

# LA SNI Pilot

# Short Notice

# Inspection

Southampton City Council

June 2009



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# Audit Commission Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing services, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

Short notice inspections (SNIs) have been developed to encourage improvements in the performance of local authorities and housing associations at delivering services to their customers. They focus on the outcomes for residents and work on the basis that these organisations will concentrate on improving services rather than preparing for an inspection, which could happen at any time.

The SNI methodology has not previously been utilised for local authority strategic housing services and is therefore being trialled for the first time in this inspection. Southampton City Council has volunteered to participate in this pilot and to provide commentary on the process from the perspective of an inspected body. This report has not therefore been published on the Audit Commission's website.

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# The Context

- 1 Southampton is a major port with a population of over 200,000. The level of population growth (9.6 per cent) exceeded the average for the South East between 1997 and 2007 but it is projected to increase at a lower than average rate between 2016 and 2029. However, the number of households is expected to grow at an above average rate for the South East over the same period. The 2001 Census shows that Southampton had the highest proportion of black and minority ethnic (BME) residents in the Hampshire region at 7.6 per cent, projected to rise 11.2 per cent by 2006.
- 2 The level of social housing (23 per cent) is nearly twice the average for the South East. At 23 per cent, the proportion of private rented homes is almost three times higher than the national average but the proportion of owner-occupied homes is much lower (53 per cent compared to 71 per cent nationally). More than a third of homes in Southampton are flats, one of the highest proportions in the South East and more than double the average for England.
- 3 Southampton is the most affordable place in Hampshire to buy a home with an affordability ratio of 7.01<sup>1</sup>. However, average house prices in the city rose by 89 per cent between 2000 and 2008, households in receipt of benefit make up 26 per cent of the population and average income levels are only slightly above the national average. As a result, the demand for social housing is high and there are currently 13,000 households on the waiting list.
- 4 The housing requirement within the South East Plan for the city is for 16,300 new homes in the period 2006 to 2026 which is an annualised target of 815 homes. This is also the target adopted in Southampton's Local Area Agreement.
- 5 The Council is a member of Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH), a sub-regional partnership of eleven local authorities which has come together to address the economic and regeneration issues facing urban South Hampshire, focused on the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton.

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## The scope of the inspection

- 6 The scope of this inspection focused on the Council's approach to enabling the provision of new housing and related aspects of its strategic approach to housing delivery. It also included an assessment of how the Council is addressing three cross-cutting themes within the areas included in the inspection's scope: access and customer care, diversity and value for money.
- 7 We would like to thank the staff of Southampton City Council who made us feel welcome during the inspection, met our requests efficiently and provided useful feedback on the short notice inspection process and related methodology.

Dates of inspection: 9 to 11 June 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> A household with an average income in the area would need to find 7.01 times their income to be able to purchase an average priced home

## The Context

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# Summary of our findings

- 8 We have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Assessment**

How good is the service?	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access and customer care<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> </ul>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value for Money</li> </ul>	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Approach</li> </ul>	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling the provision of housing</li> </ul>	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses

- 9 We have asked Southampton City Council to consult with its stakeholders on the findings of this report and on the preparation of an action plan to implement our recommendations.

<sup>2</sup> Access and Customer Care, Diversity and Value for Money are assessed in relation to the service areas inspected only.

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# How good is the service?

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## Access and Customer Care in the service areas inspected

**10** We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

**11** There are a number of strengths.

- There is a strong culture of customer care within the service, supported by a well-developed framework of customer charters and internal awards, with some service standards in place.
- Well-located Council offices and a range of access routes (including a one-stop-shop, planning portal, free pre-application discussions, a duty officer and a single point of contact for all planning agreements) help to ensure that customers can easily access the service.
- There are clear standards in place to help housing associations understand the quality of service they will receive from the Council, helping to promote effective joint working on housing delivery.
- There is clear written guidance available to developers to help them understand the Council's policies and requirements, including supplementary planning guidance. This helps developers identify high level planning constraints and submit appropriate planning applications, saving both costs and time.
- The Council has begun to assess tenants' satisfaction with their new homes and to seek feedback from developers on the enabling process. Initial returns from new tenants found that 83 per cent were either very satisfied or satisfied with their new homes.

**12** There are some weaknesses.

- Customer feedback systems are relatively new in some key areas and there is a lack of routine exit surveys for planning customers. As a result, customer feedback has yet to influence work processes or design standards.
- Service standards are either not in place or are not well publicised for all areas of the development control service. This means that customers are not always able to make informed decisions about the services that are available.

