

**AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION (MAY 2007) – STRATEGIC APPROACH TO HOUSING**

---

**1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise of the outcome of the recent Audit Commission Inspection of Wirral's Strategic Approach to Housing and the resultant actions required. The Strategic Housing Service provided by Wirral Council has been assessed as being a 'good' two star service with promising prospects for improvement.

**2.0 BACKGROUND**

2.1 In the Council's CPA assessment 2005 the Housing Service was awarded a rating of four stars (out of four). The Council's Strategic Housing Service was then included in the Audit Commission's Housing Inspection Programme for 2006/07. The Council was inspected in February 2007 and the final report was published in May 2007. A copy of the final report is attached as Appendix I.

2.2 The report sets out the reasons for the service being rated as a 'good' two star service with promising prospects for improvement. The report makes an assessment of how the Council addresses Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money in providing its strategic housing function as well as how well the component services perform. This includes strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing advice, HMRI and private sector housing renewal and supported housing. The report also assesses the service's prospects for improvement as 'promising' based on its delivery, capacity to improve and performance management structures. The report also sets out a series of recommendations and cites examples of good practice and innovation that exist within the Council's Strategic Housing Service.

2.3 The assessment of two stars with promising prospects places Wirral's Strategic Housing Service among the top 10% nationally and one of the highest rated in the North West of England based on Audit Commission scoring.

**3.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

3.1 The report summarises that the Council is achieving significant impact in a number of key areas.

3.2 It has an effective and robust approach to developing its housing strategies. Its approach to regeneration and delivering improvement against a challenging picture of private sector market failure and dereliction is particularly strong and demonstrating results. It works well with partners at local and sub-regional level and has brought significant investment into the Borough. It is also investing heavily in housing as a priority from its own resources. It has taken action to reduce the numbers of empty properties and to enable improvement across the private sector. Its approach to

rehousing is developing well through a long-standing Borough-wide choice based lettings scheme. It has refocused resources to bring about improvements in its weaker areas, including homelessness services and adaptations.

3.3 The report identifies a number of areas which require improvement. There are inconsistencies in customer care standards and information and the Council does not yet have a clear and consistent approach to obtaining and using customer satisfaction information. The Council has not, in the past, taken a sufficiently active role in the development of affordable housing across the Borough, as this was not an issue until more recently. This has meant that it is behind many other Authorities in having a clear strategy for the delivery of new, affordable housing, with targets in place for the type, location and level of new build and for optimising the use of Section 106 agreements. There are also some weaknesses in demonstrating value for money.

#### 4.0 **A GOOD SERVICE?**

4.1 The report finds that the service is a 'good' two star service because of the following strengths:

- Access to services is generally easy and staff are customer-focused.
- Engagement with residents, particularly in the HMRI area, is effective.
- There is an effective approach to equality and diversity emerging.
- The approach to developing housing strategies and the information on which they are based is robust and comprehensive.
- The Council understands its role as a strategic housing authority post-transfer of housing stock and is making good progress on delivery of its priorities for housing.
- Some elements of service are particularly well developed, for example the Homemovers Service, the approach to empty homes, HMO licensing, engaging with private landlords and private sector housing group repair schemes.
- There is strong performance on improving energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty.
- The Council is taking effective enforcement action.
- There is strong performance on reducing the levels of properties not meeting decent homes standard across both private and social sectors.
- The adaptations services is accessible and delivering positive outcomes for service users.
- There is a strong and clear focus on balancing the housing market through area based regeneration.
- The Council is improving perceptions of the east of the Borough as a place to live.
- The Council is effectively combining funding streams – both capital and revenue – to support its priorities and delivery clear outcomes for local people.
- There are several examples of effective procurement being used to deliver value for money on the ground.

4.2 The report also identifies some areas that require improvement:

- Customer service standards and customer information are inconsistent and are lacking in some key areas of service.
- There is no systematic and consistent approach to gaining and using customer satisfaction information.
- The Council lacks a clear and explicit vision for "Housing" for the whole Borough over the longer term.

