



Inspection Report

County Palatine Ltd

Registered number: LH4255

**Date of publication:
MARCH 2002**



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SUMMARY

OUR KEY FINDINGS

The Housing Corporation and the Inspection

The Housing Corporation is a statutory body which regulates Housing Associations – or Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) as they are legally known. We ensure that they provide decent homes and services for tenants. In December we carried out an inspection of County Palatine Ltd. Just as Ofsted looks at the quality of education in schools, our team looked at the service that County Palatine Ltd gives to its tenants and other customers. We also looked at whether it was trying to improve the service for the future.

Our inspectors spoke to tenants and staff at County Palatine Ltd, and members of the Association's Board of Management. We also talked to the Local Authority. We visited homes that it owns and manages. We looked in particular at six aspects for the service:

- Repairing and maintaining properties;
- Allocating and letting housing;
- Dealing with nuisance and anti-social behaviour;
- Meeting the needs of black and minority ethnic communities;
- Ensuring responsive customer services;
- Involving tenants in decision making.

A full explanation of inspection is in “The Way Forward: Inspection our Approach” available from the Corporation or on our website www.housingcorp.gov.uk.

What is County Palatine Ltd ?

County Palatine Ltd (CP LTD.) was created in February 2000. It is a charitable, general needs RSL working mainly in the Wigan MBC area, but with stock across other parts of the North West and Merseyside. On creation it absorbed the stock of three organisations:

- CP LTD., a general, then none charitable RSL;
- Palatine Home Ownership, a low cost home ownership specialist RSL;
- Palatine Commercial Limited (an unregistered commercial development subsidiary).

In total the group has around 1600 units and employs 113 staff, of which 72 are full time.

- CP LTD. operates from a centrally placed office on a busy cross road in Leigh. The counter service was found to be friendly and efficient. Rooms for private interview are available.
- The Chief Executive has been in position since 1996 and has established a high profile in the organisation. The management team is organised in a traditional hierarchical manner with Directors of Housing Management, Finance and Development reporting to the Chief Executive. Unusually for a relatively small Association it has a Direct Labour Organisation and an active research section. The research section piloted the Associations Best Value work and produces the Associations publicity material.

What we found

In our inspection we asked two key questions:

- How good is the service delivered to residents?

A customer satisfaction survey completed around November 2000 found 80% of the Associations tenant's to be fairly or very satisfied, with only 6% of tenants expressing dissatisfaction. During the inspection we found similar levels of satisfaction and a perception of generally good services. Tenants considered that the Association cared for them and their welfare and enthusiastically recommended them to family and friends.

- Is the Association working towards continuous improvement?

The Association is working towards continuous improvement. The Association has a 3 year cycle of comprehensive service reviews. The Neighbour Nuisance, Responsive Repairs and Rent and Service charge services have been subject to Best Value (BV) reviews. A review of Resident Participation is currently ongoing. All reviews were concluded with action plans containing targets and timescale for service improvements. The Association learns from complaints and actively pursues the opinion of customer's who have recently used their service. Additionally they have developed a representative customer services panel who are canvassed for their opinions on the service. Ambitious targets for improving the service are set and progress to those closely monitored.

OUR MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Association's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) strategy lacks clear indications of realistic and achievable responsibilities and also milestones for monitoring and reporting. We would recommend that the forthcoming review should strengthen the BME strategy in the following areas:
 - The BME strategy should include an annual community audit of the development programme with BME community groups.
 - Monitoring of recruitment should be improved, especially to show applicants against BME targets and successes.
- The Association needs to update its stock condition information survey to avoid unexpected maintenance costs.
- Improve the recording of completion times of repairs completed by external contractors.
- The cost effectiveness of the DLO needs a rigorous examination.
- Record the cost of individual repair jobs so that they can be benchmarked for cost effectiveness.

Improve the customer satisfaction monitoring for external contractors.

Adopt a void or lettability standard

- Formalise procedures for the monitoring of Variation Orders
 - Review the criteria for assessing housing need so they are less subjective terms which need revision
- Review the procedure for assessing housing applications so that applicants are not rejected on the basis of unverified information.
- Ensure allocation decisions are properly recorded.

We keep in regular contact with all the large housing associations that we regulate. We have asked County Palatine to produce an action plan to show how it intends to respond to these recommendations and we will monitor the Association's progress in dealing with these issues.

