

**JOINT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY TRANSITION – HOUSING TASK GROUP  
4<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2008**

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**Harmonisation of Key Policies, Procedures, Practices and Fees / Charges**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. To provide an opportunity for the task group to consider the progress made in harmonising the various housing policies, procedures, practices and fees and charges for the new council .

**Action Required of the Task Group**

2. To discuss this report, with a view to clarifying any matters which need to be taken forward to the task group's final report.

**Background**

3. The establishment of one council for Wiltshire requires the blending together of a considerable array of individual housing activities that with very few exceptions operate under different policies and procedures for each of the four districts. In a number of areas significant progress has been made and uniform policies and procedures agreed, and it will be possible to deliver some services in a uniform way from 1 April 2009. For some other activities convergence will be achieved over a number of years and in a number of cases it may not be appropriate or desirable to have a single approach since different parts of Wiltshire will have different needs.
4. This report will identify policies and procedures grouped under 6 thematic headings mainly using a simple tabular format to show the progress that is being made.
5. Consideration will be given to improvement that can be gained by taking a Lean Systems approach, and those areas where this approach can easily be applied and where clear benefits could be achieved, will be prioritised. It is unlikely that any Lean review of services will commence for another year and it is likely that Private Sector Housing is likely to be the first area of the housing service to be reviewed in this way. However it will not be necessary to delay harmonisation until a lean review has been carried out.
6. The overriding objective for day one will be to achieve business as usual and as a minimum to achieve harmonisation where it is legally necessary or it makes sense to do so.

## Housing Strategy

7. For many years central Government has expected housing authorities to produce a Housing Strategy covering a 3 – 5 year period. Although referred to in statute, ministers have not so far enacted statutory powers to compel councils to produce a Housing Strategy, however almost all councils produce one because:
  - i. it is good practice
  - ii. the Audit Commission will expect one to exist
  - iii. the development of the strategy is a good basis around which to bring together external stakeholders and service users to discuss the future of housing
8. The strategy will deal with all aspects of housing, not simply those that are managed as part of the housing service. It will include private sector housing, planning of new housing overall, housing support and energy efficiency in the home, as well as the more obvious matters such as affordable housing delivery, council housing and homelessness. The strategy will include a narrative, priorities, targets, and actions. It will set out the needs of the area and the resources required to meet its objectives. It will also show the context of the housing service, nationally, regionally and locally.
9. All Districts in Wiltshire each have a Housing Strategy that is deemed *fit for purpose* by the Government.

District	Period of Current Strategy
Kennet	2004 – 08
North Wiltshire	2005 - 08
Salisbury	2006 – 09
West Wiltshire	2005 - 10

10. Before a new unified housing strategy can be developed for the one council a number of issues have to be resolved first:
  - i. baseline data around housing need, housing markets and house conditions for Wiltshire
  - ii. housing priorities for the new council
  - iii. government guidance on housing strategies
  - iv. agreeing some of the policies that will inform the new strategy
  - v. creation of a new housing partnership for Wiltshire
11. It is the shared view of the 4 districts that to plan a new strategy for vesting day would be both ineffectual and unnecessary. The document would be rushed and ill informed. Consequently it is planned to produce a new housing strategy in 2010 by which time we will have been able to address the matters raised in paragraph (d) above.

## Housing Options

### 12. Issues:

This is a service that has a number of distinct features:

- a. staff work with service users in a very intense face to face environment
  - b. a relatively small number of customers but they each require a lot of time and thought and commitment
  - c. a homelessness procedure that is well defined in statute and case law and often involves formal appeals and legal challenge
  - d. a prevention/housing options approach that is not well defined; requires creativity and innovation; depends on staff working at the very limits of policy and procedure.
13. The service will continue to be delivered in the 4 hubs, however service users will expect to have similar opportunities and levels of service across Wiltshire. At a policy level there is no reason why this should not be achieved by 1 April 2009. However, there are some practical issues that mean that a level playing field may not ever be achieved. These include our ability to appoint and train staff in new uniform approaches and the different resources available in each area, such as hostels, foyer, support, private sector leased homes, different customer access arrangements at hub offices and differing stock transfer agreements.

