on progress made in stock transfer decisions, seamless service to customers, gas servicing levels, planned maintenance progress and satisfaction surveys.
- 11 We would like to thank the staff of the London Borough of Brent, particularly the Housing Directorate staff who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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1 Profiling London Borough of Brent

The Locality

- 12 Brent is a diverse outer London borough (the eighth largest of the 33), with many characteristics of inner London, demonstrated by key socio-economic indicators. It has a population of over 253,000 and the total number of dwellings in the borough stands at 103,284 of which 10.6% is local authority owned. The remainder is split between 61% owner occupation, 17% private rented and 11.4% Registered Social Landlords (RSL). Brent has pockets of relative affluence throughout, along with concentrations of deprivation in the south, where the Council housing is concentrated.



- 13 Brent is one of the most culturally and racially diverse of all authorities in England & Wales. 49.5% white, 27.7% Asian, 18.8% black, (4.5% other). It has the third highest percentage (49%) of pupils with English as an Additional Language. Unemployment is 6.7% compared to the London average of 5.5% and national average of 4.4%.

The Council

- 14 The Council has 66 elected Members - 43 Labour, 19 Conservative, 4 Liberal Democrats. The Council introduced new arrangements in October 1999 – a Cabinet with Deciding and Scrutiny committees.
- 15 Brent's overall General Fund budget for 2000-1 was £272 million, with a £10.4 million contribution to Housing. There is also the Housing Revenue Account budget of £98 million.
- 16 Housing is one of ten Directorates in Brent. Housing Management is one of four service areas in Housing and contains 151 of its 198 staff. The areas of Housing Management subject to review covered the work of approximately 110 staff, responsibility for almost 100% of the non-grant HRA income and for the repairs budget of £11+ million.
- 17 It was the first area of housing service to be reviewed or inspected in Brent.
- 18 Brent's vision is "*We want the community and our staff to be proud of Brent Council's services and of the borough. We value excellence and diversity and will strive to be an inclusive, dynamic and outward looking authority*"
- 19 This is underpinned by four key values:
 - ◆ providing best value services;
 - ◆ promoting regeneration and future prosperity;
 - ◆ serving our community and
 - ◆ valuing and empowering staff.
- 20 The Council selected ten priority issues, as key themes in its Corporate Strategy for 1998-2002:
 - ◆ achieving best value services;
 - ◆ raising education standards and promoting lifelong learning;
 - ◆ combating crime and promoting community safety;
 - ◆ reducing poverty and social exclusion;
 - ◆ tackling unemployment and supporting business;
 - ◆ creating a quality environment;
 - ◆ providing affordable homes;

- ◆ caring for people in need;
- ◆ involving our community and
- ◆ creating a modern well-managed authority.

21 The council believes that 2% efficiency savings can be achieved each year through the Best Value Review process.²

Housing Management Services in London Borough of Brent

The Council's Best Value Review

Scope of review and action plan

22 In 1999 Brent agreed eight service areas in which to pilot its Fundamental Service (Best Value) Reviews.

23 The area selected within Housing comprised the Housing Management service, responsible for:

- ◆ rent accounts and arrears recovery;
- ◆ tenancy management;
- ◆ tenant participation;
- ◆ estate management (building cleaning, grounds maintenance);
- ◆ void management and
- ◆ responsive and cyclical repairs.

24 It did not include housing benefits, RTB & leasehold management, allocations, out-of-hours service or the capital programme.

25 Brent Housing currently manages approximately 11,000 homes and there are also approximately 3,000 leaseholders. There has been a steady reduction of the stock from more than 20,000 in 1990 by voluntary transfer and Right to Buy sales. Most recently, in October 2000, all Sheltered Housing was transferred to Willow Housing (a subsidiary of Network H.A.), a specialist RSL dealing with the housing needs of the elderly.

² Best Value Performance Plan, p.13

- 26 The Housing Directorate has a staff of approximately 200 of whom 151 work in Housing Management. There are centrally based teams for Tenant Initiatives, Rents and Finance, Home Ownership and central management (including Human Resources). The remaining 98 staff work in the (currently) five Area Offices providing repairs, tenancy management and rent arrears recovery service.
- 27 The authority has a Housing Revenue Account spend in 2000-1 of more than £97m detailed as follows:

HRA	2000-01
	£
Rent and rates	4,082,000
Services	1,938,000
Rent rebates	30,524,000
Costs of Capital Financing	32,554,000
General management	13,586,000
Special management	3,509,000
Housing repairs	11,059,000
Contingency/bad debts	405,000
TOTAL	97,657,000
This expenditure is funded as follows:	
Government Grant (Housing Subsidy)	54,391,000
Rental income	42,551,000
Other external income	715,000
Total	97,657,000

- 28 The council is currently working on a New Deal bid to the DETR for the South Kilburn area. The result of this bid will seriously impact upon the future of the service across the borough and, indeed, the future of council-owned housing in Brent. Current changes in the housing service are being planned with this possibility in mind.

- 29 The council has also set up one Tenant Management Organisation, with three more under development.
- 30 At the time of inspection area office teams were organised in different ways. All had a separate repairs team. In one, the housing officers dealt with both tenancy management and rent arrears work; in others, the work is done by different housing officers. In terms of arrears work some housing officers had patches, others worked on 'bands' of arrears.
- 31 Brent has received a number of awards for its housing services. South Wembley received a Charter Mark in 1999 and North Wembley was 'highly recommended' in 2000. Brent was 'Commended' by the Local Government Chronicle in its 'Housing Team of the Year Awards 2001'.

2 Findings: How Good Are the Services?

Are the council's aims clear and challenging?

- 32 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.
- 33 In line with the Council's corporate strategy mentioned above, the principle objectives for the housing service are:
- ◆ to apply Best Value across the service and take forward a programme of service reviews;
 - ◆ to ensure that housing plays a key role in reducing crime and the fear of crime;
 - ◆ to encourage the creation of sustainable communities, implementing a unified strategy for single people particularly the homeless and
 - ◆ to provide strategic support for regeneration priorities.
- 34 These objectives link clearly to corporate strategy which in turn links to the government's national policy initiatives for modernising government, e-government, sustainable communities and supporting people.
- 35 Housing has in place a Customer Charter, delivered to all tenants, which lists service standards and service aims for 2000-1. Some of the most relevant to Housing Management are to:
- ◆ work with tenant management organisations such as boards, residents and tenants organisations to improve the services provided;

- ◆ collect 100% of rent due;
 - ◆ do 100% post-inspections on repairs completed following surveyors' inspections, and make 50% of telephone post-inspections following repair completion;
 - ◆ complete 90% of repairs within government time limits;
 - ◆ make empty properties ready to let in a minimum of 33 days;
 - ◆ inspect building and communal areas weekly and
 - ◆ acknowledge 95% of complaints in five days, respond within 15 working days.
- 36 Tenants and residents were involved in developing targets as part of CCT preparations and representatives are involved in regular performance monitoring with Area Housing Officers. They also receive formal quarterly monitoring reports at the Area Housing Boards.
- 37 There is a 60+ page Tenants' Guide issued at the start of all new tenancies which gives more detail about council and tenant responsibilities and obligations. This is a thorough, if rather dry, document.
- 38 The Tenants' Compact requires the Council to give tenants information about "*performance standards and targets for housing management and neighbourhood services*". Tenants and residents were closely involved in the development and content of the compacts.
- 39 Housing does have its own separate target times for response to letters and complaints, which could be specified. There are other target times laid down in internal procedures, e.g. racial harassment cases to be visited within two days of complaint, which are not mentioned in the Tenants' Guide.
- 40 In conclusion, our view is that the Customer Charter, Tenants' Guide, Area Housing Board and Tenant Compact work demonstrates much good practice and a serious commitment to involving residents in service monitoring and development.
- 41 They could be improved by incorporating the detail found in the Corporate Customer Service Policy and Standard which gives standards and time-scales for face to face contact, waiting times, telephone calls, answer-phones, voicemail, written correspondence, enquiry handling, complaints, suggestions and consultation.

Does the service meet the aims?

- 42 Having considered the aims the Council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is performing in meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific standards and targets and the council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.

Access

- 43 Customers access the Housing Service differently in the north and south of Brent. There is also a telephone 'call centre' pilot, which has been running for two years, and which takes all calls for the Harlesden and Brentfield Office. There are specific staff in the call centre who deal with Housing calls only.

	Public access via	Telephone Service
North Wembley	One Stop Shop*	Direct (8am–6pm, 5pm Friday)
South Wembley	One Stop Shop* (don't order repairs)	Direct (8am–6pm, 5pm Friday)
Harlesden and B'field	One Stop Shop*	OSS Call Centre (8am – 8pm)
North Kilburn	Area Housing Office	Direct (8am–6pm, 5pm Friday)
South Kilburn	Area Housing Office	Direct (8am–6pm, 5pm Friday)

* note that One Stop Shops are closed on Friday mornings.