1 The Inspection: terms of reference and coverage

- 1.1 The Inspection took place between December 4th and December 14th 2001. As part of our inspection, we were looking to determine whether or not the Association is working for continuous improvement and providing a good service to its tenants. In making this assessment we looked at each of its main service areas.
- 1.2 The report contains a number of recommendations are listed which the Board are required to respond to with a plan of action to be agreed with the Lead Regulator of the Association.
- 1.3 The Inspection team looked at the following service areas:
- Repairs and Maintenance;
 - Lettings and Allocations;
 - Tenant Participation;
 - Customer Services and Complaints;
 - Dealing with Anti Social Behaviour;
 - Strategy for services to BME and Diverse Communities.
- 1.4 The Inspection Team would like to thank the staff and management of CP LTD. for their cooperation during the inspection.

2 A profile of County Palatine

- 2.1 The Association provides a housing service for several client groups. Predominantly general needs housing, but also hostel accommodation for young single homeless, the elderly and those with special needs. A proportion of its stock is made up of low cost home ownership initiatives and a smaller proportion of privately owned property where the Association acts as managing agent. The bulk of the Association's stock is in the Wigan MBC area but also Chorley, Sefton, Lancaster, St Helens and Preston.
- 2.2 It is involved in a variety of development initiatives which include Renewal Areas, sheltered housing schemes, a drop in centre and move on flats for street drinkers and an innovative scheme to turn low demand terraced properties in Preston into 'loft style' apartments.

Location and area of operation

- 2.3 CPHA's operating environment, whilst not as benign as some HA's, is not as difficult as those working in areas such as inner Liverpool and Manchester. A proportion of stock suffers from some problems with low demand but with good marketing strategies most properties can be let. Along with several other HA's and Wigan MBC a property shop is to be opened in Leigh and Wigan where hard to let properties will be advertised.

The Association's stock appears to have remained relatively free from severe anti social behaviour problems. Where there have been problems the Association has either resolved the situation or erected railings to discourage anti social behaviour. One Tenant's Association whose members were suffering repeated break-ins of their cars and general nuisance from youths were helped to make a successful application for funding from the Coalfields Funds to install CCTV. Deterred by this, youths stopped congregating in the area and the break-ins and nuisance ceased. Some nuisance problems have been experienced at the Associations single homeless hostels but these have been dealt with satisfactorily.

2.4 Given the broad range of the Associations client group it is difficult to draw a concise profile of a typical CP LTD. tenant. However they do share some characteristics found in similar associations tenants such as a large proportion of elderly people and high rates of benefit dependency. With the exception of the Preston area the Association's stock is in areas of low B & ME populations and the Associations tenants profile reflects this.

2.5 Key statistics and performance indicators

	1998	1999	2000	2001*	Regional Average	National Average
Rents collected as % gross rents due:	97.26 %	95.42 %	96.35%	93.55 %	97.3%	97.27%
Rent arrears as % gross rental income:	7.23%	6.94%	6.34%	6.4%	7.54%	6.77%
Rent loss through bad debts/voids:	2.91%	3.62%	5.35%	2.5%	3.33%	3.47%
SCU Vacant and available:	0.25%	1.86%	2.54%	1.85%	1.85%	1.53%
SCU average relet time	1.2 weeks	2.2 weeks	3.0 weeks	3.4 weeks	4.1 weeks	4.8 weeks
Emergency repairs completed on time	86.4%	96.9%	98.05%	100%	98.0%	95.5%
Urgent repairs completed on time	93.6%	96.5%	97.5%	98%	95.8%	91.9%
Routine repairs completed on time	94.5%	97.1%	96.69%	95%	96.0%	92.7%
% of lettings to LA nominees	85.8%	78.6%	65.9%	20%	22.1%	41.5%
% of lettings to statutory homeless	1.2%	0.7%	Not available.	3.0%	2.4%	10.9%
BME Lettings	3.7%	2.1%	2.5%	1.49%	6.0%	11.9%
Management cost per unit	£362.27	£376.65	Not available	£414.03	£422.27	£486.66
Maintenance cost per unit	£520.26	£526.80	Not available	£546.49	£675.86	£616.37

* Following the formation of the new group structure strictly comparative data is not available. Information from Associations own figures.

- 2.6. Several of the Association's performance indicators show slight deteriorations in performance from 2000 to 2001. The most notable of which are rent arrears recovery and routine repairs completion times.

As with most social housing providers the Association's performance on rent arrears collection is hampered by the delay in processing Housing Benefit claims. The Association is taking part in the Housing Benefit verification pilot and it is hoped that this will lead to an improvement in the performance of the local Housing Benefit unit. Should this transpire then we can expect an improvement in their rent recovery performance.

