
Event: Housing Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group

Place: Committee Room 5, County Hall, Trowbridge

Date: Monday 8 September 2008

Time: 9.30am

MINUTES

Attendance: Cllr Janet Giles (Kennet District Council) [Chairman], Cllr Nina Phillips (North Wiltshire District Council), Cllr Pip Ridout (West Wiltshire District Council) and Cllr Pat Rugg (Wiltshire County Council)

Officers: Graham Hogg (Service Director – Housing), Karen Linaker (Scrutiny Support Officer), Andrew Reynolds (Head of Strategic Housing Services, SDC), Andrew Winfield (IDEA Consultant) and Laura Young (CBL Project Manager)

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Mike Fowler.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

Members agreed the minutes of the last meeting held on the 1st August 2008. Members noted that there were a number of issues which would be taken forward to future agendas, including those reported to the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Transition Board (JOSTB) on the 29th August, and to be raised with the Implementation Executive (IE) on the 23rd September.

3. Chairman's Announcements

The chairman made the following announcements:

- (a) a consultant from the Improvement & Development Agency would be attending the meeting to deliver a presentation on strategic housing
- (b) a light buffet would be provided for lunch
- (c) on the 27th August, the IE had confirmed that John Thomson (WCC), Stephen Fear (SDC) and Philip Brown (KDC) would be the IE members responsible for Housing Services during the transition
- (d) the task group's interim report had been received well by the JOSTB on the 29th August, when members had highlighted that they were supportive of the following progressed further:

- the development of appropriately constituted tenancy boards
- reinforced links and better communication with Housing Associations
- the West Wiltshire PFI Housing project
- the Salisbury Special Purpose Vehicle Local Housing Company
- the national campaign for the review of the Housing Revenue Account subsidy scheme

4. Housing Project Officer Group – Summary of Main Focus

The task group was asked to note a report which summarised both the overall focus of the Housing Project Officer Group and the Housing Task Group. This report helped to clarify the context in which the task group would be working, in pursuing the key issues it had identified, as of particular importance during the transition.

With a number of the key issues identified by the housing task group relating to the budget and staffing structures, members agreed to note this report as a useful guide for its future work, and to move on to the next report on the agenda.

RESOLVED to note the Housing Project Officer Group's main focus, as the context in which the task group would be pursuing the key issues it had identified for scrutiny during the transition.

5. Brief Update on Budgets & Structures

Graham updated members regarding progress so far made in devising capital and revenue budgets and a staffing structure for the housing service in the new council. In doing so the following clarifications were given and further issues discussed:

Capital Budget

- (a) all services had been requested to submit capital funding bids by the 1st September, which had meant a total of 12 bids for housing services. These included those listed within the report, which covered all previously bid for projects within each of the district councils
- (b) the bids submitted came to a gross programme total of £17.2m in year one, and total programme value of £52m over the next 5 years
- (c) out of these 12 bids, the projects of key importance and capital funding significance, all related to the objective of maximising the provision of affordable housing. These included proposals for the council to purchase houses from developers, struggling as a result of the credit crunch
- (d) one of the bids was intended to facilitate a new approach, whereby the council would provide loans against the available equity in private sector households for the vulnerable and low earners, instead of simply

issuing grants for such purposes. This bid was subject to a successful application for regional housing funds

- (e) demand for housing adaptations was increasing, but there was no additional government funding to meet this need. Consequently, capital bids had been submitted to fund this area of housing services
- (f) there was a link between the capital and revenue budget, i.e. if the council could deliver more affordable housing through use of its own capital, whether that was through cash or use of land, this would help to relieve pressures on the homelessness budget
- (g) equally, through prioritising more capital funds for projects to improve and adapt service user accommodation – facilitating more independent/supported living - housing services would contribute to the revenue savings quest being pursued by the DCS' care home service rationalisation
- (h) without capital investment in projects for affordable housing and adaptations/disabled facilities, there was a risk of a rise in the number of people seeking homelessness services, and in the council being required to pay for expensive bed and breakfast accommodation
- (i) having submitted the list of capital bids, Graham had also had to identify where the resources would come from, whether from e.g. existing council budgets, right to buy income or government funding. Having done this, he had identified a shortfall in the capital programme for housing
- (j) consequently there was a need to pursue some alternative means of service delivery, and to use the considerable size of the new authority to help facilitate this, for example improved use of available public land, which the South Wiltshire Strategic Alliance had already started to explore