### Diversity in the service areas inspected

13 We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

14 There are a number of strengths.

- The Council has a well-established corporate equality and diversity framework and provides diversity training for all staff. This helps to promote a consistent focus on the housing needs of diverse groups within the service.
- Strategic housing work, such as the black and minority ethnic (BME) housing needs survey and housing strategy for older people have influenced the delivery of services to meet identified needs, including the development of larger homes for some BME families and extra care housing.
- Close work with the Supporting People team has improved the pattern of supported housing for vulnerable people. For example, through the development of new purpose-built schemes which offer better support.
- Eight per cent of new build completions since April 2007 have been wheelchair adapted, giving people who use wheelchairs better access to suitable housing.
- Accessible buildings and the offer of translation facilities for all documents reduce access barriers for some vulnerable people.

15 There are some weaknesses.

- The Council has been slow to respond to the need for additional pitches for gypsies and travellers. This adds to the barriers facing the gypsy and traveller community in securing accommodation and increases the likelihood of unauthorised encampments in the city.
- Aspirational design standards relating to Lifetime Homes and access for disabled people set out in planning policies are not being monitored, meaning that the service does not know how many homes are meeting the needs of some diverse communities.
- Robust equality impact assessments have not been completed for a number of key areas within the service. This increases the risk that services and/or policies may not be meeting the needs of some diverse groups.



## How good is the service?

### Strategic approach

16 We found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

17 There are a number of strengths.

- Participation in PUSH is helping the Council to ensure that its strategic work is well integrated at sub-regional level and to improve partnership working with other Councils. This helps to ensure that the City and the wider sub-region are better placed to develop well-coordinated responses to issues such as sustainability and inclusion, to influence Government policy and to develop a shared agenda for delivery.
- Affordable housing is clearly a high level priority for the Council and its sub-regional partners and this is reflected in all key plans. This ensures that key decision makers and partners are focused on housing outcomes for the community.
- Sustainability features highly amongst the strategic objectives. All developments in the city are expected to achieve an equivalent rating to the EcoHomes/BREEAM 'very good' rating (and by 2012 an 'excellent' rating) with particular emphasis on water efficiency. This helps to tackle fuel poverty in vulnerable households.
- There is a strong evidence base to help the Council identify housing need and supply issues. This will help the Council and its partners deliver the right type, size and quantity of new housing.
- The housing strategy sets challenging and ambitious targets for the delivery of new homes and makes appropriate links to wider health, training and employment, community safety and sustainability issues. A strong focus on the range of challenges facing Southampton will help to promote sustainable communities.
- Housing and Supporting People policies are well aligned. This has led to better supported housing services for a range of vulnerable people.
- Good joint working between the planning and housing enabling teams helps the service to monitor progress on housing schemes, develop planning policy and streamline the enabling process, contributing to effective delivery of new homes.
- The Council is transforming the balance of the communities in its eleven priority neighbourhoods. Over half of all new housing has been in the priority neighbourhoods (a total of 1,056 new homes) with just 26 per cent of new homes being affordable. This is helping to improve the integration and social inclusion of its communities in poorer parts of the City.

18 There are some weaknesses.

- The affordable housing requirements of the Local Plan are currently relatively modest, requiring developments of 15 or more units to provide up to 25 per cent affordable housing (despite the Council's original intentions to set a threshold of 5 units which was overturned by the planning inspector).
- The Council is not monitoring the impact of its design guidance and its commitment to sustainability standards is not well-understood by private developers. As a result, its aspirations for well-designed and sustainable homes may not be realised.
- The lack of agreement about the need for gypsies and travellers sites is acting as a barrier to progress in meeting the accommodation needs of this group.
- Despite some good initiatives, the Council and its partners are only just developing a more strategic approach to addressing the challenges proposed by the recession. Without a clear framework, there is a risk that some housing developments may fail to materialise.

