

# Short Notice Inspection Report

Short notice inspection of access, customer service  
and diversity

Hyde Housing Association

April 2010



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# Housing Association Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

For housing associations our current inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41A and 41B of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003). Provisions contained in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 will amend our role and remit in due course, but are not yet in force. Our role is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact.

Short notice inspections (SNIs) have been developed to encourage improvements in the performance of housing associations (HAs) at delivering services to their customers – tenants and leaseholders. They focus on the outcomes for residents and work on the basis that associations will concentrate on improving services rather than preparing for an inspection, which could happen at any time.

The scope of each inspection of a housing association, undertaken by the Audit Commission has been agreed in consultation with the Tenant Services Authority. The Tenant Services Authority is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable as set out in its Regulatory Code.

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### The Association

- 1 Hyde Housing Association (Hyde HA) was founded in 1967 and registered in 1974. It is now the parent of a group of property owning housing associations which form the Hyde Group. The Group is divided into seven business units. Hyde HA itself owns 18,000 properties in 64 local authority areas across eight counties plus London. The scope of this inspection has been limited to the services provided to the tenancies managed by a business unit called Hyde South East (Hyde SE). This excludes 1,000 homes managed by Northside in Islington, 5,000 managed by HydeMartlet in Sussex and Hampshire and 3,000 managed by the supported housing arm In Touch. Hyde SE manages 9,200 general needs units; 6,700 in eight different South London boroughs and 2,500 in 20 Kent Districts.
- 2 Hyde SE has offices in Lewisham, Woolwich, Canterbury and Maidstone. In 2008/09, Hyde HA had a turnover of £138 million and Hyde SE had a turnover of £70 million. Hyde HA employs 1,064 people of whom 163 work for Hyde SE.

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### The scope of the inspection

- 3 The scope of this inspection focused on the following areas, which have been identified in consultation with the regulator, the Tenants' Services Authority:
  - access and customer care; and
  - diversity.
- 4 Within this, the inspection focused mainly but not exclusively at the quality of access and customer care in providing services to deal with anti-social behaviour and responsive repairs. The inspection does not include an assessment of how Hyde HA is addressing value for money.
- 5 We would like to thank the staff of Hyde HA who made us welcome and met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 8 to 10 December 2009

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# Summary of our findings

- 6 We have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Assessment**

How good is the service?	Assessment
• Access and customer care <sup>I</sup>	Weaknesses outweigh strengths
• Diversity	Weaknesses outweigh strengths

- 7 We asked Hyde HA to consult with its customers on the findings of our original report on the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas we inspected; and on the preparation of an action plan to implement our recommendations. Following receipt of that action plan this final report has been published to include our assessment of the Association's prospects for improvement.
- 8 We have assessed Hyde HA as having 'promising prospects for improvement' for the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and the short notice inspection action plan agreed with customers. These are summarised below.

**Table 2 Assessment for prospects for improvement**

Prospects for improvement <sup>II</sup>	Assessment
Track record of improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
How well is performance managed	Strengths and weaknesses are in balance
Is there capacity to improve	Strengths outweigh weaknesses

<sup>I</sup> Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money are assessed in relation to the service areas inspected only.

<sup>II</sup> In the relation to the service areas inspected

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# How good is the service?

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## Access and customer care in the service areas inspected

9 We found weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

10 There are a number of weaknesses.

- Standards of customer care and service are inconsistent. This lack of consistency applies both between different areas and between different staff. This is recognised by Hyde HA and confirmed by residents that we spoke to. Initiatives to improve services are carried out in one part of Hyde SE and not another. Residents talked of 'a postcode lottery' with some staff reliable in returning calls and addressing issues while others are not.
- The website is of a low standard. It is hard to navigate, it lacks information and it is not kept up-to-date.
- Repairs appointment times are limited. Residents are offered 9am to 1pm or 1pm to 6pm. Appointments that miss the school run are available but not publicised. Residents have asked for two-hour appointment slots. Appointments are not convenient for many residents.
- Residents are not adequately informed about progress on services they are waiting for. When repairs are delayed residents are not routinely kept informed. A new anti-social behaviour policy was supposed to introduce a process of informing residents of progress on their case but residents told us this is not happening. Residents have to chase up on services, wasting their own time and that of Hyde staff.
- Residents are not regularly informed about performance. Hyde only provides a limited annual report which does not include comparisons outside Hyde Group. Residents do not know if Hyde is meeting its service promises and this has not been measured for Hyde SE. Residents do not know how reliable Hyde is when it makes promises and cannot hold the association to account.
- Overall satisfaction at 76 per cent is in line with the worst 25 per cent of housing associations nationally.
- Satisfaction information in key areas is not robust. Rates of return are low and not reported adequately. Information on customer views has been collected for less than one in four complaints and a lower proportion for anti-social behaviour. Satisfaction figures are not reliable and Hyde misses feedback opportunities for improving services.

