

Agenda item:

[No.]

Audit Committee

On 2 November 2010

<p>Report Title Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Services Re-Inspection – Final Report</p>	
<p>Report of Director of Urban Environment</p>	
<p>Signed: </p>	<p>Date: 25 October 2010</p>
<p>Contact Officer : Phil Harris, Assistant Director (Strategic & Community Housing Services)</p> <p>Tel: 020 8489 4338 E-mail: phil.harris@haringey.gov.uk</p>	
<p>Wards(s) affected: All</p>	<p>Report for: Key Decision</p>
<p>1. Purpose of the report</p> <p>1.1 To inform the Audit Committee of the outcome of the Audit Commission's re-inspection of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services and to summarise the contents of the final inspection report.</p> <p>1.2 To approve the approach that the Council will take in responding to the Audit Commission's recommendations and findings.</p>	
<p>2. Introduction by Cabinet Member</p> <p>2.1 Overall, the final report is very positive and recognises the significant progress that has been made in Strategic & Community Housing Services since the last inspection in October 2007 and the recruitment of a new management team.</p>	

2.2 Although there is still much to be done, I am especially pleased with the second judgement of 'excellent prospects for improvement' (page 39) and the references to "good progress", "strong track record" and "strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses". By reading this section of the report first, it is possible to gain a good overview of the Housing Service as a whole and the journey we are on. The preceding sections of the report look at the service in more detail.

3. State link(s) with Council Plan Priorities and actions and /or other Strategies:

3.1 The actions taken in response to the Audit Commission's recommendations will help meet the following priorities in the Council Plan:

Priority 3 - A Thriving Haringey

Improving housing conditions in the private sector and in the Council's stock of permanent and temporary accommodation, to provide families and vulnerable households with the stability they need, making it easier for them to maintain their links with schools, healthcare professionals and support networks.

Priority 4 - A Caring Haringey

Continuing to prevent homelessness by leading the delivery of Haringey's multi agency Homelessness Strategy 2008-11 and maintaining focus on effective prevention and options services. Improving the speed of homelessness decision making and adopting a more transparent Allocations policy. By moving homeless households out of Temporary Accommodation and into private sector accommodation the Council is supporting independent living.

Priority 5 –Driving Change, Improving Quality

Improving value for money through more cost-effective procurement, rent negotiations with private landlords and more effective use of the Council stock.

4. Recommendations

4.1 It is **recommended** that the Audit Committee:

- (a) Receives and notes the Audit Commission's final report and judgements in relation to its re-inspection of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services.; and
- (b) Agrees to the proposed approach for responding to the Audit Commission's recommendations and findings.

5. Reason for recommendation(s)

- 5.1 The Audit Commission's re-inspection was a significant statutory requirement and the outcome is therefore being reported to Members for consideration and noting.
- 5.2 The successful outcome of the re-inspection indicates the good progress that has been made in Strategic & Community Housing Services since the last inspection in October 2007 and contributes to enhancing the Council's reputation.

6 Summary

- 6.1 The Audit Commission inspected the Council's Housing Allocations and Lettings Service in October 2007 and after some delay, published its final report in December 2008. The judgement was that the Housing and Lettings Service was a "poor" (no stars) service with "promising prospects for improvement".
- 6.2 In accordance with usual inspection practice, this meant a re-inspection would be conducted and, in May 2010, the Audit Commission undertook a re-inspection and extended the scope of that inspection to include Homelessness services.
- 6.3 The Audit Commission's draft report was issued on 21 June 2010 and, following minor changes, the final report was published on 12 August 2010.
- 6.4 It was the judgment of the Audit Commission that the Council is providing a "Fair" (one star) service that has "excellent prospects for Improvement".
- 6.5 The Audit Commission identified a number of improvements that the Housing Service has achieved since the previous inspection, along with a number of areas where strengths were adjudged to outweigh weaknesses. The Commission's summary and scoring is set out in **Appendix A** of this report.
- 6.6 In its report, the Audit Commission made 4 specific recommendations (see **Appendix B**) in relation to improvements that the Council should make in relation to the following areas:
- (a) Access to services and customer focus
 - (b) Allocation of vacant social housing
 - (c) Prevention of homelessness
 - (d) Unit cost benchmarking and value for money
- 6.7 The Council is expected to act on the recommendations and to address the weaknesses identified in the report.