### Enabling the provision of housing

19 We found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

20 There are a number of strengths.

- The service is performing very strongly in enabling the delivery of new housing in Southampton, with an average of 1,040 new homes completed over the last five years. This has helped many residents find housing solutions in the City.
- The delivery of affordable housing over the last five years has averaged just over 40 per cent of all new completions, with 71 per cent of these homes for rent. This has helped many people who cannot afford market housing to secure affordable homes.
- The Council is helping to promote intermediate housing by working with the zone agent to raise its profile. This has helped many people get a foothold on the home ownership ladder and resulted in only one completed shared ownership home being unsold despite challenging market conditions.
- The Council is maximising the potential for new house completions through its requirement for challenging residential densities, helping to ensure that each development maximises its potential for new homes.
- A very small minority (less than five per cent) of new housing developments have been on greenfield sites. The use of previously developed land protects recreational space within the city and prevents urban sprawl.
- The service manages the development of affordable housing effectively, with contractual agreements with each housing association, quarterly progress monitoring and effective partnership working with housing associations and developers. This helps to ensure the timely delivery of new homes.
- A clear and competency-based selection process for the housing associations which Southampton works with has helped to ensure that the six preferred partners are adding value to developments through additional community benefits.

## How good is the service?

- New homes are finished to a good standard using high quality components, reflecting initiatives such as design competitions and input from the City Design Team and an architects' panel. All homes increasingly meet sustainability code level three. This helps to reduce energy costs for people who may be facing fuel poverty.
- The Council is prepared to take difficult decisions in order to meet its housing obligations, for example, by making changes to design and providing assurances on the management of the housing, it has been able to keep some contested large housing developments on track.
- The Council is supporting development through the commitment of its own resources, helping to facilitate high levels of social rented housing.
- The Council has provided strong support to developers to mitigate the effect of the recession and maintain the delivery of new housing, including the re-phasing of affordable housing and the postponement of payments under section 106 arrangements. This has helped developers to mitigate the effect of the recession and keep housing delivery on track.

21 There are some weaknesses.

- Low delivery of larger family housing in recent years means that the Council and its partners are not yet providing effectively for the accommodation needs of the whole community.
- Below average performance in deciding planning applications in 2007/08 and failure to meet the services' own target on the level of successful appeals slows the delivery of new housing and can bring added costs to developers and the service.
- Some tenants are expressing dissatisfaction with some aspects of their new homes. Based on 77 responses to date, more than 25 per cent of new tenants express some dissatisfaction with the quality and space of their new home, soundproofing between floors and the proximity of their homes to their place of work.

## Value for money

22 We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

23 There are a number of strengths.

- A strong corporate framework for value for money has resulted in significant efficiency and procurement savings over the last three years. This has allowed for investment in service improvements such as the call centre which is providing residents with better access to services.
- Membership of PUSH has increased available funding for strategic studies such as flood assessments, research studies and sub-regional strategic plans. This has meant that the City (and the sub-region) has been well-placed to respond to the challenges around sustainable development and economic growth.

- The service has been effective in securing new affordable housing through planning gain, helping to reduce demands on the public purse and supporting the development of more housing when grants are paid.
- The effectiveness of the Council's housing partnerships has been reviewed, resulting in the streamlining of key groups and improved operational working.
- The Council and its partners have been successful in leveraging in capital funding for a range of new housing schemes and have responded proactively to new funding opportunities offered by the Homes and Communities Agencies. A total of £34 million of capital funding for affordable housing was awarded in 2008/11 the largest allocation in the region.
- The service is achieving a good balance between quality and cost in its requirements for new housing. This means that developers are less likely to challenge planning decisions and helps the Council avoid costly appeals and delays in delivering new housing.

### 24 There are a number of weaknesses.

- Scrutiny work is reducing the variation in the grants required by different housing associations for the same types of development but there still remains some variation. High grant levels reduce the amount of funding available for other developments
- It is unclear if the Council's requirements for Lifetime Homes are delivering value for money, with no evaluation of the impact on either resident satisfaction or lower running costs.
- The service does not yet have a robust understanding of how well its costs compare to services provided by other councils, limiting scope to identify further efficiencies.
- The current system of delegations to planning officers is not efficient, with many decisions referred to monthly planning committees. This is increasing the cost of the service and increasing the waiting time for customers.

# Recommendations

- 25 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>3</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### Recommendation

**R1** Improve the customer focus of the service by:

- developing and publicising service standards for all aspects of the enabling service;
- introducing and responding to customer satisfaction surveys for all customers who have used the development control service;
- effectively monitoring the extent to which the aspirational standards set out in the Residential Design Guide are being delivered and taking appropriate follow-up action to promote compliance; and
- improving the time taken to make decisions on planning applications.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better informed customers; and
- better services for customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

### Recommendation

**R2** Improve the approach to meeting the needs of gypsies and travellers by:

- establishing a project plan with key milestones to deliver the targets set out in the South East Plan and effectively monitoring progress to ensure delivery.

