



REPORT TO: Council Meeting

DATE OF MEETING: 29th June 2006

REPORT OF: Assistant Chief Executive

SUBJECT: Environmental Service Inspection Judgement

ITEM NUMBER: 10

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise members of the result of the Environmental Services Inspection. The Inspectors appointed to assess the service issued their findings in a report published on 18th May 2006.

1.2 Members are recommended to:

1. Acknowledge the receipt of the Audit Commissions Report set out in Appendix 1 attached to this report
2. Acknowledge, communicate and celebrate the achievement of the service
3. Record their thanks and appreciation for the staff involved in the delivery of the service
4. Agree that the service develops an Improvement Plan to address the recommendations and areas for improvement identified in the judgement, in accord with proposals in the 2006/2007 Corporate Plan.

2. CONSULTATION

2.1 Corporate Management Team and the Head of Environmental Services have been consulted.

2.2 No further consultations have been felt to be necessary

3. CORPORATE PLAN AND PRIORITIES

3.1 The subject of this report is relevant to the council's Corporate Plan and all the council's priorities. The services that are subject to the report underpin **Priority 5 Neighbourhood Management**. As part of the Audit Commission judgement relates to value for money **Priority 7, Maximising Efficiencies** is also relevant, particularly in terms of value for money..

3.2 The Council's new Corporate Plan for 2006 – 2009 was considered at Council on 25th May 2006. It will be published by the end of June. It includes specific proposals to develop the service as a result of this judgement.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial

There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. Proposals that may be developed as part of any improvement plan may have financial impacts and these will be considered during the development of the improvement plan. Part of the judgement relates to value for money. In developing any improvement plan the service will need to prove value for money as will the council across all services

4.2 Legal

It is not proposed that the council challenges the inspector's findings. It is not therefore considered that the report presents any significant legal implications.

4.3 Personnel

It is not considered that there are any specific personal issues. The report recommends that the Executive acknowledges the achievements of those who deliver the service.

4.4 Other Services

There are no direct impacts on other services as a result of this report. There may be impacts as a result of responding to recommendations and areas for improvement. An example of this will be the development of service level agreements. The judgement sets a benchmark for other services to aspire to. The judgement is important to the corporate health of the council.

4.5 Diversity

It is not felt that there are any diversity issues arising from the report. Again there may be issues arising from the development of any improvement plan.

4.6 Risk

The main risk is the failure of the service to respond to the inspectors findings. The report recommends the development of an action plan which ought to effectively manage this risk.

4.7 Crime and Disorder

It is not felt there are any specific implications of the report on Crime and Disorder. Crime remains a key issue for our community and it is not an issue the council can resolve on its own. Working in Partnership is one of the council's priorities and this is not proposed to change. The service continues to work in partnership with the Police and Fire and Rescue Service to help to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

4.8 Other Implications

The report does not relate to a key decision. The main other implication of the judgement is communication. The judgement has been publicized on the council's website and on the intranet. Press releases have already been issued and the Executive Member with responsibility has undertaken local radio interviews. The judgement will feature heavily in the council's new corporate plan. Residents and stakeholders who took part in the inspection, and the external challengers engaged in the inspection preparation have been provided with a copy of the inspector's report. It is important that the council maximizes opportunities to promote the findings.

5. **BACKGROUND, POSITION STATEMENT AND OPTION APPRAISAL**

5.1 The Audit Commission carried out an inspection of Environmental Service Inspection in the week commencing 27th February 2006. The council agreed to undertake the inspection in November last year. The service produced a self assessment based on Audit Commission guidance and submitted this in advance to the inspection team. The self assessment was subject to a challenge event prior to submission with the engagement of service deliverers from adjacent councils. The assessment came to the view that the service was a **good service with promising prospects of improvement**.

5.2 In undertaking the inspection the inspection team considered a wealth of documentary evidence to back up the statements made in the self assessment. They toured the district and interviewed key members of staff and Members. They held focus groups with service users and interviewed partners. The Inspection team were complementary about how the council organised and managed the inspection.

5.3 The Inspectors published their findings on 18th May 2006. They concurred with the council's self assessment in concluding that the view that the service was a **good service with promising prospects of improvement**.