Revenue Budget

- (k) currently, the biggest pressure so far identified during the budget setting process was the requirement for all services to set a cash freeze budget at 2008/09 levels, whilst also committing to contribute to the overall £18m 1C4W savings target
- (l) consequently, any inflationary increase on housing services would need to be subsumed within this baseline, and would be recognised as a contribution towards the services' efficiency savings targets
- (m) however, housing services were also required to realise savings of £200,000 in 2009/10, within an economic climate which was likely to see an increase in the homelessness population, an increase in the numbers of vulnerable people requiring local authority assistance, and

a depletion of available Section 106 contributions for affordable housing. This presented a considerable challenge, regarding which the task group reiterated its concern

- (n) on the 26th September, housing services would be the first of all the other services to present its budget requirements for 2009/10 to a “star chamber” style workshop. At this workshop, Graham would present the total budget requirement for housing services in 2009/10, and explain how these resources would be used to meet service user need, demand and performance standards. In doing so, Graham would also need to reflect the economies of scale which were likely to be realised in joining up 5 services into one
- (o) at the November meeting, as previously requested, the task group would receive a fuller report on the budget and structure for the new Housing Service, when members should be able to explore issues such as
 - the Benefits Realisation Management Plan for housing
 - the service delivery implications of the required £200,000 savings in 2009/10
 - the key cost pressures for housing next year, which needed to be honoured in the budget setting process as truly unavoidable costs
 - likely growth bids, should any available headroom be identified during the budget setting process
 - whether or not the district councils’ capital commitments for housing – previously agreed – had been secured in the capital programme for the next 5 years
 - the amount of funding which the new council would be prioritising for affordable housing projects

Housing Service Structure

- (p) the new council should help to facilitate improved links and working relationships between housing services, social services and health services, resulting in more effective ways of addressing, for example, hospital delayed discharges
- (q) Graham was hoping to be able to work with the Department for Community Services (DCS) and the Department for Children & Education to secure the location of a number of occupational therapists within the new housing service structure, particularly to assist with service users requiring disabled facilities grants and assistance. If this was possible, with the combined private sector housing team likely only to be of a modest size, one option to be pursued would be to locate this team across two areas in the county, one covering areas in the north and one in the south
- (r) members reiterated their concern that legal officer support had not as yet been confirmed for housing services. Graham explained that Mark

Boden had raised this as an important issue at a recent meeting of the new directorate of Economic Development, Planning & Housing. Graham also highlighted that the Head of Legal Services had recently been appointed, and therefore, housing officers would be able to call on him for assistance.

RESOLVED to note the brief update on budgets and structures for the new Housing Service, and to await a fuller report on these matters at the November meeting.

6. New “Homes 4 Wiltshire” Choice Based Lettings Scheme

The task group received a presentation from the Project Manager of this new scheme (see attached copy of slides on pages 8 – 13). In considering this presentation, the following further key points and comments were made:

- (a) choice based lettings (CBL) was one of the ways local authorities were exploring how to achieve the overall government objective of providing more choice and individual responsibility for service users
- (b) the scheme was intended to provide a more transparent and open service to customers and agencies, with previous, more traditional schemes having had a reputation for being less transparent and more restrictive
- (c) CBL would allow service users access to the full range of available accommodation, and to also provide customers with details (not personal) of the successful applicant, giving the customer a greater understanding of the priority and time the successful person had waited for that accommodation.
- (d) one unified scheme, operating across dissolved district boundaries, would be a significant improvement for the partner agencies working with the council, in that they would only need to understand and operate within one policy, one application process, and one IT system
- (e) savings would be generated by developing this one unified scheme, as the four hubs would not need to invest in four separate operating systems
- (f) CBL could help the council towards operating more effectively as a sub-regional partner and in attaining beacon status
- (g) having consulted with the district councils not currently operating CBL (North Wiltshire and Salisbury), each had expressed support for the scheme, as well as support from the customers during the consultation days
- (h) new literature had been produced to promote the scheme for current clients, new clients, and partner agencies, and a new application form had been devised in consultation with customers

