



**Service review
of
Redland's
Housing Management Strategy
2005-2010**

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on behalf of

Service Review Working Group

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1 Introduction

1.1 Redland Housing Association is a registered social landlord providing a housing management service to almost 1500 residents living in its properties. These are primarily in the old Avon area, with small amounts in Taunton, West Somerset and Mid Devon. Almost half Redland's properties are within the City of Bristol.

1.2 Redland enjoys a diverse resident profile, and our commitment to resident involvement enables that diversity to impact on the work of the Association. During 2007 we carried out our first comprehensive census of residents, adding to information that we had previously collected. The overall response rate was about 30%, and the main findings are listed in annex 1.

1.3 Redland's housing management service is delivered through our Housing Management team. This is one of the two key operational teams in the organisation and it provides the following core services:

- Lettings (including void management)
- Tenancy management (including nuisance and ASB)
- Estate management
- Rent and service charge recovery
- Leasehold management (provided in part through a management agreement with SCHAT)

The team operates within wider, organisation-wide frameworks for customer care and accessibility, diversity and resident involvement but the service – and this review – recognises where those issues impact on the services that the housing team provides.

1.4 The delivery and development of Redland's housing management service is steered by a housing management strategy. The strategy provides an overall goal for the service and those involved in its delivery aimed at taking it forward successfully and positively. It also includes a number of key strategic objectives which lead to the achievement of the strategy's goal.

1.5 The strategy is underpinned by a strategy action plan which sets out operational objectives required to deliver our strategic objectives.

1.6 The current housing management strategy has been reviewed in recent months and the following report delivers an overview of the review, including its scope, methodology, objectives and key findings.

2 The Housing management strategy and the review

2.1 *The Housing Management strategy*

2.1.1 Redland's Housing management strategy was written in 2005. It has been updated annually in response to Redland's business plan objectives.

2.1.2 The overall goal of the current strategy is to

“deliver a continually improving, efficient and resident focussed housing management service which is responsive to the diverse needs of the communities where we work and which enables vulnerable residents to live independently in those communities”

2.1.3 Its strategic objectives are to

- contribute to the financial viability of the Association by maximising income
- meet our obligations as a landlord, and help residents meet theirs as tenants, in a way which is consistent and fair
- contribute towards the improvement and longer term sustainability of the neighbourhoods where our residents live
- provide high and improving levels of customer care and services to residents
- provide homes which meet peoples' needs in an environment where people want to live
- fulfil our responsibilities to leaseholders, providing a service which meets their needs and aspirations
- contribute to meeting the needs of the homeless and to the prevention of homelessness
- identify and meet the needs of vulnerable residents, supporting them to achieve independent living in their own home

2.1.4 In 2007, following a review of our housing with support service, we decided that providing support to vulnerable residents should be seen as an integral part of our mainstream housing management service, and not as a separate function. We therefore removed our separate housing with support strategy, and added the final phrase and the final strategic objective in 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 above.

2.2 *Reasons for the review*

2.2.1 As noted above, the current strategy has been in place for the past four years. With the exception of the change in respect of housing with support, annual changes have been piecemeal, and essentially additions in the light of new business plan priorities.

2.2.2 In order to take the housing management service forward for the next five years, a review of the existing strategy is necessary to ensure that it is fit for purpose, that the overall goal and strategic objectives remain relevant, that it reflects current internal and external priorities, and that existing resources and management arrangements are capable of meeting them in the most effective and efficient way.

- 2.2.3 Government thinking (nationally and locally) about the role of social landlords and their housing management function has evolved significantly since the current strategy was written. The sector has witnessed changes in legislation, regulation, expectation and performance benchmarking. Redland needs to be satisfied that its housing management strategy can achieve the demands of government and regulators.
- 2.2.4 Housing management services are not delivered in isolation from the rest of the organisation. Much of its success depends upon good partnership arrangements with internal teams and external agencies and on a ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing circumstances. The strategy needs to demonstrate that the housing management service recognises these links.
- 2.2.5 Increasingly, social landlords are expected to demonstrate value for money in the delivery of services. The review needs to establish how well we can do this and how we can demonstrate that it is an inherent part of the service to deliver services which are efficient as well as effective.
- 2.2.6 Finally, over the lifetime of the current strategy Redland has developed as a key organisational objective the delivery of excellent services to its customers. This includes not only the housing management service itself, but also those services – such as customer service – which impact throughout the organisation. Changes have been made to the current strategy to reflect this, but the review is an opportunity to take a fresh look and ensure that the strategy properly reflects what we want to achieve.

