

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL
PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT BOARD

19TH August 2008

AUDIT COMMISSION RE-INSPECTION OF STRATEGIC HOUSING SERVICES

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The report summarises, for consideration by the Performance Management Board, the report of the Audit Commission upon the re- inspection of Strategic Housing Services that took place in February 2008 and tbrings forward for member approval an action plan to address the Audit Commission's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That members note the summary and recommendations made by the Audit Commission in respect of the re-inspection of Strategic Housing.
- 2.2 That members note the action plan (Appendix 1) containing Corporate, Strategic Planning and Strategic Housing actions to address the recommendations made by the Audit Commission.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council's Strategic Housing Service was re-inspected by the Audit Commission in the week commencing the 25th February 2008. The service had previously been inspected in March 2006 when it had been rated as being a poor, zero star service with uncertain prospects for improvement.

4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 4.1 The outcome of the Re-Inspection that took place in February this year states that Bromsgrove District Council's Strategic Housing Service is a fair, one-star service which has promising prospects for improvement.
- 4.2 The Audit Commission report confirms that this represents a significant improvement from 2006 and makes the following observations:
- The Customer Service Centre provides an effective, one-stop shop service and supports a streamlined housing advice service for customers. Services are accessible to people with physical disabilities, and customers can access advice outside normal office hours. Information about services is comprehensive and widely available, in community locations and in a range of different formats to meet different communication needs.
 - The Council has improved both accessibility to supported accommodation and the quality of service provision for victims of domestic violence. It is investing its own resources in increasing the supply of accommodation to

meet needs and invests significantly in grants to provide aids and adaptations to vulnerable people, which are being completed quickly.

- The strategic approach to housing has increased the supply of affordable housing and is working to overcome constraints on supply. This is clearly supported by members. It is supported by a robust research base, which is being added to, and effectively guides the Council's actions. It is using an effective range of tools to prevent homelessness, and has decommissioned poor quality hostels.

4.2 Areas for improvement remain:

- The Council does not know the profile of its customers, and is not able to demonstrate that services are delivered fairly to all parts of the community. This also limits the ability of the Council to shape services to meet individual needs. Lack of capacity, until recently, in both the strategic housing and strategic planning services means that development of key strategic documents to support delivery of affordable housing has been delayed. There has been mixed progress in ensuring that houses in multiple occupation provide safe and suitable standards of accommodation.
- In addition, the Council's work on value for money is at an early stage. It can show where it has made efficiency savings in a number of areas, but limited cost information and gaps in customer satisfaction and performance information means that it cannot demonstrate that the service provides value for money.
- Since the last inspection, the Council has delivered a range of improvements in service delivery and performance. Delivery of priorities is supported by integrated financial and performance management, although some gaps remain in what is being monitored. The Council has invested in priority areas to improve performance, and is effectively securing external funding to help it deliver its plans, although it has not yet assessed the impact of its own and external investment.

4.4 In scoring the service the Audit Commission commented that:

- The standard of temporary accommodation is high, and the Council is not placing homeless people in bed and breakfast accommodation;
- Effective use is made of a range of tools which is helping to reduce the number of people who become homeless;
- The Council is working well with partners and investing its own resources to increase the supply of new affordable housing; and
- Customers do not have to wait for a long time for aids and adaptations to be completed.

4.5 However the Audit Commission identified that there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- The Council lacks a strategy to ensure that all of its services are fully accessible;

- Arrangements for collecting and using customer satisfaction information are not fully embedded;
- Service standards have been developed but are being routinely monitored with customers, and standards for the strategic housing service are not comprehensive;
- Complaints are not being used to shape services;
- Customer profile information is underdeveloped and the Council cannot show that services are delivered fairly to all parts of the community;
- The Council is not spending all of the resources available to it to provide grants assistance to vulnerable people;
- Houses in multiple occupation are not being effectively targeted to ensure that they provide suitable standards of accommodation;
- Development of key strategic planning documents to guide delivery of new affordable housing has been delayed; and
- Development and use of cost comparison is at an early stage and the Council cannot demonstrate that its services provide value for money.

4.6 The Audit Commission stated that the service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- It has delivered a wide range of service and performance improvements;
- Positive progress is being made in line with improvement and action plans;
- Delivery of corporate priorities is supported by investment and an integrated financial and performance management framework;
- Performance is monitored and reported regularly and action taken to correct variations from targets;
- Improvement plans address key weaknesses in service delivery;
- The Council responds positively to internal and external scrutiny and customer feedback and is using it to improve services;
- Members and senior officers are providing leadership to the service;
- Partnership working and external funding are being used effectively to increase capacity and deliver improvements; and
- Targeted efficiency savings and improved procurement practice is increasing resources available to support priorities.

4.7 The Audit Commission identify a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- Limited information about the costs of services constrains the Councils ability to improve value for money;
- Lack of customer profile information and monitoring service take up by diversity categories means that improvements cannot be targeted at inequality;
- There are some gaps in what is being measured such as customer satisfaction, complaints, and some agreed targets within housing service level agreements;
- The strategic housing service is not benchmarking its performance;
- IT systems are not fully supporting all areas of service; and
- the Council has not fully assessed the skills and capacity of the service to deliver future improvements.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY THE AUDIT COMMISSION

5.1 The Audit Commission Inspection Team has made the following recommendations.

Recommendation R1 Improve the focus on customers by:

- Monitoring, reporting and taking action to ensure that all agreed targets within the housing advice and CAB service level agreements which relate to accessibility and timeliness of the service are met;
- Developing and implementing arrangements to monitor and report measures of satisfaction for all aspects of the strategic housing service and setting targets for improvement;
- Involving customers in the review and re-development of service standards for the strategic housing service, implement arrangements for customers to be involved in monitoring them, and publicise the standards and performance against them; and
- Ensuring that analysis of complaints, which includes common and recurring factors, is regularly reported by service area and that action to resolve them is recorded and reported internally and externally.