The Association's completion times for routine repairs has fluctuated for some time and is currently below the regional average. As discussed later in the report there are some issues around the recording of external contractors repair completion times, when they are addressed this may lead to an improvement in performance.

3. How good is the service?

Is the service shaped around its customers?

- 3.1 As the BV review process rolls out services are becoming increasingly shaped around the customer. The vast majority of tenants whom we met were satisfied with the level of service. A closer examination of the Association showed structures and mechanisms in place to secure this. The Association is innovative and eager to learn. The remote working of a Property and Housing Officer and computerisation of complaints and neighbour nuisance cases are good examples of their innovative approach. Its positive attitude to complaints and readiness to adopt best practice from elsewhere shows a willingness to learn. It has adopted Neighbour Nuisance procedures from another organisation recognised as a leader in the field.

Are the services easily accessible?

- 3.2 The use of a remote working Housing Officer and Property Officer as well as local 'surgeries' has ensured that far flung tenants can easily access services. The Property Officers role mirrors the Housing Officers in that they also have responsibility for their own 'patch' of properties. Within this patch the Property Officer will pre inspect and complete all minor repairs and void works. For jobs which are beyond their expertise they commission external contractors. Property Officers have become a familiar sight to Tenants who regularly report repairs and other problems

to them without contacting the office. Tenants were particularly appreciative of this 'familiar face' on their estates and their value to the Association should not be underestimated.

Are the services responsive?

- 3.3 Direct services to tenants are good with only a few issues which need addressing. These include the possible under reporting of anti social behaviour and the over reliance on the written word when dealing with rehousing applicants. During Tenant Focus Groups several tenants complained about anti social behaviour in their block of flats. When asked if they had reported it to the Association, most had not for fear of reprisals or a belief that there was little the Association could do to solve it. Other complaints were made about communal entrance doors being continuously kicked in. Although they were repaired quickly it was only to the same specification as before despite the tenant asking for a stronger door and lock.

Is the Association informative?

- 3.4 The Association keeps in contact with its tenants and residents using a variety of media. Newsletters are regularly produced and the annual report is on a cd-rom. Tenants views are sought by telephone polling and further flung tenants can either make personal appointments with their Housing Officer or attend a local 'surgery'. Rent accounts are posted to all tenants eleven months a year.

Is the Association inclusive and non discriminatory?

- 3.5 The Association's B & ME strategies generally address most of the issues affecting members of the B & ME community. There are a number of areas which could do with strengthening particularly relating to roles and responsibilities. Most leaflets and publications have translation panels except the annual report.

The Association is willing to make adaptations to their properties to meet the needs of disabled tenants. The Local Authority are expected to fulfil their statutory obligations for larger adaptations.

Are the Association's tenants safe and secure?

- 3.6 Whenever tenants have expressed that they feel vulnerable the Association have taken steps to address that. The Association has good

policies and procedures for dealing with nuisance and the application of them was found to be effective.

Quality of the Associations homes

- 3.7 All the properties visited during the inspection were found to be of good quality and well maintained. The properties meet their occupant's needs and fitted in well with the general area. The present stock condition survey is now out of date and a new one is to be completed soon.

Assessing housing need

- 3.8 Applications for rehousing are assessed solely on application forms which have to be completed by the applicant or their representative. Some applicants maybe reluctant or unable to enter all their details. Some of the housing need categories are subjective and could do with clarification. Properties are allocated in an appropriate manner and which reflects the level of demand for them.

Ensuring effective maintenance

- 3.9 All tenants spoke well of the repairs service delivered by the Association's own DLO and external contractors. The role of the Property Officer was seen as particularly effective both in terms of maintenance and generally 'keeping an eye' on properties.

Best use of resources

- 3.10 Resources are used wisely, but the cost effectiveness of the DLO needs to be rigorously established. When ever possible IT systems are used to deliver and monitor the service. The performance of all staff is closely monitored and Housing Officers have targets set for different aspects of their work.

4. Is County Palatine working for continuous improvement?

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

- 4.1 The Association is working towards continuous improvement. Not only is the culture of the organisation conducive to this, but there is also the mechanisms in place to achieve it. To sum up the level of services provided by the Association it is useful to quote an officer at the Local Authority who dealt with the Association on both strategic and day to day issues who said:

“A few years ago I would have thought them to be one of the worst associations in the area, now I think they are amongst the best.”

