

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET – 4TH JUNE 2008

THE INSPECTION OF EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL'S HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS SERVICE

Report by Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise Cabinet of the publication by the Scottish Housing Regulator of the final report on the Inspection of the Council's Housing and Homelessness Services and to seek Cabinet approval of an Improvement Plan to address the key recommendations contained within the report in respect of services to homeless people, housing management, and asset management and repairs.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The inspection was carried out by the Scottish Housing Regulator under Section 72 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 on behalf of the Scottish Government. The purpose of inspection is to provide an independent external assessment of the effectiveness of Housing Service delivery and make recommendations to help improvement.
- 2.2 In assessing performance, the Inspection team asked two key questions namely: how good are the services which have been inspected; and how well are these services being managed for improvement?
- 2.3 The Inspection team:
- spoke to tenants, service users, staff and Elected Members of the Council;
 - asked other partner organisations for their views;
 - visited homes and local areas;
 - saw and tested first hand how well services were being delivered;
 - examined key policies, publications, information and the Council's self assessment submitted for this inspection; and
 - analysed published performance and financial information.
- 2.4 The Scottish Housing Regulator's final report was published on 11th April 2008. The final report was placed on the Council's website and also in the Member's Information Point.

3. REPORT CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 East Ayrshire Council's inspection report is one of the most positive reports received by any Scottish local housing authority. It clearly demonstrates the commitment and good work being done by the Council in providing Housing and Homelessness Services within East Ayrshire.
- 3.2 The Inspection report provides an evaluation of the quality of services in three specific areas. There are four possible grading scores: 'A' – Excellent; 'B' – Good; 'C' – Fair; and 'D' – Poor. Housing Management and Asset Management and Repairs received good ratings, ('B' Grade) while Services to Homeless People were rated as fair ('C' Grade).
- 3.3 The Scottish Housing Regulator assessed the Council's Housing Service as having many strengths in the delivery of its services.
- 3.4 In Housing Management, the report highlights:
- the Council's success in housing a large number of people in housing need
 - the wide range of ways provided to customers by the Council to access the Housing Service
 - the excellent range of information provided by the Council to tenants on tenancy and neighbourhood management
 - the Council's good approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour
 - that estates are well managed and tenants are largely happy with the quality of their neighbourhoods
 - the Council's good approach to consultation with tenants and residents in a variety of ways
 - the excellent performance in income maximisation and collecting rent arrears.
- 3.5 In terms of Asset Management and Repairs, assessed strengths include:
- the Council's good progress in gathering reliable information on its assets and the level of investment needed to improve stock condition
 - our approach to consulting with tenants on priorities for improvement works
 - the implementation of improvements to the repairs service, resulting in improved levels of tenant satisfaction
 - our robust approach to asbestos management
 - the good lettable standard for empty houses.
- 3.6 In delivering Services for Homeless People, a number of strengths were identified, including:

- the Council's policy to offer a housing option to all those it finds to be homeless
 - the support provided to people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness
 - our quick response to interviewing homeless applicants
 - the Council's policy to offer homeless people the same choice as other applicants when allocating permanent housing.
- 3.7 In addition, the Inspection Report highlighted a number of issues for the Council to consider to strengthen services to tenants and other service users. Specific examples include the need to:
- amend our approach to cancelling and suspending housing allocations
 - maintain awareness around the requirements to carry out annual gas safety checks
 - put in place a referral protocol for independent advice offered to tenants and prospective tenants.

All of the detailed issues contained within the final report will be considered in the forthcoming Best Value Service Review of Housing Services, due to be completed and reported to Cabinet in December 2008 and will inform future service planning. The key recommendations set out in the report are addressed in the attached Improvement Plan.

4. DRAFT IMPROVEMENT PLAN

- 4.1 The Scottish Housing Regulator published updated guidance on post inspection improvement plans in April 2008. Under the terms of that guidance, grading scores of 'C' or below require that Improvement Plans be submitted to the Regulator for approval. As such, the Council's Improvement Plan in respect of Services for Homeless People requires to be agreed with the Regulator. The draft Improvement Plan, appended to this report, has been prepared in accordance with published guidance and covers all areas highlighted in the key recommendations part of the Inspection Report. For completeness, this includes proposed improvement actions for Housing Management and Asset Management and Repairs. It should be noted, however, that these do not need to be agreed with the Regulator, but are included to reflect the Council's clear commitment to continuous improvement.
- 4.2 The Improvement Plan demonstrates that all actions are specific in their purpose and capable of being monitored for achievement against stated timescales.

