

REPORT TO THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE		Report No 8.
Date of Meeting	17 July 2008	
Title of Report	Rural Unitary Task Group – Final Report	
Link to Corporate Priorities	All	
Public Report	Yes	

<p>Summary of Report</p> <p>The report sets out the findings and conclusions of the Rural Unitary Task Group.</p>
<p>Task Group Recommendations</p> <p>The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:</p> <p>(1) Accept the report.</p> <p>(2) Agree that the recommendations be forwarded to the appropriate Committees as set out in paragraph 6 of the report.</p>

Other than those implications agreed with the relevant Officers and referred to below, there are no other implications associated with this report.				
Financial Implications	Legal Implications	Community & Environmental Implications	Human Resources Implications	Equality & Diversity Implications
NONE	NONE	NONE	NONE	NONE

Contact Officer/Member	Marie Todd – Senior Democratic Services Officer Tel: 01249 706612, E-Mail: mtodd@northwilts.gov.uk Councillor Chris Caswill – Chairman of the Rural Unitary Task Group E-mail: ccaswill@northwilts.gov.uk
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1. Introduction

1.1 This report summarises work undertaken by the Rural Unitary Task Group from August 2007 to June 2008.

1.2 The Task Group consisted of the following members:

Councillor C Caswill (Chairman)
Councillor R Cinnamond
Councillor C Coleman
Councillor C Crisp
Councillor R Sanderson
Mr T Jacques Wessex Chamber of Commerce
Ms J Fortune Local Strategic Partnership

2. Terms of Reference

2.1 The Terms of Reference of the Task Group were:

Taking account of the experience of existing unitary local authorities which serve large and rural areas of England and Wales;

- 1) To review the proposals for One Council for Wiltshire and associated work, in order to identify policies and issues of particular importance.
- 2) To contribute to policy development for the new authority, with particular reference to:
 - The proposals for Community Area Partnerships, Boards of Councillors, and extensive delegation to area managers;
 - The service areas of development control, leisure, waste and housing;
 - How the promised improved service to local people may be measured and evaluated; and
 - How North Wiltshire District Council's more successful features may be carried forward into the new Council.
- 3) To scrutinise arrangements being put in place for dealing with assets, where appropriate.
- 4) To consider how the four Wiltshire District Councils might co-operate in scrutiny work during the transition period.
- 5) To consider such other issues as arise which are significant for North Wiltshire's contribution to the effective establishment of a unitary council for Wiltshire.
- 6) To make timely recommendations on these questions to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to the Executive and to the Council, bearing in mind the timetable set by the Secretary of State.

3. Background

3.1 The Task Group met on six occasions and also visited three rural unitary Councils to gain information on their experiences.

3.2 The new Wiltshire Council will be one of the largest unitary authorities with a population of approximately 635,500 and covering 1,257 square miles. Task Group members were keen to identify any particular areas of concern for the transition to a unitary authority.

- 3.3 During the life of the Task Group the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board was set up and members were mindful of the work it was undertaking. The Task Group also concluded that it would not wish to duplicate the excellent work of the Joint Scrutiny Task Groups considering Waste and Recycling and Housing.
- 3.4 The Task Group focused on those areas where it felt evidence could be gained and also those areas of particular concern which were not being covered elsewhere in the various organisations. The Group was keen to identify aspirations for the unitary Council and its work beyond 2009. This included the use of performance indicators to measure performance against previous levels. Members were keen to learn from other authorities who had experienced a similar transition and to find out about their successes and mistakes.
- 3.5 The aims of the Task Group were:
- To contribute a valued input into all aspects of the transition process
 - To be flexible in its approach
 - To contribute to a successful implementation for the people of North Wiltshire
 - To provide an evidence based input into the reorganisation process

4. Evidence

- 4.1 The Task Group gathered evidence from a variety of sources:

- Feedback from partner organisations

The Task Group contacted all Town and Parish Councils in the North Wiltshire area and Westlea Housing Association asking for their views on areas of concern or any issues they felt merited further investigation as a result of the merger of the five Wiltshire Councils into one unitary authority.

There was a very low level of response from Town and Parish Councils. Westlea Housing Association sent a response which is attached as Appendix 1. These comments have been forwarded to the Joint Housing Scrutiny Task Group, to the Executive member for Housing at North Wiltshire District Council and to the transition team dealing with frontline services.

- Other Rural Unitary Authorities

The Task Group visited three rural unitary authorities - Herefordshire, Monmouthshire and East Riding.

These visits were very informative and members were able to ask questions about area working and service provision in large rural authorities. The notes of the visits have been forwarded to the relevant Joint Scrutiny Task Groups for use as evidence or further information.

The notes of these visits are attached as appendix 2.

- CPA and Peer Reviews

The Task Group took into consideration the results of the most recent CPA and peer reviews.

- Wiltshire County Council's Proposals

In forming its recommendations the Task Group considered the One Council document submitted by the County Council to the Department of Communities and Local Government.

- The White Paper

5. Key Issues

(a) General

Evidence of change to large rural unitary authorities with similar geography to Wiltshire has been difficult to find. There appear to be no relevant rural examples of area working of the type envisaged in the new Wiltshire Council i.e. Community Boards. The new Council is breaking new ground in terms of scale and devolved working. The Community Board pilot schemes will be very important and need to be carefully and objectively planned. One of the strengths of the County Council's bid for unitary status is the local nature of the Community Boards and it is very important that these are successful.

