



## ITEM 2

**Event:** Housing Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group

**Place:** Committee Room 1b, Kennet District Council Offices

**Date:** Thursday 9 October 2008

**Time:** 10.30am

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### MINUTES

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

**Officers:** James Cawley (Service Director – Strategic Commissioning, DCS), Graham Hogg (Service Director – Housing), Caroline Law (Finance Officer, SDC), Karen Linaker (Scrutiny Support Officer), and Steve May (Housing Officer, KDC)

**1. Apologies**

There were no apologies for absence.

**2. Minutes of the last meeting**

Members agreed the minutes of the last meeting held on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

**3. Chairman's Announcements**

The chairman made the following announcements:

(a) that the meeting needed to finish promptly according to the schedule, as she had a Supporting People Partnership Board Meeting at 12.30pm

(b) that the task group members only would meet on the 10<sup>th</sup> December at 1pm, as an additional and hopefully final meeting, to agree their final report and recommendations

**4. Implementation Executive's Response to the Task Group's Interim Report**

In discussing this report, the following key comments were made:

(a) whilst the task group's interim report had not requested a comment from the Implementation Executive (IE) in September regarding the

Salisbury District Council Housing stock and service, John Thomson reassured members that in the short term there would be little change to the way in which this service was delivered in Salisbury, including the location of officers providing the frontline services. He clarified that the long term future of Salisbury's housing stock, would be a consideration for the new council, rather than the IE, and that in the short term it was important to continue to maintain this stock to the appropriate standard.

- (b) agenda item 8 would provide members with an opportunity to further investigate the affordable housing strategies of the district councils and to discuss the differences between them in terms of policy and service delivery
- (c) with regard to the IE's request that the task group also give some consideration to the issue of extra care housing, and housing for vulnerable young people, members noted that a report on this would be brought to the 4<sup>th</sup> November meeting
- (d) with regard to the IE's request that the task group identify which specific housing associations the new council should be represented on, Graham explained that he would bring a report to the 4<sup>th</sup> November meeting which would offer a draft proposal for members to consider. He outlined that the report would propose that representation should largely remain as was currently the case for the three main LSVT housing associations, due to the legal complexities that would be involved in amending the stock transfer agreements, and to allow the new council to make this decision for itself
- (e) members reflected on the need for councillors to have representation on housing association boards, particularly due to the high number of housing issues they were called to manage on behalf of constituents, the fact that the associations manage and own housing stock, that in some cases has been funded by the councils
- (f) the task group felt that, should there be an absence of any member level panel or committee for housing in the new council, maintaining links with the housing associations would be even more crucial
- (g) John Thomson requested that Graham's report should not only include a proposal for councillor representation on housing associations during the April – June 2009 period, but also beyond and into the new council
- (h) appropriate governance arrangements for local decision making regarding Salisbury's housing stock would need to be agreed before the 1<sup>st</sup> April, and members noted that Graham was in discussion with the Salisbury District Council tenants panel and Niki Lewis to resolve this

- (i) whilst the council might be able to insist on representation on the three LSVT housing associations, there was scope to request representation on other housing associations
- (j) the Housing Partnership, set up as part of the Local Agreement for Wiltshire – Family of Partnerships, would provide a forum through which all housing associations could meet together periodically
- (k) the task group's work schedule would be amended to incorporate the new areas members had been requested to investigate, including extra care housing and housing for vulnerable young people
- (l) in addition, the James agreed to attend the task group's 2<sup>nd</sup> December meeting to discuss the housing related aspects of the Supporting People strategy

**RESOLVED to note the IE's response to the task group's interim report, and to take forward the requests in that response as part of the work schedule**

## **5. Key Issues & Risks Update**

Graham updated members regarding the Housing Project Officer Group's current evaluation of the top ten key issues and risks associated with the transition. In discussing this update, the following key comments were made and clarifications given:

- (a) a performance report would be submitted to the 4<sup>th</sup> November task group meeting for consideration
- (b) members formally congratulated Graham on his appointment as Housing Service Director, noting that he would be released from his current district council duties from the 1<sup>st</sup> November
- (c) a number of staff were also leaving - causing the most difficulty in the private sector renewal and enabling services. However, remaining staff were working to combine resources and expertise across the four areas to ensure business as usual
- (d) the IE had agreed on the 6<sup>th</sup> October an appointments' process which would mean that all staff would know where they fitted into the new council by late December 2008, early January 2009. This process had been agreed in such a way as to minimise redundancies
- (e) good progress was being made in agreeing new policies and in harmonising others
- (f) structures were being developed to deploy geographical knowledge to the best effect

- (g) Graham was holding meetings with staff across the four areas to ensure good communication with all, and this was having a good impact on maintaining good staff motivation and morale
- (h) other key issues and risks relating to the capital bidding process, the review of contractual arrangements, and the current economic climate, were all being carefully monitored and would be the subject of future reports to the task group.

**RESOLVED to note the update on the monitoring of key risks and issues associated with Housing Services in the transition.**

## **6. Housing Service Structure**

The task group considered an update on the drafting of staff structures for the new Housing Service. In doing so the following key comments were made:

- (a) there will be six main service areas, and support from a PFI project manager who would either be based within the Housing Service structure or within the new council's corporate procurement unit
- (b) apart from the service director position, the structure had yet to be populated, and this would take place following the agreement of job descriptions and job evaluation questionnaires with HR
- (c) in order to ensure that housing options and private sector housing teams remained locally accessible, these two services would be structured across two areas – east (covering Kennet and Salisbury) and west (West Wiltshire and North Wiltshire)
- (d) there was some concern over this proposal, and Graham was asked to revisit this with his departmental director, on the basis that there was a need to minimise any potential for the new council to become fragmented. Graham was asked to consider how the county council's "Ways of Working" policy, which would remain a policy in the new council, could be used to help revise this proposal. This policy was designed to ensure that staff were not restricted to a geographical location but encouraged to work flexibly, whether at home or in one of the four area hubs, as a way of ensuring their local responsiveness and minimising the amount of travel across the county
- (e) Graham was proposing a new strategy & support service within the overall Housing Service, which would share resources with adult social care services, to maximise the potential for joined up working
- (f) another key benefit of the strategy & support service would be the capacity it would provide to research and develop new ways in which the Housing Service could improve for the future, bearing in mind that Wiltshire Council would be the second largest housing authority in the south west, to which other councils would look for lessons in innovation

- (g) the head of the strategy & support service would play a key role in the LAW Family of Partnerships
- (h) the three home visiting assessment officers written into the Homes 4 Wiltshire structure were new posts. The task group expressed some concern that three may not be sufficient to serve the many vulnerable people in Wiltshire. In response, Graham clarified that, not all assessments would require home visits, and explained that three officers represented his best estimate in terms of the demand for this new service, for the time being. He offered reassurance that the ability of this new service to cover demand would be carefully monitored
- (i) the task group also expressed concern that the 0.8fte occupational therapist post written into the private sector housing structure would not be sufficient. Members were given an assurance that the James and Graham would work together to ensure the appropriate availability of occupational therapists. Members noted that, if possible, James and Graham would report back to the task group on this matter in December.