- 4.2 The Association has a 3 year cycle of comprehensive service reviews. The Neighbour Nuisance, Responsive Repairs and Rent and Service charge services have been subject to fairly thorough BV reviews. A review of Resident Participation is currently ongoing. All reviews were concluded with action plans detailing targets and timescales for service improvements. The inspection team looked at the repairs BV review in some detail. The review covered all aspects of the service and led to some important innovations and changes such as a dedicated repairs phone line and evening appointments. However the review may have benefited from the inclusion of consumers earlier on in the process and the involvement of external contractors. Cost comparisons between the DLO and external contractors were insufficiently thorough to warrant the drawing of conclusions.

As one would expect the ongoing review of Resident Participation has included residents from the outset. Tenants were invited to attend BV review meetings at the Association's offices at 6.00pm. The difficulties associated with holding meetings like this are well documented in that they tend to attract a narrow sample of tenants – usually those already involved with the Association in some capacity and normally white and elderly. The one meeting the inspection team attended was no exception to this other than that one tenant from a B & M E background attended, who was a former Board Member.

For future BV reviews the Association may want to adopt some of the tactics it presently uses to consult with 'difficult to reach' groups such as telephone polling and 'graffiti walls',

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

- 4.3 The Association learns from complaints and pursues the opinion of customer's who have recently used their services by telephone polling. Additionally they have developed a representative customer services panel that is regularly canvassed for their opinions on the service.

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

- 4.4 Ambitious targets for improving the service are set and progress to those closely monitored. Individual officers have regular supervision sessions during which their achievements are noted and targets set for them: individual officer's performance on arrears and lettings are displayed in the office. The theory behind some targets may benefit from a review. Tenant Participation activity is measured by how many Tenant groups are set up against a target of 12. A target such as this could be misleading. It does not explain what is meant by a 'group' nor should the establishment of a group be seen as a good indicator of tenant involvement

County Palatine Ltd has been working continuously to improve the housing it owns and the services it offers. It actively engages with tenants, staff and stakeholders. It has used customer feedback, target setting and formal processes to deliver solid improvements to services. Its challenge now is to maintain the momentum for improvement and continue to search for ways to deliver better services.

5 Review of service areas

5.1 Key features of the service

Response Repairs

- CP LTD. stock is a mixture of rehabilitated, relatively new purpose built, converted houses and terraces. The stock is dispersed over a relatively wide geographical area. Some properties are in high demand, whilst others have little demand.
- The Association has its own DLO which completes about 70% of the Associations maintenance work. The Association hopes to increase this percentage over time.
- The Association has clearly defined standards for response times, the quality of repairs and the manner in which repairs are carried out.
- Repairs are reported by tenants or sheltered scheme wardens either in person at the office, over the phone or direct to the Housing Officer (HO) or Property Officers (PO). The Association's Repairs Officer, who has their own dedicated phone line, enters all jobs onto the computer. The repairs completion date is then set by the system after the Repairs Officer has determined its priority. The property data base software system has Bank Holidays set within its parameters and this could have an adverse effect on performance figures. For external contractors this problem is compounded as repair completion dates are taken as the date at which the invoice has been authorised for payment by the Finance Department. This could put external contractor's performance in an unwarranted poor light. It may also explain the Associations slightly weaker performance on routine repairs when compared with their excellent performance in other areas. The Association is in the process of rectifying this.
- There is no standard specification of lettable condition for void properties. Inspections are carried out by PO's.
- In agreement with the Tenant, orders and inspections are allotted one of four daily appointment slots and distributed to the PO's each morning by their line manager. The remote working PO's work is e-mailed to them. Maintenance Managers monitor the orders whilst distributing them to the PO's.
- PO's have 300 / 400 units and deal with some 85 repairs a week. PO's can commission work with external contractors up to the value of £200.

Above this figure they need authorisation from a line manager. Variation Orders are approved by one of the Maintenance Managers and about 20% are pre inspected. Monitoring of variation orders is on an informal basis and this needs to be tightened up.

5.2 Planned maintenance and improvements

- The existing stock condition survey was completed in December 1998. A new survey to be completed by the PO's is planned for 2003. Whilst in many ways it is commendable as a training exercise to have several PO's complete the survey the number of people involved in it could lead to inconsistent results. . We understand that the Association has amended its proposals and now intend to contract a surveyor to complete the survey.
- The requirements of the Decent Homes Standard needs to be incorporated into any survey.
- The present Asset Management Policy is inadequate and on completion of the Stock Condition survey a new one needs to be drawn up. The policy should incorporate lifecycle costings, projections for demand alongside demographic profiles and Local Authority Development Plans.

