

37/07 ANNUAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION LETTER

Mesdames S. Jewkes, Relationship Manager and L. Tomlinson, Audit Manager, from the Audit Commission were in attendance for this item.

The main messages for the Council were as follows:-

- Breckland Council had a strong focus on improvement. 70% of Performance Indicators had improved which was above the average of 58% and 42% were in the best quartile which was above the average of 31%.
- Local people were getting some high quality services, especially in benefits and were experiencing improved access to services and information and overall customer satisfaction was improving.
- The impact of migrant workers on the local area had been recognised and steps had been taken to integrate them into the local communities.
- Business and improvement plans matched Council priorities and robust performance management assisted delivery. Capacity had recently been enhanced by key partnerships with both Parkwood Leisure and Capita.
- Strategic Housing was not improving and Cultural Services were judged to be 'poor' in a recent inspection.
- There was a lack of engaging and consulting well with older people.
- Risk management, although improving was not fully integrated with performance management framework and annual delivery plans.
- Senior management capacity had been stretched although this should be resolved when the new Chief Executive takes up his post.
- The Council made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2006, except for the failure to put arrangements in place to manage its significant business risks.
- Overall corporate governance arrangements were satisfactory but further work was necessary to develop risk management arrangements.

Breckland officers were thanked for their assistance and co-operation throughout the audit inspection.

In response the Chairman stated that there had been a significant amount of work undertaken in all areas to improve performance, particularly in risk management. He wished to thank both Members and staff for the increase in the Best Value Performance Indicators.

The Executive Member for Cultural Services stated that there were many projects being undertaken to increase participation of older people within the community.

A new Cultural Team had been established and had already set up large scale activities including a partnership with the Theatre Royale to take out into all areas of Breckland.

With regard to housing issues the Executive Member for Environment (Housing and Planning) stated that housing was the number one priority in the Direction of Travel Statement. There had been real progress in relation to homelessness with the establishment of a Young Homeless Forum which had impacted positively on homeless numbers within Breckland. In addition a Private Landlords Forum had been a success with more private landlords releasing homes for rent. The Norfolk Sanctuary Scheme had been established which provided safe homes for those fleeing domestic violence and Breckland were actively seeking a domestic violence shelter within the District.

Sue Jewkes understood that there was a timing issue with the release of the Audit Inspection Letter and not all improvements could be included within the statement.

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission enquired what measures had been put in place to raise the level of wages for migrant workers. Was Breckland working with Trading Standards to punish rogue traders using cheap migrant worker labour? Finally, whether steps were being taken to ensure that the skills taught were in line with the job vacancies within Breckland.

In response the Chief Executive stated that the Economic Development Team were working hard to understand the skills gap within Breckland and ensure that those skills were being taught. Appropriate action would be taken against any illegal traders but information regarding those traders was needed before any prosecution could take place. Other local authorities were looking towards Breckland for advice or information on dealing with migrant workers especially with regard to the work undertaken by the Community Liaison Officer.

A Social Inclusion Strategy Roadshow was currently 'on tour' within Breckland and those views could be used to shape the Strategy for Breckland.

Work was undertaken with the police to assist migrant workers who were being exploited by illegal traders and would cease the activities of those traders.

In relation to the REV project the Executive Member for Commercial Services stated that this project together with the Economic Development Strategy would have a positive impact in Breckland as the Council was fully committed to drive the Strategy forward.

The Executive Member for the Cabinet Office stated that the Star Chamber had improved the use of resources within the Council. The strong Performance Management culture would continue to be improved together with further integrated working.

Members thanked both Sue Jewkes and Laura Tomlinson for their presentation and work undertaken to produce the Audit Letter.