



**REGENERATION ENVIRONMENT HOUSING
AND COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL**

**AGENDA
ITEM:**

15 DECEMBER 2004

7.8

ENVIRONMENT INSPECTION

Ward(s): All

Forward Plan: Yes

Portfolio: Councillor Marco Longhi, Environment

Service Area: Built Environment

Summary of Report:

This report presents the findings of the inspection by the Audit Commission of a range of the Council's environmental services. These services are now judged to be "fair" with "excellent prospects for improvement".

This demonstrates a significant improvement since the previous inspection in 2001 and is another important step on the Council's path towards being an excellent authority by 2008.

Background Papers:

Audit Commission Inspection Report on Environmental Services, January 2002.

Reason for Scrutiny:

To ensure that outcomes from the improvement plan for Environmental Services are achieved.

Recommendations:

1. The Panel is recommended to note the contents of this report.

Signed:

Executive Director: S Davidson-Grant

Date: 30/11/04 .

Resource and Legal Considerations

This report has no direct resource implications but it is important to note that the Audit Commission considers that the very good progress that has been made since the previous inspection is due, in part, to increased investment with particular reference to road maintenance and recycling.

Citizen Impact

The inspection report identifies, amongst other things, the positive impact for our citizens of improved recycling facilities, the Gold Standard for Walsall Town Centre, better maintenance of the principal road network and much improved street lighting.

The inspectors' statement that Walsall has "excellent prospects for improvement" will give our citizens confidence that Walsall is on target to achieve its Vision of being an "excellent" authority by 2006.

Environment Impact

Rising standards in the Council's environmental services are having a wide-ranging impact on the environment of the borough. The Audit Commission's report praises several initiatives and service improvements that have had a significant positive impact on the borough's environment. These include the launch of the Litter Hit Squad, the abandoned vehicles amnesty and the Carpenter's Shop, all of which are projects on which the Council has worked successfully with its partners.

The report also noted the work Walsall Council has done in producing a suite of service standards relating to environmental issues of interest to our citizens, such as The Gold Standard, Abandoned Vehicles, Refuse Collection and the Litter Hit Squad.

Performance Management and Risk Management Issues

Improved project and performance management will be incorporated as part of the Improvement Plan.

Risk management issues will continue to be monitored regularly and, corrective action will be undertaken promptly where projects are identified as at risk of not achieving forecast targets.

Equality Implications

The service improvements generally benefit all sections of the community. The impact of all environmental services is being assessed through equality action planning in line with corporate policy and adjustments made as necessary to ensure equal opportunity for all.

Consultation

Environmental services officers and key partners have been made aware of the findings of the inspection and thanked for their invaluable contributions. Arrangements will also be made to ensure that the findings and planned further improvements are also communicated to our customers.

Vision 2008

Achieving a judgement of "fair", with "excellent prospects for improvement" is a significant step towards achieving the Council's Vision of becoming an excellent authority by 2008.

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ENVIRONMENT INSPECTION

1. INTRODUCTION

A range of the Council's environment services were inspected by the Audit Commission in September 2004. The services inspected were as follows:-

- Highways and Transportation
- Waste Management
- Grounds Maintenance

This was very similar to the scope of a Best Value inspection carried out in 2001, when the services were judged to be "poor" with "no prospects for improvement".

The Commission's inspection report has been published and now rates these services as being "fair" with "excellent prospects for improvement". The report states that the Council has made very good progress in improving its environmental services since the previous inspection which, it feels, has been brought about by increased investment in services, improved management, a committed workforce, effective partnerships and closer working across the services.

There has been a clear focus on service improvement in the last two years, it continues, and this has resulted in impressive improvements. The Council has demonstrated the ability to make changes to order to ensure that the services improve. The report also comments that there is now an effective leadership from councillors and senior management and that staff are committed and aware of their performance targets.

2. STRENGTHS

The strengths of the services identified in the report include:

- Walsall Town Centre is clean and well presented
- Street cleaning across the rest of the Borough is generally effective
- Refuse collection is a relatively low cost and reliable service
- Play equipment within parks is generally well maintained and regularly inspected
- Transport initiatives are delivering positive outcomes with improved public transport, road casualties reducing and particular success to improve street lighting
- There are increasing opportunities for walking and cycling and improving open space to encourage use
- Many elements of environmental services are being recognised nationally through awards
- Performance in some key performance indicators compares well with other authorities.

The prospects for improvement are 'excellent' because:

- The Council has a clear overall vision and there is a strong focus on achievement
- There is a strong commitment from all involved in environmental services to achieve the stated goal of excellence
- Investment in services has improved the environment with generally well maintained clean open spaces, roads and footways
- There is significant additional investment planned over the next two years to further improve recycling performance, the standard of play equipment and condition of roads
- Councillors are providing strong and effective leadership and commitment to service improvement and are prepared to take and implement difficult decisions
- Senior officers are working well within this overall leadership to implement the improvements
- The service has responded to criticism in the previous environmental inspection by taking corrective action and now has a track record of improvement
- The service is near to completing a restructure that should increase capacity and result in more co-ordinated working and appointments to key posts
- There is good partnership working in all the environmental services with strong community links and benefits from working with the private sector adding expertise and sharing knowledge to deliver improved performance.

Because the inspection team recognises that the prospects for improvement are excellent, the Commission has made few recommendations. There are just three of them and these are that the Council continues to:

- Complete and co-ordinate strategies and identify environmental service links to the ten vision priorities;
- Use the existing service planning framework to clarify the actions to deliver of waste targets, identifying the expected contribution of different initiatives; and
- Develop the lessons from transport partnering arrangements and apply to other areas of the Council.

These actions, which are clearly focussed on the Council continuing to undertake activities already in place and planned, will be incorporated in directorate and service plan actions.

The inspection report can be viewed on the Audit Commission's website at www.auditcommission.gov.uk