## How good is the service?

- Complaints handling is improving but has weaknesses. Only a third of residents who complain are satisfied with the process. A review has improved the service but it still has several weaknesses including in monitoring, learning from complaints and ensuring residents concerns are met to their satisfaction.
- Involved residents find it difficult to understand how they can influence the service, although they think Hyde HA listens. Hyde is slow to carry out changes and improvements in response to tenants' requests. The group structure is complicated and residents do not understand where they fit in. Residents are not informed what has changed as a result of their input. Involved residents are not sure of the benefit of their involvement.

### 11 There are a number of strengths.

- Hyde has a clear approach to customer care that staff understand. Leadership on customer care is strong with a focus on resolving issues at first point of contact. Performance is improving through this cultural shift.
- Effective customer care training is making a difference. Workshops, NVQ level 3 training, motivational training and coaching are contributing to an improved focus.
- Service promises are in place and consulted on with residents. This year residents agreed 75 service promises to customers. Staff understand what is expected of them with these customer standards.
- The service is easy to access by telephone. Residents can telephone free from landlines between 8 am and 6 pm. Over 90 per cent of calls are answered within 20 seconds and less than 1 per cent of calls are abandoned.
- Residents have appropriate input in the literature they receive. New leaflets have a logo showing that they have been checked and approved by residents. Residents are involved in design and content and in editorial panels for newsletters.
- Residents have many options for being involved and putting forward their views. Some residents input into group-wide changes while others are more local. A youth panel considers activities for younger people and surveys are used to inform policy changes. A survey of tenants shows that 67 per cent are satisfied that their views are taken into account. This is above the national average of 62 per cent.

### Diversity in the service areas inspected

12 We found weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.

13 There are a number of weaknesses.

- Leadership on diversity is underdeveloped in key areas. Despite benefiting from a flexible and easy to use database on residents needs, no lead is being taken to use this information properly. Nobody is checking contradictory information or ensuring that services that Hyde thinks it is supplying are actually being provided. Hyde is late in carrying out a full census on the profile and needs of residents and late in carrying out equality impact assessments. Barriers to service delivery are not being addressed quickly enough.
- Hyde lacks information on residents' needs and profile. The organisation is only now starting to collect a full census of profile and needs. Information that has been collected by HydePlus is not available to staff who might need to know. Valuable information on residents is not available.
- Work on identifying residents who are not accessing services has been limited. One isolated estate in Kent benefits from appropriate work to help resident's access services. Hyde has not found out which other residents are not asking for or getting services they need. Needs of isolated and vulnerable residents are not being met.
- Hyde does not know how representative most involvement structures are. Figures are only available for the highest level of panel's and boards with small numbers involved. Hyde cannot take action to make representation structures more representative without information.
- Hyde lacks clear expectations of contractors on diversity. The code of conduct for contractors has no mention of diversity issues or expectations where operatives are told about vulnerabilities. One in five operatives have received diversity training. Residents do not know what they can expect from operatives and most operatives contractors have no framework to work to.
- Response to hate crime and DV is not fully developed. A mystery shopping exercise was mainly positive but staff failed to advise of the sanctuary scheme and focused on assessment and rehousing rather than support and advice. The policy for hate crime involves a two-stage assessment, one held within 24 hours of the report and a fuller assessment within a week. Residents with urgent needs will not be getting the support and information they need from the outset.
- Hyde has only completed five equality impact assessments. Five is less than other organisations and these have been done over the past year or so. Outcomes have not been delivered from these assessments yet as they are in plans yet to be carried out.
- Not all staff have received the mandatory diversity training. Only three out of four of Hyde Group staff have received the training.
- Satisfaction surveys of the repairs and other services are not analysed by diversity strand.

## How good is the service?

### 14 There are a number of strengths.

- HydePlus<sup>III</sup> provides significant practical help to disadvantaged residents. About 500 Hyde SE residents benefited from effective support in the first eight months of 2009/10. With £472,000 of funds for the service in Hyde SE, HydePlus has helped residents towards employment, provided money advice and enabled residents to participate in constructive activities. Many have received these services at home due to their isolation. Disadvantaged tenants are having their personal circumstances improved.
- Effective support is available from specialist staff within teams. In addition to the HydePlus support and support through Supporting People funding, residents in crises with income and ASB issues get further support from Housing Support Officers. In eight months, 190 residents have been helped to resolve immediate issues like eviction and accessing welfare benefits, as well as being signposted to further support services.
- Some vulnerable tenants receive a tailored and enhanced service. Hyde has examples of staff proactively providing enhanced repairs services and communications in alternative formats and languages.
- Hyde SE is working proactively with partner agencies to respond to tenants needs and increase resources available for residents. It funded an event to inform and empower people with learning disabilities to proactively deal with hate crime and bullying.
- Progress is being made removing barriers to equal access to services. Hyde has assessed itself against the CRE Code of Practice for Promoting Racial Equality in Housing, against the IDeA Equality Framework and against good practice in other organisations. The approach to equality impact assessments is robust with training of assessors and with both contractors and residents involved. Plans for improvement have been strengthened by these evaluation processes.
- Corporate commitment is strengthening. Hyde Group is putting in resources to catch up in areas where it is behind. Three Hyde Group forums are now running with a budget of £250,000 per year to help them plus £1,500,000 for activities to support vulnerable residents through HydePlus. Plans and schemes set out where the organisation wants to go.

