

HOUSING CABINET MEMBER MEETING

Agenda Item 27

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject: Audit Commission – Advice & Assistance Visit

Date of Meeting: 17 July 2009

Report of: Director of Adult Social Care & Housing

Contact Officer: Name: Diane Freeland Tel: 29-4650

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Key Decision: No

Wards Affected: All

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 To provide the housing cabinet member with the results of the advice and support work provided by the Audit Commission during March 2009.
- 1.2 To provide the housing cabinet member with an action plan to take forward the recommendations made by the Audit Commission following their visit in March 2009.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 (1) That housing cabinet member notes the contents of this report and agrees the action plan to meet the recommendations from the visit.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- 3.1 The Council recognises the need to demonstrate strong housing management performance in order to ensure an effective service for both new and existing tenants, increase confidence among stakeholders, and maximise potential investment opportunities. In an environment of wider resource constraint, maximising housing income collection and reducing levels of arrears is also recognised to be of importance.
- 3.2 Within this context, the audit commission agreed to provide Brighton & Hove City Council with advice and support work during March 2009. The purpose of this work was to provide advice and support in three distinct areas:
 - To ensure that current policies, procedures and performance management arrangements for housing income management and related debt and welfare benefits advice reflects current good practice.
 - To review tenant and resident participation activities to determine how well they contribute to wider work to improve housing services, inform strategic decision making and promote engagement of the wider tenant base.

- To review the council's housing revenue account business plan to highlight any headline issues and/or omissions.

The auditor also considered the overarching issues of value for money, access and customer care and diversity within these three areas.

3.3 Housing income management support work

3.3.1. Local councils who retain their housing stock rely heavily on their rental income to fund the management and maintenance of their homes and other housing services. The Council's performance has previously identified housing income collection as a comparatively weak area, with performance outturns in 2006/07 placing the Council in the worst quartile nationally. The Council has substantially improved performance over the past two years, but overall outcomes are yet to place the Council among the best performers.

3.3.2 Against this background, the Audit Commission's role was to carry out an independent assessment of the Council's approach to housing income collection, with recommendations for improvement based upon good practice. This included:

- Assessing whether current policies and procedures for housing income management reflect good practice and are implemented effectively; and
- Looking at how easily tenants and residents can access welfare and benefits advice and any broader work to promote financial inclusion.

3.4 Tenant and resident participation support work

3.4.1 The Council's Housing Service has developed a wide range of informal and formal mechanisms to promote tenant and resident involvement. There has been considerable success in promoting different levels and styles of involvement, with recent initiatives including the development of the City Assembly, the Chairman's focus groups and the Asset Management Panel. The Council now aims to build upon this success and focus upon the effectiveness and outcomes of involvement.

3.4.2 Against this background, the Audit Commission's role was to carry out an independent assessment of tenant and resident participation activities, acting as a 'critical friend', with recommendations for improvement based upon good practice. This included:

- Assessing how well formal tenant participation activities work, with a focus on role clarity and their overall contribution to service improvement, strategy development and decision-making (outcomes);
- Looking at how effectively tenants and residents can get their views across.
- Some analysis of how current arrangements promote the engagement of, and reflect the views of, the wider tenant base, including more marginalised groups; and an assessment of the performance management arrangements for monitoring impact of tenant and resident involvement.

3.5 Review of Housing Revenue Account Service Improvement Plan

- 3.5.1 The Housing Revenue Account Service Improvement Plan provides the main improvement plan for the Housing Management Service, focusing on both proposals to improve the quality of the housing stock and its overall delivery of housing management services. As such, it is important that the plan reflects the principles of effective service planning and the full range of housing management challenges faced by the Council.
- 3.5.2 Against this background, the Audit Commission's role was to review the content of the Improvement Plan to highlight any headline issues/ and or omissions.

