

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.

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