

Strategic Housing Panel
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Item 10



29 June 2010

Councillor George Clements
Housing Portfolio Holder,
Copeland Borough Council
The Copeland Centre, Catherine Street
Whitehaven, Cumbria
CA28 7SJ

Direct line 07909687381
Email r-irwin@audit-
commission.gov.uk

Dear Councillor

Copeland Strategic Housing Re inspection

Thank you for your letter of 7th June to Michael O'Higgins, the Chairman of Audit Commission in respect of the above. Michael has asked me to respond to you on this matter. Can I start by apologising for the delay in getting back to you.

I am sorry to hear that you are unhappy and disappointed at the re-inspection score, but I am pleased to note that you value the challenge the Audit Commission brings to service scrutiny and outcomes for the people of Copeland.

Below I address some of the specific points of concern in your letter, prior to making a suggestion which you might find helpful to move the authority forward and to build capacity.

Re-inspection within 18 months:

It is the Audit Commission's general approach to re-inspect authorities which receive a zero star judgement within 12 to 18 months. The initial inspection of Copeland was on 14th January 2008 and the re inspection was on 19th October 2009. The Commission believes this allowed time for the Council to demonstrate improved outcomes.

Many of our recommendations from the January 2008 Inspection should have been capable of being implemented in the intervening period. For example taking action to comply with the 2004 Housing act, on the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. This is a serious issue, both in terms of health and safety of residents and in terms of performing your statutory functions which have been in place since April 2006.

Of the 21 recommendations made by officers in 2008, only 4 had been fully achieved, 6 had satisfactory development and the remainder had limited or were still in development.

Concerns on Customer involvement and interviews of Councillors:

I agree that inspectors did not interview service users in the same way as would apply in landlord inspections. When the Commission completes landlord services inspections, we take a tenant or service user on site for the duration of the inspection. This adds less value when we complete strategic housing inspections as much of progress is measured on plans and outcomes of delivery of those plans. However, the team did complete focus group with your Housing Association partners, as well as local advice and third sector agencies.

In addition case files were reviewed which gave good insight into customer service and customer contact. Inspectors did also meet families in temporary accommodation as well as observing reception areas. These activities all contributed to assess how customer services were delivered.

In terms of interviewing members, the Commission agreed the inspection timetable in discussion with your officers several weeks in advance of the on site dates of the inspection. I am sorry that we did not know that members had wished to be interviewed and will ensure that they are involved in any follow up work.

The prescription of the re-inspection's recommendations:

The first recommendation made by inspectors asks the Council to develop plans to address local needs or to update systems and policies. The Commission has not been prescriptive, it is for the Council to determine the policies which will sit comfortably within the locality and which will provide improved outcomes for local people.

The inspection was against the Key Line of Enquiry on strategic housing and adheres broadly to this questioning to ensure a level playing field for all councils on inspection scoring. It also supports the "no surprises" approach. We recognise fully that each Council operates in a unique setting and this is something we set out at the beginning of our report and consider as part of our judgements. In this inspection, many of the recommendations made are not significantly impacted on by the local conditions, many relate to improving the focus on customers; better joint working between council teams and better performance management arrangements.

Prospects for Improvement:

Inspectors acknowledge in report your plans to improve as set out below:-

Para 107: signs that the rural housing agenda is beginning to develop

Para 111: The approach to risk management is not robust, but plans are in place to improve.

Para 112: evidence of improving leadership since the last inspection

Para 113: recently signed up to the voluntary COMPACT which aims to improve the quality of support to the third sector and the quality of services the third sector provides in Cumbria.

Para 115: weak basis for negotiating with developers will be addressed through the emerging Local Development Framework

Para 110 & 116: Improved performance management arrangements

Para 118: Plans for better access to services and increasing the focus on customers

Para 122: review of organisational arrangements means that the service is better placed to deliver service improvements

Para 125: service is now working more effectively with its external partners

Para 127: improving its approach to value for money

However, at the time of the inspection many of these plans were new and started from the council was starting from a low base. This, together with the absence of strong evidence of improved outcomes, was why the second judgement could not be lifted.

Increasing public standards:

The Commission sets its standards within its key line of enquiry (KLOE) and the one star standard was not met, though we were pleased to acknowledge within the report the progress which Copeland is now beginning to make. The KLOEs which we publish are a guide and not a prescription.

Since the re-inspection, the Commission has, following national consultation, published a new KLOE which has been in use for this type of inspection since April 2010, which can be found at:

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing/inspection/Keylinesofenquiry.

Any preparation by officers for any future re-inspection, as well as delivering the outcomes of the original inspections, should also consider the requirements of the new KLOE.

The Commission has also produced a study on Strategic Housing, including good practice and some related toolkits which we hope will be helpful at:

www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/buildingbetterlives

Given the decision by the new Government not to continue Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA), this work has now ceased. CAA will therefore play no part in any future assessment of the Council. However, the Commissions inspection powers remain and any future risk based inspection would be based on the application of these powers.

Finally, I would like to thank you for informing me of your "Choosing to Change" strategic development. It may be that the Commission could offer support in developing your service through this mechanism.

On that basis I have asked Yvonne Davies, Head of Housing and Economic Development in the North to contact you in the near future. Should you wish to contact Yvonne directly then please do so, either on 07814 976326 or yvonne-davies@audit-commission.gov.uk. She will also be able to discuss the recent re-inspection in more detail if that is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roy Irwin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Roy Irwin

Director of Housing, Sustainability and Economic Development

cc Michael O'Higgins, Chairman of the Audit Commission

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

David Hoole, CAA lead