

Feedback from Audit Commission Strategic Housing Consultancy

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Councillor Clements
LEAD OFFICER: Fergus Mc Morrow
REPORT AUTHOR: Laurie Priebe

Summary and Recommendation:

Attached as Appendix 1 is the feedback from the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate following their three days consultancy in January 2009. This report describes your officers' conclusions on the way forward.

Members are requested to note the report and their comments are invited.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In August 2009 it was agreed with the Lead Housing Inspector for the North West Region that the Audit Commission would provide three days consultancy to informally advise the Council on our progress towards improving the strategic housing service.
- 1.2 The consultancy occurred during the week ending 30 January 2009, comprising a desk top analysis of 22 evidential documents that we submitted plus one full day of interviewing managers and customer-facing staff. This was followed by a feedback session involving staff, service managers, corporate managers, the Leader of the Council and the Chairman of the Strategic Housing Panel.
- 1.3 Although the feedback attached as Appendix 1 is printed it is informal, will not be published by the Audit Commission and does not count towards the assessment of the service when we are re-inspected in October 2009.

2 Conclusions

- 2.1 Overall, the Inspector identified 52 current strengths (excluding those that are planned but not yet completed) and 38 weaknesses. At its simplest, strengths outnumber weaknesses by a ratio of 6:4, but this is an unweighted score.
- 2.2 The experience of our service users is the most important test and one of the key indicators here is the time taken to approve Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) from the date of first referral. The following table shows progress.

Disabled Facilities Grants: Average time to approve grants from referral date.

Quarter 1 2008/09	33 weeks
Quarter 2	19 weeks
Quarter 3	19 weeks
Quarter 4	16 weeks

2.3 The Copeland average for 2008/09 to date is 22.68 weeks against a Local Area Agreement Target for Cumbria of 28 weeks. Our progressive improvement in the second half of 2008/09 shows the value of recruiting and training a new team.

2.4 Most significant of all is that the number of Disabled Facilities Grants approved in 2008/09 more than doubled from the number in 2007/08, as shown below.

Number of Disabled Facilities Grant Approvals

Year	DFGs Approved
2007/08	33
2008/09	70
Rate of Increase	112%

2.5 Another key indicator, also reflecting service users' experience, is homelessness prevention. The Inspectors' report of 2008 was very critical of its absence but the current feedback recognizes that preventative initiatives are in place. These have now begun to produce results, with 95 instances of prevention being recorded in the quarter ending 31 December 2008. The following table indicates a reducing trend in homelessness that could not be prevented and where a full housing duty was accepted.

Acceptances of a full homelessness duty

Quarterly Reporting	2007/08	2008/09
Qtr 1	24	23
Qtr 2	27	11
Qtr 3	24	9

2.6 It would be hazardous to draw longer lasting conclusions from the above table, given the current economic position and its effect on housing

and employment markets. However, by the end of 2008 we achieved the Government target of halving by 2010 the number of households resident in temporary homelessness accommodation from the baseline date of 31 December 2004. On the base date we had 12 households resident. In 2009 to date it has been 6 or fewer.

2.7 Despite the numeric superiority of strengths over weaknesses, the latter are serious and your officers accept the critical findings of the Inspectors in full.

3 Way Forward

3.1 It is pleasing that the Audit Commission's feedback places our improvement at approximately the same stage as the Portfolio Holder's report to the January 2009 meeting of the Council. However, taking both documents into account we must make a step-change in service delivery now that we are barely 6 months from re-inspection in October 2009.

3.2 Officers will address all 38 identified weaknesses, beginning with renaming the Strategic Housing Action Plan to Improvement Plan, explicitly linking the recommendations to the inspection report and adopting SMART targets throughout (specific, measured, agreed, realistic and timed). The format of the plan will also be revised to separate tasks which have been delivered from those still in progress.

3.3 For the more complex tasks involving partnerships, consultation and Council approval before implementation, we shall produce project plans showing targets for the various stages (often called Gant Charts). These will be especially important for projects such as the proposed Cumbria Choice Based Lettings Scheme which is expected to go live in 2010, six months after our re-inspection. It can also apply to the emerging Fuel Poverty Strategy and to a proposed Affordable Housing Development Programme. If the Inspectors see a project plan they will more easily be able to assess our prospects for improvement.

3.4 The new Strategic Housing Services Improvement Plan will be presented to the next meeting of the Strategic Housing Panel.

4 FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOURCES OF FINANCE).

4.1 The cost of the Audit Commission's consultancy falls within the remit of our annual audit and inspection fee and so there are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

5. IMPACT ON CORPORATE PLAN

5.1 This report and recommendations are in accordance with the Council's action plan following the Audit Commission's inspection report.