### 14. Policies and Procedures

<b>Policy/procedure/activity</b>	<b>Target merge date</b>	<b>Is it vital for 1/4/09</b>	<b>Risks/issues</b>
Rent deposit scheme	1/4/09	Yes	Draft policy complete
Furniture storage	1/4/09	Yes	Work started
Furniture removals	1/4/09	Yes	Work started
Rent arrears policy for tenants in council managed temporary accommodation	1/4/09	Yes	Not yet started
How staff take service users through the options process	1/7/09	Desired	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role. Standard letters being piloted

Dealing with case reviews and appeals	1/4/09	Desired	Work to start when Head in post
Referrals to and from external organisations	1/7/09	Desired	
Processing homelessness applications	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role. New common form being piloted
Evictions from council managed temporary accommodation	1/4/09	Yes	Not yet started
Management, acquisition and returning of PSLs	1/9/09	Desired	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role. Standard letters being piloted
Sanctuary scheme	1/4/09	Desired	
Mediation	1/4/09	Desired	
16 and 17 year olds	1/4/09	Desired	This is part of a wider LAA objective
Supporting applicants in court	1/10/09	No	There are currently two external providers
Debt counselling	31/3/10	No	This will depend on our ability to build skills and training
High risk offenders	1/7/09	Desired	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Lone visiting	1/4/09	Desired	
Helping applicants with ad hoc financial support	1/4/09	Desired	

Medical issues	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Disrepair and overcrowding	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Threatened evictions	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Homeless at home	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Domestic violence	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Move on	1.7.09	Desired	Will depend in part on local resources
Assistance to non priority cases	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
MAPPA	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Children at risk	1/4/09	Yes	Work to start when Head in post. Will require time to train staff once in role.
Homelessness Strategy	1/4/09	Yes	

15. Fees and charges

<b>Fee, charge or rental</b>	<b>Harmonisation date</b>	<b>Risks/issues</b>
Charges for B and B	1/4/09	Getting agreement with HB service and individual arrangements with those in the system already
Rent on Private Sector Leased properties	uncertain	There will be many pre existing leases based around different approaches
Charges for storage and removals	uncertain	There will be many pre existing leases based around different approaches
File copy requests	1/4/09	
Charges for damage to council managed temporary accommodation	uncertain	There will be many pre existing leases based around different approaches

**Housing Allocations**

16. Issues

It is planned that the housing allocations service will merge prior to 1/4/09. This project is well advanced and a considerable amount of work has been done already. The service will be managed by a central team and customers will be able to access the service via phone, internet, local publicity and probably local libraries.

17. Policies and Procedures

Policies have been agreed in full to deliver a uniform Choice Based Lettings Service across Wiltshire. There are still some issues to be ironed out regarding how we can ensure a good, equal and fair marketing of vacancies at a local level. Additionally there is still work to be done on customer access to the service via the hubs.

18. Fees and Charges

There are no issues around equalisation of fees and charges.

## **Private Sector Housing**

### **19. Issues**

The most obvious and significant difference between Private Sector Housing and the other housing activities is that the delivery of this function is currently split between Environmental Health and Housing, with 3 different structural models adopted across Wiltshire. Unifying the structure presents an additional challenge to that of bringing together policies and procedures. Additionally different software is in use across the county and different funding arrangements and service level agreements exist with external partners.

20. Private sector housing is a key component of any overarching Housing Strategy - its purpose being to ensure that those living in the private sector housing and particularly the most vulnerable members of society benefit from properties that are well maintained, accessible, safe and warm to live in. Services that are included in Private Sector Housing include the following:

- Disabled Facilities Grants
- Financial assistance for Home Repairs
- General enforcement: Housing Health and Safety, Mobile Home Sites, Overcrowding and Houses in Multiple Occupation.
- Empty properties
- Home Improvement Agencies
- Working with private landlords. Driving up standards by education including landlord forum and accredited standards
- Home Energy Advice

21. The relationship between strategy and enforcement is symbiotic and is encapsulated in the Private Sector Renewal Policy. This policy is fundamental to the Private Sector Service and the formal adoption is a legal requirement to ensure business as usual on 1/4/09.

## 22. Policies and Procedures

<b>Policy/procedure/activity</b>	<b>Target merge date</b>	<b>Is it vital for 1/4/09</b>	<b>Risks/issues</b>
Private Sector Housing Renewal Interim Strategy & Policy	1/4/09	yes	<p>Overarching document which allows the council to provide a full Housing Renewal Service.</p> <p>Draft by 30/11/08  → consultation by 1/2/08  → public notice→  adoption of policy</p> <p>Risk is managed and considered low. If not in place by April the risk include : 1. Leaving vulnerable residents without timely assistance  2. Damage to reputation and CPA.</p>
Disabled facilities grants procedures	1/4/09	yes	<p>Mandatory requirement for a council to provide the grant. Procedure review for 1/4/09 to map current practice and procedures and align. A further best practice review will need to be undertaken in the future.</p> <p>Risk is managed and considered low. If not in place by April these include : 1. Leaving vulnerable residents without timely adaptation.  2. Damage to reputation.  3. Not fulfilling the council mandatory role</p>