5. POLICY AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, together with the associated published framework of performance standards, provide the legislative and regulatory framework for the conduct of these inspections. The Scottish Housing Regulator expects organisations to address weaknesses identified during the Inspection within a 2 year period from the date on which the improvement plan is agreed.
- 5.2 The detailed Improvement Plan set out in the attachment to this report demonstrates the Council's commitment to implement fully the findings and conclusions arising from the Inspection Report.
- 5.3 Over the course of the 2 year period, the Regulator will re-visit the Council to check on progress in implementing the Homelessness Improvement Plan.
- 5.4 The Council's Corporate Management Team has considered and approved the contents of this report.

6. FINANCIAL AND PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None arising directly from this report. Any implications arising from the forthcoming Best Value Service Review of Housing Services will be reported to a future meeting as appropriate. The review of former ring-fenced budgets will take cognisance of the need to secure appropriate levels of funding to develop and sustain effective services to homeless people and ensure delivery of the agreed Improvement Plan.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 Overall, this is a positive report from the Scottish Housing Regulator and demonstrates the Council's standing as one of the top performing Scottish Housing Authorities inspected to date. Officers' assessment of the report's findings places East Ayrshire Council in the top performance quartile of all Scottish local authorities whose Housing and Homelessness Services have been inspected and reported upon to date. The report also offers useful insight into those areas where services could be strengthened further to support delivery of Community Planning objectives covering the opportunities, poverty and environment agendas. Delivery of the agreed improvement plan will ensure the highest quality of service provided to tenants and other service users.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- (i) notes the generally positive conclusions arising from the Scottish Housing Regulator Inspection of East Ayrshire Council's Housing and Homelessness Services:
- (ii) approves the draft improvement plan appended to this report;
- (iii) agrees to forward the Homelessness Improvement Plan to the Scottish Housing Regulator; and
- (iv) otherwise notes the contents of the report.

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 1. 'East Ayrshire Council Inspection Report Scottish Housing Regulator April 2008**

Any person wishing to inspect the background paper listed above should telephone 554876 and ask for Chris McAleavey, Head of Housing Services.

William Stafford
Executive Director of Neighbourhood Services

WS/CMcA/CF

27th May 2008

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East Ayrshire Council - Housing Services Inspection Report – Improvement Plan

Housing Management : Good (B)

The Scottish Housing Regulator April 2008

Improvement Area	Para	Action	Post Holder	Timeline	Priority	Comments
1 Improve approach to suspensions and cancellations of applications for housing.	2.6	1.1 Improve level of information provided to applicants on suspensions process.	HSM	May 2008	High	Acknowledgement/registration letter to include additional information.
		1.2 Review guidance to staff and information provided to applicants.	HSM	May 2008	High	Guidance for staff updated in procedural document.
		1.3 Publish reasons for suspension in house allocations policy.	HSM	May 2008	High	Current criteria to be included in existing policy information, pending review.
		1.4 Amend letters to suspended applicants to include level of points where appropriate.	HSM	May 2008	High	Letter to show points level, but not list position.
		1.5 Publish reasons for cancellation in house applications policy.	HSM	May 2008	High	Current criteria to be included in existing policy information, pending review.
		1.6 Review policy on cancellations as part of review of house allocations policy.	HSM	Dec 2008	Medium	Review of policy to be carried out in conjunction with Tenant Representatives.
		1.7 Review policy on suspensions as part of review of house allocations policy.	HSM	Dec 2008	Medium	Review of policy to be carried out in conjunction with Tenant Representatives.
2 Develop post-decree occupancy procedures.	2.6	2.1 Introduce procedures for managing occupancy where re-possession orders obtained.	HSM	May 2008	High	Procedures drafted. Consultation with Finance and Legal before implementation.