- 44 Housing offices are open from 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday. One Stop Shops are closed on Friday mornings. There is no One Stop Shop in South Kilburn.
- 45 Access for people with pushchairs, or the disabled, is not easy as few offices have automatic doors.
- 46 Signage is not of consistent standard. Brent House in South Wembley just states 'One Stop Shop'. We were told that signs are being made stating that it was the South Wembley and St Raphaels Area Office. There is no signage from the main road pointing out the North Kilburn Area office in Dyne Road, and it is hard to spot until you reach the main door.

- 47 Brent is carrying out a corporate Best Value Review of Customer Services, which will report this year. We expect signage and other access issues to be considered as part of that review.
- 48 There is a comprehensive set of detailed procedure notes available to all staff on the Council 'Intranet'. They offer guidance on dealing with almost all aspects of their work. For instance the arrears recovery procedure explains how to deal with vulnerable tenants.
- 49 This means that all callers to housing should receive the same advice, guidance and treatment of their enquiries. Staff at the Focus Group commented on the usefulness of the procedures and said they used the Intranet regularly.

Callers at reception

- 50 A survey at North Wembley in 1998-9 showed 86% satisfied with how long they waited. A survey at South Wembley did not link questions to the corporate targets but 68% of customers said their waiting time was acceptable. When we visited four offices we found waiting times to be within corporate targets.
- 51 However, there is no consistent testing of customers' satisfaction with how long they wait or how good is the service they receive.
- 52 There were implementation difficulties when the One Stop Shops took over Housing Management's reception service. "*Defensiveness of Housing staff*", and "*over-emphasis on the customer advocacy part of their (one stop shop staff) role*" were acknowledged in the review, and further training will be required over the next 15 months as their role expands. Staff Implementation Groups are identifying training needs as part of their work.

Correspondence

- 53 All routine correspondence should receive a reply within ten working days and this is monitored locally. Performance between 1st April and 30th September 2000 was only fair - 74% of 11,706 letters received at Area Offices were replied to within time.

Record keeping

- 54 Filing appeared up to date and well maintained when we inspected South Wembley and we noted the improvements in South Kilburn and North Wembley where filing reviews were already under way.
- 55 HMS is introducing 'electronic document management'; scanning file contents for the last two years and then all new documents by the end of March 2001. One manager was keen to stress the benefits of this work "*from the customers' point of view*" – it will enable all staff, at any office, to tell

callers whether their correspondence has been received by the council or not, and what the reply says.

- 56 The Best Value Review commented that *“Poor record keeping and process management”* feature in almost every Ombudsman report and the above proposal should address this.

Telephone answering

- 57 With the possible exception of South Kilburn, tenants generally use the telephone to contact Housing. A quote made at a Tenant Focus Group was *“Everyone uses the phone to contact the Area Office”* and this was backed up by a unanimous show of hands!
- 58 Customers can ring the Area Offices from 8 am to 6 pm, Monday to Friday, except for Harlesden and Brentfield where the call centre takes calls from 8 am to 8 pm. The Call-Centre takes all of Harlesden’s ‘phone calls and is the repair administrator. Staff and tenants’ views on its success were mixed.
- 59 There is a corporate target for telephone answering of 15 seconds. We looked at monthly performance reports for October to December 2000 and found that Housing Management only achieved this in 80% of calls compared to an overall council figure of 91%. No figures are available for the North Wembley office.
- 60 Brent carried out a mystery shopper telephone survey in October 2000 to compare the service from One Stop Shops and Housing Offices. Both services answered their calls promptly. Callers rated the responses from the One Stop Shops more highly than the Housing Offices. Only three of 11 Housing calls rated a nine or ten (out of ten) score. All 12 of the One Stop Shop calls received that mark.

Complaints

- 61 According to ‘Improving Brent’ (the Council’s programme for change) complaints should be responded to in an *“honest and prompt manner. Good complaints handling builds confidence in the community and enables the council to learn from its mistakes”*.
- 62 There is a corporate target response time of 15 working days but housing has introduced its own target of ten working days. Between April and December 2000 HMS had replied to 326 complaints, 77% within their own target and 87% within the corporate target. This is better than the 60% figure for 1997, but less than the 92% quoted at the time of the review.
- 63 In an effort to improve standards, Housing has monitored its own complaints since 1998. In July 1999 it introduced the ‘Respond’ complaints management system – it is accessible in all offices. Surveyors have been offered additional financial incentives to improve performance which is steadily improving.

- 64 We inspected four recent complaint replies and found them to be generally of a good standard, although attention needs to be paid to those involving more than one service area. One response about repairs and transfer issues covered repairs well but then said there were “32 households ahead of you” for rehousing. It did not explain what this meant.
- 65 Brent has a wide range of remedies available for customer complaints including many types of financial compensation. Brent is producing a staff procedure note on these remedies and should consider how best to promote this when this is launched - customers as well as staff should know what the remedies for service failures are.
- 66 The Local Government Ombudsman has criticised Brent about the level of complaints made – in 1999-2000 only one council in London had more complaints decided by the Ombudsman. Brent has made strenuous efforts to tackle the problem and numbers are dropping. For example there were 17 for HMS (excluding North Kilburn) in 1999-00, compared to 55 in 1997.

Rents

- 67 The collection of rent and other charges is of fundamental importance to a council to support the delivery of services. Effective rent collection and debt management are also important to tenants. Rent statements are one of the few regular items of correspondence the Council sends out to tenants and, therefore, a constant reminder of the Council's efficiency. The consequences of inaccuracy or fraud could be stress, extra debt or the loss of a home. This is particularly relevant in a borough with the highest Council rent in the country.
- 68 Tenants in Brent have a wide range of payment methods - at cashier offices at the Town Hall or Brent House, via their own or the National Westminster Bank, at any post office, or via the credit card hotline. These are advertised via the Customer Charter, the Tenants' Guide and by publicity campaigns around benefit entitlement, such as 'Are you getting enough?'
- 69 Rents are based upon the value of the property and there is a right of appeal on the valuation. Relevant service charges may also be payable. Arrears recovery is the responsibility of Housing Officers based at the Area Housing Offices. Rent statements are sent out every three months, as stated in the Tenants' Guide.
- 70 Brent's rent collection performance has improved considerably in recent years. Rent collected/rent due was 99.4% in 1999-2000. The number of tenants owing more than 13 weeks was 8.2% in 1999-2000.
- 71 The improvement can be ascribed to the introduction of a computerised arrears recovery package, the formation of specialist arrears teams in most of the offices and an arrears performance 'trophy', for which staff and offices compete on a quarterly basis.

- 72 In addition, each Area Office has access to **Viewstar**. This is a computerised system allowing housing staff to view tenants' records on the Housing Benefits System. They can see archived records and use the information to audit cases and see if there are gaps in any claims, which they then pro-actively pursue. For the last two years this has helped tenants receive additional benefit of £400,000 from gaps in claims.
- 73 The Best Value review identified an increasing requirement for welfare and social support, which HMS cannot currently give. It is acknowledged as desirable to extend the service provided by rent recovery (Housing) officers to provide general welfare support and advice. One manager admitted, it is a *"weakness that we don't do as much of that (benefit advice) as we could"*
- 74 Under the structure to come into place in April 2001, there will be 16 housing officers to carry out this work (or about 690 tenancies each) and it is our view that this will enable them to provide more support in this role.
- 75 In early 1999, the award of a 'Shield' for the best performing officer and office was introduced to motivate staff. It is based on a points system developed by Tenancy Team Leaders. Staff did seem to respond to this innovative scheme in a spirit of friendly competition. Our only criticism is that points are not awarded for reducing arrears, merely for processing casework.

Tenancy Management

- 76 Tenancy Management includes initial investigation/action in cases of anti-social behaviour and harassment; visiting 'vulnerable' tenants; tenancy verification visits; tenancy termination processes; attending viewings with potential tenants, and new tenancy signing procedures. This work is generally carried out by Housing Officers, based at the Area Offices. There is also a borough wide officer for vulnerable tenants managed within housing.
- 77 From our tenant focus groups and telephone calls, many tenants say they had seen the Tenants' Guide and there was general agreement that letters are sent out about issues to do with noisy children, ball games, nuisance, etc, when complaints are received:

"They write to everyone about a complaint which causes resentment – even when they get given a name"

"Nowadays new tenants don't seem to be clear about what they can and can't do. New tenants don't seem to care. They don't realise or care that this is where I live"

"They took action against one of my neighbours and the tenant got evicted after a year. I was kept informed of action at every stage"

- 78 Brent maintains a list of 'vulnerable' tenants whom they try to visit twice a year to identify any special needs requirements. There are just over 1,000 on

the list. This is good because it is a proactive attempt to sustain vulnerable tenants in their own homes, and to prevent the deterioration of the council's stock through neglect. The Council needs to do more to measure performance and effectiveness against this – it is inconsistent from office to office.

