



Event: Housing Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group

Place: Committee Room VIII, County Hall

Date: Tuesday 4 November 2008

Time: 9.30am

MINUTES

Attendance: Cllr Mike Fowler (Salisbury District Council), 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 (Director of Housing), Helen Karn (Performance Manager), Karen Linaker (Scrutiny Support Officer), and Derek Streek (Head of Housing Management, SDC)

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 9th October 2008.

3. Chairman's Announcements

The chairman asked the task group to aim to conclude its meeting by 12pm.

4. Harmonisation of Key Policies, Procedures, Practices and Fees / Charges

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

- (a) there was a significant amount of work currently ongoing to harmonise the different housing activities, that with very few exceptions operated under different policies and procedures for each of the four districts
- (b) out of the 6 service areas within the new Housing Service, 'housing management' and 'choice based lettings' were the most advanced with regard to harmonisation, with the former only needing to ensure that processes and procedures relating to the Business Management Programme and SAP were compatible for the new way in which HR, procurement and finance would operate in the new council, and with the latter aiming to be ready as a new harmonised service before the 1st April 2009

- (c) whilst acknowledging the reasons why it would be considered good practice to have a new, harmonised overarching housing strategy from Day 1, the task group agreed that there were other more essential strategies, policies and procedures to which officers should be devoting their time during the transition. Members noted that greater clarity was needed regarding the government's expectations regarding what the overarching housing strategy should look like, although it was understood that the components of any such strategy could be accommodated within the sustainable communities strategy
- (d) Graham explained that whilst the Audit Commission required local authorities to have an overarching housing strategy, its focus in the future would be redirected to assessing performance against the local area agreement
- (e) in timetabling completion of the new housing strategy for 2010, officers could be more certain of producing a strategy that was fit for purpose
- (f) it was very important to ensure that the various aspects of the new 'housing options' service were appropriately harmonised and ready for Day 1, bearing in mind that this service dealt with homelessness prevention, support and management. Consequently, work on harmonising the various aspects of 'housing options' would not begin until the new head of service was in place
- (g) whilst respecting that a rigorous appointments process would need to be followed, members were nonetheless concerned that this process could see a head of the 'housing options' service not being in place until the new year. Additionally, members noted that even when appointed, this post still might not be able to devote 100% of his/her time to the role, as s/he might retain responsibilities for work areas in one of the four district councils
- (h) the practicalities associated with customer access and service delivery of 'housing options', would also need to be carefully managed from Day 1, bearing in mind the particular locations and current organisation of the front desk offices in each of the four hub areas and of the aspiration to deliver services through a 'one stop shop' approach
- (i) the concepts of 'community led affordable housing' and 'community land trusts' were discussed as possible innovations to maximise the provision of affordable housing, noting that these innovations were unlikely to lead to developments of the scale needed in Wiltshire
- (j) having analysed the likely capital funding available from the reserves of the four districts for affordable housing developments in the next few years, officers had found that this would be a very small amount. Consequently, Graham and Mark had asked the county council's Capital Assets Board to give careful consideration to the need for the new council's capital programme to include appropriate provision for affordable housing schemes, and for this to be informed by a public sector land audit to be carried out in 2009

- (k) other PFI schemes would help in some way to meet affordable housing need, and the leader of the county council had publicly confirmed that any available S106 monies would be prioritised for affordable housing
- (l) Graham would submit information relating to a 'forward development programme' for affordable housing to the December meeting of the task group
- (m) the Implementation Executive (IE) would receive a report on the harmonisation of policies and procedures relating to the new Housing Service in due course
- (n) members discussed how key issues detailed in this report might be considered as part of a work programme of housing scrutiny in the new council, including:
 - how services within the new Housing Service might undergo a lean systems review
 - the new overarching Housing Strategy planned for 2010
 - 'housing options' – future equitable levels of customer service / access and available resources across the 4 hub areas of the new council
 - 'housing management' matters, i.e. HRA business plan and local governance arrangements
 - strategic delivery of new affordable housing across the county
 - new Housing Partnership arrangements.

RESOLVED to note this report and the further matters clarified, as material for the task group's final report.

5. Council Nominations to Stock Transfer Housing Associations

Members discussed the report provided by Graham which detailed the issues and options concerning council nominations to the stock transfer housing associations for the period between the 1st April and the June elections. In considering this report, the following comments were made:

- (a) the task group supported Graham's recommendation which would be put to the IE, West Wiltshire District Council and Kennet District Council in due course, that the stock transfer housing associations currently retaining seats for councillors on their boards (Sarsen and Selwood), should continue with those existing nominees, until the new council had had the opportunity to consider and agree new nominees after June 2009
- (b) the task group supported this recommendation, on the basis that the relevant housing associations were consulted