All works identified the 1998 survey were placed in one of five categories. The categories ranged from health and safety works requiring urgent attention to improvement works to be completed when funds permitted. The Maintenance Manager prioritises the work and provides a programme to be completed over five years. Following the completion of the new survey tenants may wish to be involved in drawing up a schedule of improvements.

- Gas servicing is carried out by an external contractor. No significant problems were found with the administration of the contract but the contractor holds the details of which properties have been serviced on a card index file. This information should also be held by the Association and preferably computerised.
- The Association's own DLO completes the external painting and communal areas painting programme. The former as part of a three year rolling program the latter over a five year period.

What works well?

√ Multi functional role of Property Officers

- √ Property Officers having own 'patch'
- √ Remote working of Property Officer
- √ Evening appointments

An example of positive practice:

The Property Officers role is greater than that of a maintenance operative. They adopt responsibility for a 'patch' of properties and act as the Association's eyes and ears on their estates. The value of the PO's regular 'on site' presence should not be underestimated and accounted for when making any cost comparison between the DLO and external contractors

Key Findings: County Palatine Ltd

Service Area: Repairs and Maintenance

Issues

Repairs completion times.
Recording of completion times is inaccurate. Computerised report systems includes Bank Holidays. Completion dates of repairs completed by external contractors entered as date invoice payment authorised.

Assessment of customer satisfaction with external contractors. Present system may not identify issues with individual contractors.

Cost effectiveness of DLO not established.

The complicated stock profile leaves the Association exposed to potentially heavy and unexpected maintenance costs.

Proposals for completing Stock Condition Survey may lead to inaccuracies.

Variation orders not adequately monitored.

Recommendations

Make necessary computer adjustments. Record actual completion dates of repairs completed by external contractors.

Supplement random analysis of 1 in 10 repairs with targeted analysis of individual contractors.

Record cost of individual works for cost comparisons.

After completion of Stock Condition Survey draw up Asset Management Policy.

Review methodology if survey to be completed internally.

Formalise authorisation of variation orders.

6.0 LETTINGS AND ALLOCATIONS

Key features of the service

Key findings

- County Palatine has a lettings policy which assesses applicants for housing in terms of need using three categories: A, B and C. The definition of categories includes some subjective terms, for example, 'severe social problems' and 'slight health and disability problems'. The policy is due for BV review in the 2002 and a review of the wording of the categories would be appropriate. Our view was that the staff are helpful and that the experience of applying for a home would be a happy one. The application form is well presented and accompanied by explanatory leaflets complete with translation boxes.
- All rehousing applicants have to complete application forms stating why and where they wish to be rehoused. If there is little chance of their being offered accommodation within 6 months their application is rejected. There is an issue here as to whether an applicant should be rejected prior to checking the information they have provided, therefore denying them a housing opportunity.
- Applicants are matched against appropriate properties, firstly by rehousing category and then by date of application. Exceptions to this must be authorised by the Housing Team Leader. Sign ups are carried out at the office except for outlying districts where they are completed at the property. File checks showed that the reason for the allocation is not always recorded.
- The sign up interview includes the use of an interactive CD Rom which is also available in Urdu translation. It explains the various responsibilities of the landlord and tenant and other issues relating to the tenancy. There is no CD Rom available at present for Assured Shorthold Tenancies (AST). AST's are used for temporary social housing tenancies (privately owned) tenancies.
- The Association has an Exclusion Policy. Reasons for exclusion are similar to that for possession such as violent behaviour to staff or residents. Where the Association cannot provide the appropriate support it also excludes those 'Incapable of Independent Living'.
- The Association uses local lettings policies in Quayside and Gin Pit Village. These policies have been developed in response to local problems and show responsiveness on the part of the Association to local

communities. During the inspection several tenants were concerned about the mixing of old and young tenants and the resultant clash of lifestyles.

- Although demand varies from area to area, County Palatine does not operate in areas of chronic low demand, Normal rehousing rules are suspended for low demand properties. The Association works closely with their main Local Authority, Wigan MBC on a number of initiatives such as the soon to open 'property shop' in Leigh and Wigan and a choice based lettings scheme.
- The Association has recently revised both their void loss target and relet target time. The void loss target has increased from 1.2% to 1.5% and their relet time revised down from 14 days to 10 days. Currently neither target is being met.

What works well?

- √ CD ROM for explaining tenancy conditions to new tenants.
- √ Local lettings policy in Quayside and Gin Pit village.

An example of positive practice:

CD ROM for explaining tenancy to new tenants. Tenants can stop and search the CD ROM at points which they are particularly interested in.

