

## AUDIT COMMISSION RE-INSPECTION OF STRATEGIC HOUSING

**LEAD OFFICER:** Fergus McMorrow, Corporate Director (Development)

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Julie Betteridge, Head of Development Strategy

**Summary:** To present the Audit Commission's findings from the Strategic Housing Re-Inspection and the Council's action plan in response to the recommendations.

**Recommendation:** That Members consider the findings of the Audit Commission report and note the Council's action plan and continued SMART planning to deliver improvements.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The re-inspection was carried out by the Housing Inspectorate of the Audit Commission using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles, that is,

- Is proportionate to risk and performance of the council;
- Judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- Promotes further improvements in the service; and
- Has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

1.2 The service was assessed against the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) for assessing performance of the Strategic Housing service. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site.

1.3 This re-inspection took place in October 2009 with the final report dated March 2010. The service was previously inspected in early 2008, just eighteen months earlier. The re-inspection focused on the recommendations for improvement. No service users / residents and only one council member, the portfolio holder, were interviewed at re-inspection.

## 2.0 KEY FINDINGS

2.1 The Executive Summary from the Report extracts the key messages and recommendations:-

### Findings

- 2.1.1 The Strategic Housing Service at Copeland Borough Council is providing a service rated as "poor" with "poor" prospects for improvement. The service was assessed as having some clear areas of strength, set out in 2.1.2 but rated overall "poor" because it has "a range of weaknesses" detailed below in 2.1.3. The re-inspection when looking at the capacity of the service to improve found that strengths outweigh weaknesses, however judged overall that the service has "poor" prospects for improvements in line with their assessment that "there are a number of weaknesses which must be overcome to improve the prospects for improvement".
- 2.1.2 The service has focused on improved services to users since the first inspection and the re-inspection assessed Copeland as having improved their help to customers access the service and delivering a service that is good in some areas:
- Effective management and learning from complaints;
  - An improved range of and more widely distributed information about services;
  - Strong homeless prevention leading to positive outcomes for many service users;
  - A new home renewal policy and quicker processing times to help vulnerable people;
  - Some examples of improvements in value for money resulting in efficiency savings and improved services.
- 2.1.3 The re-inspection found 'a range of weaknesses' in our service and reported that the council has been slow to address some key areas of customer focus and equality. The report highlighted: underdeveloped customer focus and involvement, a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the needs of some diverse groups, gaps and weaknesses in our evidence base, failure to effectively target home assistance in line with the stock condition findings, ineffective approaches to deal with empty homes and a weak approach to regulating the private sector in our evidence.
- 2.1.4 The re-inspection highlighted a number of weaknesses which must be overcome to improve the prospects for improvement. Namely: lack of clarity in some plans and slow progress and a failure to effectively manage

some initiatives including diversity, value for money, customer focus and rural and diverse needs strategies and delivery plans.

- 2.1.5 The council has increased its investment in the service by £250,000 annually since the first inspection and this has provided strong capacity to improve through increasing knowledge, skills and leadership in the service. External partnership arrangements were highlighted as improving service to customers and a more integrated approach to strategic housing.

### **Recommendations**

- 2.1 The report sets out 5 recommendations, with expected benefits and suggested timescale for improvement.
- 2.2 The Audit Commission offered a smart action planning workshop to enable a range of staff from services contributing to strategic housing services to look in detail at improving the action plan. This was held on 12 May 2010 with housing associations and members of the Council's Strategic Housing Panel joining the last session of the workshop to contribute to the smart planning. This action plan is now being produced.
- 2.3 The recommendations from the re-inspection have been combined with ongoing action from the previous inspection recommendations and the Strategic Housing 2010/11 service plan priorities. The smart action plan is being completed following the workshop and will be taken to the June 2010 Strategic Housing Panel for consultation and agreement. This panel will be monitoring the action plan.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

- 3.1 The Audit Commission re-inspection found that although additional investment of resource has led to evidenced improvements to service delivery, particularly with regard to improved benefits to service users and improved partnership working, the Strategic Housing Service is "poor" with "poor" prospects of improvement.
- 3.2 The recommendations made by the Audit Commission, and Management actions being detailed in our Action Plan, to follow, will assist the Council in delivering continuous improvement.
- 3.3 The Council considered its option to appeal against this assessment, in particular the prospects for improvement judgement. A decision has been made to focus attention and resources on continuing to improve the service rather than appeal. Strategic Housing Panel commented: "The re-inspection report recognises that Copeland Borough Council have made significant progress in a number of areas but these have yet to feed into outcomes. We have confidence that ultimately the improvements made will result in improved judgements."

#### **4. RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.1 It is recommended that Members consider the findings of the Audit Commission report and note the Council's activity in working with the Audit Commission to develop a smart action plan to deliver improvements.

**List of Background Documents:** Audit Commission Strategic Housing Service Re-Inspection Report

**Officers Consulted:** Corporate Team