

Committee: Community and Housing

Agenda Item

Date: 9 September 2010

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Title: Audit Commission Strategic Housing Services Re-Inspection

**Author: Roz Millership, Head of Housing Services
(01799 510516)**

Item for decision

Summary

The Audit Commission Housing Inspectorate undertook a re-inspection of the Council's Community Housing Service in May 2010. This report provides the Committee with the outcome of the re-inspection.

Recommendations

1. The contents of the Audit Commission's re-inspection report on the Community Housing inspection undertaken in May 2010 be noted
2. Officers prepare an action plan to respond to recommendations made by the Audit Commission within their report
3. Details of the action plan be reported back to the next Community and Housing Committee meeting

Financial Implications

4. Financial implications will fall under the following broad categories:

Category	Indicative content of Financial Implications Section
No costs* associated with the recommendation	At this time there are no cost implications for the Council however there may be resource implications involved in implementing individual actions recommended in the report

*"Costs" means anything that affects the budget and could include changes that affect income levels.

Background Papers

5. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.
 - Audit Commission Final Report - the full report can be found, from 3 September, on the audit commission website www.auditcommission.gov.uk

- The Council's Self Assessment Form

Impact

6.

Communication/Consultation	Details of the inspection will be put on the Council's website and Housing News
Community Safety	n/a
Equalities	n/a
Health and Safety	n/a
Human Rights/Legal Implications	n/a
Sustainability	n/a
Ward-specific impacts	Covers the whole Uttlesford District
Workforce/Workplace	n/a

Situation

7. The Audit Commission undertook an inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing Service in January 2008. At the time the service was judged to be fair with no prospects for improvement. Following the inspection members approved an action plan which has been used as the means of monitoring progress towards implementing the recommendations made by inspectors. Progressing the action plan has been a priority since the last inspection and work towards implementing the recommendations made by the Housing Inspectorate has been ongoing.
8. The re-inspection of the service took place in May 2010 and inspectors have now assessed the service as fair with promising prospects for improvement.
9. The re-inspection report highlights a number of particular strengths within the service including member, officer and partner support to drive forward the delivery of strategic housing services. Credit is given to the improvements made in the access to the housing options team and the improved focus on homeless prevention which has reduced the number of people becoming homeless and being placed in temporary accommodation. The Council is also praised for continuing to enable a sustained level of new affordable homes on rural and urban sites even during the recession.

10. Some areas were identified where inspectors did not feel that significant improvement had been made since the last inspection. These include the Council's approach to value for money, diversity and private sector housing. Whilst it acknowledges some work has started to develop in these areas it emphasises that there is more to do.
11. With regard to prospects for improvement the report acknowledges that the council has significantly improved its financial position and delivered improvements that customers have noticed and benefitted from. The report highlights that there is now clear leadership in place and the Council is open to learning from others and external challenge. With further improvements identified in corporate improvement planning and performance management the Council is now judged to have promising prospects for improvement.
12. More detailed information regarding the strengths and weaknesses identified within the Service can be found in the Summary feedback of the Inspector's report.
13. The recommendations in the re-inspection report will shape a new action plan that will be presented to members at the next committee meeting.

SMB comments

14. SMB has worked closely with the housing service in relation to this inspection.
15. Bearing in mind the cost of the inspection to the Council (both in terms of finance and manpower), it is difficult to see where the report provides 'value for money'. There are no real surprises, in the sense that the Council was already aware both at the service level and corporately that there is still work to do, and our corporate plan underlines the intended approach.
16. It is particularly disappointing that, throughout the inspection process, there seemed to be a failure by the inspection team to be able to put the situation in Uttlesford into context. Instead, the team seemed to rely on a rather dogmatic approach and even appeared to arrive on site with pre conceived ideas about the standard of service, and proceeded to seek out evidence to confirm those views.
17. Even so, it is particularly pleasing to note that the report does acknowledge improvements made over the past two years, as shown in the table below:

Section of report	2008 conclusion	2010 conclusion
Access and customer care	Weaknesses outweighed strengths	A balance of strengths and weaknesses
Diversity	Weaknesses outweighed strengths	Weaknesses outweigh strengths, but clear signs of positive

		progress
Strategic approach to housing	A balance of strengths and weaknesses	A balance of strengths and weaknesses, but with signs of positive progress
Making best use of existing housing	A balance of strengths and weaknesses	A balance of strengths and weaknesses, but clear signs of positive progress, particularly in the approach to homelessness
Provision of more housing to meet needs	Strengths outweighed weaknesses	An area of strength
Delivering value for money	An area of weakness	Weaknesses outweigh strengths, and recognition of positive progress
Track record in delivering improvements	Weaknesses outweighed strengths	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
Managing performance	Weaknesses outweighed strengths	A balance of strengths and weaknesses, but with signs of positive progress
Capacity to improve	A balance of strengths and weaknesses	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses

18. SMB feels that staff should be congratulated on the progress made in the delivery of this sensitive and important service.

Risk Analysis

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Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Work to address recommendations identified by the Audit Commission does not progress	1 unlikely	2 Failure by the Council to address the recommendations set out in the audit commission report would	Work with members and tenants to address recommendations identified in the audit commission report

		mean that service does not continue to improve	
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1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.

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