- (c) with regard to the new council's decision on future nominees, the task group again stressed that the housing associations should be consulted
- (d) also, the task group felt that, with there only being 98 councillors in the new council, and as the new unitary councillor role was likely to involve members in many more activities than some may have previously been used to, the opportunity to invite parish councillors to represent communities on housing associations and other outside organisations should be explored.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) support the Director for Housing's recommendation to the IE concerning council nominees to Sarsen and Selwood Housing Associations during the interregnum period**
- (2) carry forward the above comments relating to council nominations to housing associations to the task group's final report.**

6. Salisbury District Council – Housing Matters

The task group was given the opportunity to rehearse the detail relating to three key issues associated with housing in Salisbury, i.e. the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) business plan, options for new affordable housing and the governance arrangements for the housing stock. In doing so, the following key issues were discussed:

HRA Business Plan

- (a) SDC had agreed this 30 year business plan on the 1st October 2008, and it would be submitted to the IE for its consideration and approval in due course
- (b) a recent staff restructure, an increase in garage rents and a rent restructuring calculation were significant contributory factors to improving the revenue position by £250,000 each year
- (c) however, the HRA would peak at a surplus balance of £10.8m in 2010/11, and then progressively reduce in its value until 2019/20, when all of its surplus would be spent
- (d) current assumptions to balance the HRA over 30 years would require efficiencies of £300,000 per year from 2012/13 – equivalent to 3% per annum, or cost freeze, i.e. no inflation on budgets
- (e) with regard to capital – the housing stock would meet the government's Decent Home Standard by 2010, and maintain it for some years, but overall investment requirements would exceed available resources from 2013/14

- (f) the government's review of the HRA might serve to ease the pressures on Salisbury's HRA, but the recommendations from this review were unlikely to be implemented until the next comprehensive spending round (2011 - 2014), which would be developed during a time of economic downturn, and following a general election
- (g) whilst, subject to the successful generation of annual 3% efficiency savings from 2012/13, the revenue position could be maintained, without further investment, whether from the new council's reserves or by a large scale voluntary transfer exercise, the Salisbury council housing stock would begin to deteriorate
- (h) this matter would need careful consideration early on in the sitting of the new council to put in place contingency plans in case the national review of the HRA did not result in the benefits hoped for
- (i) consequently Graham suggested that, alongside the report Derek would submit to the IE on the 30 year HRA Business Plan, he should also include a view on how the gap in resources might be addressed

Options for New Affordable Housing

- (j) the task group considered a proposal which would be put to the IE in due course for the setting up of a 'local housing company' in Salisbury, designed to generate new opportunities for the development of affordable housing
- (k) noting the background to and rationale for the 'local housing company' model, the task group agreed to recommend to the IE that it commission further research into the merits of this model

Governance Arrangements for Salisbury's Housing Stock

- (l) the task group noted the concern that had been expressed by tenants and SDC members that the current status that tenants had in the decision making process in Salisbury might be compromised as a consequence of the new Council taking responsibility for the functions of the HRA
- (m) a report would consequently be written for the IE in due course listing options for the future governance arrangements, and seeking a model of decision making that would preserve the tenants' status
- (n) of the options initially outlined by the Head of Housing Management, the task group expressed a preference for the one which suggested the setting up of an arms length management body, similar to that of the LSVT housing associations, with a board accommodating a third members, a third tenants and a third independents with the relevant mix of skills, supported by an appropriate constitution
- (o) whilst such an arrangement might not include decision making powers, this set up could act in an advisory / consultative capacity

- (p) members noted that such an option would need to be carefully negotiated with the county council's Head of Development Services, particularly as the required model for local decision making in the Wiltshire Council would be via the new network of area boards
- (q) Graham would be encouraging the tenant representatives in Salisbury to comment directly to the Head of Development Services on this matter
- (r) due to the task group's current understanding and concern regarding the area board model, members felt unable to support an option which would see decisions for Salisbury's housing stock being carried out as part of this model.

RESOLVED to support in principle the suggestion that an arms length management body, similar to that of the LSVT housing associations, with a board accommodating a third members, a third tenants and a third independents with the relevant mix of skills, supported by an appropriate constitution, be set up as the preferred local governance model in the new council for Salisbury's housing stock

7. Performance Update

Members considered an update on the 08/09 second quarter performance data for housing services across the four districts. In considering this data, the following key comments were made:

- (a) in all aspects of performance, targets looked set to be achieved or even exceeded as at the end of the 2nd quarter
- (b) NI 160 'local authority tenants' satisfaction with landlord services' – this appeared to show a lower % age to 07/08 figures, but was maybe due to a change in the way in which this target had been measured this year
- (c) there was an aspiration for performance to be recorded, monitored and managed according to each community area in the new council.

RESOLVED to note the 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 2nd December in Meeting Room 1b, 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 12.15pm
Karen Linaker is the Scrutiny Support Officer contact for queries concerning
these minutes (01225 713056 email: karenlinaker@wiltshire.gov.uk)*