- There is no affordable housing policy to guide the development of affordable housing across the Borough and the Council is not making optimum use of Section 106 agreements to increase the proportion of affordable housing.
- Comparative costs are high and the Council cannot consistently demonstrate value for money across its housing service.

## 5.0 PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVEMENT?

5.1 The report concludes that the service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- It has a track record of achievement and key performance indicators are demonstrating positive trends.
- It has responded positively to inspection recommendations and the outcomes of its own reviews.
- It is addressing gaps in service delivery.
- It has had a major impact on the regeneration of the Tranmere area over a long period of time.
- Aims and priorities are clear.
- There is effective balance between national, regional, sub-regional and local priorities.
- Plans are cascaded and staff are clear what is expected of them.
- Performance management is sound.
- The service is open to learning from elsewhere and embraces positive practice.
- The Council is clear about efficiency targets and achieving value for money and plans are in place to reduce costs over the medium term.
- Capacity within the housing service is strong – staff are motivated and customer focused and sickness levels are low.
- The approach to procurement is well developed.
- The Council attracts significant external funding to deliver its priorities.

5.2 The report highlights a number of barriers to improvement, namely:

- The lack of a track record in improving value for money over time.
- The lack of a clearly articulated and explicit vision for the housing market across the Borough and clear targets for development.
- Pressures on the budgets for housing as a result of the £30 million savings that the Council needs to make.
- Lack of certainty on the availability of external funding in the future.

## 6.0 AUDIT COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The report makes six recommendations for the service to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement. These are:

- R1        Develop consistent customer focusing service information and customer service standards with customers and monitor their implementation.
- R2        Develop a systematic and robust approach to gaining and using customer insight information, for example, through customer satisfaction surveys and focus groups.
- R3        Develop explicit and SMART aims for housing across the Borough as part of the review and development of the housing strategy through completion of the

strategic housing market assessment, development of an explicit, affordable housing policy and the development of a corporate approach for the use of Section 106 agreements.

- R4 Focus resources on proactively preventing homelessness and develop a clear menu of approaches to be used in a range of circumstances.
- R5 Work with RSLs to identify the scale of adaptation work currently being funded directly and establish a mechanism to ensure that there is equity across all tenures.
- R6 Undertake more detailed cost comparisons for housing services, identify where costs are high and the reasons for this and develop an explicit strategy to address the achievement of value for money within housing services.

6.2 In response to these recommendations a Service Improvement Plan is being prepared to ensure that the service continues to improve. This will be reported to a future meeting of this Committee.

## 7.0 AREAS OF GOOD PRACTICE

7.1 The report highlights five areas of exceptional good practice and innovation which the Audit Commission will promote. These area:

- Home Movers support and advice.
- BME Support Team.
- Using NRF to bring empty properties back in to use.
- Approach to dealing with Empty Properties/the Empty Property Team.
- HELP Scheme.

## 8.0 FINANCIAL & STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no direct financial or staffing implications arising from this report. If financial and/or staffing implications arise in order to improve services, then these will be reported to Members separately.

## 9.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral's Housing Strategy Service has a positive impact across the Borough especially in the most socially and economically deprived neighbourhoods.

## 10.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The Strategic Housing Service improves the quality of living environments and environmental standards through many parts of Wirral.

## 11.0 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

11.1 All Wards are affected by this report.

## 12.0 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Having access to a decent home and support is a basic human right which the Strategic Housing Service contributes to.

### 13.0 **COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

13.1 The Strategic Housing Service works to tackle poorly designed or unsafe housing conditions and creates more secure, safer living environments.

### 14.0 **PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

14.1 The report highlights the use of Section 106 agreement and the Council's approach to affordable housing provision and these have planning implications which will be reported separately to Members as required.

### 15.0 **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

15.1 Audit Commission Report May 2007 – Strategic Approach to Housing (Wirral Council)

### 16.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

16.1 Members note the outcome and resultant actions of the recent Audit Commission Inspection of Strategic Housing Services.

Alan Stennard  
Director of Regeneration

This report was prepared by Chris Bowen, HMRI Manager who can be contacted on 691 8198.