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<sup>III</sup> HydePlus is an organisational part of the Hyde Group that provides assistance to residents who have challenging circumstances.

# Recommendations

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

## Recommendation

- R1** In consultation with residents and reviewing best practice elsewhere, improve customer care and access to services by:
- reviewing and improving the website and implementing systems to check it is comprehensive, easy to navigate and up-to-date;
  - offering a more flexible appointment system for repairs in response to resident requests;
  - introducing, monitoring and reviewing systems for keeping residents informed on progress with services that they are receiving;
  - routinely informing residents how well their services are being delivered, how well service promises are being kept and how this compares with other organisations;
  - informing residents in specific involvement groups, and residents generally, how their input has been used and what has changed in response to that input;
  - publishing an involvement strategy that states what model of involvement is being aimed for and how different structures and surveys will influence services;
  - improving the quality of information on satisfaction with individual cases of service delivery and improving services by learning from reasons for high and low satisfaction; and
  - improving complaints processes to learn more systematically from trends and to focus on fully and proactively addressing the concerns of individual complainants.

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

## Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- residents will be better informed about services they receive;
- residents will be able to hold Hyde to account more easily;
- services will be more flexible and of a higher standard;
- residents will be more inclined to be involved; and
- satisfaction with services will be higher.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2010.

### Recommendation

**R2** In consultation with residents, improve outcomes for tenants who have diverse needs by:

- gathering information on the profile, vulnerabilities and additional support and communication needs of all residents;
- using available information on residents needs to tailor and enhance services in a proactive way when required and monitoring whether this is being done;
- periodically checking with residents with needs for differentiated services that information about them is correct and services are appropriate;
- identifying residents who are not accessing services and checking that their needs are being met;
- monitoring service take up by diversity to identify any groups of residents who are not accessing services;
- setting out clear expectations on contractors and operatives on diversity issues, sharing them with residents and introducing systems to ensure they are kept;
- finding out how representative resident involvement structures are and taking action to balance them where necessary;
- reviewing the approach to responding to reports of domestic violence and hate crimes to ensure that they are fast and effective at meeting needs; and
- ensuring that all staff understand diversity issues and know how to act, respond and prioritise appropriately.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a greater understanding among staff and contractors of the need to address diversity issues and ensure suitable outcomes for residents; and
- residents who cannot access services in the normal way have their service needs met.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

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# Prospects for improvement

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**What prospects are there that the services inspected will improve?**

**What is the track record in delivering improvement in the areas inspected?**

**16** We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**17** There are a number of strengths.

- The focus on diversity is stronger. Groups have been set up to carry issues forward. HydePlus is helping more residents, with its budget increasing by 15 per cent to £1.5 million in 2009/10.
- Performance in telephone answering has improved. Calls answered within the service standard of 20 seconds was consistently below 90 per cent per month before March 2009 and consistently above since then.
- The complaints service has improved. Informal complaints are now monitored and Hyde now responds to complaints faster.
- Residents feel that their views are being taken into account more. Surveys shows that 67 per cent of residents believed this in 2008 compared to 60.5 per cent in 2007.
- Hyde has shown it can implement a restructure of services successfully. The creation of Hyde South East in March 2009 involved pulling together locally managed services across Kent and South London. This was well managed and is delivering improvements.

**18** There are a number of weaknesses.

- Resident dissatisfaction with the overall service increased from 13 per cent in 2007 to 21 per cent in 2009.
- Progress on some diversity issues has been limited. Hyde is behind other organisations in collecting information on residents' needs and profiles. It has also not carried out many equality impact assessments of its services.
- Customer service improvements in the repairs service have been delayed. Hyde SE was going to procure a new repairs service. However this has been delayed in order to involve the rest of the Hyde Group and consult those residents.
- Hyde has not carried out all the recommendations from the last inspection in 2005. One recommendation was to enter into more appropriate and local benchmarking arrangements, and use the information gathered to improve services and targets setting. This is still an area of weakness.