List of Appendices – Appendix 1: Feedback to Copeland

Is this a Key Decision? No



January 2009

Copeland Borough Council 30th APPENDIX 1

Audit Commission review of progress against 2008 Strategic Approach to Housing inspection recommendations

Strengths	Weaknesses
Action plan	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All recommendations (and bullets to meet recommendations) from the inspection report are included and are itemised on the action plan • CBC has itemised additional actions it considers need to be carried out to deliver a recommendation. For example for 'develop borough-specific plans to implement sub-regional strategies and meet local need' 5 action points relating to different strategies requiring development have been set • A strategic housing panel (comprising of elected members) oversees the housing improvement programme (inspection action plan) monthly and makes recommendations to the Executive regarding service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title unclear - does not specify is responding to inspection recommendations • Targets to complete recommendations have not been converted into specific dates, remaining for example at '6 months' as per the report. This may prevent the deadline being understood • Targets of 3 to 6 months were set to deliver recommendations, and therefore should have been completed since it is a year since the last inspection. In most cases these are not met. It would appear that the targets set are longer than that specified so many actions are on schedule for the action plan but not the inspection report. (However considering the staff changes this is realistic) • Targets are also unclear because 'complete by' does not mean implementation, e.g. if consultation and/or Council

	<p>approval is required. Suggest have several targets for the various stages when this applies, and these should be reflected in any project plans e.g. gant charts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CBC assesses progress with actions identified to deliver recommendations, but it does not assess whether the recommendation overall has been delivered or outcomes. It is difficult to assess whether recommendations or individual actions contributing to their delivery have been signed off. There is no coding to reflect this.• New objectives to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of work completed (including outcomes) e.g. R1. 2a task group and 2d Supporting People and PCT, 3a strategic housing panel are not set. The Audit Commission has attempted to assess whether actions have been delivered based on the information provided in the status column.• When updating an action and referring to another action as the answer, this is not always referenced e.g. says 'as above'. See R1. 3a private sector strategy• Some actions contain several actions, making them difficult to sign off as completed if any are outstanding. See R1. 3B private sector enforcement.• Not always clear what is taking place to deliver actions e.g. R1. 5c and 5d 'work underway', or if the target is imminent (Jan 09) whether are on schedule to meet.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is unclear whether systems to manage complaints have been established (R3. 3a and b)• Deadlines are not revised if missed to set new expectations on what should be delivered e.g. R4 2.a.• Managers meet to discuss the action plan, but this is informal and does not always fit in with monthly reporting cycle to strategic housing panel• Report to portfolio holders is useful for explaining outcomes delivered from action plan, but crucially does not explain if recommendations have been completed
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Strengths	Weaknesses
Staffing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff resources promptly increased following last inspection. • Managers have clear accountability to respond to recommendations and lead on specific strategic housing functions. • Have recruited for posts previously had difficulty filling, including through setting higher salaries: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ technical officers - is having an impact by providing more responsive services and dealing with backlog of grant requests ○ housing research and policy - leading on updating housing needs data ○ strengthened homelessness service - capacity to deliver more housing advice, including homelessness prevention initiatives • Resources also allocated for 2009/10 to enable the commissioning of consultants as required to meet deadlines and fill skills gaps • Staff/managers seem clear about what needs to be done and in what order – challenging due to limited amount of time available since recruited and reinspection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible gap for leading on affordable housing

Strengths	Weaknesses
Cross cutting areas	
	<p>Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service standards still undeveloped - awayday as a housing team using a consultant, but further work needed to agree, and no plans to consult customers • Arrangements to record, respond to and monitor customer complaints are under review, but changes will not go live until April 2009. The inspector has not seen the new procedure to enable an assessment of whether the recommendation in the previous inspection relating to complaints will be met. (Currently complaints logged by receiving staff and passed to manager – cannot see any central monitoring) <p>Diversity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No equality impact assessments being carried out, staff not trained to complete and no programme of retrospective assessments planned • Unclear whether Language Line is in place – arrangements that are known require referrals to another part of the Council and translation through other agencies takes time to arrange, sometimes several days • Still not done anything to understand the needs of migrant workers <p>Value for money</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No benchmarking but have recently joined HouseMark for homelessness module