2.3 *Scope of the review*

- 2.3.1 The review considered the housing management strategy and the way in which core services are delivered.
- 2.3.2 However, the review panel and working group were mindful of significant pieces of work that had been undertaken during the recent lifetime of the strategy which had resulted in significant changes to strategic aims and to the action plan.
- 2.3.3 As noted above, a service review of housing with support had resulted in the decision to replace the separate housing with support strategy with a new strategic objective of the housing management strategy. That objective, and its associated actions, had all emerged from a service review only last year, and so it was considered inappropriate to include that objective in this review.
- 2.3.4 During 2007 Redland also signed up to the Respect standard. This is a national standard which assess how a housing management service

deals with nuisance and anti social behaviour – a key housing management service. The standard is based on rigorous self assessment, which Redland had carried out with the help of external audit, and we considered that a further detailed review of that core service would be of little benefit.

2.3.5 During the course of the previous year, all but one of the 7 local authorities in which we have property have launched their new ‘choice based lettings’ schemes. These are a fundamental change to the way in which social rented housing is let, and their introduction – in which Redland has been closely involved – has necessitated a wholesale rethink of our lettings service and a complete re-write of our lettings policy. Again, a further review, within a year, would have served little useful purpose.

2.3.6 Although the review did not ignore these services, it started from the assumption that appropriate strategic objectives, and actions to achieve those, were in place.

2.4 *The Review Group and Panel*

2.4.1 The review was led by David Clarke, Head of Customer Services

2.4.2 A Review Panel was established to oversee the review process. The Review Panel members were

- Gerry King – Tenant board member
- Martin Loveridge – Resident (nominated by RRC)
- Louise Swain – Managing Director

2.4.3 The detailed work of the review was the responsibility of the Review Working Group. This comprised

- Lorna Davies – Housing Manager
- Rob Andrews – Assistant Accountant (SHG)
- Steven Atkinson – Housing Officer
- Tony Castell – Housing Officer (Rents)
- Kay McConnell – Resident (nominated by RRC)
- Kate Innes – Board member
- Julie Evans – Director of Customer Services (SCHAT)
- Rachel Cobb – Housing Services Manager, Bristol Community Housing Foundation

3 Objectives of the review

3.1 The review panel and the working group agreed the following key objectives which were approved by Redland’s management team and by Group Executive.

- To critically examine our current approach to service delivery, particularly in light of the relevant key lines of enquiry
- To examine the current structure for delivering housing services to our customers in respect of capacity and effectiveness
- To compare the quality and performance of the service against other organisations and the Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry
- To identify and illustrate the gap between our current position and the benchmark for service excellence
- To consider whether the service provides value for money, comparing the cost of the service with others, and looking at the costs associated with specific functions
- To look at how the housing management service contributes to the corporate goal of service excellence and whether it could do more
- To examine the goal of the housing management strategy and its strategic objectives, to consider whether they are still relevant or if they require alteration to take us forward to 2014

3.2 The Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) are evidently a key feature of the review's objectives. This reflects Redland's business plan objective of service excellence which defines excellence largely in terms of the KLOEs. These were therefore the starting point for the review, and the objectives were then agreed as being firmly based around practical and operational steps to achieve excellence as determined by the KLOEs.

4 Review methodology

4.1 The review used the Best Value "4 Cs" methodology as its basic framework: these are

- Challenge
- Comparison
- Consultation
- Compete

4.2 Mindful of the issues set out in paragraphs 2.3 and 3.2 above, it was decided that the review should not revisit in detail services related to

- vulnerability and housing with support
- nuisance and anti social behaviour
- lettings
- leasehold management

and should make the assumption that appropriate strategic objectives are in place as an outcome of the recent reviews. We would not ignore the KLOEs but would not focus on those areas unless there were particular concerns.