Key Findings: County Palatine Ltd Service Area: Lettings

Issues

- The criteria for assessing need contain qualitative and subjective terms which need revision.
- Difficult to detect an audit trail in the allocation process. In some instances applicants points totals could not be identified.
- Applicants are rejected for housing on the basis of unverified information. Some applicants might be reluctant or unable to write down personal/confidential information and therefore lose opportunities for housing.

Recommendations

- Best Value review of lettings should include the assessment criteria.
- Introduce an allocations audit trail system in order to demonstrate that allocations are being made in accordance with published procedures.
- Review lettings procedures in consultation with tenants to deal with issues around the disclosure of sensitive information.

5.3 ANTI SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Key features of the service

- Levels of neighbour nuisance and harassment are not high in the areas the Association works. Where there have been problems the Association's intervention has usually been able to either resolve the situation or take alternative action such as erecting railings. Consequently the Association is not considering introducing starter tenancies.
- The Association has both a Neighbour Nuisance and Harassment policy. The Harassment Policy is under review following Race and Housing Challenge Report and we did not have sight of it. The Neighbour Nuisance policy was recently subject to a BV review. The policy is detailed and gives clear direction for staff when tackling the problem.
- Nuisance is reported regularly to the Board, mainly in numerical terms with a short narrative on more serious cases.
- Neighbour nuisance complaints are entered onto a monitoring system similar to that used for complaints. The system has been in place since May and incorporates all stages of the Neighbour Nuisance procedure. Again similar to the complaints system it has built in alarms to remind officers when service deadlines are approaching. The Housing Officers commented that they had been well trained and felt that Management supported them when dealing with this difficult problem. Sadly all Housing Officers commented that dealing with neighbour nuisance is a growing part of their workload.
- The Association holds meetings with other Housing Associations operating in their areas to swap ideas concerning nuisance neighbours and harassment.
- During the Tenant Focus Group at least two tenants complained about drug dealers living in their neighbourhood. When asked if they had reported the problem to the Association, neither had as they preferred to ignore the problem rather than risk any retaliation which may follow from a complaint. It is possible that such fears are also deterring other tenants from complaining and the Association may wish to allay their fears in a newsletter devoted to neighbour nuisance. As part of the Crime and Disorder strategy the Association works with the Police and Wigan Local Authority, they may wish to extend this to other Local Authorities where they experience problems with anti social behaviour.
- The majority of the tenants we spoke to felt that County Palatine did as much as they could to combat the problem, although there was concern

expressed from several tenants about frequent changes in their Housing Officers not helping matters.

- The Association works with a number of other agencies such as Police, Environmental Health, Panda (Mediation service in Preston) and Social Services to combat nuisance.

What works well?

- √ Computerised neighbour nuisance monitoring
- √ Comprehensive neighbour nuisance policy and procedure

An example of positive practice:

Use of computerised monitoring to check progress on individual cases.

5.4 TENANT PARTICIPATION

- The Association's Tenant Participation (TP) strategy is currently subject to a BV review. A draft strategy, due to be introduced during 2001/2, was available for the inspection. During a recent restructuring the Association's dedicated Tenant Participation officer's position was dissolved and responsibility for TP passed to Housing Officers, Sheltered Scheme Manager and Housing Management Team Leader. The move appears to have been welcomed by staff.
- The Association has a variety of resident groups, some of which are more organised than others. The Association sees Tenant Participation in a broad light and supports several community groups such as youth groups and sits on Whelley and Ince Community Risk Management Group.
- Tenant Participation activity is reported to the Board at each meeting. The reporting simply details how many groups are set up and this is measured against a target of 12. A target such as this could be misleading. It does not explain what is meant by a 'group' nor should the establishment of a group be seen as a good indicator of tenant involvement.
- There is no specific budget for TP but there are budgets for Housing Plus activities and tenant training. Access to them is devolved to Housing Officers.
- The Association considers that the nature and style of tenant consultation it has introduced should make it easy for all tenants to become involved. Tenants whose involvement is restricted to responding to either a postal or telephone survey have their views equally considered alongside tenants who are in a position to become more involved. The Association has a Tenants Panel picked by the Association to be broadly representative of CP LTD. Tenants. The Panel members are regularly canvassed for their opinion on changes to policy and procedures.
- Changes were made to the complaints and compensation policy following tenant's comments. With the Association developing even further a field this approach needs to be strengthened and they may wish to use methods such as emailing and text messaging.
- Training is given to Tenants to set up their own groups and in other subjects which maybe of help to them, such as CV composition.
- Two Tenant Board Members sit on the full board. They are given induction training from the Chair and the Chief Executive and can nominate themselves for courses included in the Boards training programme. Adverts are placed in the newsletter for Tenant Board Members and they

are usually elected un-opposed. Whilst the increased use of IT is normally considered in a positive light a number of comments were made to us during the inspection that not everyone has access to, or is competent in, the use of a PC. For the meantime at least the Association should continue providing electronic and paper documentation in parallel.