- 79 Brent also organises a programme of Tenancy Verification visits to all their properties to check that the original tenants are still resident. The visits also serve to identify additions to the 'vulnerable' list. We think this is good because it is a proactive attempt to identify abandonment, unauthorised occupation and vulnerability at an early stage; important in terms of ensuring that the best use is made of council resources and that a tenant's problems can be identified early. Again, the Council should do more to measure performance and effectiveness of this service – it too is inconsistent from office to office.
- 80 A recent initiative is the photographing of all new tenants. This is a measure to assist tenancy verification and deter unauthorised sub-letting. A passport-sized photograph is pinned to the inside of the tenancy file. It is a useful method but one which could be viewed with considerable suspicion by new tenants. There is no evidence to suggest that tenancies are being refused because of the measure but Brent should review its effectiveness and tenants' and housing applicants' opinions about it.
- 81 Dealing with anti-social behaviour is a key priority for Housing, given its key role in reducing crime, the fear of crime; and encouraging the creation of sustainable communities. The 'nuisance' procedure, however, does not have defined target time-scales and monthly monitoring records numbers of cases but not quality of performance.
- 82 There has been a Nuisance Working Group since 1994-5. Cases are referred to them when money is required for, say, sound insulation or the hire of professional witnesses. All other remedial action can be instigated locally.
- 83 All cases of racial harassment should be automatically referred to the Racial Harassment Working Group, which has been in existence for many years. It is a multi-agency group, including the police and Mediation Service. Area office staff do initial interviews only and deal with transfer or repairs requests if needed at that stage. However, the manner in which a case became to be classified as Racial Harassment seemed to rely on one or more of the parties coming from an ethnic minority background, rather than being based on a statement taken from the victim and then followed by an investigation. There was no evidence that the clearly laid down procedure had been followed.
- 84 Domestic violence – few cases approach Area Housing offices direct although this is the advice given in the 'Tenants' Guide'. Only eight cases were recorded in nine months according to figures given to us; compared to 14 cases of racial harassment and 92 cases of anti-social behaviour or

harassment. A view expressed was that victims “*don’t see housing as first point of call*” and that this may be a legacy of an old policy whereby victims were offered rehousing outside the borough. Domestic violence cases are not monitored and reported as a separate category.

- 85 The advice given to victims of Racial Harassment and Domestic Violence was inconsistent. There needs to be a specifically tailored training package for tackling anti-social behaviour, racial harassment and domestic violence. This should be targeted to all staff in order to ensure a seamless approach to dealing with casework.
- 86 Our overall view is that, although there are a number of strengths in tenancy management, the approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour needs strengthening. In summary, performance monitoring concentrates on quantitative rather than qualitative data. There are no target response times in the ‘nuisance’ policy and response times are not monitored. There was little evidence that cases were subject to a review with a senior manager and that an action plan was established for each case, with clear time-scales, responsibilities or multi-agency working. There was little evidence that cases were systematically investigated, or followed-up, and there were no case conferences. This should be introduced as a matter of priority.

Consultation

- 87 During 1998-99, and outside of the Best Value Review, Brent reviewed its Tenant Involvement strategy, policies and procedures. Detailed consultation took place and, in September 1999, the Council approved three separate Tenant Compacts (1) for tenants and leaseholders, (2) for Tenants’ Associations and tenant representatives and (3) for Area Housing Boards.
- 88 It is evident that suggestions made during the consultation were taken on board by Brent and included in the compacts, which go well beyond statutory requirements. However, they do not contain action plans with development targets.
- 89 We found that Brent is demonstrating effective working in tenant participation by:
- ◆ supporting the establishment of 65 Residents’ Associations covering 85% of estates in Brent;
 - ◆ involving tenant representatives in drawing up, letting and monitoring contracts. For example North and South Kilburn repairs, cleaning & grounds, and Harlesden and Brentfield repairs;
 - ◆ doing regular estate walkabouts with tenant representatives to identify and report repairs work. Reports of these go to the Area Housing Boards;

- ◆ providing a detailed ‘Guide to Organising Tenants’ and Residents’ Associations’;
- ◆ paying an attendance allowance to Area Housing Board members, and offering assistance with transport to and childcare at meetings - or alternatively paying a care allowance;
- ◆ introducing quarterly feedback reports from T.A.s on the performance of the Tenants’ Initiative Unit in terms of support, training, communication, meetings and general quality of service and
- ◆ establishing good working relationships with tenant representatives at Area Housing and Public Sector Management Boards.

90 Brent has done commendable work on tenant participation and produces a good quarterly newsletter. There was some evidence that information may not be cascading down to tenants as well as it could. Comments made at the tenants’ focus group indicated that many believed that they got very little information from the Council, Area Housing Boards or Tenant Associations, and that what they got was usually telling them about things rather than seeking their views. Brent needs to do more work to determine whether the views expressed represent a generally held view outside recognised residents’ groups.

91 Brent’s Interim Business Plan noted that, although the number and membership of tenants’ and residents’ groups has grown, the profile of members does not fully match that of the customer base in all areas. In particular, younger people, including those with children and ethnic minority communities are under-represented in the north of the borough. This is a concern given Brent’s demographic profile and the high priority given to estate regeneration and tackling social exclusion. Research with focus groups has shown a need for specific measures:

- ◆ Provision of more and better facilities for groups to meet.
- ◆ Provision of greater discretion for “spot funding” local improvements.
- ◆ Using the experience of the best value pilot to roll out user and focus groups across the borough.

92 We conclude that Brent have a very solid base for future development of Tenant Participation outside of existing structures and conventional Tenants’ Associations, and for a more clearly defined action plans for the Compacts.

Property Issues

General background

- 93 Whilst not believing there are high levels of unfitness in the public sector, the stock is generally recognised to be in poor condition as a result of under-investment. This is due to insufficient approval for capital spend, compounded by historical decisions to spend that allocation on non-housing services or on housing other than the existing stock (e.g. H.A.s).
- 94 There is very limited information about the condition of council homes. A small survey was carried out in 1997 but even this data is not held in a readily accessible form. This is one of the main areas that consultants were appointed to assess in 1999.
- 95 In recent years Brent has sought to deal with some of these issues with a range of positive partnerships. For example, South Kilburn - SRB5, Local Housing Companies (e.g. Fortunegate CHA), Stonebridge Housing action Trust, the Chalkhill Joint Development Board with Metropolitan Housing Trust and the Sheltered Housing stock transfer to Willow Housing.
- 96 Brent's capital HIP allocation for 2001-2 is £17.5m plus £8.0m Major Repairs Allowance, an increase of 20% on 1999/2000 resources.
- 97 There have been considerable revenue contributions from the HRA to capital in previous years (33% of the HRA in 2000/01 was for costs of capital financing). In 2001/02 the revenue contribution to capital will be £4.5m. Brent is also planning a £12.5m leasing arrangement for security works, lifts and central heating on a 'facilities management' basis.
- 98 Repair orders are generally issued by either front line staff at Area Housing Offices or One Stop Shops. Pre-inspection, day-to-day monitoring of the contract and resolution of problems is carried out by area based repair surveyors. Area Housing staff also deal with tenants' complaints about poor performance and surveyors carry out post-repair inspections of work have issued with a value of more than £100. The central Post Inspection Team carries out telephone surveys of other repairs orders, visit dissatisfied tenants and share the running of contract monitoring meetings with Strategy and Development.
- 99 New contracts are being let under traditional tendering arrangements, although final selection is based upon a mix of quality and cost criteria. Tenants and housing management staff are involved at all stages in the specification and letting of contracts.
- 100 The latest responsive repair contracts also contain an innovative system of incentives for good performance as well as penalties for poor, and a requirement for a 5% improvement in productivity over the life of the (three year) contract.

- 101 The lift and door-entry contracts are penalty-based at the moment. These contracts need to change in line with improvements in the responsive repairs contract to encourage good performance.
- 102 There is tension between Housing Management and Strategy and Development Sections over which should have responsibility for contract procurement and management. This is expected to be resolved within the next few months. Currently a team of four staff in the Strategy and Development Section specify, let and administer any penalties within responsive repair contracts (Amey Property Services do this for mechanical, electrical and external decoration works).
- 103 Amey Property Services supervise electrical and mechanical contracts. These contracts now include a larger proportion of repairs that used to be done as responsive work. This has enabled Brent to maintain a ratio of 69% planned to 31% responsive spend. Amey also manage external redecoration contracts.

Responsive repairs

- 104 With the possible exception of estate cleaning it is repairs performance which determines the reputation of the Housing Management service in the minds of its residents. Not delivering an effective service can lead to considerable waste of scarce resources and has a fundamental impact on the health and well being of individual tenants
- 105 Brent spends approximately £10 million per year on repairs to its housing stock. Approximately 31% of that expenditure is on responsive repairs and Brent issues roughly four orders per year per property.
- 106 Generally speaking we found that the repair service was solid, improving and developing new ways of working. Brent completed 88% of its repairs within government time limits in 1999-2000 (up from 81% in 1998), and made and kept appointments for 81% of repairs in 1999. This is good performance. Brent lets separate contracts for responsive and void repairs in each of its five Housing Areas. All contractors are linked to the council's repairs computer system and Brent offers them training on any developments with the IT system.
- 107 Seven of the 60+ pages in the Tenants' Guide are devoted to repairs information and it is a clear explanation of the service standards tenants can expect. Although not advertised as a repairs reporting service Brent does have an on-line enquiry form which could be used for reporting repair problems.
- 108 Brent is also introducing an on-line 'Repairs Finder' system to improve repairs specifying and ordering. It allows both staff and tenants to identify defects from a common source and prompts the officer to issue the correct order.