<sup>3</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a better focus on meeting the needs of this diverse group; and
- better prospects for the social inclusion of gypsies and travellers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve the approach to value for money by:

- developing a strategic approach to facilitating housing development during the economic recession;
- developing a better understanding of the reasons for variations in the grants required by different housing associations for the same types of development and continuing to take action to narrow the gap as appropriate; and
- benchmarking the cost and quality of the enabling service to provide a better understanding of how costs compare and drive efficiencies.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improving value for money to enable better services; and
- better information for decision makers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

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# Prospects for Improvement: summary of our findings

- 1 We have assessed the prospects for improvement of the service areas included in the scope of the inspection. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

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**Table 2      Assessment**

What prospects are there that the services inspected will improve?	Assessment
Track record	Strengths outweigh weaknesses
Managing performance	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses
Capacity	Strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses

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# What prospects are there that the services inspected will improve?

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## What is the track record in delivering improvement in the areas inspected?

2 We found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.

3 There are a number of strengths:

- The Council has a strong track of delivering new homes, including affordable housing, to meet local needs and regional housing targets.
- The 65 per cent target for the rented element of new affordable housing has been exceeded, with 71 per cent achieved over the last three years.
- The vast majority of new residential units are in developments with a density of over 50 units per hectare (over 85 per cent in the last three years) and the percentage of dwellings on previously developed land over the last five years has consistently been above 95 per cent.
- The 2007/08 Direction of Travel Assessment<sup>4</sup> has concluded that the Council is improving well and strengthening its approach to value for money, with improvements in housing and work on major regeneration projects cited as key strengths.
- The Council has demonstrated its ability to work successfully with a range of partners and stakeholders to deliver new housing and promote sustainable communities.

4 There are some weaknesses:

- The Council has struggled to achieve a mix of affordable homes for families. While 30 per cent of new housing needs to have three or more bedrooms, only 15 per cent was delivered.
- The accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers have not yet been satisfactorily addressed.
- The speed of deciding planning applications has been below average.
- Southampton is later than some councils with its Local Development Framework (LDF). This is because the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) required some revisions to the draft Core Strategy which had 'knock-on' effects to the rest of the programme (including progression of the city centre action plan Development Plan Document). This has delayed the Council in maximising its potential to deliver affordable housing.

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<sup>4</sup> Carried out by the Audit Commission

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## How well is performance managed in the areas inspected?

5 We found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

6 There are a number of strengths:

- The Council is showing strong leadership around its ambitions for affordable housing, demonstrated through its approach to planning policy, partnership working and willingness to make hard decisions to support delivery.
  - The Council has strong ambitions to transform the city into the premier city on the south coast. Housing forms a central part of the vision of the city and stands to gain from its successful regeneration.
  - The LDF process is being managed well and reflects regional, sub-regional and local priorities. The Core Strategy, which is due to be adopted in January 2010, aligns with PUSH sub-regional work and maps out how the 16,300 homes required under the South East Plan will be delivered on designated sites.
  - Strong plans are in place or being formulated. High level plans (such as the Housing Strategy, the LDF and the City of Southampton Strategy) are based on robust evidence, are well integrated with wider ambitions, appropriate to meet the future needs of residents and set a clear strategic direction for the service.
  - These plans address key weaknesses in the current approach. For example:
  - The LDF is increasing the qualifying threshold to 30-40 per cent on developments of 15 homes or more and 20 per cent on those between 4-14 homes. It will also increase the present requirements for density of development. This will help the Council to further improve the delivery of affordable housing.
  - Additional guidance for developers on the delivery of family homes will be adopted in July 2009. The Supplementary Planning Document will lead to the provision of an increased number of larger new homes and provide housing solutions for larger households.
  - Significant plans are in place to further promote sustainable housing. All developments in the city are expected to achieve an equivalent rating to EcoHomes/BREEAM “very good” rating (and by 2012 an “excellent” rating) with particular emphasis on water efficiency. The draft Core Strategy also sets out a requirement that all housing must meet the Code for Sustainability level three at adoption, level four by 2012 and level six by from 2016.
  - The Council is implementing a programme of renewal and housing growth across the housing estates it owns. By 2026, it estimates that the programme will provide 4,000 new homes with 130 existing homes demolished and a split of 50 per cent market and 50 per cent affordable (70 per cent of the affordable housing will be rented).
  - There are strong performance management arrangements in place to support the housing enabling service. Regular partnership meetings, detailed quarterly reports on the progress of the development programme and clear targets for development partners help to quickly identify slippage and get performance back on track.
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- There is an effective performance appraisal system in place. Team targets are clearly set out and understood by staff and this helps them focus on meeting the housing needs of residents.