Land Charges procedure	1/4/09	yes	<p>Allows the council to provide financial assistance with the prospect of recovery of funds.</p> <p>Low Risk which include: 1. Delay in delivery assistance.2. Ability to recover funds</p>
Local Land Charges procedure	1/4/09	yes	<p>Allows the council to recover funds in the case of more expensive Disabled Facilities Grants.</p> <p>Low Risk which include: Ability to recover funds.</p>
Enforcement Policy	1/4/09	yes	<p>Included in Housing Renewal Policy</p> <p>Risk is managed and considered low. If not in place by April these include : 1. The ability to defend decisions if challenged. 2. Damage to reputation. 3. Not fulfilling the council mandatory role</p>
IT system /Database/ Information recording	1/4/09	yes	<p>Effects the ability to deliver and monitor the service provided. Most likely require an interim measures.</p> <p>Medium risk associated with a rushed decision to commission an unsuitable long term solution</p>
Appeals process/complaint investigation	1/4/09	yes	<p>Incorporated into the Housing Renewal Policy</p> <p>Risk is managed and considered low</p>
Private Sector Application Forms for Assistance	1/4/09	yes	<p>Effects the ability to deliver the service</p> <p>Low Risk which include: 1. Leaving vulnerable residents without timely assistance 2. Damage to reputation and CPA</p>

Procedures for discretionary assistance	1/4/09	yes	Effects the ability to deliver a consistent approach  Risk is managed and considered low
Regulation of Mobile Homes	1/4/09	yes	Included in the enforcement policy  Risk is managed and considered low
Regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation	1/4/09	yes	Included in the enforcement policy. Makes up a part of the enforcement policy  Risk is managed and considered low. If not in place by April these include .1. Damage to reputation. 2. Not fulfilling the council mandatory role
Standards for validating processing applications and request for service	1/4/09	yes	Requires local indicators to be developed for the service including those to contractors.  Risk is managed and considered low
Outsourcing and contracts i.e. HIA, Handyperson and Energy Efficiency Advice Centre	31/12/08	yes	Discussion with providers about extending existing contracts where appropriate.  Risk is managed and considered low
Empty Home Policy and procedures	1/4/10	no	Development of a new policy
Accreditation Scheme for Landlords	1/4/10	no	Development of a new policy
Revision of Agreements with Home Improvement Agencies	1/4/10	no	There are currently contracts in place with 2 providers

## 23. Fees and Charges

Fee, charge or rental	Target merge date	Is it vital for 1/4/09	Risks/issues
HMO licensing charge	1/4/09	yes	Charging structure to be assessed in line with guidance. Low risk
Work in default charges	1/4/09	yes	Charged at an hourly rate Low risk
Local land charge registration	1/4/09	yes	Not a fee but a charge on the property following a Disabled Facilities Grant. Low risk
Legal charge with the land registry	1/4/09	yes	Not a fee but a charge on the property after financial assistance. Low risk

## Housing Management

### 24. Issues

There is only one council providing council housing in the County and therefore there is no requirement to harmonise council housing management.

## New Affordable Homes

### 25. Issues

Methods of delivery, and the requirements for new affordable homes are different in each district. Harmonisation will need to be constrained by the existence of different planning policies and the different levels of needs. Additionally Wiltshire is covered by three housing market areas, and there are different housing providers across the county as well as different opportunities for new homes. However, there will in future be a single team dealing with affordable housing, and whilst needs will continue to differ it will assist the effective delivery of new homes if good practice is shared and effective procedures.

26. Policies and Procedures

<b>Policy/procedure/activity</b>	<b>Target merge date</b>	<b>Is it vital for 1/4/09</b>	<b>Risks/issues</b>
Map the forward development programme	Complete	Y	
Standardise S106 agreements	Dec 08	Y	
Produce comprehensive procedures for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ s106 negotiations</li> <li>▪ Exception sites</li> <li>▪ 100% RSL grant funded</li> <li>▪ Special needs commissions</li> </ul>	Dec 08	Y	
Develop Wiltshire-wide evidence base	Jan 09	Y	
Develop LDF housing policies	TBC	N	Conversations already underway – dependant on LDF timetable
Develop Interim Enabling Strategy	Dec 08	Y	
Develop new Housing Partnership arrangements with RSL developers	Dec 08	Y	

27. Fees and Charges

<b>Fee, charge or rental</b>	<b>Target merge date</b>	<b>Is it vital for 1/4/09</b>	<b>Risks/issues</b>
None			

## General issues

### 28. Policies and Procedures

Customer access	2010/11	No	This will depend on new ways of working and availability of premises
Out of ours and lone working	1/4/09	Yes	
Common leaflets	1/4/09	Desired	This will depend on speed at which uniform policies can be agreed
Scheme of delegation	1/4/09	Yes	

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