- 109 When a tenant reports a repair, an officer either issues an order immediately (with a specific appointment date for category 2 or 3 repairs), makes an appointment for a surveyor to visit, or tells the tenant that it is not the Council's responsibility. Appointment systems ensure that tenants are offered appointments as a matter of course, and contractors are subject to a penalty of £25 for missing an appointment (for any type of repair). However, it is an anomaly that tenants receive only £10 as compensation for this service failure.
- 110 Staff are under a standing instruction to issue only orders for which the council has a statutory obligation. Some repairs, for example fencing or replacement kitchen units, are added to an 'abeyance' list for issuing when funding is identified. Tenants do not receive information about what happens with these repairs.

Priority code	Target completion time	Example of type of repair
0	Out of hours emergency	Trace and remedy gas leak
1	Emergency – within 4 hours	
2	Urgent – attend by appointment, complete within 3 working days of date of issue	Reglaze clear glass up to 0.5 sq. m.
3	Attend by appointment complete within 21 working days of issue	Carry out minor repairs to gas boiler
HLD	Held in abeyance due to budget restrictions	Renew fence

- 111 Brent should keep tenants informed of progress of works held in the abeyance list, both individually and through their representative groups. If tenants are refused non-statutory repairs, and are not kept informed of progress on others, this will lead to increasing complaints and dissatisfaction.
- 112 In Autumn 2000, Brent held an evening surgery for leaseholders to come and check their bills before they were issued. As a result, 110 people turned up at North Kilburn in one evening. It meant that leaseholders were far more likely to understand, and therefore pay, their bills promptly. Even those who did not attend are likely to have benefited from receiving more accurate bills as a result of the exercise.

- 113 Customers are involved directly in contractor monitoring. They attend the formal monthly contract monitoring meetings with contractors. Contractors also attend quarterly Area Housing Boards where tenant representatives can question them.
- 114 Performance and contractor management was considered to be an area of weakness by the Best Value review group, and we heard several comments from tenants and members to indicate that this perception still exists.

“They need to follow up repairs better”

“Be stronger with contractors”

“Need to improve contract management. There is a possible lack of expertise”

- 115 However, we found that much stronger controls and performance management measures had been put in place over the last year, and recognise that customer perceptions can sometimes take a longer time to change.
- 116 To give an example of the changes, Brent set up a team of two surveyors in November 1999 specifically to monitor customer satisfaction with repairs. The team have managed to check approximately 50% of all completed repairs and recorded an overall satisfaction rate of 84% in 1999-00 and 90% between April and September 2000.
- 117 This team has also saved money - £66,000 saved in 1999/2000 from one contractor. In the last quarter they found £8,000 of incorrect charges and £10,000 work to be redone.
- 118 We limited our own reality checks because of the robustness of this system. Where we did carry out telephone survey checks, and found a dissatisfied customer, we generally found that the Post Inspection Team were aware of the issue and were dealing with it.
- 119 There are two Gas Servicing contracts (north and south) managed by Amey Property Services on behalf of Brent. There is a third contractor available as back-up. Gas contractor performance varies. One has a high level of complaints, missed appointments and poor builders work. Brent is meeting the contractor weekly to manage this.
- 120 In the review, Brent identified access problems with gas servicing. Access rates in 1998 and 1999 stood at 44% and 78% respectively. Clearly there are substantial risks to residents – council and non-council – from failure to manage this programme. Brent has introduced new procedures developed from good practice found in other London boroughs and, in 1999 and 2000, published notices in the local press on the importance of the servicing. Despite previous problems in gaining access Brent told us that have not yet

used injunctions to force entry - "...we will eventually gain entry to dwellings without taking court action ...".

- 121 At 31st December 2000, there were 888 (8%) homes where no services had been carried out (subsequently revised to 742 (7%)). Brent has a 12-week programme in place to deal with the backlog and planned forced entries in April if access refusals continue.
- 122 In 1998-9 Brent spent £340,000 on costs and settlements in disrepair litigation. All Ombudsman reports featured reference to very poor record keeping. Brent is responding by creating a central Litigation Team. We make the same comments about this plan as we did about the Neighbour Relation Team. This should improve the consistency of approach and advice. However, there are the risks of tenants being confused about whom to contact, and of area staff lacking ownership and knowledge of cases.
- 123 The level of variation orders raised varies between areas from 37% to 56% (average 50%). This means that the original description of the repair necessary was inaccurate. This may be as a result of the contract specification, the repair problem not being well described or a failure to diagnose the most appropriate remedy. The result is that time may be wasted, costs made more difficult to manage and tenants gain a poor perception of the service. Brent need to review the reasons for this.
- 124 Amey Property Services manage mechanical and electrical contracts for Brent, and they have introduced telephone surveys of tenants. These are targeted at jobs where variation orders have been requested. As yet they do not keep statistics, but plan to do so. "*Things have moved on, but there is still some more work to do.*"

Empty Property Repairs

- 125 The quick reletting of empty properties maximises the use of council's resources, enables people in housing need to be helped more effectively and generally improves the environment of an estate. Expenditure on empty properties is an effective use of resources in that they are often in a significant state of disrepair and carrying out all necessary maintenance to them should lead to fewer reactive repairs later. Brent spends approximately £900,000 on empty property repairs each year.
- 126 Brent took on average 35 calendar days to relet an empty property in 1999-2000. Rent loss through properties being empty was 1.5% in that period.
- 127 Almost 60 council homes a month become available for letting in Brent. Housing officers accompany all prospective tenants to look at the property being offered to them. We found that Brent's voids procedure contains a strong emphasis on the needs of the customer, stating for example, "***Under NO circumstances should a Customer arrive at an Area Office to be told that the viewing has been cancelled or be left standing at the property.***" It also

reminds staff that people may be “*nervous and worried, the viewing may be the culmination of several years wait for an offer*”. Decoration vouchers are available to assist new tenants with the cost of decorations and are not means tested.

- 128 There is a minimum repair standard, which each empty property must meet before letting. Void orders have a range of completions from one, three, five, ten or 15 days dependent upon the value of the work. In reality, the vast majority of voids (70% - 80%) fall into the ten or 15 day categories. The average cost of void repairs was around £1200.
- 129 There is evidence that the void work is effective in that only nine people (4%) of the 225 who refused an offer between 1st April and 31st December 2000 did so because of the condition of the property (952 offers had been made during this period).
- 130 We visited five voids and also spoke to four tenants who had moved in to their homes in the last year. We believe that, in general, empty properties are let in a good standard of repair, so that no repairs are required in occupation. We considered it helpful to the letting process that surveyors have some discretion over non-essential repairs like replacement of linoleum and kitchen units as well as decoration allowances for poorly decorated rooms.

Estate Management

- 131 It is generally recognised that residents’ perception of a council is influenced greatly by the visual aspects of their environment – what they see every day as they leave their homes is a regular reminder of a council’s standards and performance. Until very recently the only promise given to residents is that “building and communal areas will be inspected weekly”.
- 132 We visited approximately 12 estates around the borough and are pleased to say that, in general, we found Brent’s estates to be clean and tidy. This applied equally to floors and walls inside blocks and lifts, refuse chambers and external grounds.
- 133 Brent does not employ its own care-taking staff and, for many years, has let separate contracts for building cleaning, grounds maintenance and cleaning of estate roads in each of its five housing areas. These have been let and expired at different times and have been won by a mix of internal and external contractors. They had been self-monitoring without regular cleaning schedules and this led to some resident dissatisfaction. There was no clear idea of overall levels of satisfaction with the service until a survey was carried out on the St.Raphael’s Estate (see below).
- 134 The cleaning of estate roads is carried out as part of the borough-wide highways cleaning and refuse removal contract, managed by Brent Streetcare on behalf of Housing. It has been the subject of considerable concern – for its poor standards and for the difficulty in getting Streetcare to

take issues on Housing estates seriously. This has had an adverse effect on tenants' opinion of the housing service – they quite rightly make no distinction between the separate management arrangements.

