

Copeland Borough Council

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Roy Irwin

Director of Housing, Sustainability & Economic Development

Audit Commission

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19 August 2010

Dear Mr Irwin

Re: Copeland Strategic Housing Re-Inspection

Thank you for your reply, dated 29 June 2010, to my letter of 7 June.

Like you before me, I must apologise for the time taken to reply. In this case I chose to consult my elected colleagues and ask for my officers' comments before responding. As a consequence I would draw your attention to a serious error in your letter and another in the inspectors' report.

I would agree with your assertion that the recommendations in regard to complying with the 2004 Housing Act and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) were capable of being implemented before the re-inspection in October 2009. They were implemented with effect from April 2009, six months before the re-inspection, when our financial assistance policy for private sector housing renewal took effect. This was (and is) focused on the removal of Category 1 HHSRS hazards.

The letter you signed on 29 June 2010 strongly implies that we have not done so, which you describe as "a serious issue." That is the error in your letter. It is indeed a very serious matter for you to ignore or deny the policy that we introduced in April 2009 which, by 31 March 2010, had delivered grants and loans to help mostly economically vulnerable households remove Category 1 HHSRS hazards from their homes. In 2009/10 we spent just under £560,000 on this alone, with a further £193,000 carried forward on approved grants and loans for completion in 2010/11. 105 grants and loans were completed in 2009/10 under this policy and its predecessor. At the very least I think you should apologise for the error.

Your inspectors were well aware of the policy when they re-inspected the service in October 2009. They would not have known the capital spending outturn for that year but they should have observed the trend.

The factual error in the report is in paragraph 47, in relation to gypsies and travellers in Copeland, which refers to “a count in July 2007 recording 107 caravans on unauthorised encampments and police records showing up to 50 having been dealt with by them since 2004.” The truth is that these numbers refer to the whole of Cumbria. In later correspondence your inspector Mark Sawyer admitted this error on 19 March 2010, when he wrote the following to an officer in my housing team:

“Having looked over this issue, I can confirm that your conclusion is absolutely correct – the figure we have quoted of 107 caravans on unauthorised encampments in 2007 is from the GTAA and does indeed refer to Cumbria as a whole – not Copeland in particular.

We also note your comments that the GTAA incorrectly quoted this number as applying to unauthorised encampments when, in your view, it should refer to all caravans (in fact, it is largely those on authorised sites).

Please accept my apology that para 47 suggests that the 107 unauthorised encampments were in Copeland when, clearly, they were not.”

Mark should be credited for his apology but the inspectors ought never to have made such a careless mistake, especially since it was by then too late to correct the final report of the inspection, which still contains the error and is published on your website. While writing I would also confirm that Copeland was a member of the Cumbria joint bid for HCA Innovation Funding for Gypsy & Traveller Sites. Your inspectors knew of our intention to bid because we told them. The bid was made before the deadline of 30 April 2010 but, sadly, the HCA later withdrew the funding round.

In relation to Choice Based Lettings, and despite the scepticism in the inspection report, the Council has since become a full member of the emerging sub-regional scheme, which includes all 6 Cumbria District Councils and 8 RSLs.

Yours sincerely

Councillor George Clements

cc Michael O'Higgins, Chairman of the Audit Commission

Yvonne Davies, Head of Housing & Economic Development (North)