3 Investigate alternatives to eviction.	2.6	3.1 Consider alternatives to eviction in arrears management cases.	HSM	March 2008	High	Complete. Short Scottish Secure Tenancies offered, following Homeless assessment, in appropriate cases. Progress to be monitored by manager on quarterly basis.
		3.2 Strengthen formal referral criteria and procedures to Tenancy Support Team in arrears or Anti Social Behaviour cases.	HSM	April 2008	High	Complete. Referral guidelines and documentation in place. Managers to monitor operation of referral procedures on quarterly basis.
		3.3 Monitor numbers of tenancies ended within 12 months and conduct analysis trends to improve sustainability levels.	HSM	March 2008	Medium	Complete. Reports in place for presentation to scheduled Performance Management Meetings.

Updated: 22 May 2008

Post Holder key

HOHS Head of Housing Services
HSM Housing Services Manager

East Ayrshire Council - Housing Services Inspection Report – Improvement Plan

Asset Management & Repairs: Good (B)

The Scottish Housing Regulator April 2008

Improvement Area	Para	Action	Post Holder	Timeline	Priority	Comments
1 Ensure that the Council meets its statutory obligations with regard to gas safety.	2.6	1.1 Continue implementation of gas safety improvement plan to achieve full compliance with statutory obligations.	HBW	August 2008	High	Revised working practices, introduced in Sept. 2007. Current activity 93.4% level will deliver full compliance by Aug 2008
2 Continue to improve performance in response repairs.	2.6	2.1 Targets to be reviewed as part of cross cutting BVSR of property maintenance services.	HOH	July 2008	High	Final BVSR report to go to Cabinet - July 2008.
		2.2 Deliver refresher training to repairs staff. Review effectiveness of monitoring systems to identify errors.	HOH	Sept 2008	High	Training to follow on from final report.
		2.3 Issue revised written procedure notes to repairs staff.	HOH	March 2008	High	Revised written procedures issued to staff in Repairs Team. To be reviewed quarterly to reflect procedural developments.
3 Continue to develop evidence of value for money in property maintenance rates.	2.6	3.1 Arrangements for demonstrating continuous improvement in obtaining VFM in repairs incorporated into of cross cutting BVSR.	HOH	July 2008	High	Evidence of VFM will feature in BVSR, along with proposals for ensuring and demonstrating continuous improvement.

Updated: 22 May 2008

Post Holder key

HOHS Head of Housing Services

HBW Head of Building and Works

East Ayrshire Council - Housing Services Inspection Report – Improvement Plan

Services for Homeless People : Fair (C)

The Scottish Housing Regulator April 2008

Improvement Area	Para	Action	Post Holder	Timeline	Priority	Comments
1 Ensure that the Council provides emergency accommodation to people approaching the 'out of hours' service.	6.12 6.13	1.1 Review protocol with Helpline for 'out of hours' contacts.	HSM	Dec 07	High	Complete Implemented new protocol and staff training provided Dec 07. Operation of protocol monitored & reviewed quarterly by SMT.
		1.2 Introduce an on-call rota of managers to provide support to front line staff.	HSM	Dec 07	High	Complete System in place for senior managers to be contacted 'out of hours' to provide advice on legislative duties and authorise decisions in complex circumstances. Ongoing review of effectiveness of system by HOHS.
		1.3 Introduce arrangements for senior management to review decisions on 'out of hours' contacts, the morning of the next working day.	HSSM	Dec 07	High	Complete Arrangements in place for 'out of hours' contact details to be reviewed by Homeless Manager and for any follow up action to be implemented. This information is input into the Initial Contact database. HSM conducts review of arrangements quarterly to gauge its effectiveness.

2	Develop a formal referral protocol with an independent advice provider.	6.23 6.24	2.1 Agree formal referral protocol with independent provider of housing information & advice.	HOHS	Dec 08	High	In Progress Discussions with CAB are ongoing to strengthen existing referral arrangements.
3	Improve the transparency of investigation and decision making.	6.28 6.29 6.30	3.1 Deliver refresher training to Homeless Persons Officers.	HSSM	March 08	High	Complete Refresher training has been delivered on 'Priority Need' and 'Intentionality' and the relevant inputs and validations within the HL1 recording system. HSSM conducts ongoing review to ensure accurate HL1 input.
			3.2 Introduce arrangements to monitor level and quality of recording through case management audit process.	HSSM	Dec 07	High	Complete Retrospective 10% inspection from April 2007 has been completed. Currently 25% inspection is being carried out. Feedback systems incorporated into inspection process to ensure improvement activities. Reporting system developed for management information to be reviewed quarterly.
			3.3 Update staff guidance.	HSSM	Sept 08	High	Complete Staff guidance updated Dec 2007. Ongoing review of guidance updates to be systematically informed by case management audit findings. Tool box talks currently being developed