Target for completion – November 2008

Recommendation R2 Improve the focus on diversity by:

- Collecting and using customer profile information and feedback to inform development of a corporate strategy and action plan to identify and remove any barriers to accessing services;
- Developing and implementing diversity monitoring for service take up and satisfaction, across all groups identified in the equality scheme, reporting this regularly and taking action to address any actual or perceived inequality in service provision;
- Revisiting and updating the Equality Impact Assessments for the strategic housing service to ensure that they are robust and that any weaknesses are integrated into the current service improvement plan; and
- Reviewing compliance with the CRE Code of Practice for Rented Housing and for Employment and ensuring that actions to achieve compliance are included in existing improvement plans.

Target for completion – April 2009

Recommendation R3 Maximise the impact of activities in the private sector by:

- Revisiting internal guidance regarding identification of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and developing and implementing regular programmes of work in the district to identify the type and location of HMOs and targeting inspection and enforcement activity appropriately; and
- Developing an overarching strategy to guide all activities in the private sector which clearly sets out the expected combined benefits of work in this area supported by performance targets and monitoring.

Target for completion – April 2009

Recommendation R4 Maximise the delivery of affordable housing by:

- Ensuring that sufficient staff resources are in place to prioritise the development of strategic planning documents linked to delivery of affordable housing;
- Assessing the skills and capacity within the strategic housing and planning teams to ensure that they are equipped to maximise opportunities for delivery following the outcome of the review of the Regional Spatial Strategy, particularly in relation to negotiation skills;
- Formalising arrangements for contact and liaison with developers and partners; and
- Formalise joint working arrangements between the strategic housing and planning teams to more proactively consider and address required flexibility within pipeline schemes.

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Target for completion – September 2009

Recommendation R5 Improving value for money by:

- Ensuring that spending performance against allocated capital budgets for grants is more closely monitored and maximised and that reporting arrangements allow for prompt action to mitigate any under spends;
- Developing baseline cost, performance, and satisfaction analysis to determine value for money of the strategic housing service and any services provided under agreement, subject to regular review;
- Assessing the effectiveness of internal and external funding and investment in the service, and the impact of different resource streams, to inform a strategy for maximising the impact of future funding; and
- Implementing arrangements to ensure that the impact of investment in learning, training and development is assessed and meets stated objectives.

Target for Completion – April 2009

6. DEVELOPMENT OF AN IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

- 6.1 A new Strategic Housing Re- Inspection Action Plan has been developed to address the key recommendations set out above and the actions from the previous inspection report that are not fully completed, again focussing upon where the service can be further strengthened.
- 6.2 The Re-Inspection action plan sets out the areas of work that need to be addressed both Corporately and those that are more specific to Strategic Planning and the Strategic Housing Section itself. The proposed outcomes and targets set out in the Audit Commission recommendations will, as in the previous action plan, be transferred into the new Re-Inspection Action Plan for clarity.
- 6.3 The Strategic Housing Team are pleased with the outcome of the Strategic Housing Re- Inspection and the recognition of the progress that has been achieved over the past 18 months and enthusiastically embracing the new

action plan as a framework for taking the service forward into further improvement.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no financial implications associated with the recommendation to approve the action plan as the actions set will be addressed within existing budget and staff resources.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no legal implications directly linked to the recommendations

9. COUNCIL OBJECTIVES

- 9.1 Housing is a Council priority under Objective 1 – Regeneration.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 10.1 The main risks associated with the details included in this report are:

- Failure to embrace the recommendations made by the Audit Commission could impact upon the Councils corporate rating under CPA.

11. CUSTOMER IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The recommendation to approve the action plan will ultimately impact upon customer service and satisfaction as service improvements are implemented.

12. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 Actions within the plan will help improve awareness of customer requirements and help strengthen the application of the Council's Equalities and Diversity Policies.

13. VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 Actions within the plan will help improve and strengthen the application of the Council's Value For Money Strategy and Policies.

14. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

None
Personnel Implications
None
Governance/Performance Management
None
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime and Disorder Act 1998
None
Policy
None
Environmental
None

15. OTHERS CONSULTED ON THE REPORT

Portfolio Holder	Yes
Chief Executive	Yes
Executive Director - Partnerships and Projects	Yes
Executive Director - Services	Yes
Assistant Chief Executive	Yes
Head of Service	Yes
Head of Financial Services	Yes
Head of Legal, Equalities & Democratic Services	Yes
Head of Organisational Development & HR	Yes
Corporate Procurement Team	No

16. WARDS AFFECTED

‘All Wards’

17. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Strategic Housing Re-Inspection - Action Plan April 2008

18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Audit Commission Local authority Housing Inspection Report – Strategic
Housing Re-Inspection – Bromsgrove District Council.

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