4.3 By making the KLOEs the starting point for the review, some of the groundwork that is usually associated with the best value methodology

was taken as read, and the basis for comparison and consultation were determined by the principles of the KLOEs

5 Challenge

- 5.1 The review working group challenged the existing strategy by considering
- why we have a housing management strategy?
 - what would happen if we didn't have one?
 - does the overall strategic goal need to be revised?
 - what other options could be considered for delivering the service
 - is the strategy 'fit for purpose' by giving us the tools to achieve excellence?
- 5.2 The working group carried out a SWOT analysis of the current service provision. The outcome of that analysis is summarised at annex 2.
- 5.3 The working group carried out a self assessment against the three relevant KLOEs; these are
- income management
 - tenancy and estate management
 - allocations and lettings
- and summaries are attached at annex 3.
- 5.4 The assessment covered all parts of the KLOEs; in terms of operational service areas the focus was particularly on estate management, tenancy management, void management, rent accounting and recovery, rent arrears and debt advice.
- 5.5 The assessment also considered the 'cross cutting' KLOEs –
- access and customer care
 - equality and diversity
 - value for money
- and considered in a similar vein
- resident involvement in housing management services
- The group felt that the work, and the resulting action plans, on customer service, and particularly around the Mary Gober training and coaching, was relevant. Rather like the operational service areas mentioned above, the group recognised that much of its work in this area had already been done.

6 Compare

- 6.1 The group used a number of methods to compare our performance with others.

- 6.2 A desk top exercise was carried out which compared Redland's performance with others, considering key housing management functions:
- % rent arrears
 - average relet times
 - % rent lost through vacant dwellings
 - satisfaction of tenants with overall service
 - satisfaction of tenants with opportunities for involvement
- 6.3 Using the best practice directories of the Audit Commission and of the National Housing Federation's 'Housemark', examples of positive practice were identified, particularly in those service areas where gaps had been identified in the KLOE reviews.
- 6.4 An exercise using the Housemark website sought to compare Redland's costs in providing services with those of other similar and top performing organisations.
- 6.5 The involvement of the Housing Services Manager from Bristol Community Housing, discussions with housing services staff from Solon SW HA, and our involvement in the BHP and other local authority liaison groups enabled the group to compare Redland's performance with that of similar sized organisations operating in the same region. The group was also able to compare performance with our fellow member organisations of Somer Housing Group throughout the review.

7 Consult

- 7.1 The group sought to consult with a wide range of stakeholders which reflected the range and diversity of our residents and other partners. The group used the following methods to consult stakeholders.

Stakeholder	Consultation method
Residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation on working group and SRC • STATUS survey • Residents panel questionnaire • Tenants Day
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation on working group and SRC • Questionnaire
Board members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation on working group and SRC • Tenants Day
Wider partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation on working group • Ad hoc meetings

- 7.2 The group used the outcomes of a STATUS survey which Redland carried out in 2007. There is a separate report which sets out the findings of the survey, and includes analyses of the results by different sub groups, including age and ethnic origin. A response rate to the survey of 44% of all Redland residents gives the survey a high degree of statistical accuracy and confidence in the data it provides.
- 7.3 A questionnaire was sent to all members of staff at Holly House during September 2008. The response rate was a disappointing 30%, but this still enabled the group to draw some conclusions. The questionnaire focussed particularly on the role of Redland's housing management strategy and team within the organisation's structure and how effective this was for the business as a whole.
- 7.4 A questionnaire was sent to just over 250 members of Redland's residents' panel during September 2008. 126 responses were received – another good response rate giving a high degree of confidence in the outcome. A copy of the questionnaire, and of the outcomes, is attached at annex 4. The questionnaire had two very deliberate aims.
- 7.5 Firstly, it was not a traditional "satisfaction" questionnaire; the STATUS survey provided the review with that information. It was a survey which sought to establish what services were important to residents; some were services that we already provided whilst others were not, and we hoped to learn from the survey what residents' priorities for service development were. We also asked how well residents thought we did at providing those services so that we could identify where the biggest gaps were between residents' priorities for service provision and what we are doing.
- 7.6 Secondly, the questionnaire deliberately focussed on service areas that we had identified as either a priority or a concern from the review of the KLOEs. Those issues included, for example, estate management and inspection, accessibility, and tenant rewards; the purpose of the survey was to establish residents' views on these issues.
- 7.7 Tenants Day took place during the review, and the group decided to use the event to carry out some further consultation. Tenants' were asked to consider Redland's overall strategic priorities as part of the day; along with issues relating to homes (environmental, accessibility, facilities) was an option to allocate resources to enhanced housing management services. Separately, the group had a 'stall' where attendees were invited to give examples of what they considered to constitute "excellence" – the group was keen to consider whether the KLOEs' examples reflected the views of residents.