- 6.8 During the period leading up to the inspection, Strategic & Community Housing Services revised its approach to service improvement and developed the Housing Improvement Plan for 2010-12. This sets out the Housing Service's approach to continuous improvement and ongoing service change and development in response to the political, financial and social challenges the service is facing.
- 6.9 The Housing Improvement Plan was developed shortly after the preparation of the self-assessment submitted to the Audit Commission for inspection and, as a result, it anticipates to a great extent the improvements and weaknesses that the inspectors have since identified in their report. It therefore provides a ready-made framework within which the required local improvement actions are being managed and monitored.
- 6.10 A review is being carried out to ensure that all of the Audit Commission's recommendations and findings are reflected appropriately in the Housing Improvement Plan and its underlying action plans.
- 6.11 The Audit Commission invited the Council to submit a formal response to the inspection recommendations, which was duly published alongside the report on the Commission's website. There are no material issues with the inspection findings or the conduct of the inspection, and overall the inspection was balanced, professional and a positive experience for the service.

7 Chief Financial Officer Comments

- 7.1 Homelessness is a key financial issue for the Council, as changes in Housing Benefit levels from April 2010 have already led to a significant overspend within the Housing budget in 2010-11 and further proposed changes are likely to exacerbate this position.
- 7.2 The Issues identified within the Inspection report are covered within the Housing Improvement Plan and are thus in the process of being actioned. These actions can be delivered within existing resources and are expected to mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes by continuing to reduce the level of Homelessness

8 Head of Legal Services Comments

- 8.1 The Head of Legal Service has been consulted in the preparation of this report.
- 8.2 This re-inspection was carried out by the Housing Inspectorate pursuant to its powers under the Local Government Act 1999 section 10. Under the Act the Housing Authority has a duty to ensure that its services comply with the requirements of the best value legal framework and as such the recommendations and findings should be implemented as part of the Housing Improvement Plan and its underlying action plans.

9 Equalities & Community Cohesion Comments

- 9.1 The inspection report includes comments relevant to the equalities and diversity elements of the service's improvement plans and these will be reviewed and strengthened to ensure the Audit Commission's findings are addressed.
- 9.2 This will include, for example, ensuring that Equalities Impact Assessments are completed more comprehensively, and ensuring that the approach to monitoring diversity to ensure fair and equal access across all services is more consistent and produces more demonstrable outcomes.

10 Consultation

- 10.1 Consultation took place with the Audit Commission on their findings and the draft report. The final report has been published on the Commission's web site and the Council has submitted a formal response, to be published alongside it.
- 10.2 A number of the improvement actions that address the inspection findings are already underway and where appropriate these include provision for service user and stakeholder consultation. This is identified in the Housing Improvement Plan or its underlying plans, including consultation on the Housing Allocations Policy.

11 Service Financial Comments

- 11.1 The Service is continuing with the approach outlined in the Housing Improvement Plan for 2010-12. The recommended service improvements will be contained within the budgets for 2010/11 and 2011/12.

12 Use of appendices

Appendix A – Audit Commission Summary and Scoring
Appendix B – Audit Commission Recommendations

13 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 13.1 Audit Commission Report - Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Re-inspection, London Borough of Haringey July 2010.
- 13.2 Strategic & Community Housing Services, Housing Improvement Plan 2010-12.

