

REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY)  
TO THE EXECUTIVE  
7<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2006

**AFFORDABLE HOUSING INSPECTION**

**1.0 Introduction and Report Summary**

- 1.1 The Executive will be aware that the Housing Inspector carried out an inspection of the Council's Affordable Housing Service during April 2006.
- 1.2 The Council has now received the final report from the Housing Inspector and a copy is available on the web site. This report summarises the findings of this report, and sets out the key messages for the Council as it seeks to drive forward continuous improvement.
- 1.3 The contact officer for this report is Paul Staines, Assistant Director (Housing & Community Safety) 01235-547621

**2.0 Recommendations**

*(a) That the Executive receive and note the findings of the Housing Inspector and*

- (I) Request that the Assistant Director (housing and community safety) ensure that the recommendations of the inspector are incorporated into the service development plans for the housing service*
- (II) Request that officers use the recommendations of the Inspector to drive service developments across the Authority as part of the Council's drive towards an improved CPA rating.*

**3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies**

- (a) This report relates to the Council's vision strands A, B, C, D, E & G
- (b) This report relates to the Housing Strategy
- (c) This report complies with existing policies in respect of housing and service planning.

**4.0 Background and Supporting Information**

- 4.1 The Housing Inspection Service is a stand-alone arm of the Audit Commission that deals with inspecting housing services across local authorities and housing associations.
- 4.2 The Housing Inspector last visited this Council in 2002 when it carried out a service wide inspection. This year they carried out a themed inspection of the Council's Affordable Housing Service, an inspection remit that is closely aligned to the scope of the housing element of a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).
- 4.3 Although the inspection centred upon the Housing Service of the Council its thematic approach led it to inspect other areas of the Council's work. The main areas also inspected were:
- The Planning Service
  - Contact Services

- The Council's approach to performance management, equalities and diversity
- The Council's approach to securing value for money

## 5.0 **Main findings**

5.1 The headline finding of the inspector is that the service is awarded **Two Stars with uncertain prospects for improvement.**

5.2 Officers from housing are proud to advise the Executive that this rating represents the first time that a service inspection in this authority has received a two star or good rating from the Audit commission. As such it not only reflects well upon the housing service but represents a major step forward on the Council's journey towards being recognised as a Good Council under CPA.

5.3 The Inspector found much to praise in the affordable housing service, key findings were;

- The Council has developed a significant amount of affordable housing with an appropriate mix of tenures and size.
- There is a large volume of up to date research into housing needs and the condition of existing housing.
- Housing applicants benefit from the first choice-based lettings system in the sub region.
- Housing advice and the new banding system of housing allocations is being well used to prevent homelessness occurring.
- The use of current housing stock and brown-field land is being optimised.
- Face-to-face, telephone and internet access to the service is easy.

5.4 However the conclusions of the Housing Inspector were tempered by their finding that although the service is a good one, it has some way to go to becoming an excellent service. This leads them to the conclusion that the service has uncertain prospects for improvement.

5.5 This is an important message for the Council since the uncertainties of the Inspector are mainly to do with uncertainties about the Council's progress in some key corporate areas.

5.6 The remainder of this report therefore highlights those areas where the inspector believes corporate improvement is needed

## 6.0 **Access and Diversity**

6.1 In this area the Housing inspector finds much to praise when examining the work that the Council has done to improve the ability of our customers to access our services. For example the Inspector praises the Council's web based choice based lettings scheme and the Local Services Points.

6.2 The Inspector is more critical however of the way that the housing service engages with its customers and the work it does to provide services for the full range of its clients. This reflects his view that corporately the Council has concentrated its efforts upon developing a quality interface with customers but has not made such great progress in developing services for its full range of clients in consultation with them, for example in setting service standards across the Council.

6.3 The report concludes that engagement and consultation with our clients is not as strategically driven as the Inspectors might like and although for example housing can demonstrate major service improvements driven by customer feedback, the most notable example being Choice Based Lettings it is difficult to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Inspectors that there is systemic consultation and customer engagement across the authority.

6.4 The Executive will be aware that the Communications officer now drives the development of consultation mechanisms strategically and this officer will be working across the authority to ensure that the concerns of the inspector are addressed in Service development Plans.

## **7.0 Value for Money**

- 7.1 The report's conclusions represent a difference of opinion between the Council and the Inspector on this subject.
- 7.2 The Executive will be aware that the Council has adopted an approach to Value for Money that is predicated upon a strategic service review of all the Council's services. The review produced a list of services that would see the issue of value for money examined in depth.
- 7.3 Officers believe that this approach to value for money is based upon sound best value principles and reflects the resources available to this Council to carry out such work.
- 7.4 However, the fact that this approach means that not all services are subject to value for money appraisals at the same time means that at the time of the inspection there was, in the Inspector's view little evidence of work to establish value for money within housing. Although officers demonstrated that work had taken place in certain areas, for example the costs of temporary accommodation, the Inspector was critical of the lack of the strategic approach across the Council.
- 7.5 Ironically a best value review of housing services was due to take place in 2006, a review that would have addressed value for money as part of its remit. However this review was delayed so that officers could prepare for the inspection.
- 7.6 Officers continue to believe that the approach of the Council is sound, and believe that as the scope of the value for money reviews across the Council widens so the criticism of the Inspector will become less relevant. In the meantime the delayed best value review of housing services will take place in the autumn of 2006 and benchmarking work has already commenced to ensure that value for money is examined as part of this review.

## **8.0 Alignment of the Council's Budgets to its Priorities**

- 8.1 In his final recommendation to the Council, the Housing Inspector concludes that work is required to show that the priorities of the Council are demonstrated in its budgeting decisions.
- 8.2 Officers believe that the Inspector's conclusion does not demonstrate the financial realities of the Council, nor does it recognise the difficult decisions that the Council has taken in the last two budgets as it has sought to realign its budgets in the context of a shrinking financial base.
- 8.3 Nonetheless the officers do accept that the Council needs to demonstrate to its customers and to the Audit Commission that the budgetary decisions of the Council are made in the context of its stated priorities and accept that on occasions this is not always evident.
- 8.4 Officers will therefore be reflecting on the recommendations of the Inspector and seeking to ensure such clear linkages are further developed as the Council embarks upon setting its 2007-8 budgets later this year.

## **9.0 Conclusions**

- 9.1 This report introduces the finding of the Housing Inspection to the Executive and asks the Executive to receive the report and note its findings.
- 9.2 The report contains a number of key service improvement suggestions for the Housing Service. These will be reflected firstly in the Affordable Housing Priority within the Council's Best Value Performance Plan document and also in the individual Service Development Plans of Housing Services.

- 9.3 The Inspection also has important messages for the Council as a whole as it seeks to improve its performance. This report highlights those and suggests that the Executive require officers to reflect these issues in the service developments across the Council.

PAUL STAINES  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY)

**Background Papers:**

Affordable Housing; report of the Housing Inspector June 2006