

Westlea Housing Association Response

Unitary authority: Issues for transition

Structuring, resourcing and supporting the delivery of new affordable housing; effective estate management; and community development are going to be critical to the success of the new unitary authority. Westlea is keen to ensure that these and related needs are properly addressed in the establishment of the new authority. We would like to play an active role in the consultation on this move, and to be kept up to date on the answers to the issues and questions that we have highlighted below.

Structure and location

- Will there be local offices for the unitary authority, where will they be and which services will be based there?
- What will the staff structure be at county and local level?
- How will the work and priorities of the current local strategic partnerships, area committees and sustainable community strategies be assimilated into the unitary structure? Consideration should be given to the management, use and development of community assets and to developing local structures in response to the government paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*.

Housing strategy and enabling

- The resourcing and role of housing strategy and enabling work is going to be critical. How will this be structured to make sure it reflects different markets and needs within and alongside the unitary boundary?
- Which department will housing be part of, how will it be structured and where will it report to? We would have serious concerns about it being combined with Social Services, as housing could be lost in other agendas and priorities. We would prefer a "Communities" focus, in line with the local authority's "place-shaping" agenda, in which Westlea and other housing associations' role and investment is going to be crucial.

Housing register and homelessness

- What will happen in the short, medium and long term to the housing register as we move into a county based CBL system?
- Will there be a local service in North Wiltshire for homelessness and housing advice/enquiries?
- We would like to work with the new authority on developing a strategic approach to homelessness.

Existing arrangements

- How will aids and adaptations be funded? The 3 LSVT housing associations have different arrangements – will they be honoured and what will the budget be?
- What will be the arrangements and timing for payment of Housing Benefit? We receive automated downloads from North Wiltshire whereas with other authorities, we have to input each transaction, adding cost and delay.
- What will happen to:
 - Agency agreements we have with NWDC to repair/service vehicles and clear drains;
 - Our existing contracts with NWDC to provide temporary accommodation to homeless families; and
 - The one short term let property that we currently manage for NWDC?

Communication and consultation

- How can we influence the debate on housing during the transition phase?
- Will there be any further consultation?
- What will the communication arrangements be with and from the new authority?

New homes

- What will be the approach to land disposals? We need to be able to work cooperatively with the new authority to make best use of local land holdings and other local authority assets.
- Are all NWDC commitments for allocations of funding going to be honoured?
- Will the housing capital budgets identified by NWDC be preserved or will they be re-directed to other uses?
- What is going to happen to the planned developments within NWDC of young persons hostel?
- What will future clawback arrangements be?

Managing estates

- Are there any plans to rationalise grounds maintenance work and other “public realm” management in the future?
- Will there be the opportunity for us to take over the management of some of the grassed and other communal areas within our estates?
- How will rubbish and recycling services be run?

Supporting People

- What will the effect be on supporting people and the ongoing country wide framework as lots of current delivery is at local level?