Appendix A – Audit Commission Summary and Scoring

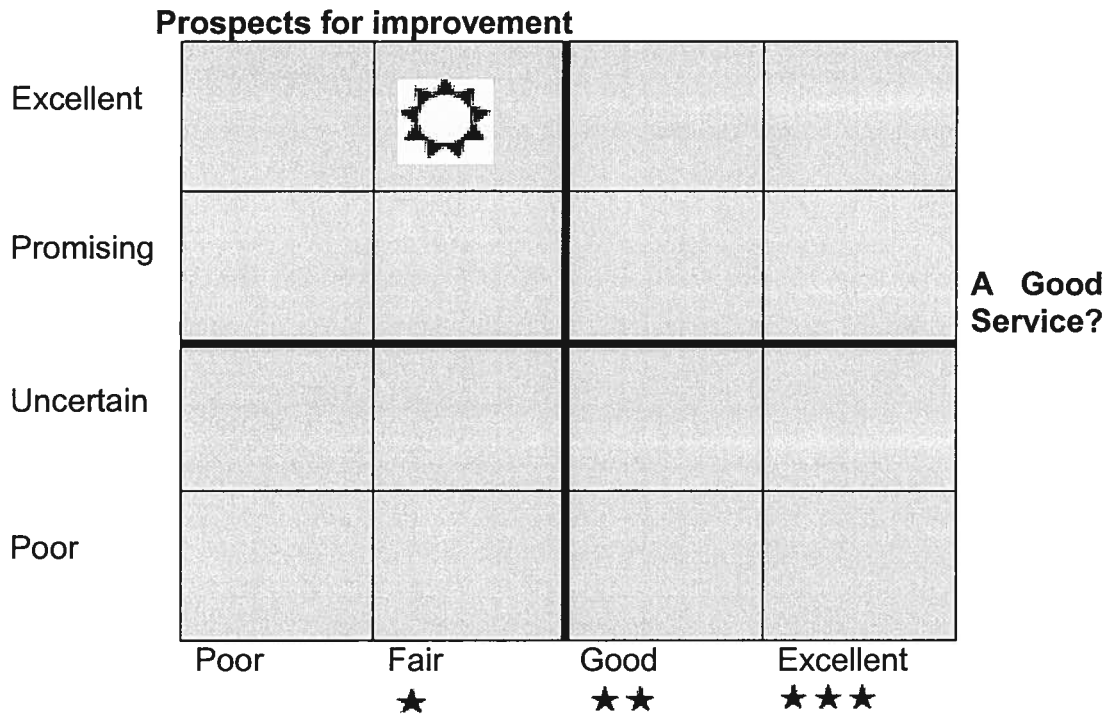
Summary

- 1 Haringey Council provides 'fair' allocations, lettings and homelessness services, which have excellent prospects for improvement. The services were inspected in 2007 and found to be 'poor', with promising prospects for improvement. This re-inspection found that services have improved in a number of areas.
- 2 There is now a comprehensive approach to preventing homelessness and offering housing options, which has contributed to a steady reduction in the use of temporary accommodation. Targets to limit the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met, and the standard of temporary accommodation is generally satisfactory. However, Haringey still has a very high number of households in temporary accommodation and the speed of homelessness decision-making is slow.
- 3 Services are generally easy to access and a good range of information is available, although the speed of telephone access is not meeting targets. Frontline staff provide a good level of customer care, and appointments are made efficiently and in appropriate timescales. There is also a sound approach to dealing with complaints. However, service standards are not comprehensive and the approach to obtaining customer feedback is patchy.
- 4 There is an effective approach to assessing and meeting the needs of vulnerable adults, and a strong multi-agency approach to providing advice and support to people experiencing domestic violence. There are arrangements to make services accessible to all customers, and a range of surgeries and activities take place to reach out to different groups. However, the approach to monitoring diversity to ensure fair and equal access across all services is not consistent or comprehensive and has produced limited outcomes.
- 5 The present lettings policy is not sufficiently transparent, registrations are not carried out promptly and the register has not been reviewed for several years, although the Council has plans to address these issues.
- 6 The Council has reduced the cost of providing temporary accommodation, while maintaining standards, but there is also a lack of comprehensive benchmarking and comparative data to enable the service to be sure it is delivering value for money.
- 7 The prospects for improvement are considered to be 'excellent' because appropriate plans and strategies are in place, with actions that will improve services for customers. There is a strong track record of improvement over recent years, including good progress against the recommendations of the 2007 inspection. Performance monitoring and reporting is generally robust and there has been strong leadership of the inspected services. There is the financial and staffing capacity to deliver further improvement and capacity is strengthened through external funding and partnership working.