5.4 In summary they reached the good service view on the basis of the following:

- There are generally above average levels of satisfaction with environmental services with good service outcomes during 2005/06.
- The service is increasing the opportunity for residents to use open spaces through biodiversity and conservation work with communities.
- The Council maintains high levels of cleanliness in the district measured as top quartile performance in 2004/05.
- The Council is meeting recycling and composting targets, rates have increased in the last year from 12.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent in 2005/06.
- There is a proactive approach to waste minimisation which has resulted in a slight reduction in the amount of household waste collected, against a national trend of increased amounts.
- The service is working more closely with communities through new practices such as zonal working and neighbourhood management pilots in two areas.
- It has received environmental awards include Green Flag, Green Apple and a Gold Award at the Tatton Royal Horticultural Society show.

5.4 From an area of improvement point of view the Inspectors also found:

- communication of the Council's overall approach to sustaining the environment and the services provided is not fully effective;
- the service lacks a consistent approach to managing value for money, and consequently may not be maximising its use of resources; and
- agreements between the service and its partners and other Council departments are not robust with few service level agreements in place.

5.5 In reaching their conclusions on prospects for improvement the inspectors concluded;

- The service can demonstrate a significant track record in recent years that has delivered improving performance through new and improved working practices and enhanced services that users recognise.
- Satisfaction with services and facilities is generally increasing.
- The Council is an effective environmental leader and the service has strong corporate and political support.
- The service has a good calibre of staff who are committed to driving improvements for their customers.
- There is good partnership working to increase the service's capacity to deliver.
- Plans for the future showing how the service will contribute to corporate and community priorities are set out in service plans and are supported by the Council's performance management system.
- The performance management system and the links between some strategies, policies and standards are not fully complete.
- Procurement and asset management arrangements at the corporate level are still in development and have yet to make a positive impact on the service.

5.6 The Inspectors make only four recommendations which are as follows:

- *Improve communication, including feedback to local residents, of the Council's overall approach to sustaining the environment and the services provided.*
- *Formalise agreements with partners and other Council departments who contribute to the delivery of or require the use of environmental services.*
- *Improve the framework under which the service is delivered by linking strategies, policies and standards.*
- *Expand value for money assessment to all areas of the service through analysis of the benefits of expected outcomes from decision making, investment and community involvement against the costs of providing the service and making the best use of resources through procurement, asset management and benchmarking of costs.*

5.7 There are other areas within the report where the inspectors have suggested improvements can be made and where they have not felt they needed to make specific recommendations upon.

5.8 The inspector's findings are a major boost for the council and the communities we serve. The result is impressive taking into account that this inspection was undertaken under the criteria of the 'harder test'. The judgement acknowledges the hard work and the level of service the Environmental Services Teams deliver on a daily basis as well as how far it has improved since the earlier inspection. It acknowledged the work put into

preparing for and managing the inspection which will further build on the council reputation with the Audit Commissions. The council can learn from the reasons why the inspectors reached their conclusions and how well the inspection was undertaken. It is another step forward in our journey out of recovery. This ought to be acknowledged, celebrated and communicated.

- 5.9 There is no room for complacency. The council needs all services to continue to improve and Environmental Services cannot stand. It needs to develop and implement an improvement plan to respond to the findings. This needs to encompass the specific recommendations identified in the inspectors report as well as other areas of improvement the report identifies.

6. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 6.1 Members are recommended to:

1. Acknowledge the receipt of the Audit Commissions Report set out in Appendix 1 attached to this report
2. Acknowledge, communicate and celebrate the achievement of the service
3. Record their thanks and appreciation for the staff involved in the delivery of the service
4. Agree that the service develops an Improvement Plan to address the recommendations and areas for improvement identified in the judgement, in accord with proposals in the 2006/2007 Corporate Plan.

7. **BACKGROUND PAPERS / DOCUMENTS REFERRED**

- 7.1 Chester-le-Street Corporate Plan 2005/2008
7.2 Chester-le-Street Corporate Plan 2006/2009
7.3 Audit Commission – Environment ; Environmental Services Chester-le Street District Council May 2006

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16th June 2006
Version 1.0

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