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strategic Approach to Housing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As per previous inspection there is the Cumbrian Housing Strategy 2006/2011 which all districts are signed up to and is assessed as 'fit for purpose' in 2006 • Working with neighbouring councils to update the strategic housing market assessment • Countywide housing needs strategy due 2010 • Key: CBC has allocated funding to update housing needs before this in 2009, because it recognises this is a priority • Working with countywide partners for housing needs, and strategic housing market assessments, Supporting People, and housing officers group - shares best practice and agrees common working practices • Understanding the needs of vulnerable people - Commissioning Plan for older people services (July 08), supported housing for young people (joint venture - floating support to look at education and sustaining tenancies). • Housing needs surveys now taking place in rural areas through Cumbrian rural housing trust which CBC is one of the funders and CBC is beginning to work with parishes to discuss results • CBC actively involved in the project to introduce a sub-regional choice based lettings scheme by Spring 2010: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ CLG funding secured ○ recruiting for project manager ○ in the process of agreeing common housing policy with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key: CBC still does not have a plan setting out how it will implement the Cumbrian Housing Strategy locally (deadline Feb 09 is an extension and plans to consult on the plan may make the deadline unrealistic) • Key: No project plan setting out how and when it will agree the above, and who/what this will involve • There has been no consultation on the Cumbrian Housing Strategy at Copeland • Housing needs surveys for parishes yet to feed into plans since plans still to be agreed (in response to Cumbria Housing Strategy)

<p>partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ involves councils and housing associations	
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Strengths	Weaknesses
Homelessness and housing advice	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention initiatives now in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ family intervention for young people who are potentially homeless ○ can refer to an organisation that will provide rent deposits ○ now have formal referral arrangements with CAB to advice on a range of issues ○ supported accommodation available for offenders and young people ○ is a panel to award discretionary housing payments ○ homelessness prevention fund of £35K can fund mediation, assist tenants to comply with tenancy conditions (e.g. maintain property) and offer a months rent in advance to support the rent deposit scheme • Other prevention initiatives planned: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ formal arrangements with welfare benefits to fast track HB claims of homeless or potential homeless • Key: Have met target to reduce temp accommodation to 6 units from 12 units (achieving 5) • Furniture is available through charities for homeless people/families moving into accommodation • CBC is putting systems in place to formalise referrals to other agencies and to monitor housing advice it is delivering and the impact of this, this is informed by a clearer definition of what constitutes prevention (also see weakness) • Bed and breakfast has reduced and CBC is now regularly only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBC accepts it is still not monitoring the impact of housing advice yet even though identified as a weakness in the last inspection (also see strength) • There is no sanctuary scheme for women subjected to domestic violence wishing to remain at home (in homelessness strategy action plan to consider), there is floating support available, but this seems generic rather than specifically for domestic violence • The main bed and breakfast used is not DDA compliant • New leaflets for homelessness and housing advice service but not consulted on with service users • Action plan for delivery of homelessness strategy is not being monitored beyond immediate manager • No landlord accreditation scheme

<p>using one provider within the borough, which CBC has inspected (only used 5 times in the last 3 months)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Now meeting monthly with housing associations and plans to agree early warning systems to make referrals for housing advice (potentially homeless) are out to consultation; are also agreeing performance management indicators.	
<p>Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Things planned but not in place:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Service user exit survey Feb 2009○ Rolling out service to boroughs (surgeries not just Whitehaven)○ Obtaining credit card so can use a bed and breakfast which is DDA compliant	

Strengths	Weaknesses
Private sector housing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing renewal policy has been revised (this has not been given to inspectors, so CBC will need to check now includes HHSRS) • Publicity on housing renewal confirms restriction found in last inspection of three year residency rule has been removed, and first time buyers are also able to access a home renewal grant where property was vacant for 6 months • Are identifying empty properties e.g. through council tax records, newspaper adverts • Have range of procedures now in place as guidance for service delivery and new staff, ensuring consistency • Key: DFG completions (referral to approval) stretch target in Local Area Agreement, to reduce from 44 weeks to 28 - CBC is meeting this with performance improving at 19 weeks (outcome of technical officer posts and streamlining processes such as OT referrals) • DFG - Had a backlog of 70 properties, and are inspecting now, about 20 left. Clear end of Feb. • Are starting to raise awareness of DFG e.g. disability forum • All staff trained on HHSRS • Have a register of unfit properties (identified through reports from: private tenants, homelessness team, CAB and others) • Are visiting unfit properties promptly and taking action <u>(confirm if you have issued any</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key: No publicity on DFGs to raise awareness amongst residents of service • Landlords' forum still not underway (first meeting next month) • Key: Renovation grant publicity limited to website • Still nothing on equity release option • No customer satisfaction results for DFG and renovation grants service yet

<p><u>notices to complete works and if so what timescales have been set)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interest free loans are available - owner occupiers qualifying for part grant and part interest free loan• Have continued to canvass partners to identify HMOs but with little success (seems not to be an issue in the area), the two identified have been licensed• HECA report was completed on time for submission• Satisfaction surveys - DFG and renovation grants now in place	
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Strengths	Weaknesses
Affordable housing	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordable housing under construction - 10 units, plus several schemes being supported for funding (housing association for rent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key: No guidelines on affordable housing such as Local development framework and this is not in any other plans for the department Key: No plans to deliver affordable housing target e.g. section 106 agreements Staff resources for leading in this area are less defined

Housing Inspector – Elaine Sams