

Agenda item:

[No.]

Audit Committee

On 3 February 2011

**Report Title: Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Services
Re-Inspection – Update**

Report of: Assistant Director ,Strategic and Community Housing Services

Signed:



Date: 26/11/2011

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Wards(s) affected: All

Report for: Key Decision

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To comply with the Audit Committee's request of November 2010 to have sight of the action plan that Strategic and Community Housing Services has produced in relation to the implementation of the recommendations made by the Audit Commission during its re-inspection of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services in the summer of 2010.
- 1.2 To present the action plan put in place to ensure that the Council acts on the Audit Commission's recommendations and findings.

2. Introduction by Cabinet Member

- 2.1 The final Audit Commission report of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services is very positive and recognises the significant progress made in Strategic & Community Housing Services since the last inspection in October 2007 and the recruitment of a new management team.

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 action plan attached in **Appendix C** which has been produced in response to the Audit Commission's final report and judgements in relation to its re-inspection of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services.
- (b) Agrees that the implementation of the action plan is monitored by the Housing Improvement Board.

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.
- 5.3 The action plan will ensure that the Council complies fully with the recommendations made by the Audit Commission.

6 Summary

- 6.1 In November 2010, the Audit Committee received a report which set out the results of the Audit Commission inspection of the Council's Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness services that took place in May 2010.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 It was the judgment of the Audit Commission that the Council is providing a "Fair" (one star) service that has "excellent prospects for Improvement". 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.
- 6.4 The Commission's full report is attached, as **Appendix A**, to this report. A summary is also attached, as **Appendix B**.
- 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.
- 6.6 In its report, the Audit Commission made 4 specific recommendations 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 The action plan, attached as Appendix C, sets out the key actions being taken to address the issues raised in the inspection report and has been aligned to each of the recommendations in the report.
- 6.9 A number of the recommendations have already been implemented and the majority of the outstanding ones are due to be concluded by the end of May 2011 and incorporated into the Service's day to day work.
- 6.10 Specifically on each of the strands on improving customer access and customer focus, the action plan sets out a range of actions that are being undertaken which include closer liaison and communication with Customer Services, increasing the level of monitoring and analysis of customer feedback and ensuring corrective action is taken where necessary.
- 6.11 To address the recommendations on improving the approach to allocating social housing, a key action was to review the Housing Allocations Policy which was already under way at the time of the Inspection. Since the Inspection, the new Policy has been approved by Cabinet, been the subject of three months' consultation and is about to come into effect. This will address the issues relating to the re-registration process and void turnaround times.
- 6.12 The Audit Commission also made recommendations in relation to the rent deposit scheme for non priority homeless people and speeding up the decision making in respect of homelessness applications. The rent deposit scheme has now been set up and the speed of homelessness decisions has already improved, with further measures set out in the action plan.
- 6.13 The final recommendation relates to the need to carry out further benchmarking to improve value for money. This has now been put in place and was used to support the recent re-structuring of Strategic & Community Housing Services and will be used again as further financial savings are made.

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. Further proposed changes are likely to exacerbate this position and lead to further pressure on the Housing budget and provision for this has been made in the draft budget for 2011-12.
- 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 help mitigate the impact of Housing Benefit changes by continuing to reduce the level of Homelessness.
- 7.3 Due to the constant change in regulations the cost to the Council of responding to its Homelessness duty and strategies to mitigate this cost are under constant review.

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 by way of the action plan at Appendix C.

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 - Full Report of Audit Commission's Re-Inspection of Housing Allocations, Lettings & Homelessness Services

Appendix B - Summary Report of Audit Commission's Re-Inspection of Housing Allocations, Lettings & Homelessness Services

**Appendix C – Action Plan: Audit Commission Re-inspection of Housing Allocations,
Lettings & Homelessness Services**

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.