- The role of Tenant Board members has not been clearly defined; as a result their impact on the Associations' activities has not been as great as it could have been. How Tenant Board Members link with the concerns of other tenants is also unclear.
- Tenants are involved in the BV review groups, but predictably the tenants who are willing to become involved in this way are few and do not represent a cross section of all tenants in terms of age, sex or ethnicity. If this issue was addressed we feel that the reviews would be made even more effective, particularly in terms of challenging existing service provision. It should be noted that the Association are aware of the unrepresentative nature of their BV review groups. They try to address this by further disusing changes with the more representative Customer Panel and drawing on other research sources such as STATUS surveys.

What works well?

- **Tenants Panel**
- **Comprehensive tenants survey**

Key Findings: insert number
Area: insert heading

Service

Issues

Recommendations

- The role of tenant Board members has not been clearly defined; as a result their impact on the Associations' activities has been limited.
- Next years Board recruitment process should seek to provide better information with respect to the role and responsibilities of Tenant Board Members

6.0 Customer Services

- The reception area is staffed by four full-time customer care personnel plus one trainee. There is a wide ranging display of leaflets covering all issues relevant to applicants and tenants. It is welcoming with toys for children and easy access for the disabled. The front office is fairly busy dealing with approximately 60 telephone calls and between 50-60 personal callers a day. Our experience during observation was that telephone and personal callers are dealt with promptly. All customer care staff are well trained in the Association's policies and procedures but are able to refer callers on if they are unable to help them. A BT call monitoring system is in place identifying the busiest times, the number of calls answered and the number missed. The information is used to make sure sufficient staff are available when the office is likely to be busy.
- A customer satisfaction survey completed around 2000 found 80% of tenants to be fairly or very satisfied and only about 6% dissatisfied. During the inspection we found similar levels of satisfaction.
- Each customer care staff member is paired with a Housing Officer (HO). When the HO is not available they can take the call and update their HO at the earliest possible opportunity. This arrangement is rotated in order to give all customer care staff the experience of working with all HO's and observe their differing workloads.
- As part of a mystery caller exercise we received an information pack on stock availability and location the day after it was requested.
- During the inspection we encountered one tenant who had difficulties with reading and writing. The Association was not aware of this and had no means of drawing this to the staffs attention when dealing with the tenant. The Association needs to have some means of recognizing vulnerable tenants.
- The Association produces ten newsletters a year with tenants being encouraged to contribute. The style of the publication is 'chatty' with a mixture of local news, general advice and CPHA developments. As with the newsletter, all tenants are given a copy of the Association's annual report. Like the newsletter it appears in only 2 colours and is less 'polished' than other HA's. Following research with tenants the Association made a decision to produce more frequent lower cost newsletters rather than less frequent higher cost ones. The recent STATUS survey confirmed the popularity of this decision. Nevertheless some statistical information in the annual report was very difficult to read and overall its style was much drier than the newsletters. A more detailed copy of the

annual report is available free on a CD ROM. Take up of the report in this format has been limited. Unlike many of the Associations other publications the annual report is not available in any ethnic minority languages nor converted to Braille or tape.

- Generally speaking the standard of publicity material produced is considered to be good with most leaflets easy to understand and attractive in appearance. The Association has a strong brand image with all publicity material in corporate colours and prominently featuring the Association's logo. Standard letters were generally clear and easy to understand. However there was a complaint from a leaseholder that the quarterly service charge statements were less clear than other communications and the Association may wish to investigate this further. We understand the Association has taken steps to address this.
- The Association provides all tenants with a copy of the Complaints Policy and Procedure in their sign up pack. The policy statement defines what the Association considers to be a complaint, how it will respond and the timescales for doing so. The tenants we spoke to were generally aware of the policy and procedure. All complaints are taken seriously by the Association. The Complaints Procedure is available to anyone requesting or receiving a service from the Association or any person acting on their behalf. The complaints policy is available in other languages, on cassette or in Braille if requested. Verbal complaints are accepted and there is a standard form for staff to complete for monitoring purposes.
- All complaints are entered onto the recently introduced computerised complaints monitoring system. The system allows managers to monitor the progress of complaints and built in triggers warn them when service deadlines are approaching. Monthly reports are made to the Board about the number of complaints received. The Board can ask for further details on individual complaints but it maybe more informative to give classifications of complaints or details of any trends.
- Complaints are used as a driver for continuous improvement and we came across two examples where complaints led directly to changes in policy and procedure.