- 135 In 1999-2000 Brent 'piloted' a new method of cleaning estate roads on the St.Raphael's Estate. This idea arose out of Brent's Best Value Review of Refuse and Street Cleansing. On this estate, the in-house building cleaning contractor took over the cleaning of estate roads too – both now supervised within Housing.
- 136 A survey on the estate in October 2000 confirmed that the 'pilot' had made a difference – the percentage of residents who considered the service to be good or satisfactory rose from 50% to 70% between July and October.
- 137 Brent is also testing another new way of working. In North Kilburn a combined building and grounds maintenance contract was tendered in 2000 and won by the in-house contractor. The building cleaning contract in South Kilburn was re-let in 2000 and, because it was won by the same (in-house) contractor who does the grounds maintenance, a similar arrangement is in place as for North Kilburn. Higher standards within these new contracts include cleaning schedules being posted in communal areas so that residents know what level of service to expect.
- 138 These changes did not arise as a result of the Best Value review but show evidence of a commitment to respond to tenants' concerns and to provide more 'joined-up' services.
- 139 In recent months graffiti and abandoned vehicles have become high profile issues in Brent, a view confirmed during our user focus group. The council has responded by reviewing procedures and allocating additional resources. (See Refuse and Street Cleansing Report).



- 140 Both staff and tenants expressed the view that the pilot methods of working had improved matters. Staff comments included:

“Grounds maintenance in South Kilburn is now ten times better”

“St. Raphael’s is immaculate, has improved a lot”.



- 141 At a focus group tenants expressed the view that the Kilburn estates got a better treatment and one quote was:

“I live in a tower block. It used to be a mess but now it’s clean”

- 142 The only other general problem we encountered was the level of abandoned vehicles on estates, particularly in the south of the borough. Brent has set up a special team to investigate and remove abandoned vehicles and a comment was made at the Area Housing Board representatives’ Focus Group that things were *“much better. Improved now Streetcare involved”*.
- 143 In conclusion although we did see areas where standards were not high, we believe that this is due to poor performance agreements in earlier contracts and inconsistent contract monitoring. Evidence from the new methods of working, and our own eyes, shows a service that is improving.

Planned maintenance and programmed improvements

- 144 A well-resourced and managed planned maintenance programme can have a significant impact on the condition of a building. It will lead not only to a more comfortable and safe environment for residents but also to a lower level of spend on reactive repairs. Since 1994 Brent has tried to maintain a five-year programme of external decoration and window replacement – the Tenants’ Guide says that the council will redecorate the exterior *“when necessary”*.
- 145 Recently, that programme has slipped because of budget reductions and also because Brent now carry out window replacement as a matter of course. The latter is prudent but has a substantial impact on the number of properties which can be done in any one year. The budget averaged £2 million in 1998-

1999 and 1999-2000; or £400,000 per contract. Ten residents complained to the Ombudsman in an 18-month period and were awarded a total of £4,500 compensation because of the council's failure to carry out external decoration.

- 146 Brent is doing several things to improve matters. Tenants' representatives have been involved via the Area Housing Boards in reprioritising the outstanding works for the future programme. They also take part in the appointment of project managers. Tenants' representatives seemed pleased with their level of involvement in the decision-making although comments at the tenants' focus group indicated that information may not always filter down to the grassroots. In addition, an extra £4 million is to be injected into the budget from the Major Repairs Allowance in 2001-2.
- 147 Separate contracts for each area are commissioned, scoped, designed and let by Amey Property Services on behalf of Brent. Amey believe that an improvement would be to look at term arrangements rather than individual commissions.
- 148 We visited Gauntlett Court, South Wembley, one of four external decoration jobs on site at the time of the inspection, and Amundsen House where decorations had been completed recently.
- 149 At Gauntlett Court, the work done to the balcony, windows, front door all appeared to be completed to a good standard. The block was also well painted and finished, very clean and free of litter.
- 150 We spoke to one tenant who happened to be a member of the local Tenants Association (TA). Whilst happy with the standard of work she was not happy with the length of time the contractors have been on-site, nor the amount of time various operatives had to return to their home. It also seemed that with more support from the council at the start of the contract the residents may have been able to receive more benefit from the contractor for using the tenants' room as a site office.
- 151 At Amundsen House we found a generally good standard of work although there was evidence of poor preparation of surfaces to the communal staircases.
- 152 All residents receive a customer satisfaction questionnaire when external decorations works have been completed. These can be returned either to the contractor or direct to the council. There is a low rate of return (between 1.5% and 33% on the samples we inspected) and satisfaction varied between 52% and 83%. We would recommend that the council try to increase this rate of return. Full and accurate feedback will enable the service to improve in the future.
- 153 The questionnaire also needs redesigning to allow for collection of ethnicity, age and disability data as part of the process – to bring them in line with the

good practice adopted by the Post Inspection Team. This will not only enable Brent to build up data to assist in targeting information to minority groups but also enable it to identify any perceived inequality in service provision.

- 154 Amey produce monthly reports of schemes and will be changing the format to make them more user friendly. They are beginning to develop performance indicators to monitor outcomes at three stages: pre-contract, on-site and post-contract.

Equalities, ethnic and disability monitoring

- 155 The Race Relations Code of Practice in Rented Housing (with which Brent says it complies) states that *“in order to determine whether an organisation is providing housing and its services on an equitable basis, it needs to maintain an ethnic record keeping and monitoring system.”* Whilst having a detailed knowledge of Brent residents as a whole, the housing service do not know the make up of their own tenants and leaseholders in any detail because ethnic monitoring of tenants and applicants stopped some years ago and has only recently become common practice again. Now that Brent is starting to capture the information it also has to find a way of establishing an easy means of storing and positively using the information.

- 156 Brent are to be commended for the detailed Housing Equalities action plan put into place in late 2000, based on an audit carried out in May 2000. They have recognised the importance of knowing the background of their tenants and that *“effective equalities policies cannot be demonstrated without .. monitoring .. across various needs groups”*. Two early targets were:

- ◆ to train all staff on equality issues (*“to ensure appropriate and informed response to all service users without unlawful discrimination”*) by November 2000;
- ◆ to set ‘SMART’ targets to achieve equal access to services. Some monitoring data is already being collected but an update of the main housing computer system is required to make it accessible and capable of analysis. This is due to be done by the end of March 2001, and we were told that the deadline is to get all this data within two years – by which time an analysis of the 2001 census data should also be available.

- 157 It is important for appropriate and effective service delivery that Brent does not allow any further slippage of the programme.

- 158 There is an inconsistent approach to dealing with customers whose first language is not English. We were told that One Stop Shops have access to Language Line, but not the Area Housing Offices. They are reliant upon local staff language skills and the corporate language section in Town Hall. They are exploring the possibility of having leaflets in different languages. One response we received to dealing with non-English speakers was;

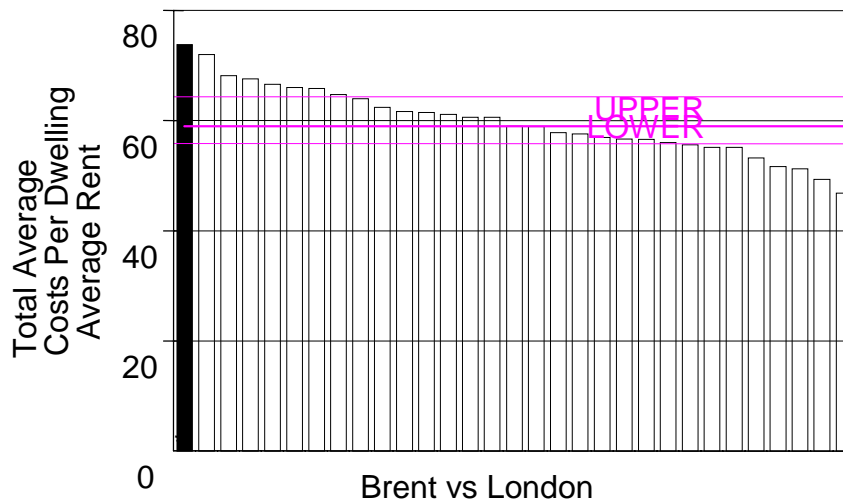
“... will use staff with language skills or will ring in the evening when children or the husband is in. Or... will go out (to visit)”

How does performance compare?

159 Informed comparison is the basis of performance management and is also critical to an effective review. Councils should aim to compare their performance against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is less that of exact comparison, more that of exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required over the review cycle.