Scoring the service

8 We have assessed London Borough of Haringey as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

'a fair service that has excellent prospects for improvement'



Source: Audit Commission

9 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:

- an effective approach to preventing homelessness and using the private rented sector has significantly reduced the level of temporary accommodation used;
- the housing and support needs of vulnerable adults are being addressed;
- targets for limiting the use of bed and breakfast accommodation have been met;
- good quality information and an informative website are available for service users;
- there is effective working with housing associations and other partners in the allocation of homes and prevention of homelessness;
- the multi-agency Hearthstone service is providing effective one-stop help to people facing domestic abuse;
- there is effective procurement of temporary accommodation, which has reduced unit costs while maintaining standards; and
- there is a sound approach to dealing with complaints.

10 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- the current allocations policy is not sufficiently transparent and needs updating;
- housing registrations are not carried out promptly;
- there are lengthy average relet times for empty council homes;
- the speed of homelessness decision-making is not meeting targets;
- diversity monitoring is not comprehensive and has not been systematically used to improve service delivery;
- the service does not have a clear understanding of the value for money of the inspected services and how this compares with other organisations;
- telephone calls are not answered within target times; and
- service standards are not yet comprehensive, and there are weaknesses in monitoring and reporting of performance against the standards.

11 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- there is a strong track record of improvement over recent years, including progress against the recommendations of the 2007 inspection;
- appropriate plans and strategies are in place, with actions that will improve services for customers;
- performance monitoring and reporting is generally robust;
- there has been strong leadership of the inspected services which has supported improvement; and
- there is the financial and staffing capacity to deliver further improvement and capacity is strengthened through external funding and partnership working.

12 However, there are barriers to improvement. These include:

- progress has been slow in some areas, such as a failure to review the housing register; and
- there has not been a sufficiently strong focus on learning from other organisations or from customer feedback.

Appendix B – Audit Commission recommendations

Recommendation

R1 The Council should improve access and its customer focus by:

- ensuring that service standards are comprehensive and that performance against them is regularly monitored and reported;
- ensuring that telephone answering is accurately monitored and meets target timescales;
- ensuring that support is available to people bidding for properties at all Customer Service Centres;
- ensuring that the diversity of service users is monitored and that this information is used to shape service delivery and to ensure fair and equal access to services;
- completing equality impact assessments of all key service areas; and
- ensuring that customer feedback on the inspected services is regularly collected, reviewed and acted upon.

Recommendation

R2 The Council should improve its approach to allocating vacant social rented homes by:

- reviewing the present allocation policy, in consultation with stakeholders, to ensure that it provides customers with a clear understanding of how homes are allocated;
- ensuring that new housing applications are registered promptly;
- regularly reviewing the housing register to ensure that it records current housing need; and
- ensuring that the allocation element of property relet times is minimised.

Recommendation

R3 The Council should improve its approach to preventing and addressing homelessness by:

- developing an effective private sector deposit guarantee scheme for 'non-priority' homeless people;
- ensuring that landlords of Home Finder Scheme properties are either accredited, or meet accreditation standards before being accepted onto the scheme;
- ensuring that homelessness decisions are taken as promptly as is reasonably possible;
- considering the provision of a specialist mediation service, particularly for young people leaving home; and
- ensuring that all reports of disrepair in temporary accommodation are responded to in line with the agreed procedures and timescales.

Recommendation

R4 The Council should take action to improve its approach to providing value for money by assessing the unit costs and outcomes of its services and initiatives and comparing these with other organisations, including high performers.