What works well ?

- Friendly helpful staff
- Computerised complaints monitoring
- Computerised telephone monitoring

7.0 Services to Black and Minority Ethnic and Diverse Communities:

- According to 1991 census data, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities accounted for approximately 0.6% of the population of the Wigan Local Authority area. Lettings made to BME households by CP LTD. have generally been representative of the BME population in their locale. The regional average, taken across all housing associations working within this geographic area is much higher at 12.3%. This compares with CP LTD. figure of 1.6%.
- In response to a Housing Corporation requirement the Association's BME strategy was launched in March 2000. The strategy was largely produced by the Chief Executive (CE) after consultation with Local Authorities, Senior Management Team and a local Ethnic Elders Group. The strategy was informed by the CE's involvement with the Federation of Black Housing Organisations and was also discussed with Sajjad Hussein (CE of AKSA who is on the CP LTD. Board). The strategy is subject to annual review and is due to be reviewed in March 2002.
- The Association acknowledges that the strategy lacks clear indications of responsibilities and milestones for monitoring and reporting. This will be addressed in the review. Responsibility for recruiting Board members are given to the 'Search Committee', a sub-committee set up for this purpose.
- Vacancies are advertised through COFEM and also in the Manchester Evening News and Lancashire Post. Although the strategy refers to the use of a number of agencies and groups for advertising vacancies this has yet to happen. The BME strategy is referred to in the Business Plan but only when working in Preston in partnership with Ashiana. The BME population in Preston is higher than Wigan at 6.2% of the total population. When reviewing services any links with BME issues are considered, for example the Development Strategy and Housing Plus Strategy. A good example of this is the Association's work in the Preston Renewal Areas on Intermediate Labour Markets where Asian households make up 10% of the local population.
- The Association has set itself a recruitment target of 10% of applicants and 2% of appointments to be from a BME background. It was not clear where these targets had come from. The Association currently has no BME employees. Applications have been received from the BME community but it was hard to tell from the monitoring whether the 10% target was met - this could be improved. It would be useful to look at exit interviews for BME staff to see what their reasons for leaving are.

- A number of relatively junior staff have specific responsibility for dealing with BME issues, for example HO's are expected to ensure that the needs and aspirations of any particular section of the BME community are satisfied. This is a complex area of work and too onerous for HO's alone. In addition their tasks in relation to BME issues should be refined to make them more measurable and monitorable. Furthermore the strategy should spell out who is accountable for other BME issues from the Board and CE down.
- The strategy requires an annual community audit of the development programme with BME community groups. In practice this involves scheme by scheme audits which are not the same thing as an audit of the whole development programme. The Association will need to look at ways to ensure that their development strategy truly reflects the BME aspect.

Key Findings: County Palatine Ltd
Service Area: Services to Black and Minority Ethnic and Diverse Communities

Issue	Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Association’s strategy lacks clear indications of responsibility and also milestones for monitoring and reporting. • The responsibilities of the Housing Officers are too onerous and not really achievable. They should be redefined to make them measurable and modifiable. • The strategy requires an annual community audit of the development programme with BME community groups. • Monitoring of recruitment should be improved, especially to show applicants against targets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish regular race equality audits as part of the business planning process and service reviews. • Redefine role of Housing Officers in relation to B & ME. Investigate means of measuring and monitoring work. • The Association will need to look at ways to ensure that their development strategy truly reflects the BME aspect. • Improve monitoring of applicants against targets.

Appendices

The Inspection Team:

Dawson Noone	Lead Officer
John Cox	Inspection Manager
Lee Banfield	Inspector
Rob Palin	Inspection officer
SusanCheini	Tenant Inspector.

The Housing Corporation is introducing Tenant Inspectors to the Inspection service and this was Susan's first inspection. Susan is a tenant of Arawak Walton Housing Association.

The Inspection process:

Several methods were used to investigate each service area:

- Analysis of written policies, procedures and statistical data;
- Door step interviews with tenants recently rehoused;
- Door step interviews with tenants who recently had a repair completed;
- Interviews with the Senior Management Team;
- Staff Focus Group;
- One to one interviews with members of staff;
- Focus Group of tenants chosen at random;
- Interviews with Tenant Board Members;
- Void Inspections;
- Observation of the reception team;
- 'Mystery shopping';
- Interview with Wigan Local Authority.