8 Compete

- 8.1 The purpose of this part of the traditional best value review is to look at the cost of current service provision, to consider other ways of providing the service and to test their (cost) effectiveness.
- 8.2 The group sought to test the current cost and to compare it with others by using information from the Housemark website. Members of the group also met with the Group's Finance Director to talk about value for money and ways in which we might better measure what we do and how we demonstrate this.
- 8.3 The group was also mindful of the fact that the strategic level reviews of a number of service areas (referred to above) such as supported housing, lettings, anti social behaviour and leasehold management had all encompassed the way in which the service was provided, and its cost effectiveness. Two examples are the provision of home ownership services through a management agreement with SCHAT, and the training of housing staff to produce witness statements (part of the Respect standard action plan). The group did not consider it appropriate to look again at these issues, nor to consider further wholesale changes which would affect those decisions, and therefore limited itself to considering the remaining service areas in isolation.

9 Outcomes

- 9.1 This part of the report deals with the detailed outcomes which arose as a result of the above. The outcomes have been brought together by topic (rather than being spread throughout paragraphs 5 – 8 above) and these outcomes lead into the specific recommendations made in paragraph 10 below.
- 9.2 *The Housing management strategy*
 - 9.2.1 The group considered that the format and structure of the housing management strategy – with its associated action plan – works well. Staff are aware of the strategy and of its impact on what they do, and in that sense it works well as a business planning tool and as a mechanism for achieving desired goals. It enables actions – including those arising from the KLOE review – to be recorded and monitored in a co-ordinated way, and to highlight links with other strategies.
 - 9.2.2 The recommendations of this review are therefore structured around the existing strategy format, and anticipate that the action plan which comes from that strategy should continue to demonstrate links with other strategies, including that of the Redland Residents' Committee (RRC)
- 9.3 *Customer service*

- 9.3.1 Customer service has been a key business objective for Redland over the past two years. The housing management team have embraced these objectives enthusiastically and have led the way as far as their implementation is concerned. Customer service skills is now one of the strengths of the team and there is scope for the organisation to make better use of those skills by the housing management team taking a lead role in more front line, customer focussed, services.
- 9.3.2 The feedback on customer service from residents is generally good – consultation as part of this review confirmed the outcomes of mystery shopping, the Status survey and other satisfaction feedback. However, that is not to say that further improvements cannot be made. Residents told us that they find Redland easy to contact, and generally know who to speak to, but we are less good at dealing with enquiries at the first point of contact.
- 9.3.3 We are developing better mechanisms for getting feedback from residents – through satisfaction measures, complaints and so on – but there are clearly some underlying areas of dissatisfaction which we risk ignoring by focussing on satisfaction. A more co-ordinated approach to the monitoring of satisfaction – and of dissatisfaction – would take us further towards excellence.
- 9.3.4 Finally, the group felt that the current strategy does not give the emphasis to customer service which it deserves, or which reflects the priority it is now given within the organisation.
- 9.4 *Value for money*
- 9.4.1 A consistent feature of all three KLOE reviews was that our worst performance is in the “value for money” section. The KLOEs do not set out to determine whether an organisation is achieving value for money, but to measure the extent to which considering value for money is an integral part of the organisation’s culture. It is in this area that we need to improve.
- 9.4.2 Our efforts to compare and benchmark our performance reflected this position. We know that, very broadly, our housing management costs are probably higher than those of larger organisations (they are greater than those of the Trust for instance, but the Trsust’s are very low) but about average for those of medium sized RSLs. However, our attempts to look in greater detail were largely inconclusive because we cannot make use of tools such as Housemark as we do not collect or provide comparable data to enable comparison.
- 9.4.3 Embedding value for money is a group wide objective for the coming year and we noted that Redland had already taken the initiative on this, managers meeting with the Group’s lead.
- 9.5 *Accessibility and estate management*