## Prospects for improvement

### How well is performance managed in the areas inspected?

19 We found strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area.

20 There are a number of strengths.

- Hyde has a clear vision and an ambitious, coordinated plan to improve services. It combines a cultural shift with complex restructuring, investments of £15 million over four years and many other elements. It has been well researched and thought through.
- Performance management of staff is robust. In Hyde SE, 98.6 per cent of staff have annual appraisals. Assessments of individual performance have led to poor performers getting extra support to improve and 23 across the Group being required to leave for poor performance.
- The organisation is aware of most of its weaknesses. Most of the recommendations listed in this report have already been identified with plans in place or already underway to address them.
- Hyde SE is learning from other parts of the Hyde group. A resident inspection process is being rolled out across the group and all parts are benefiting from the findings.

21 There are a number of weaknesses.

- PI monitoring and reporting is not comprehensive. Trend information is missing for more than the top eight indicators. Performance is not monitored at a local enough level; combining figures for Kent and London obscures performance in some areas. Outcome indicators like satisfaction with the ASB service are not reported. The organisation lacks a full understanding of where performance can be improved.
- The quality and monitoring of plans is mixed. Plans lack clear outcomes, measures and timescales for actions and do not show relevant links to other plans. Parts of the Hyde SE annual plan are not properly monitored.
- However the Hyde South East Short Notice Inspection Action Plan that was written in response to this report is better. It is very detailed and addresses the weaknesses above.
- Benchmarking is not sufficient or focused enough. Hyde SE compares itself to 15 large London organisations and 14 organisations across England for customer care issues. However it does not compare with strong performers nationally and it does not compare London and Kent performance separately and locally. Performance reports lack comparisons and staff do not know how their performance compares.
- Hyde lacks systematic processes of learning. Hyde does network with other landlords in London the South East of England and Europe. However it lacks a systematic approach to picking out the best organisations to help it improve individual services. It does not monitor and learn from complaints trends and a new staff suggestion scheme is too recent to assess whether it is effective.

### Do the areas inspected have capacity to improve?

22 We found strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

23 There are a number of strengths.

- Hyde offers good training and development opportunities. Customer care training is producing results and a management training programme shows improvements for 63 managers. Hyde supports staff to undertake professional qualifications.
- Hyde has robust IT systems with effective plans for improvement. Day to day work is maintained even where the system hits significant problems. Resources are shared between offices and available information is easy to access. Plans for new software will improve on the solid base that already exists for providing services.
- The Board is effective with an appropriate range of skills. It has faced serious challenges well, and has shown that it can take difficult decisions. It has set out a strong and challenging vision and members are well connected to different parts of the Hyde Group.
- The capacity of Hyde SE to provide an effective customer service at the first point of contact is continuing to increase. A new central customer service team and dedicated repairs contact centre were established in 2009. The use of training and software has improved services and plans for new structures and software are positive.
- Resident capacity to contribute to service improvement is increasing. Residents are being trained to carry out mystery shopping and assess performance against service promises. This has already led to improvements when carried out in other parts of the business.
- Hyde Group have achieved a bronze standard in their Investors In People<sup>1</sup> accreditation. This is better than most social landlords achieve and indicates a sound approach to human resource management.
- Hyde SE has an accessible and approachable management team. Staff are comfortably raising ideas and concerns with managers at all levels.
- Hyde brings in external funding for the benefit of residents. The £323,000 that Hyde put towards HydePlus for Hyde SE was supplemented by £147,000 in external funding.

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<sup>1</sup> Investors in People (IiP) is a national standard for the training and development of people in the workplace.

## Prospects for improvement

24 There are a number of weaknesses.

- Hyde SE does not have a good sickness record. In the year to November 2009 an average of 10.3 days per employee were lost to sickness absence and the figure is rising. This compares to an average of 9.4 days for the non-profit sector nationally.
- The ASB IT management system is limited. It is not able to monitor missed response deadlines in order to manage performance. Hyde cannot identify how effectively response times are being met and whether there are performance issues in particular areas.
- Hyde lacks reliable systems to monitor the training of staff. It has to consolidate data manually through various reports to monitor training. This makes it more difficult to ensure mandatory training is carried out and that all training needs are being met.

### Recommendation

**R3** In consultation with residents, improve monitoring, reporting and planning systems by:

- monitoring performance at a more local level where relevant with appropriate local targets and benchmarks;
- providing more trend information to see the direction of travel of performance;
- providing more benchmarking information with standard performance reports;
- benchmarking performance with a wider range of service providers including high performers;
- setting clear SMART<sup>1</sup> targets for actions within plans; and
- monitoring progress against plans in writing.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the highlighting of areas where the service is not consistent;
- the identification of areas where performance can be improved;
- a more focused and effective use of resources and improvement;
- easier learning from high performers; and
- more efficient and effective planning.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2010.

<sup>1</sup> SMART: specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound.

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