160 At £73.79 in 1999-2000, the Brent council rent was the highest in London.

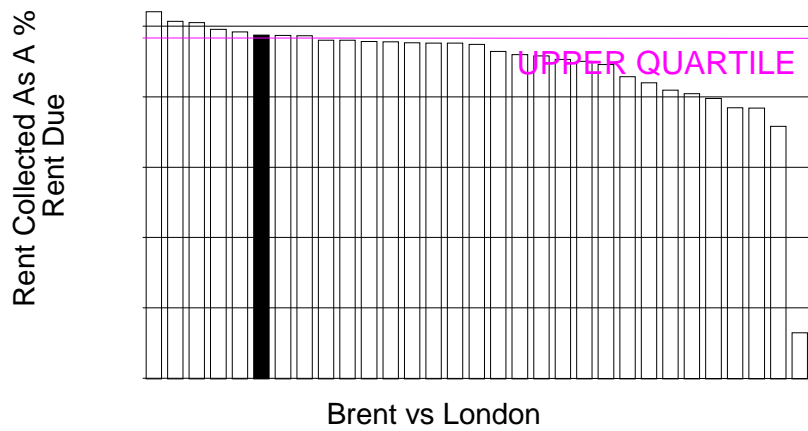
TOTAL AVERAGE WEEKLY COSTS PER DWELLING AVERAGE



161 Brent performs well against all the relevant key indicators.

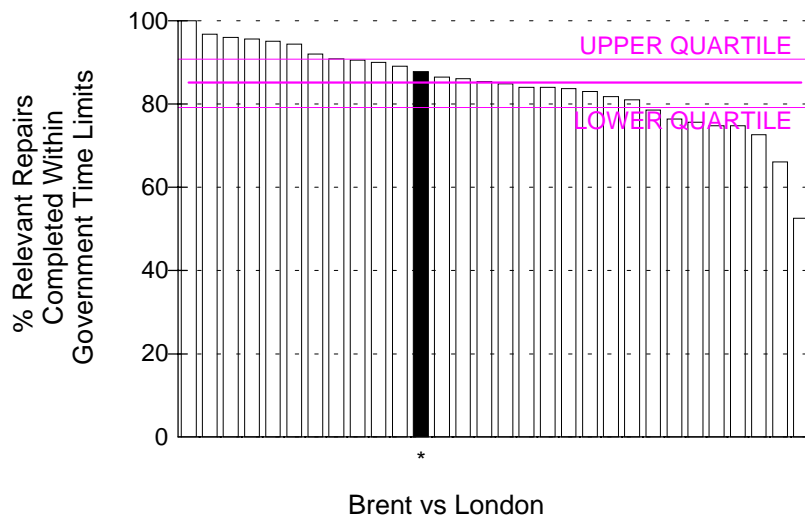
162 The rent collection rate in Brent was 99.4% in 1999-2000. This places Brent in the top 25% performance in London. At the same time, the percentage of tenants owing more than 13 weeks rent has decreased to 8.2%. This is above average performance for London.

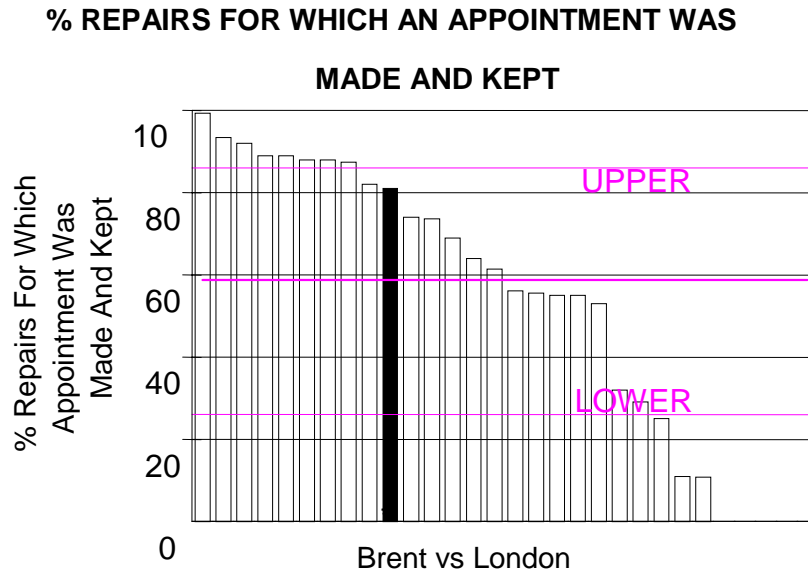
RENT COLLECTED AS A % OF RENT DUE



163 In 1999-2000, Brent completed 88% of its repairs within government time limits and made and kept appointments for 81% of repairs. This performance is above average for London.

HI107: % RELEVANT REPAIRS COMPLETED WITHIN GOVERNMENT TIME LIMITS





- 164 Brent's performance on void turn-round has improved from six weeks in 1998-9 to five weeks in 1999-2000, and is now in the top quartile for London Boroughs. Rent loss through properties being empty is 1.5% compared to the London average of 2%.
- 165 Brent also carried out some performance comparison with London based RSLs with a stock greater than 5,000. This showed that Brent generally exceeded their performance.

Summary

- 166 The general view we took away from Brent was that the service is genuinely trying to involve customers in more and more aspects of its work and that tenant representatives are appreciative of this. Comments made at the Focus Group included;

"I think they've done well. They listen to us"

"Staff bend over backwards to help us"

- 167 And a member commented that *"if all services had such good channels of communication ... we would be pleased"*.
- 168 Brent has the highest Council rent in London, is a relatively high-spending authority on repairs (almost top-quartile) but management expenditure is now average.
- 169 Brent displays many examples of good practice in service delivery. It is in the top 25% of London boroughs at collecting its rent and reletting its empty properties. Staff use their access to the Housing Benefit computer records to maximise tenants' benefit take-up. They try to visit all elderly and 'vulnerable'

tenants every six months and carry out checks to deter and detect unauthorised occupation.

- 170 The general cleanliness of the estates is good, and Brent carries out repairs more quickly, and with a higher percentage of appointments, than the London average. It is one of the quickest 25% of London boroughs to re-let its empty homes, and in general all necessary repairs are done before a new tenant moves in.
- 171 Brent has good relations with its tenant and leaseholder representatives and supports a wide range of residents' organisations. There is a wide range of remedies available for service failures, including many types of financial compensation, and Brent has made a determined effort to improve the way it deals with customer complaints and learns from them.
- 172 Some local performance targets have not been met – response times to letters, complaints and telephone calls, and the numbers of tenancy verification visits. In particular, 8% of gas servicing jobs were not completed in 2000.
- 173 Satisfaction surveys are carried out, but not yet in a consistent manner with the exception of the Post Inspection Team. A detailed annual sample survey is being set up to satisfy the requirements of the new Best Value Performance Indicators.
- 174 Brent has started to ensure that customer satisfaction survey forms include space for details of, for example, race, sex, age and disability to test consistency and equity of service. This should be done in all services.

3 Findings: Are They Going to Improve?

Does the BVR drive improvement?

- 175 The best value review is the mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the services they provide.

Overview

- 176 Under Best Value, the review of the service(s) as scoped by the authority should act as the key driver of continuous improvement. Having addressed the four C's of Challenge, Consult, Compare and Compete the Review should produce an action plan (sometimes known as an Improvement Plan), allocating responsibilities, containing targets and identifying necessary resources, tied together by a detailed project plan, complete with key milestones and deadlines.

- 177 Brent has produced a Best Value Service Review Toolkit for departments to follow. It includes a range of information including the principles of review, the roles of key individuals and groups and advice on the process.
- ◆ Strategic Best Value Group – cross-council support and integration under Policy and Regeneration Unit.
 - ◆ Chairs Group – chairs of FSR groups meet regularly.
 - ◆ There are two Performance Review officers in Policy and Regeneration to support reviews.
 - ◆ The Management Consultancy Services unit provides advice and support on practical implementation of review.
 - ◆ Best Value data is available on the Intranet.
 - ◆ The ‘Financial Toolkit’ comprises 11 forms which Finance complete during the review.
- 178 The toolkit was developed from the experience of the pilot reviews and was not available to the Housing Management review group. It is to be reviewed and could be improved by the inclusion of more pointers on sustainability (e.g. SOLACE/IDeA/LGA) and equalities.
- 179 The Labour members to whom we spoke saw Best Value as a positive influence on services;
- “Everything we do is driven by Best Value”*
- “We like Best Value because it’s driven by quality, not ideology”*
- 180 Brent produced a high quality, corporate Staff Training Pack, launched in June 2000 and which *“should have been delivered”* during that summer. We would have expected Policy and Regeneration to seek confirmation that the ‘cascade’ training had actually been delivered, but this did not happen.

Process

- 181 The reviews were carried out by Service Review Teams (SRTs) comprising a Lead Officer from outside the department concerned, a service manager, finance officer, policy officer, staff representatives and, in the case of Housing Management, five tenant/leaseholder representatives selected by the Area Housing Boards. All three political parties on the council were invited to participate but only one (Labour) member did so.
- 182 The review group structure was determined by *“importance of focused and meaningful consultation ... engaging key stakeholders at all stages”* and

“need for access to expertise from a number of sources, both within and outside the housing service”.

- 183 The review started in July 1999 but, in September, the Council commissioned consultants (HACAS Chapman Hendy) to assess the stock condition information available, the way it was gathered and consider options for the long term future of the housing stock. From our interviews, it was evident that this came as a considerable shock to the group, who thought it was an area they were meant to address. It prompted serious discussions as to whether the group could continue its work.

“disappointed and annoyed”

“not best pleased”,

“not the way to run a railway”

- 184 The review group decided to continue but agreed to meet again to consider and comment on the HACAS report and produce a supplementary report. Unfortunately, the final HACAS report has not yet been received. The delay is believed to be due to difficulties with stock data and, in particular, lack of information on street properties. A small and targeted stock condition survey of 300 homes is being carried out to enable completion of the report.