- 9.5.1 This was a key issue to emerge from the review. The KLOE review identified some shortcomings in the 'estate management' area and these were followed up – and confirmed – in the consultation with staff and residents.
- 9.5.2 "Redland's estates are clean, tidy and well managed" was the only statement on the staff survey which resulted in concerns being expressed by more than one staff member. The concern is less that they aren't, but more that we don't always know. The group considered this to be a significant concern also in the context of our customer care commitment; our estates are the face of the organisation to many people and we should consider them just as, if not more, important than the office as a 'customer service area'.
- 9.5.3 The survey of residents was even more enlightening. Residents clearly consider Redland to be an approachable and accessible organisation. The statement "It's easy to contact Redland when I need to" was rated as the single most important service. It was also the statement that had the smallest gap of all (almost none at all) between its importance and its truth. Residents find us easy to contact.
- 9.5.4 Probably because of this, when we then asked whether residents wanted to see Redland staff on estates so that they could report repairs/ask about anything else, the response indicated that this would be one of the least important services.
- 9.5.5 However, the statement "Redland knows what needs doing on the estate" was one of the most important – and was also one of the largest gaps between importance and what is happening.
- 9.5.6 Physical accessibility, the accessibility of our estates for disabled people, was also given a high importance 'score' by residents – and a similarly large gap between importance and reality.
- 9.5.7 The Status survey results were also relevant – indicating (as we also know from our own resident profile) that we have a high proportion of disabled residents living on our estates, and indicating also that residents' concerns about the neighbourhoods where they live are often about the physical aspects of the immediate estate – parking, litter, dogs and so on.
- 9.5.8 The group's conclusion is that a priority for the early part of the new strategy should be to implement a new "better neighbourhoods" framework, with a clear focus on getting to know what residents want for their estates and neighbourhoods, working with them to provide it, and setting and monitoring clear objectives and outcomes. The group identified some examples of good practice, notably NS Housing, which use tools such as estate walkabouts to raise our profile and our

accessibility and to make more coherent use of resources such as our resident profiles, estate improvement budget and so on.

9.6 *Resident involvement*

9.6.1 Redland has a separate resident involvement strategy – and that emphasises the strategic importance that we attach to it. However, it should not suggest that resident involvement is somehow a separate function; the group felt that it is as important a ‘cross cutting’ issue as the three recognised by the KLOEs, and the housing management strategy should recognise that.

9.6.2 This is not to suggest that it isn’t! An internal audit of resident involvement during the review noted the extent to which resident involvement is an embedded part of the housing management culture. If the objectives set out in this report are to be achieved then we need to know who our residents are, to find ways to hear from every group within our resident population and to respond to the needs of individual residents: we recognise that the role of resident involvement will be crucial to achieving this.

9.7 *Excellence*

9.7.1 The KLOEs formed the basis for the review’s definition of excellence. The review group was anxious to find out whether residents shared that view. Efforts to do that at Tenants’ Day were largely unsuccessful and it is something that the group felt should be taken further.

9.7.2 Focus Groups are an increasingly central part of our resident involvement structure, and are central to the Partnership agreement and to the way in which all of our services are reviewed, monitored and improved. We suggest that Focus Groups should be more involved in critically examining our (and the KLOE) definition of excellence. It may be appropriate to focus on the new definitions emerging from the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) during 2009, considering these with service area focus groups to ensure that each group has a clear understanding of what it considers to be an excellent service.

9.8 *Affordability and poverty*

9.8.1 Within the context of this review, the need to extend the availability of good debt advice, and of more general financial advice was identified. It was clear that this was a priority for residents – and an area that required improvement.

9.8.2 It was also clear that debt advice is considered more of a priority for Redland as a landlord than are wider issues of ‘financial inclusion’; that is not to say that these are unimportant, but we should recognise where residents want our resources to be focussed.

9.8.3 At the same time, residents told us – at Tenants Day in particular – that affordable warmth, energy efficient homes, and affordable rents are all important too – and these clearly are issues for us as a landlord. These are strategic priorities for Redland in 2009/10, and the group felt that it would be helpful to see in place an over-arching anti poverty framework for these initiatives, including the debt advice and financial inclusion priorities of this review.

9.9 *Reward schemes*

9.9.1 The review considered the issue of tenant reward schemes; this is identified by the KLOEs as something that excellent landlords consider, and it was a strategic priority to do so in 2008/09. We looked at examples, including the HomePlus scheme operated by SCHAT, and we also asked specific questions about this as part of our consultation with residents.

9.9.2 There are a number of high profile schemes to which a number of RSLs are very committed. At the same time others have raised doubts about their value, and particularly about whether they change behaviour to the extent that justifies sometimes high levels resources.

9.9.3 More significant was what our residents told us. We asked residents to consider how we should respond to tenants who paid their rent regularly and kept to their tenancy agreement and we put the question in two ways; firstly whether those tenants should be recognised, and secondly whether they should be rewarded. The responses were very different; the former was considered to be a high priority whilst the second was conspicuous by its low priority.

9.9.4 We therefore consider that we should look at ways in which we can recognise those residents who meet all their tenancy conditions (and who we probably, in many cases rarely see) but that we do not pursue the notion of reward schemes beyond those which may address specific issues (eg an incentive at the end of a tenancy relating to the return of keys and condition of property).

