

**Report to: Audit and Governance
Committee**



**Report Reference: LDF-023-2010/11
Date of Meeting: 14 February 2011**

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Performance Management

Subject: Audit Commission National Local Government Studies

Responsible Officer: Steve Tautz (01992 564180)

Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That the Committee note the recent publication by the Audit Commission of national reports relevant to the Council's areas of service provision, and any actions or implications for the Council arising from the reports.

Executive Summary:

This report provides details of national local government studies recently published by the Audit Commission that are relevant to the Council's areas of service provision. Arrangements for the reporting of local government studies issued by the Commission were agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 24 September 2009.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

At the meeting of the Committee held on 22 June 2009, members requested that details of all Audit Commission national reports and publications received by the Council be reported to the Committee for information. To meet the request of members, the publication of national local government studies by the Audit Commission that relate to the Council's areas of service provision, is reported to the Committee on an ongoing basis, with each report having first been considered by the Corporate Governance Group. The Commission's Executive Summary (where produced) of each study is provided to members for information, together with a weblink for the download of the full document.

Other Options for Action:

None. This report is presented at the request of the Audit and Governance Committee.

Report

1. The Audit Commission's national studies programme aims to improve local public services through an independent authoritative analysis of national evidence and local practice. The Commission has a duty to undertake studies designed to make recommendations for improving the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of certain bodies, and to improve the financial and other management of local public bodies. The Commission's national reports address strategic issues affecting specific sectors as well as the public sector as a whole, identifying practice that works, highlighting emerging findings and examining national trends to influence local practice and national policy. Each of national local

government studies published by the Audit Commission since 2000 can be downloaded directly from the Commission's website at:

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/pages/list.aspx?ctype=ACNationalStudy>

2. The following national local government study relating directly to the Council's areas of service provision, has been published by the Audit Commission since the last meeting of the Committee:

(a) 'Protecting The Public Purse 2010: Fighting Fraud Against Local Government and Local Taxpayers' (October 2010).

3. A summary of this study has not been published by the Audit Commission. A full copy of the study is therefore attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

4. The 'Protecting The Public Purse' report published by the Audit Commission has been considered by the Corporate Governance Group (CGG). The CGG is satisfied that most of the recommendations contained in the report are already carried out by the Council. In addition, the Internal Audit Unit are currently engaged in a study on recruitment processes for permanent and temporary staff.

5. In terms of the recommendations contained in the report relating to registered housing providers, the Director of Housing has advised that these would have been implemented through the Council's one-year pilot 'Social Housing Fraud Initiative' agreed by the Cabinet, utilising the £10,000 grant from the CLG for this purpose. The Cabinet agreed to the appointment of a one-year temporary, part-time Housing Officer (Fraud) post, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), topped up by Housing Revenue Account funds. Although the post was advertised and an appointment provisionally made to an internal candidate, this offer had to be subsequently withdrawn. The post was re-advertised but, before an appointment could be made, the post was frozen under the Council's recruitment Freeze. At the time of writing, it is unsure if the post is covered by the Recruitment freeze exemption relating to externally funded posts, since the post is only partially joint-funded, and the position in this respect will be clarified by Management Board early in 2011.

6. In terms of the Audit Commission's specific recommendations relating to registered housing providers, the Director of Housing has advised that:

(a) both targeted and random tenancy audits would have been undertaken by the frozen Housing Officer (Fraud) post. The post-holder would also have liaised with Registered Housing Providers (RHPs) operating in the District on suspicious cases. RHPs are responsible for their own arrangements for undertaking tenancy audits, which the frozen post would have encouraged;

(b) the Council does treat unlawful tenancy cases as fraud, takes immediate action when suspicions come to light, and has been successful in recovering properties;

(c) one of the key roles of the frozen Housing Officer (Fraud) post was to work with other RHPs in the District to set up a network to develop joint initiatives and incentives to tackle tenancy fraud, including the introduction of a reward scheme for tip-offs from members of the public;

(d) recovering fraudulent profits from illegal sub-letting was one of the initiatives that the frozen Housing Officer (Fraud) post would have investigated; and

(e) the Housing Directorate has a copy of the CLG Guidance on tackling tenancy fraud, and the frozen Housing Officer (Fraud) post would have used the various initiatives set out in the Guidance to identify and to respond to tenancy fraud.

7. The Internal Audit Unit will be reviewing the Council's lettings procedures during early 2011, and the Chief Internal Auditor will report to the Committee and the Corporate Governance Group in due course, on the findings of this exercise.

8. This Audit Commission study, 'Against The Odds: Re-Engaging Young People In Education, Employment Or Training' (Updated November 2010), does not relate directly to the Council's areas of service provision, other than in terms of a general overview, and is aimed at members of children's trusts and local strategic partnerships. The CGG has referred this report to the Child Protection Working Party for consideration.

9. The Committee is requested to note the recent publication by the Audit Commission of national reports relevant to the Council's areas of service provision, and the action being taken by the Council to meet relevant recommendations.

Resource Implications:

None.

Legal and Governance Implications:

There are no legal implications or Human Rights Act issues arising from the recommendations in this report.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

There are no implications arising from the recommendations in this report for the Council's commitment to the Nottingham Declaration for climate change, the corporate Safer, Cleaner and Greener initiative, or any Crime and Disorder issues within the district.

Consultation Undertaken:

This report has been agreed by the Corporate Governance Group, and any possible actions or implications arising from the Audit Commission's national reports will be reported to the Committee. Relevant reports of the Audit Commission are also considered by the Corporate Executive Forum and Management Board as necessary.

Background Papers:

Audit Commission report - 'Protecting The Public Purse 2010: Fighting Fraud Against Local Government and Local Taxpayers' (October 2010)

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

There are no risk management implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report.

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?

No. The content of this report has no specific equality implications. However, the equality implications arising from any proposals for action in respect of areas for local authority improvement recommended by the Audit Commission, would need to be considered if pursued by the Council.

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?

N/A.

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?

N/A.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?

N/A.