- 185 The full review group established a smaller ‘core’ officer group to gather data and research for them. Whilst the group as a whole worked well overall there remained a suspicion amongst the ‘stakeholders’ that the core group (which met more often) may have had discussions that should have taken place in the full group. They sensed they were there *“almost to approve officer decisions”*. Nobody suggested a deliberate attempt to subvert - more that the relationship between the groups could have been managed better.

- 186 The main group met every 6 weeks or so between July 1999 and February 2000, then again in August 2000 to discuss the final report. The officer group also met approximately every month. Minutes were taken of both sets of meetings.

- 187 Other lessons which the review group learned included that the timetable may not have been realistic, that the full group should have met more often (i.e. monthly), and that some consultancy support might have helped.

Challenge

- 188 The ‘Challenge’ part of Best Value aims to get local authorities to ask why a service is delivered at all and, if it is to be delivered, what are its overall aims and objectives and who is it best delivered by?

- 189 This review set out to ask whether the service was carrying out the right functions to a reasonable standard and whether Brent should continue as a social landlord.
- 190 The group looked at various definitions of ‘housing management’ and concluded that it had no concerns about the range of functions carried out by the housing management service, a view with which we agree.
- 191 Whilst one member felt that there was “*no evidence that service had asked itself questions in the past*” as “*people too busy struggling to stop and ask serious questions*”, we noted that Brent has considerable experience of transferring stock and management responsibilities in the past. For example, Local Housing Company (Fortunegate CHA), Stonebridge Housing action Trust, the Chalkhill Joint Development Board with Metropolitan Housing Trust and the Sheltered Housing stock transfer to Willow Housing. We are, therefore, confident that Brent is prepared to embrace change if it is likely to result in benefits to residents.
- 192 However, the decision to appoint HACAS at an early stage in the review undermined the review group’s ability to effectively challenge or ‘market test’ the service. The group instead “*focused on the improvements that can be made to the current service*” and agreed that attention should not be distracted from the achievement of these (service) improvements by market testing. We believe, though, that Brent have considered different ways of delivering the service that save money or improve quality – for example, reducing Area Offices and expanding the role of the One Stop Shops in the Housing service.
- 193 The group decided to focus on ‘big issues’ in its action plan rather than minor, ‘quick win’ ideas as (change) “*...can’t be done by small initiatives on the ground*”.
- 194 Attitudes to external challenge were also formed by bad experiences when Housing Management services were compulsorily tendered under CCT. Two contracts were won by outside contractors who did not perform and withdrew from the contracts at an early stage. It was noted in the report that, although tenant representatives could not forecast the outcome of a vote on stock transfer, “*they have expressed a firm desire to remain tenants/leaseholders of the Council on the basis that the service has improved in recent years and information available to date has not persuaded them of the benefits of any other arrangement*”.
- 195 On a positive note, we were told that all members of the review group will have an opportunity to consider, and comment on, the final HACAS report when it goes before the Public Sector Management Board.
- 196 Another issue not resolved during the review was the responsibility for contract procurement and management – mentioned in the Property section above. The argument basically was whether contracts should be specified

and procured within Strategy and Development or Housing Management (the ultimate client). This was left to the Director of Housing to resolve separately.

Consult

- 197 Best Value requires that service users and other key stakeholders are consulted in terms of the service standards and methods of service delivery that they would wish to see implemented.
- 198 Tenants, leaseholders, members and staff were represented on the Service Review Team. The views of other Brent Council service providers, external contractors and managing agents were sought and considered as part of the review.
- 199 A range of ad hoc surveys and consultation about the Housing Management Service had taken place within the previous 12 months
- ◆ South Kilburn Regeneration survey;
 - ◆ North Kilburn Best value pilot survey and Focus Groups;
 - ◆ North Wembley survey;
 - ◆ South Wembley/One Stop Shop survey and
 - ◆ Post Inspection Team repairs telephone surveys.
- 200 The review group took the view that the above, together with an analysis of complaints, gave them sufficient data on the views of service users to make another special survey unnecessary.
- 201 We understand this decision but the data did not give the group evidence as to whether the council was providing an equitable service to minority groups, and whether they had any particular areas of concern. There was no separate attempt to seek the views of representative minority groups.
- 202 Housing set up a consultation group to keep staff informed, although nobody at our staff focus group mentioned it when we discussed the review with them. It is certainly the case that staff are actively involved in a very positive way in putting the action plan decisions into practice via a number of implementation groups.
- 203 We were told that it might be better to consult in two stages. Not only at the start of the review but also in greater detail on the final proposals. This is an option Brent should consider for future reviews.
- 204 Tenant representatives on the review were keen to retain their existing consultation arrangements (Area Housing Boards and Public Sector Management Board) and this was agreed. It was also evident from the

consultation that general views on the strengths and weaknesses of the service were shared by all stakeholders.

Compare

- 205 Best Value requires that service providers compare themselves against other providers of similar services to both understand how their services compare and to learn how they might better provide those services, for example by implementing any best practice so observed.
- 206 Brent already had good performance in a number of areas and an initial, if superficial, analysis of management costs pleasantly surprised them – they had thought they were expensive and top heavy but revised that opinion.
- 207 Brent has done considerable work in comparing its performance against other London boroughs, London-based RSLs, against best practice and best performers. This included process benchmarking. It also compared its performance against good practice in equalities including the CRE Code of Practice in Rented Housing.
- 208 The action plan includes several proposals to integrate good practice found there and in the Chartered Institute of Housing's Good Practice guides.
- 209 At the time of the review, Brent had the second highest Council rent in London and the review suggested that *"tenants would have right to ask why they were not living in the second best properties in London receiving the second best management service"*. Brent now has the highest rent in London.

Compete

- 210 As mentioned under 'Challenge' above the group admitted difficulty in getting to grips with competition and agreed that market testing was not to be undertaken *"pending resolution of the ownership issue and implementation of a restructure and various other service changes"*. It concludes that there is *"insufficient hard data to decide whether continued Council ownership is a viable proposition"*.
- 211 The vast majority of the housing management service has been tendered at one time or another in recent years, and all repairs and maintenance contracts still are. The management of mechanical and electrical and planned maintenance contracts had been transferred to a private sector company, Amey Property Services, before the review started. So had the legal service.
- 212 In parallel with the BVR, Brent has been reviewing how these contracts have operated and has introduced a number of positive changes in recently let contracts. For example, a range of incentives for good performance as well

as penalties for poor. It is also developing a partnership approach for a leasing scheme for heating, lighting and security works.

- 213 In relation to housing management, the review concluded that “*a certain leap of faith would be required to market test seriously at this stage. The group was not convinced that the justification for such a leap existed*”. However, the debate in the review concerned outsourcing the whole service and did not discuss in detail whether smaller areas of the service could be market-tested. It did no detailed work on assessing the costs of individual parts of the service.
- 214 If market testing is to be carried out, Brent will need more information on the costs of the separate elements of the service. We recommend that Brent use ‘Housemark’, of which they are members, to make a start on this work as soon as possible.

Scoping

- 215 Whilst the review was adequately scoped, it did not fully review all aspects of the service included. In particular, the estate management service and tenant consultation were given a light touch. In respect of estate management, we received a range of responses when we asked about this;

“It was in so much as looking at the type of contracts”

“did not review service as a whole”

“anticipation is that there will need to be a separate review”.

- 216 Clearly this needs to be resolved. We saw no evidence that either service was reviewed thoroughly and they will need to be included in future review programmes. Brent have told us that this will happen.

How good is the improvement plan?

- 217 A best value review should produce an improvement plan that sets out what needs to improve, why, and how that improvement will be delivered. It should contain targets which are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the service amongst the top 25% of councils within five years.
- 218 The action plan clearly flows from the review and seeks to address the weaknesses it identified. It concentrates on ‘big issues’ as mentioned above and contains a wide range of improvements which, when implemented, should lead to substantial improvement in the service. It allows for different stock option choices to be made, and includes incremental targets to achieve top quartile performance.

- 219 The review itself paid particular attention to comparison and tried to be inclusive in its consultation arrangements. The review group were frustrated in their attempt to challenge because of the appointment of consultants to assess the stock condition information available, the way it was gathered and consider options for the long term future of the housing stock. More work could have been done to cost and market test sections of the service but it seems quite clear from the degree of outsourcing which has already taken place that there is no fundamental obstacle to competition.
- 220 In the review, Area Offices were recognised to be “*extremely vulnerable to staff shortages from turnover, leave or sickness*”, and it was recognised that demands on generic staff were “*unrealistic*”. Work is “*demand led or crisis activity*”. To address this the Housing Management service is being restructured over the next 15 months to reduce the number of housing areas from five to three, and to create specialist central teams to deal with voids and litigation cases and neighbour relations. The changes are also intended to bring consistency to the work of housing officers.
- 221 Other positives were the involvement of users in developing the action plan, and of staff in implementing it.
- 222 There are, nonetheless, areas for improvement.
- ◆ The action plan is heavily front-loaded, with only two of 37 actions having a target date beyond December 2002.
 - ◆ The corporate expectation of 2% savings from the Best Value process was not discussed in the review, and none of the actions have been costed. This was generally recognised as a weakness by all members of the review group to whom we spoke, and the Best Value toolkit now reminds review groups of the importance of this area – a lesson which has been learnt from the pilot reviews. This makes it more difficult to assess the practicality of the action plan. We would echo the District Auditor’s Audit Letter (December 2000) which recommends that “*there is a need to develop a simple mechanism to record and track savings and improvements arising from reviews and also those which are achieved in advance of the scheduled reviews*”.
 - ◆ Arrangements for monitoring and reporting progress against the action plan had not been made clear. We have subsequently been told that Housing Scrutiny committee will review progress on a quarterly basis by way of an updated progress report and officers’ presentation.