9.9.5 Other objectives – particularly those outlined in 9.5 above – may help us to achieve this. We should also consider using tenancy audits as a mechanism.

9.10 *Lettings*

9.10.1 As noted above, 2008 has seen Redland enter into new Choice Based Lettings (CBL) arrangements for most of our stock, and completely overhaul our lettings policy and procedures to recognise CBL. The review did not re-visit that work.

9.10.2 We did note, however, two issues which the KLOE review raised, and which we felt needed further work.

9.10.3 The first concerned the information that we provide to new tenants at the start of tenancies. Although this changes regularly, it is usually an ad-hoc addition rather than the result of any coherent review of what we provide. In addition, the lack of any information about the local area, neighbourhood and services was noted. We consider that we should carry out a full review of what we provide.

9.10.4 The change to CBL has been the most fundamental change to the way in which we (and other RSLs) let our homes in quarter of a century. It is still very new, but there is a concern that it may not be clear to residents (and potentially not always clear to staff) how the needs of existing tenants who need to transfer to another home fit into this. Residents did not express any significant concerns about this, but we felt that this may be because it is all so new, and we think that we should look at this again when the new CBL schemes have settled in.

9.11 *Estate services*

9.11.1 The review looked at the issue of increasing the flexibility of estate service, allowing residents to take greater control over the way in which those services are provided.

9.11.2 There seemed to be a limited appetite for this amongst residents. It was one of the least important issues for residents in the survey that we carried out. In addition, a scheme had been drawn up which would enable this to happen, as part of a group wide project, and its advertisement in Redletter had produced no applications for a pilot scheme.

9.11.3 The group felt that the option should be retained; that the grounds maintenance and cleaning contracts should enable individual estates to either opt out or to use a different specification. The model arrangements set up by the group wide scheme should be used if approaches were received from residents, but that no further pro-active work should be undertaken at present.

9.12 *Home owners*

9.12.1 As with lettings above, this is a service area which has been subject to review and scrutiny during 2007 and 2008 and relatively new management arrangements are in place.

9.12.2 However, the group was concerned that the amount and extent of information that we provide to home owners falls short of excellent and that we should work with the homeowners focus group and with members of the Trust's homeownership team to review this.

9.12.3 Towards the end of the review we were aware that some significant changes were taking place in the nature of the tenures which Redland

offers and in the nature of our potential customer base. This had been unforeseen at the outset of the review; the credit crunch, and the move into recession, left us with unsold outright and shared ownership properties and as a result we moved, in a largely unplanned way, into market renting and into 'intermediate' renting. The group did not consider it appropriate to propose amending the original scope of the review, but did feel that the new tenure types presented challenges in terms of considering how they fit into our existing structures, policies and procedures, and that a separate review to look at this should take place in 2009.

9.13 *Void management*

9.13.1 The group identified void management as a service in which our performance was deteriorating. This has an impact on both our 'financial' objective (by homes remaining empty for longer than necessary) and on our objective of providing homes.

9.13.2 Some work took place during the course of the review to address urgent issues, and as a result of this the ownership of the void management process now clearly sits within the housing management team.

9.13.3 The housing management strategy needs to reflect this, and it also needs to carry forward that work and ensure ongoing improvements to the service, notably through a review of the letting standard and the letting of a void contract to a single contractor with a view to improving both efficiency and value for money.

9.14 *Structure*

9.14 The group considered the current structure for the provision of housing management services. Mindful of the fact that this structure had already been considered by both the leasehold management and support services reviews, we did not anticipate a very different outcome.

9.14.2 Redland is still a relatively small organisation where a high degree of flexibility and adaptability is a requirement of most posts. The specialist/generic argument is less significant at an organisation which simply could not resource high levels of specialism. We have a specialist rent arrears role and we were satisfied that this works well; the consistently good rent arrears PIs, and the value for money we achieve in terms of legal costs, fully support this. A degree of specialism has also been achieved in leasehold management through the management arrangements with the Trust.

9.14.3 Feedback from the staff survey about the housing management structure was positive, with high levels of satisfaction with the structure

and (from within and outside the team) a recognition that the structure supports Redland's objectives.

9.14.4 Customer service is a particular strength of the team and we felt that this has more potential; the way in which housing management have taken ownership of market renting and void management services are examples of this, and the group felt that further opportunities should be explored.

