



AGENDA

CABINET

MONDAY, 9 JANUARY 2006

10.30 AM

**COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNCIL OFFICES, ST PETERS HILL,
GRANTHAM**

Duncan Kerr, Chief Executive

CABINET MEMBERS:	Councillor Mrs. Linda Neal (Leader/ Portfolio: Strategic Partnerships & Community Safety), Councillor Teri Bryant (Portfolio: Resources & Assets), Councillor Ray Auger (Portfolio: Healthy Environment), Councillor Paul Carpenter (Deputy Leader & Portfolio: Access and Engagement), Councillor Mrs Frances Cartwright (Portfolio: Organisational Development & Housing) and Councillor John Smith (Portfolio: Economic)
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Cabinet Support Officer:	Lena Shuttlewood tel: 01476 406119 e-mail: l.shuttlewood@southkesteven.gov.uk
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Members of the public are entitled to attend the meeting of the Cabinet at which key decisions will be taken on the issues listed on the following page. Key decisions are marked *.

<p>1. Housing Improvement Programme Update Report</p>

The Leader has agreed to take this as an urgent item at the above meeting in order that members are aware at the earliest opportunity of the receipt of a letter from the Minister for Housing & Planning in which she refers to the Audit Commission's inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing Services.

The recommendations now contained in report DRS29 require a decision now in order for the work to be carried out and reported to Cabinet before the budget is prepared for Council.

REPORT TO CABINET

REPORT OF: Corporate Director Regulatory Services

REPORT NO. DRS29

DATE: 9th January 2006

TITLE:	Housing Improvement Programme Update Report
COUNCIL AIMS/PORTFOLIO HOLDER NAME AND DESIGNATION:	Councillor Frances Cartwright
CORPORATE PRIORITY:	Affordable Housing
CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS:	None
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT IMPLICATIONS:	Unless exempt, this report is a public document and available from the Council's website: www.southkesteven.gov.uk
BACKGROUND PAPERS:	Report DRS15 – Housing Improvement Plan Audit Commission Inspection of Strategic Housing Report 0 May 2005

Introduction

1. The Council approved a Housing Improvement Programme in May 2005 following the Audit Commission's report on the Strategic Housing Inspection. The Leader of the Council has received correspondence from Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Minister for Housing and Planning.

Recommendations

2. The Cabinet is recommended to:
 - 1) Note the contents of the letter from the Minister for Housing and Planning and also note the contents of the Leader of the Council's reply.
 - 2) Request the Corporate Director of Regulatory Services to include a bid for a provision of £25,000 within the Housing Solutions Business Plan for 2006/7 for work with the voluntary sector to deliver the Housing Improvement Plan.

Details of the Report

3. The Leader of the Council has received a letter (attached at appendix A) from the Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Minister for Housing and Planning in connection with the Audit Commission inspection of South Kesteven's Strategic Housing Service, which was undertaken in Spring 2005.

Whilst the letter notes her disappointment in that the service was rated as poor with uncertain prospects for improvement, the letter does acknowledge that there is evidence found at a corporate level of strong commitment amongst senior managers to drive through improvements for the housing services and also notes that Government Office East Midlands (GOEM) has found that the new management is getting to grips with the difficult issues required.

4. The Leader of the Council has responded to this letter and a copy is attached at appendix B. The response confirms the council's commitment to improving performance on strategic housing services and recognises the progress made to date.

The original inspection report identified that advice services were basic and underdeveloped, particularly in relation to homelessness prevention advice. It was also reported that the Council has not developed a comprehensive and structured approach to the prevention of homelessness in partnership with other agencies. In particular, service level agreements with voluntary sector agencies.

5. The restructuring of the Housing Service has resulted in the creation of two distinct units: Tenancy Services dealing with the Council's landlord functions and Housing Solutions dealing with the Council's Strategic and Statutory Housing Services. Work has also been ongoing, as reported in the report on Citizen's Advice Bureau funding, in building the relationship with the CAB with a view to developing a Service Level Agreement.

Whilst the revised structure, when fully populated, will provide additional capacity, further work with the voluntary sector will be required as the voluntary sector is often the first point of contact for a number of people experiencing housing difficulties. In particular, to provide advice to prevent homelessness, such as housing debt advice and help in understanding the rights and obligations of those living in the private sector. It is therefore, suggested that

Cabinet request that a bid for £25,000 be included in the Housing Solutions business plan for 2006/7 and that expressions of interest be sought from voluntary agencies to work in partnership with the Housing Solutions unit to provide housing advice.