					in line with improvement activities identified through audit process.
3.4	Revise letters to applicants to accurately reflect decision making criteria.	HSSM	Dec 07	High	Complete New suite of letters introduced Dec07. Ongoing development to embed within HL1. HSSM conducts quarterly review of HL1 letters to ensure accuracy, currency & decision transparency.

4	Ensure that the Council provides access housing support for those who are at risk of losing their home.	6.21 6.22	4.1	Review existing referral criteria and procedures when court action is initiated.	HSM	Dec 07	High	Complete Homeless Service contact tenants who have been referred for court action to offer advice on homelessness. Further contact made if tenant is scheduled to be evicted. Operation of procedures reviewed quarterly through SMT.
			4.2	Develop joint approach with key partners to respond to requirements of section 11 of 2003 homelessness legislation.	HSSM	Sept 08	High	In Progress Draft protocol being discussed with key partners. Further arrangements being developed with private sector landlords through the Private Landlords Forum.

5	Reduce high level of repeat homelessness.	6.18	5.1	Review methodology in collating performance information internally and with benchmarking partners.	BVPO	Sept 08	High	Complete Methodology reviewed and we are satisfied that this authority is collating information strictly in line
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						with the Audit Scotland guidance. Annual departmental review of SPI methodology ensuring information collection procedures conforms to guidance and criteria used by other Scottish local authorities.	
		5.2	Commission research into the levels and causes of repeat homelessness.	HSM	Sept 08	High	In Progress Arrangements made to conduct research into the causes of repeat homelessness.
		5.3	Develop a strategic response to tackle repeat homelessness arising from the findings of the commissioned research. Monitor outcomes.	HSSM	March 09	High	In Progress Response to be informed by outcome of research findings. Discussions ongoing with key partners to strengthen support and through-care for identified vulnerable clients.
6	Review procedures for advising applicants of decisions around homelessness issues.	6.34	6.1 Enhance information provided to applicants on the decision review process.	HSSM	June 08	High	Complete HP13 letter (acknowledgement and record of interview) which includes information on the review process is further supported by a new leaflet specifically informing clients about the review process. HSSM conducts quarterly review of information in leaflets and standard letters ensuring it is accurate, current and meets the needs of applicants.

6.2	Develop existing ICT system to ensure robust data collection with regard to reviews.	HSSM	Sept 08	High	In Progress Appeals information to be recorded within HL1 system. New data gathering methodology in development. Currently manually collating this information to aid management reviews.
6.3	Review existing letters to applicants to include information on wider appeals process.	HSSM	March 08	High	Complete Existing letters include comprehensive appeals information. HSSM conducts quarterly review of information in leaflets and standard letters ensuring it is accurate, current and meets the needs of applicants.
6.4	Develop arrangements to capture and record opportunities to inform service improvement	HSSM	June 08	High	Complete Part of case management audit includes field for recommendation for improvement. Ongoing review of recommendations by HSM.
6.5	Introduce an audit of reviews.	HSSM	March 08	High	Complete Review of appeals is included within the 25% case management audit.

7	Quantify need for temporary housing accommodation.	6.40	7.1	Twenty units to be added to existing stock of temporary furnished accommodation.	HSM	May 08	High	In Progress 13 new units now in operation, 7 units awaiting completion of works, due to be returned end of May 08.
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7.2 Introduce arrangements to ensure regular review of supply and demand for temporary accommodation.	HSM	Dec 07	High	Complete Ongoing review by HSM. SMT to review supply of and demand for temporary accommodation on quarterly basis.
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Updated: 27 May 2008

Post Holder key

HOHS Head of Housing Services

HSM Housing Services Manager

HSSM Homeless Service & Strategy Manager

BVPO Best Value & Performance Officer

SMT Senior Management Team