9.14.5 If we are to achieve our objectives in relation to customer profiling, to knowing our customers as individuals and to customer feedback – looking at satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaints handling – then there is a potential need for some specialism – or at least some greater degree of co-ordination – than exists at present. It may be that housing management provide that service – or it may be a role for resident involvement. Again, we should explore this over the coming year as a strategic priority.

10 Recommendations

10.1 One of the clear messages from Tenants Day, supporting the outcomes of Ed Mayo's report for the National Housing Federation, is that tenants want us to focus on the basics of housing management services. We asked at tenants day whether we should look to enhance some of the management services we provide – to employ specialist mediators, ASB teams, set up our own credit union and so on. Against other options of improvements to homes and estates the answer was a resounding no, and the report above reflects that. At the same time, levels of satisfaction with what we already do, and how we do it, are generally good. Overall, therefore, the review does not recommend significant structural or strategic changes; the housing management strategy has objectives that still hold good, and meet the aspirations of residents (and some of the objectives have been agreed and added over the past two years) and the bulk of our recommendations are about changes of emphasis, and about how we should meet those objectives.

10.2 Using the existing strategic objectives as the starting point, the review groups' recommendations are summarised below.

10.2.1 *To contribute to the financial viability of the Association by maximising income.*

This remains a key role for the housing management service. The current focus is on managing rent arrears, and to this a greater emphasis need to be given to void management – to completing the current review of the processes, to putting a formal contract in place and to reviewing policies and procedures in a way that is outcome focussed.

There is a need for a far greater emphasis in the strategy on value for money, and this objective should be more explicit in making efficiency and value for money part of the objective. The objective itself should have a broader emphasis, and the specific actions should include joining Housemark – or a similar benchmarking club. There was a strong view that Housemark might not be the most appropriate vehicle for Redland to achieve what we want, but if it isn't we need to find an alternative so that we can better compare our performance with others, and report to residents accordingly. We should seek the support of the new Service Improvement Manager with this. We should also continue to take the initiative in the group wide objective of improving performance in this area.

Many of the anti poverty actions that we anticipate will form part of that strategy will meet this objective by maximising the income of our customers and this should be reflected in this part of the strategy.

10.2.2 To meet our obligations as a landlord and help residents meet theirs as tenants in a way that is consistent and fair.

Again, a change of emphasis in the objective is recommended. The objective needs to focus on us knowing who our residents are, understanding their needs as communities and as individuals, meeting our obligations in a way that meets those needs, and having the tools to address their needs.

Specific actions which we recommend to meet this objective, which reflect the outcomes above, should include

- Developing our residents census and profiling.
- Working with resident involvement staff on meeting hard to reach groups.
- Financial inclusion objectives, with a particular emphasis on the start of tenancies, on accessing debt counselling, on accessing credit and other financial services; this will be the key housing management contribution to a wider anti poverty framework which is a business plan objective for 2009/10
- Ways in which we can recognise and meet those tenants who comply with their conditions of tenancy and who we do not routinely meet at present (through mechanisms such as tenancy audits and estate inspection).

10.2.3 To contribute towards the improvement and long term sustainability of neighbourhoods where our residents live

To date we have focussed on estate improvements and the setting up of a specific budget as the key mechanism for achieving this objective. We need to continue this work; to use the existing tools of estate improvements, our priority estate assessment tool, estate meetings and so on. But we also need to ensure that we are much more pro-

active in the way that we use these tools, and that we are much more accessible to residents.

Our specific recommendation is that we develop, with residents, a “better neighbourhoods” toolkit, which will be based on a much enhanced estate inspection/walkabout process. It will clearly be appropriate to link this with the above, but the process will also raise our management profile, will enable residents to routinely tell us what they think we need to know and do, and will be centred around agreeing and monitoring clear objectives and outcomes. It should also make use of the website to advertise and to report outcomes.

One of the objectives of this must be to look at the accessibility of our estates for the disabled and to consider ways in which we can address residents’ priorities for this.

We recommend that the model for resident led estate services should be further publicised, and that we should seek to use that model for pilot schemes.

10.2.4 *To provide high and improving levels of customer care and services to residents.*

Whilst retaining this as a specific strategic objective, we recommend that the service’s customer service focus be given a greater emphasis in the overall strategy document.

We recommend that this objective should include specific actions to co-ordinate the way in which we collect and monitor feedback, through satisfaction and other surveys and through complaints. Furthermore, that we should include in that process monitoring not just satisfaction, but also dis-satisfaction – asking why, and learning from that – and not just resolving complaints but following up subsequently to ensure that we have done better the next time.