- (i) there were a number of risks associated with developing and implementing the new scheme. However, measures were being put in place to mitigate these risks
- (j) the new scheme's IT system would not need to be compatible to work with the new council's SAP system
- (k) the Council has received £128,000 in grant funding from the government, to deliver the scheme
- (l) there were adequate safeguards within the scheme to ensure tenants were not able to misuse the opportunities CBL would generate
- (m) the Department for Communities and Local Government were verifying the new "Homes 4 Wiltshire" CBL policy, but, noting the task group's concern, officers would also check the legal technicalities of the new policy with the council's legal department.

RESOLVED to note the presentation, as evidence for the task group's final report.

7. Presentation from the Improvement & Development Agency

Andrew Winfield, Improvement Manager from the IDEA delivered a presentation to the task group, highlighting how housing has changed over the years, and how it now needed to be delivered strategically in line with the objectives of the economy and spatial planning. A copy of the presentation slides are attached on [pages 14 – 23](#). In discussing the points made in this presentation, the following key issues were highlighted and further explored:

- (a) there were opportunities and challenges associated with the changing landscape of housing, the economy, planning and local government service delivery
- (b) traditionally, local government had been relatively inward looking in regard to housing, and over the last 30 years, various changes had encouraged councils to take a more outward focus, from being service provider to enabler and facilitator of partnership working
- (c) officers in Wiltshire were already exploring new ways in which housing could be delivered in the future, including monitoring those authorities already signed up to build their own council housing stock. However, the task group expressed some caution, that new innovative approaches to housing delivery would also require appropriate funding from government
- (d) a local authority's organisational structures would need to reflect the convergence of housing, economy and spatial planning
- (e) whilst respecting the principle behind the government's place shaping agenda, the task group expressed caution that the way in which this

agenda was being promoted was more suitable for local authorities in urban areas. Members stressed that the challenges posed by this agenda were greater for a large rural unitary authority such as the new Wiltshire Council

- (f) in order to meaningfully highlight this matter in its final report, the task group would need to understand how and where strategic housing matters were prioritised within other connecting strategies, such as the corporate plan, Local Agreement for Wiltshire, the LAA, the LDF and the economic strategy
- (g) already, by creating a combined, Economic Development, Planning & Housing Department, the council was working towards an effective joined up approach to economy, housing and spatial planning matters
- (h) sustainable community strategies, local area agreements, local development frameworks etc were all relatively new ways in which councils were being encouraged to work
- (i) new Regional Improvement & Efficiency Partnerships had recently been set up to provide assistance to local authorities in working towards the objectives of their sustainable community strategies, LAAs and LDFs etc
- (j) other counties were already working to devise one overall housing strategy, instead of operating one per local authority, and this council could benefit from researching how this was achieved
- (k) the government was reviewing the need for local authorities to produce a housing strategy in the future, as there was a view that sustainable community strategies and LAAs were sufficient
- (l) the IDEA was able to provide support and assistance at a subsidised or sometimes nil cost to councils currently undergoing local government reorganisation.

RESOLVED to note the key points highlighted in this presentation, as evidence for the task group's final report.

8. Date of Next Meeting

Members noted that the task group's next meeting was due to take place at 10.30am on the 9th October in Kennet District Council Offices. The meeting would be preceded by a members' briefing at 9.30am.

This meeting commenced at 9.30am and concluded at 1.10pm

Karen Linaker is the Scrutiny Support Officer contact for queries concerning these minutes (01225 713056 email: karenlinaker@wiltshire.gov.uk)