7 We identified only one weakness.

- The improvement plan developed by the Council following the inspection does address most (but not all) of the weaknesses identified in this inspection. It does not always contain SMART targets and, where they are in place, they are not always challenging.

### Do the areas inspected have capacity to improve?

8 We found that strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses in this area.

9 There are a number of strengths:

- There are powerful drivers for affordable housing in Southampton. The Council is clear that it is a priority, provides strong leadership and is prepared to take difficult decisions to generate new housing.
- The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment demonstrates that the South East Plan housing requirement for the city of 16,300 new homes in the period 2006 – 2026 is likely to be deliverable. It shows that the city has the potential to identify sufficient sites in future Development Plan Documents to deliver a 5 year, 10 year and 15 year supply of homes.
- Resources are in place to support continued high levels of performance in enabling new housing. The strategy and enabling team is well resourced and well regarded by partners. Effective joint working with partners and PUSH also increases capacity in this area.
- A successful track record in leveraging in external funding (and a high Housing & Planning Delivery Grant award based on strong performance) provides a solid foundation for future capacity.
- Management and staff capacity is strong. Developers and housing associations recognise that the Council has a good understanding of the housing market and value its approach to partnership working. They believe it has skilled staff and the right policies in place to support delivery.
- Some new posts are being established that will increase capacity and help the Council address some of its key challenges. This includes proposals to establish a post to focus on the creation of new gypsy and traveller pitches and a new senior post for economic development and regeneration.
- The Council is taking steps to ensure that public and private investment secures the greatest benefit to the city. By bringing together its regeneration and economic development functions the Council will be better placed to develop holistic approaches to promote sustainable communities.

10 We did not identify any weaknesses.

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# Appendix 1 - Positive practice

**'The Commission will identify and promote good practice. Every inspection will look for examples of good practice and innovation, and for creative ways to overcome barriers and resistance to change or make better use of resources'. (Seeing is Believing)**

## Guidance for Developers

A duty service enables people to obtain advice on planning matters immediately during working hours. Larger scale planning applications have been addressed through each professional arm of the Council meeting together with the developer to enable planning, housing, transport and other issues to be resolved at an early stage and without the need for multiple meetings. The Council offers a free pre-application service where initial consultation takes place and may involve a site visit. In appropriate circumstances, a formal pre-application response is provided. There is clear written guidance available to developers to help them understand the Council's policies and requirements. Comprehensive guidance is also available on line. The Residential Design Guide (SPD) 2006 provides comprehensive information and detailed design guidance to encourage best practice and a sustainable use of resources. There is an interactive section of the Local Plan on the website which helps developers identify the high level constraints. The approach taken by the City Development Team and proposals for the Estate Regeneration project is taking a slightly more proactive approach whereby the developer is identified and provided with assistance to understand the Council's requirements.

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## Sub regional working.

The Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) has come together to address the economic and regeneration issues facing the urban South Hampshire Sub Region. PUSH is committed to improving efficiency and delivery through joint working, and this is being led by the Housing Theme Group. It has developed a Sub-Regional Housing Strategy ('Homes for Growth') which recognises the links that need to be made between housing and economic development and adds value to the regional priorities by emphasising sustainability and inclusion. A Star Chamber process has been established to ensure that bids to PUSH are in line with its strategic objectives.

## High Quality Design

There are a number of initiatives in place to ensure that design is of high quality. These include:

- In 2008, the Council organised a competition (utilising external funding of £1m) with developing housing associations for family housing and set some minimum criteria.

The 'winner' provided 11 units each with their own amenity space and the majority 3xbed. This has provided an exemplar scheme for future developments to consider.

- Better design is discussed at the housing association developer liaison meetings where RSLs talk through their submissions.
  - There is a City Design Team that works with developers (a free service) to help generate quality design (the development control team also provide support).
  - An architects panel meets every two months where officers present the schemes and the panel provide comments on what improvements could be made.
  - There is also a meeting every 6 weeks with the Council's major projects manager (and there is a similar thing running with the City Development Team at a corporate level involving monthly meetings with senior members).
  - Developers and architects are invited in to look at successful schemes).
  - Planning committee councillors have undertaken training which has included utilising the Centre for Architecture.
  - All developments in the city are expected to achieve an equivalent rating to EcoHomes/BREEAM "very good" rating (and by 2012 an "excellent" rating) with particular emphasis on water efficiency.
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# The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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