Focus groups are a key tool for improving services – and no-where is the housing management culture of involving residents more evident than in the service’s commitment to focus groups. We recommend that all those focus groups consider the KLOEs (or perhaps more appropriately, their replacement) definitions of excellence.

We have noted above that we consider resident involvement to be a fourth “cross cutting” service objective and inevitably this means that there will be close links between the housing management and resident involvement strategies: we think that Redland’s business planning process enables this to happen effectively. Nowhere is this more evident than in this particular objective of improving services and improving customer service. Of course every member of staff is a “tenant liaison officer”, and has a role to play in ensuring that we improve services by listening to what customers tell us. But in terms of

co-ordinating that work – and this is what we think we now need – we need to be clear whether this is a housing management role or a resident involvement role. The same is true of the resident profiling work identified in 10.2.2 above, and in either case we believe this to be the one area arising from this review where there are potentially resource implications.

10.2.5 To provide homes which meet people's need in an environment where people want to live

This objective reflects the commitment that we had at the outset of this strategy to choice based lettings, a commitment that has led to the current position where, by April, all our homes will be let through CBL schemes. Specific actions will now be about monitoring and improving those schemes, and should include work to look at their impact on existing tenants who need to transfer.

We recommend that we also review what information we give to new tenants, and how effective this is, and that we work with tenants to update this.

Reflecting the new responsibilities for void management, a review of our void management policies and procedures, and of our relet standard, should be carried out. The establishment of a new void works contract should be included in this review.

10.2.6 To fulfil our responsibilities to leaseholders, providing a service which meets their needs and aspirations.

We recommend that the information that we provide to new owners should be reviewed. We also recommend that this objective should extend to include other tenures – market and intermediate renting – and that this should begin by establishing a clear framework for the nature of the services that we provide to the different tenures.

10.2.7 To contribute to meeting the needs of the homeless and to the prevention of homelessness

We consider that this remains a key housing management objective, and we noted that during 2008 a “Homelessness Action Plan” was produced. This was done in response to local authority partner requests, and the plan has been approved by most of the partners with whom we work. This plan is, in effect, the action plan that sits under this objective and we have no further recommendations to make.

10.2.8 To identify and meet the needs of vulnerable residents, supporting them to achieve independent living in their own home.

This objective, and its specific actions, was added to the housing management strategy as a direct result of the service review of housing

with support – a review which completed less than a year ago. Some far reaching changes are taking place as a result of that review, and we have no recommendations to add.

- 10.3 Finally, in drafting a new housing management strategy to reflect the outcomes of this review, we recommend that changes be made to the “key values” that are identified in the strategy. These are values which run through the whole of the strategy. The current values are
- Equality
 - Diversity
 - Customer care
 - Involving residents
 - Continuous improvement

We recommend that “partnership” be added – much of what we want to achieve above we will only achieve if we work in partnership with others. As well as partnerships with residents, our homelessness and lettings objectives require partnership working with local authorities, our aspirations for financial inclusion will require us to develop new partnerships, to give only two examples.

A risk with ‘values’ such as these is that it is easier to add new ones than to remove existing ones, with the danger of an ever growing ‘list’! However, we do make two recommendations: firstly that equality be removed as a specific, separate, value and that it should be incorporated into the “diversity” value – ensuring that residents from whatever background have equal access to our services. Secondly, we recommend that “continuous improvement” be removed and that the values of both customer service (instead of customer care) and of resident involvement make clear that these are the keys to improving services.

11 Conclusion

- 11.1 The initial scope of this review set a very clear focus on the Audit Commission KLOEs as the starting point and driver for the review. The outcomes and recommendations reflect that focus and the key actions that arise from the review are aimed at addressing areas where we fall short of excellence and did not already have plans in place.
- 11.2 The outcomes aim to make our housing management strategy ‘fit for purpose’ for the coming five years. Significant parts of it have been revised during the past year or two; other parts already have objectives and actions reflect our vision of service excellence. The review has reaffirmed these and has made proposals for some re-emphasis of objectives and for some specific actions (notably, for example, the development of ‘better neighbourhoods’ and of financial inclusion targets) in order to refine, rather than completely rewrite the strategy.

- 11.3 The report will be presented to the board, and to the RRC, and following discussions there, we will revise the housing management strategy so that we have a direction for the next five years, and the housing management action plan, which delivers the objectives of the strategy, will be reviewed and updated.