Will the council deliver the improvements?

- 223 Inspectors look for evidence that a council will deliver what it has set out in the improvement plan. We look for a track record of managing change within

the council and, where possible, within the service itself. We also check that the plan has the necessary support from councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders.

- 224 As the Review was only reported to Review sub-committee in July 2000, and formally adopted by sub-committee in November, we have had only limited opportunity to consider whether any progress has been against the action plan. There is, thus, limited evidence as to whether the authority had the capacity to implement the action plan it has conceived. However, we were able to confirm progress on implementation of the restructuring plans, Major Repairs Allowance decisions and the sample satisfaction survey.
- 225 Brent already has a track record of managing change - Local Housing Companies, Stonebridge Housing action Trust, the Chalkhill Joint Development Board, etc.
- 226 A range of performance indicators have improved between 1998-9 and 1999-2000 – the percentage of empty dwellings, the time taken to relet voids, the percentage of repairs carried out in government time limits, the percentage of rent collected and the percentage of tenants owing more than 13 weeks rent.
- 227 Brent is ahead of schedule on several of its 5-year targets for performance indicator improvement. Realistic performance targets have been set for key indicators e.g. rent collection rate, rent arrears but targets for housing benefit claims processed within 14 days were not achieved due to changeover to a new computer system during the year. Various measures are in place to improve performance in this area and better performance is expected next year.
- 228 There is a corporate commitment from the Best Value Customer Service Strategy to ensure that the Call Centre is *“demonstrably successful”* and that it *“adds value to the customer, rather than merely acting as a message taking service”*.
- 229 The presence of a senior housing manager on current Best Value Reviews of Customer Services, and of the Revenue and Benefits Service, should help to ensure that there is consistency in action planning.
- 230 The pro-active use of Housing’s access to Viewstar is a positive sign of the desire for improvement.
- 231 Brent is adopting an unusual approach within the Housing Officer (Rents) team, in that officers will deal with bands of arrears (e.g. up to £250, £250 to £500, etc) rather than the traditional ‘patch’ of tenants. It is argued that this will ensure that arrears at all levels are looked at, not just the higher level ones.
- 232 We have a concern that customers will not know who to contact if they get into arrears. Initial arrears letters now go out without a specific officer named

as a contact and, in at least one office, all incoming letters about rent/arrears have to go to the manager to be allocated to an officer. This does not seem an effective use of a senior manager's time.

- 233 There is the additional concern that staff may lose motivation in dealing with a particular case if they know it will become the responsibility of another officer soon. This will require very careful management.
- 234 Furthermore, with the current restructuring, Housing Officers (Rents) will soon be based in fewer locations and have further to travel to carry out visits. Several officers could be visiting the same estate to see people in different bands of arrears at the same time. This would not be using staff resources efficiently.
- 235 The Best Value review identified an increasing requirement for tenancy welfare and social support, and it is our view that the new structure will enable Housing Officers to provide more support in this area.
- 236 In theory public access will not be directly affected until the North Kilburn office at Dyne Road and the (poorly sited) Kilburn One Stop Shop agree a new joint location. However, the changes do mean that tenants may have to visit different offices some way apart if they prefer face-to-face discussion about several problems.

Office location	Housing staff based locally NOW	Housing staff based locally APRIL 2001
North Wembley	Rents, repairs, tenancy	North tenancy, North repairs
South Wembley	Rents, repairs, tenancy	North rents
Harlesden and Brentfield	Rents, repairs, tenancy	None – office closed
North Kilburn	Rents, repairs, tenancy	South rents, tenancy, repairs
South Kilburn	Rents, repairs, tenancy	Tenancy, repairs

- 237 We are concerned that the centralisation and specialisation of some services may result in a fragmented service for customers. Will they know whom to contact about each separate element of the service? Will staff lose motivation in dealing with a particular case if they know it will become the responsibility

of another officer soon? We do note that implementation groups have been set up with a view to ensuring that this does not happen.

- 238 The Harlesden and Brentfield and North Kilburn offices have been testing the new way of allocating arrears responsibilities since 1999. There is little substantive evidence to show that it has improved the collection rate or level of service to tenants.
- 239 Under the structure to come into place in April 2001, there will be 12 housing officers (about 900 tenancies each) to carry out initial investigations into anti-social behaviour. Cases will then be referred to a new central-based Neighbour Relations Team. This team will then take over management of the case. This arrangement should improve consistency of approach and advice. However, there are the risks of tenants being confused about whom to contact, and of area staff lacking ownership and knowledge of cases at area level.
- 240 The Tenant Initiatives Unit has introduced monitoring of its own performance by tenants and residents associations and this should promote improvement. We would have liked to see a Tenant Compact that included an action plan and timetable for future developments in participation against which continuous improvement could be measured.
- 241 In Estate Management an additional member of staff is being recruited. If inspections can be better programmed, and the improvements noted within the two 'pilots' can be extended borough-wide, then we would expect that high standards could be achieved more consistently. It is also encouraging to note that the Estate Monitoring Team views their role as being to look at "*anything communal*". This gives the possibility of a more joined-up service than may have been the case up to now.
- 242 The introduction of the 'Repairs Finder' system will soon improve repairs specifying and ordering; the new contract standards should promote better performance against targets and tenants are involved in repairs contract development and monitoring via Area Housing Boards.
- 243 The proposed Voids and Litigation Team should improve consistency of approach and advice. However, there are the risks of tenants being confused about whom to contact, and of area staff lacking ownership and knowledge of cases at area level.
- 244 Planned maintenance is carried out to a high standard and Brent is to put £4m from the Major Repairs Allowance in 2001-2 to help redress the backlog, giving a total budget of £6.55m. This compares to a budget of £1.8m in 1999-2000 and £2m in 2000-1. This is likely to reduce the backlog to 32%.

Summary of 'Will the service improve?'

245 In summary of the above, we consider that:

246 The action plan is achievable and addresses weaknesses identified in the review. It has the support of members and tenants' representatives, and staff are involved in its implementation.

247 Some actions on the plan have started and are on course for completion and the Council has put in place monitoring processes to track progress in implementing change.

248 There is evidence showing improvements and implementation of past initiatives.

249 However, we note that the review was not able to complete its fundamental challenge to service provision, did not fully review all service areas and did not cost the actions it recommended.

250 There are unknowns such as the effects of the stock option debate, stock condition survey and corporate procurement strategy – all of which could have major effects on the future of the service.

Appendix 1

What did the Inspectors do?

The purpose of best value inspection is make two judgements. The first is “How good is the service being inspected”? The second is “How likely is it to improve”? We carried out a range of different activities to enable us to each our judgements.

Documents examined

Before going on site we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the council for us. These included:

- ◆ Best Value Performance Plan
- ◆ Fundamental Service (Best Value) Review Report
- ◆ District Auditor’s Statutory Report and Audit Letter
- ◆ Housing investment programme submission
- ◆ Government Office for London HIP feedback report
- ◆ Housing strategy
- ◆ Corporate best value toolkit
- ◆ Tenants’ Guide
- ◆ Tenant participation compacts
- ◆ Housing revenue account draft business plan

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks building on the work described above in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on site “reality checks” were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and see how well it works on the ground. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ visiting housing estates, Area Housing Offices and One-Stop Shops;
- ◆ visiting void properties;

- ◆ carrying out telephone survey to tenants' about repairs and
- ◆ checking tenancy files and complaints files.

Interviews conducted

We also met with a range of different people involved with the service

- ◆ Separate Focus Groups with ten tenants, eleven Housing staff and seven One Stop Shop staff.
- ◆ Residents from Woodlands Court and Alexandra Court
- ◆ Officers - Phil Newby, Tony Hirsch, Gerry Doherty, Gareth Daniels, Sandra Royer, Janis Robert-Edwards, Umesh Natalia, Carol Stephenson, Mike Dwyer, Mick Buttle, Thomas Griffin, Linda Footer, Martin Cheeseman, Helen Evans, Dave March, Robert Johnson, George Varughese
- ◆ Contractors and consultants - Simon Woodward, Tim Garner, Terry Price (Utilicom), Alan Morton, Rick Pinnock (Mitie), Jamie Weir (Jeakins Weir), Roland Sweet, Graham Parker-Boyd, Roger Winchcombe, Andrew Morrison (Amey Property Services)