

JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRANSITION – HOUSING TASK GROUP

Issues for Transition: A Housing Association’s Perspective

Purpose of Report

1. To consider the issues raised by the Westlea Housing Association regarding the move to one council, and the corresponding responses provided by the Frontline Services Workstream Owner.

Action Required of the Task Group

2. To consider the issues and responses listed, noting that the questions put by Westlea are useful in gauging an initial understanding of the general queries and concerns which other Housing Associations may have about move to one council.
3. To discuss how to use this report as the basis for further consultation/dialogue with all relevant Housing Associations in Wiltshire.

Issues Raised & Corresponding Responses

4. 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.

5. Structure and location

- Q(i) Will there be local offices for the unitary authority, where will they be and which services will be based there?

There will be several offices located across the county. Most of the frontline services (including housing and homelessness) will be provided from area offices in Chippenham, Devizes, Salisbury and Trowbridge.

- Q(ii) What will the staff structure be at county and local level?

The staffing structure will be a key role for the Housing Service Director following their appointment – currently interviews are scheduled for 22 July.

- Q(iii) 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*.

The new Wiltshire Assembly (which will replace the existing Wiltshire Strategic Partnership) will be the partnership forum for agreeing the Local Area Agreements targets and actions aligned to the vision and aspirations for Wiltshire.

As part of the LAA targets it is proposed to develop a housing group to ensure that the actions are implemented. This group will include RSL's and the local authority.

Area Boards will replace the existing Area Committees and will strengthen the delivery of services (particularly front line services) at local level. Officers will have delegated authority to work with the Boards to take action at a local level.

6. Housing strategy and enabling

- Q(i) 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?

Initial thinking is that a single Strategy and Enabling team will be created as part of the Housing Directorate to deliver policy and strategies in line with the council's vision and aims.

- Q(ii) 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 sits within the Economic Development, Planning and Housing Directorate. Mark Boden (currently Chief Executive at Kennet DC) was recently appointed as the Corporate Director for this area.

7. Housing register and homelessness

Q(i) What will happen in the short, medium and long term to the housing register as we move into a county based CBL system?

We move to a county CBL register in early 2009. This will be a single team within the new council. Work is continuing to bring the four registers together.

Q(ii) Will there be a local service in North Wiltshire for homelessness and housing advice/enquiries?

Yes, this will be based at the Monkton Park offices.

Q(iii) We would like to work with the new authority on developing a strategic approach to homelessness.

Your assistance will be welcomed.

8. Existing arrangements

Q(i) 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?

DFGs will be funded as they are now, any changes to the transfer agreements will have to be negotiated with the respective RSLs.

Q(ii) 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.

Some services will continue as they are now following the transition to the new council. Service transformation will happen at a later date. Housing Benefits is one of these, so the service and staff will continue to be provided at Monkton Park.

Q(iii) 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;

Contracts will transfer to the new council.

- The one short term let property that we currently manage for NWDC?

The last short term let was returned in May 2008.

9. Communication and consultation

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

Consultation and communication will be coordinated by the new council.

10. New homes

- Q(i) 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.

As part of the LAA an audit of public owned land will be undertaken to identify land for affordable housing. The issue of disposals at less than market value will have to be resolved by the new council.

- Q(ii) Are all NWDC commitments for allocations of funding going to be honoured?

Yes

- Q(iii) Will the housing capital budgets identified by NWDC be preserved or will they be re-directed to other uses?

The budget will be drafted in the autumn and there will be a consultation process before the final budget for the new council is agreed in February 09.

- Q(iv) What is going to happen to the planned developments within NWDC of young persons' hostel?

Housing for young people is a county-wide issue. Discussions for developing a specification for a scheme for those with high support needs has taken place, but this is not necessarily going to be in North Wilts, it may be split between several locations.

- Q(v) What will future clawback arrangements be?

As per the transfer agreement or amended by mutual agreement.

11. Managing estates

- Q(i) Are there any plans to rationalise grounds maintenance work and other “public realm” management in the future?

This work will be reviewed as part of transforming the service in the new council.

- Q(ii) Will there be the opportunity for us to take over the management of some of the grassed and other communal areas within our estates?

This should be discussed as apt of any review of the service.

- Q(iii) How will rubbish and recycling services be run?

As with HB, rubbish collection contracts will continue as they are now and any transformation of the service will happen at a later date.

12. Supporting People

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

The Supporting People Team is unaffected by the move to one council and will continue to work towards implementing the national agenda for supporting people.

Conclusion

13. This report raises a number of issues which the task group may wish to take forward for a specific consultation exercise with Housing Associations and other housing stakeholders in Wiltshire.

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