**RESOLVED to note the information provided regarding the draft staffing structure for the new Housing Service**

**7. Housing Service Budgets 2009 / 10**

Members considered a brief update on the development of the 2009/10 revenue and capital budgets for the new Housing Service. In discussing this brief update, the following key comments were made:

- (a) £2.6m was the agreed baseline revenue budget position
- (b) £600,000 worth of revenue savings were required over the next three years, with £200,000 required in 2009/10
- (c) despite noting that any revenue savings identified to enable the £2.6m cash freeze position could count towards the £200,000 figure, members were nonetheless concerned that the cash freeze requirement, could lead to reduced service provision in 2009/10. Members made particular reference to the need to meet affordable housing targets, to highlight this concern
- (d) John Thomson offered reassurance that the revenue savings could be used to reinvest in services
- (e) as officer posts were re-evaluated and the new Housing Service structure was confirmed, the revenue budget requirement for 2009/10 would become clearer. Currently, officers were predicting that 2.5% would need to be added to the current combined salary commitment to cover salary costs in 2009/10

- (f) there was no guarantee that all previously bid for capital housing projects would be honoured in the new council's first year, particularly now that the generating of capital receipts was likely to be affected by the credit crunch
- (g) as housing revenue budgets traditionally included a significant amount of funding to pay for officers managing capital housing projects – if there were fewer projects to manage in 2009/10, this funding would not be included in the revenue budget
- (h) also, if fewer capital housing projects were pursued in 2009/10, this could have an impact on LAA targets
- (i) the Salisbury HRA in 2009/10 did not present any major budgetary issues. However, during that year, the level of negative subsidy was expected to rise by approximately £500,000, which would reduce the amount that would be contributed to its reserve
- (j) there was likely to be additional grant funding for the homelessness service which had not been included in the £2.6m figure
- (k) Graham would work towards achieving a target of eliminating all use of bed and breakfast accommodation by the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008
- (l) further work was needed in developing the 2009/10 budget before clarity could be given over the savings that could be achieved, and where these would be made.

**RESOLVED      To note this brief update note, mindful that a full and final report on the Housing Service 2009/10 budget would be submitted to the task group's 2<sup>nd</sup> December meeting.**

## **8. Housing Enabling – Key Issues in the Transition**

The task group considered a report regarding the affordable housing strategies currently in place across the four districts, and the plans to unify these as part of the agreement of the new Local Development Framework. In discussing this report, the following key comments were made:

- (a) recognition of the importance of affordable housing was well embedded within the LAA and LAW
- (b) all four district councils were in agreement regarding what the definition of the term “affordable housing”, however, there were a number of policy and practice differences which would need to be addressed in order to achieve a consistent and uniform approach for the new council
- (c) development officers continued to meet to discuss these differences, and whilst these were likely to remain in operation from Day 1, including differing thresholds and reliance on developer contributions or grant funding, over time these would be unified in the new LDF

- (d) there were risks for the future of affordable housing in Wiltshire, including the downturn in the national economy, the creation of the new Homes & Communities Agency (which would replace the Housing Corporation), a possibility that the new council would reduce the amount of available housing capital grant funding, and similarly a possibility that the new council does not continue with housing PFI schemes
- (e) there were a number of opportunities for affordable housing, including the carrying out of a public sector land audit in September 2009 – which could result in the new council having greater control over the amount of housing it could directly provide. The audit could not be carried out sooner, as property services' officers were needing to manage the pressures associated with local government reorganisation
- (f) the South West Strategic Alliance had already identified potentially available sites for the council to build more affordable housing in the south of the county
- (g) officers were asked to investigate the future introduction of a roof tax on developers, and how this might influence them to move more quickly to build the affordable housing allocations on already agreed sites, before this tax was imposed. Officers were asked to find out how many affordable housing units this might achieve
- (h) bearing in mind the challenges of the current economic climate, it was likely that high standards in terms of build quality and sustainable development might be relaxed
- (i) officers were asked to pursue their discussions with local developers to maximise the opportunities for affordable housing.

**RESOLVED to note this report.**

## **9. Date of Next Meeting**

Members noted that the task group's next meeting was due to take place at 9.30am on the 4<sup>th</sup> November in Committee Room 5, County Hall. The meeting would be preceded by a members' briefing at 8.45am.

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*This meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.30pm  
Karen Linaker is the Scrutiny Support Officer contact for queries concerning  
these minutes (01225 713056 email: karenlinaker@wiltshire.gov.uk)*