

## STRENGTHENING THE HOUSING SERVICE

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER:** Deputy Leader Councillor George Clements

**LEAD OFFICER:** Fergus McMorrow, Director of Development

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Fergus McMorrow, Director of Development

### Summary and Recommendation:

The report formally notifies the Council of the Audit Commission Inspection report into the Council's Strategic Approach to Housing.

It is recommended that:

1. Executive notes the findings of the Audit Commission.
2. Executive agrees the Action Plan prepared to address the issues raised by the Inspection report and agrees the process for monitoring of the Action plan.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In January of this year the Audit Commission carried out a scheduled inspection of the Council's housing service. A copy of their findings is attached as `Appendix A`. Their report was published on April 24<sup>th</sup>.
- 1.2 The report makes uncomfortable reading in that it is the worst service rating and the worst prospects for improvement. The summary of the reasons why this rating was awarded is clear from pages 6 and 7 of the report. These pages also make clear the positive efforts of front line staff in a service framework that was ineffective. In essence the Council has given this service area insufficient priority and resources since the transfer of the Council's housing stock to Copeland Homes in 2004. A lot of the housing service capacity went with the transfer and it was not replaced to sufficient levels in the restructure that took place in 2004/05. Difficulties in recruitment and staff illness have exacerbated the situation.
- 1.3 In the light of this poor report the Audit Commission will formally reinspect the service in the autumn of 2009. It has been agreed with them in

principle that they will carry out a `health check` on the Council's progress towards improvement at the end of 2008. The Council has accepted the findings of the report. It now clearly needs to move forward in a positive fashion to address the issues raised by the Inspectorate.

## **2. MOVING FORWARD FROM THE INSPECTION**

2.1 The Council has already acknowledged the lack of staffing and other resources in this service area and has enhanced the services' budget by £250k. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, the Personnel Panel agreed a report which strengthens the management and front-line staffing of the housing team. A plan to effect the necessary recruitment and other changes is now in hand. Bringing the team up to its full new strength will be crucial in achieving the improvements required.

2.2 A detailed Action Plan has also been prepared to make an immediate start on enhancements to the service. A copy of the plan is attached as `Appendix B`. It should be noted that a number of the actions require corporate support from other sections within the Council and Service heads have already committed to this. This Plan is intended to kick-start the improvements needed and meet the challenges posed by the Inspection Report to achieve specific steps forward in the first 6 months. As issues develop it will be necessary to review and revise this Plan and to extend it to a longer timeframe prior to the reinspection. Members are thus recommended to consider this Plan and agree it as the immediate way forward.

2.3 Executive also needs to consider the way in which Members can be involved in monitoring this Plan and ensuring that progress is being made (see recommendations on Page 9 of the report). Members will also need to be involved in due course in the Strategy Reviews (e.g. Homeless Strategy or Private Sector Housing Policy) outlined in the Plan.

## **3. FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOURCES OF FINANCE)**

3.1 A provision of £250,000 has been incorporated in the budget requirement for 2008/09 onwards subject to approval of this amount being allocated for housing services staff.

## **4. IMPACT ON CORPORATE PLAN**

4.1 Housing services are a key contributor to a range of corporate plan objectives;

- We will ensure that substantially all the stock of social rented sector properties will be in a decent condition by 2010.
- We will ensure that 70% of private sector dwellings occupied by vulnerable people will be classed as decent by 2010.
- We will have a balance of housing stock by type and tenure.
- There will be a reduction in homelessness.
- We will increase the supporting people funded services in Copeland

**List of Background Documents:**

**None**

**Appendix A – Strategic Approach to Housing**

**Appendix B - Action Plan**

**List of Consultees:** Chief Executive, Head of Finance and Business Development, Head of Legal Services, Interim Head of Regeneration, Interim Housing Services Manager

**CHECKLIST FOR DEALING WITH KEY ISSUES**

Please confirm against the issue if the key issues below have been addressed. This can be by either a short narrative or quoting the paragraph number in the report in which it has been covered.

Impact on Crime and Disorder	None directly
Impact on Sustainability	Will have an impact through the development of balanced housing markets
Impact on Rural Proofing	None directly
Health and Safety Implications	Will impact on health and safety through the responsibilities of staff and management.
Impact on Equality and Diversity Issues	Impacts through the Councils role in ensuring housing opportunities for all
Children and Young Persons Implications	Impacts in relation to young peoples housing opportunities especially young homeless
Human Rights Act Implications	Possible implications through rights to housing
Monitoring Officer comments	The report and draft Action Plan covers all relevant issues
S. 151 Officer comments	See 3.1

Is this a Key Decision?      No