4. **OUTCOME OF ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE VISIT**

- 4.1 In advance of the visit we prepared a self assessment on these aspects of our service and submitted a series of documents in support of our work. During the on site visit the auditor met with a variety of members, staff and residents and attended two resident meetings, the 'Our Neighbourhood' repairs pilot in Whitehawk and the Asset Management Panel.
- 4.2 The feedback from the auditor was very encouraging and included the following strengths:
- we've made solid progress and improvement and have strong self-awareness of the areas that need to improve.
 - our Service Improvement Plan sets out a clear three year programme for management of the housing stock and is built on strong links to residents priorities.
 - relationships between tenants and councillors are mature and productive.
 - we have committed staff who demonstrate a professional and caring approach towards customers.
 - diversity awareness among staff and customers is generally good.
 - resident involvement is well resourced and supported with residents consulted on a wide range of issues.
 - rent arrears are reducing and former tenant arrears are being actively managed.
 - staff are aware of the importance of preventative work to reduce evictions. There is a focus on financial inclusion.

The auditor also suggested areas where we could improve, which included:

- developing an overarching resident involvement strategy.
- developing a financial inclusion strategy.
- exploring ways of increasing the diversity of resident involvement as the profile of some tenant representative bodies does not reflect the profile of the local community.
- putting in place clear and measureable service standards on all aspects of our service.
- utilising our website to its full potential.

- looking at our ICT arrangements, which at the moment can be a barrier to improvement.

Overall the auditor recognised that we have built strong foundations to improve the service and that good progress is being made in these areas. In considering our prospects for improvement the auditor identified:

- we have a high level of self awareness about where our service is and what needs to be done.
- the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan reflects principles of effective service planning and the full range of housing management challenges faced by the council.
- trends in performance indicators are generally positive.
- significant progress has been made in rebuilding/strengthening trust with tenants since the stock transfer ballot.
- it will be easy for residents to hold the council to account over its Service Improvement Plan 2009-12. There is a clear list of success factors.

4.3 Attached at appendix 1 is a copy of the presentation given by the Audit Commission at the end of the on site visit. To help the service improve the auditor also made a number of recommendations. These recommendations are outlined in the action plan at appendix 2. We will report back to Housing Cabinet and Housing Management Consultative Committee on our progress in meeting these recommendations.

5. CONSULTATION

5.1 Audit Commission feedback presentation – City Assembly, 6 May 2009
Housing Management Consultative Committee 22 June 2009.
The draft resident involvement recommendations have been approved by the Tenant Compact Monitoring Group.

6. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

6.1 Financial Implications:

It is anticipated that the action plan can be progressed within the existing HRA Revenue Budgets for 2009/10. Some of the key actions, as they are progressed, may result in efficiency savings being identified.

Any financial implications arising from the implementation of the action plan will be monitored and reported through the HRA Target Budget Monitoring during the financial year, as well as being included in the update report back to Housing cabinet and housing Management consultative Committee.

Finance Officer Consulted: Susie Allen *Date:* 30 April 2009

6.2 Legal Implications:

By virtue of the Local Government Act 1999, the council is under a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The action plan, based upon recommendations from the Audit Commission will assist the Council in complying with that duty. No individual's human rights are thought to be adversely affected by the report's recommendations.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley

Date: 30 April 2009

6.3 Equalities Implications:

The recommendations will be implemented with due regard to equalities and diversity issues. Both the income management and resident involvement services are subject to an Equalities Impact Assessments which will be completed during Summer 2009.

6.4 Sustainability Implications:

Not applicable to this report

6.5 Crime & Disorder Implications:

Not applicable to this report

6.6 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications:

Not applicable to this report

6.7 Corporate / Citywide Implications:

Not applicable to this report

7. **EVALUATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S):**

7.1 Not applicable to this report.

8. **REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATION**

8.1 The report provides information on the advice and support work visit completed by the audit commission during March 2009. The report also contains a copy of the Audit Commission's presentation and an action plan for meeting the recommendations made by the Audit Commission.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Presentation by the Audit Commission

Appendix 2: Action Plan for meeting the Audit Commission recommendations

Appendix 3: Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms

Documents in Members' Rooms

None

Background Documents

None