Comment by the Director of Finance and Strategic Resources

6. The bid for funding should be included in the relevant Service Plan and considered alongside all of the priority investment decisions in the Budget process.

Contact Officer

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Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister
Creating sustainable communities

APPENDIX A

Cllr Linda Neal
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Yvette Cooper MP
Minister for Housing and Planning

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
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15 DEC 2005

Audit Commission Inspection
South Kesteven Strategic Housing Services

I have recently received a copy of the Audit Commission's Report of the inspection of South Kesteven District Council's Strategic Housing Services.

It is very disappointing for me to note that the Housing Inspectorate has awarded the service a rating of poor with uncertain prospects for improvement. However, the Inspectorate found evidence that at corporate level there is a strong commitment among senior management to drive through improvements to the housing service and GO East Midlands have found that the new management is getting to grips with the difficult issues required. I hope that South Kesteven will continue to work with the Audit Commission and GO East Midlands to ensure planned improvements are followed through to full implementation.

I will continue to monitor South Kesteven's performance and look forward to receiving positive reports of the Council's progress. Should I come to the view that the authority is not making sufficient progress towards compliance with the best value duties contained in Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1999 then I shall need to re-consider my position.

YVETTE COOPER



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Your ref:
Our ref:

Please ask for:
Extension:

Date: 3rd January 2006

Direct Line: 01476 406367

Ms Yvette Cooper
Minister for Housing and Planning
Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
26 Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2WH

Dear Ms. Cooper

Audit Commission Inspection South Kesteven Strategic Housing Services

Thank you for your letter of 15th December, 2005 regarding the Audit Commission's report of the inspection of South Kesteven District Council's Strategic Housing Services.

I am pleased that you have noted that there is strong commitment to drive through improvements to the housing service and that this has been recognised by GO East Midlands.

During the inspection and since receiving the final report members and officers have seriously considered the Commission's findings and have put into place a number of significant measures, which I am sure, will lead to a major improvement and development of the service. In particular these are:

- Adopted the improvement plan implementing the recommendations arising from the Strategic Housing inspection report
- Appointment of a new member champion for Housing Cllr Frances Cartwright who is now responsible for all of the Council's Housing Services
- Allocation of additional funding £210,000 (in year) to create and facilitate additional capacity from the Council's Capacity and Priority budgets and Reserves
- Implementation of a restructure of Housing and Associated Services to create two distinct units
 - "Housing Solutions" to create a unit to focus on the delivery of the Council's Strategic and Statutory housing functions

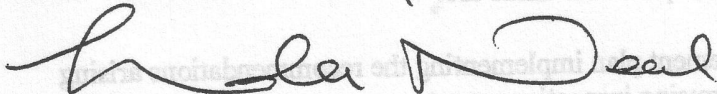
- "Tenancy Services" to create a separate unit to focus on the delivery of the Council's landlord functions
- Commissioned and received a Combined Housing Needs and Private Sector Stock Condition survey report which also incorporated an assessment of the needs of Gypsies and Travellers
- Undertaken a fundamental review of the Council's Housing Strategy due for submission to GOEM in Spring 2006
- Affordable housing approved as a category A Priority of the Council for "stepped" improvement, which follows the Council's earlier decision to identify Large Scale Voluntary Stock Transfer as the preferred option of the Council for the future ownership and management of the Council's Housing Stock
- Building relationships with Housing Partners Countywide resulting in a successful joint bid for Innovation funding which in South Kesteven's case will be to fund work with the Citizen's Advice Bureau on Homelessness prevention within the private sector housing market

Whilst we have achieved the above, there have been some external barriers, which have impeded our rate of progress, although we are determined to overcome these. Particularly, they relate to our ability to recruit suitably experienced and qualified housing professionals, which I am aware is not uncommon nationally; and the current local planning allocations emanating from the regional planning policies, which have had an impact on our ability to deliver sufficient affordable housing, in the light of ripple affect upon the south of our district from the London, Stansted, Cambridge and Peterborough Growth Corridor.

However, on a positive note, I am also looking forward, in the New Year, to the outcome of the work that officers have done with Bob Lawrence one of the ODPM's specialist advisors on Homelessness Prevention.

I am sure that you will see that the Council has taken the outcome of the Inspection seriously and has committed significant investment to the service and is introducing a new approach to its Strategic Housing Service, which can only bear fruit upon the re-inspection of the service.

Yours Sincerely



Linda Neal
Leader