Distances and communication will be important in the new authority. The availability of public transport will also be crucial – very few towns are connected by train (Salisbury, Trowbridge and Westbury have rail connections). Bus services are available but not on the scale of those in an urban area.

The distances underline the importance of local information services as well as area working and also make the case for some distribution of development control meetings. On the other hand consideration should be given to whether the distances to/from Devizes are sufficiently better to justify centralising some activities and services in the town.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **The Task Group did not find a unitary authority of comparable size and geography¹ from which direct evidence could be drawn about the Wiltshire move to Unitary status. Members were however able to have the benefit of evidence and ideas from the three rural unitary authorities which they visited.²**
- 2) **From its enquiries the Task Group concluded that the new Council will be breaking new ground in terms of its proposals for devolved working in a large rural space.**
- 3) **Distances and communication will be important. For example, it is a 48 mile round trip from Malmesbury to Trowbridge, 50 from Marlborough, 70 miles from Purton, and 96 from Cricklade.³**
- 4) **The distances underline the importance of careful planning of local services and information**

(b) Asset Management

With regard to the arrangements being put in place for assets the Task Group concluded early on that it did not need to concentrate in detail on this area of work

¹ Wiltshire is 3485 sq km, with a current population of 635,300. East Riding, one of the largest current unitaries, is 2479 sq km, with a population of 587,100.

² East Riding, Hereford and Monmouth

³ According to Via Michelin

because it did not wish to duplicate work being undertaken by the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board. Decisions relating to assets have already been taken by the Implementation Executive.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Group RECOMMENDS that a single asset register should be produced and that this matter be included on the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board workplan.

(c) Devolved Governance

From the visits to rural unitary councils it was found that Area Forums had been working well in Monmouth and Hereford, although these were largely used for consultation purposes and do not have any delegated powers. However, East Riding had just abandoned their area forums because they were not proving effective.

The Task Group concluded from the visits undertaken that partnership working was very important. It was noted that the role of Town and Parish Councils seemed to have been given little attention and had not featured strongly in any of the visited authorities.

There was some concern that Town and Parish Councils would be reluctant to put themselves forward to provide services currently undertaken by the District Councils because there were too many implications. The Task Group welcomed the consultations and “meet and greet” sessions which the County Council had undertaken with Town and Parish Councils.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The apparent lack of exemplary devolved arrangements in large rural authorities underlines the importance of the planned Area Board experiments, and of careful learning from those experiments. The Task Group RECOMMENDS that those experiments be subject to independent comparative monitoring, and that this audit should be carried out by an external team, perhaps by an academic unit specialising in local government work.**
- 2) The Task Group also RECOMMENDS that the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group keeps in close touch with these developments.**
- 3) The Task Group notes that ‘area forums’ have struggled in some places, and have just been abandoned in East Riding. None had attempted the degree of local working which seems to be foreseen for Wiltshire Community Boards, and this may have contributed to their difficulties. But the mixed results elsewhere highlight the need for effective working at the interfaces between Community Boards and Community Partnerships and with other partners**
- 4) There are lessons to be learnt about community leadership in large rural areas from the East Riding ‘Local Area Team’ (LAT) initiative. This brings together the Council, the police, the PCT and other local actors under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) – as part of the Council’s community leadership role. However this initiative has only just been launched and the Task Group RECOMMENDS its progress be reviewed at the end of this year. The Task Group also suggests that a**

better name for an initiative of this kind could be Community Delivery Team.

- 5) The Task Group visits have shown the importance of high level championship and management of area working. Given the significance of the Community Boards and their innovative ambitions, the Task Group RECOMMENDS that they should be an explicit responsibility of one person in the political leadership (i.e. in a Cabinet portfolio) and in the Council's management (i.e. at Director level).**

(d) Local Services

In a rural area such as Wiltshire it is very important to ensure that the effects of size and distance are minimal. Customers must be able to access services as easily as possible. When making recommendations members felt that it was important to maximise the use of technology and to minimise the use of transport as far as possible.

From the Monmouthshire visit members concluded that information centres worked better when they were run by a high level manager and were well integrated into the local community. Councillors also used the centres as surgeries to meet their constituents which worked well. This was an example of how the centres could be used to enhance the community leadership role of local members.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The provision of local services will be a significant challenge for the new authority, given Wiltshire's size and the distribution of its market towns and rural communities. All three rural authorities that the Task Group visited provided wide ranging information and services through 'one-stop shops', information centres or customer service centres in their market towns. There were interesting variations between them but all had in common a good quality environment, a central location, and professional staff trained to answer a range of queries and to provide access and signpost to information.**
- 2) From the Task Group's observations it RECOMMENDS providing Wiltshire Council information centres in the town centres of all the market towns and main urban areas, and at least in Chippenham, Cricklade, Corsham, Malmesbury, Marlborough, Salisbury, Trowbridge.**
- 3) These and other local services should take advantage of the new high-speed 'wireless area network' (WAN) between the District and County Council offices, which is being introduced in the run-up to the unitary authority.**
- 4) The Task Group RECOMMENDS that the option of locating information centres in or alongside libraries should be positively encouraged, with obvious possible benefits to both services. Leisure centres are another possibility, where they are in the town centres.**
- 5) The Task Group RECOMMENDS that the information centres in the main areas of population should be led at sufficiently senior level to allow for integration of the senior staff with local community organisations and for easy access to Council management.**

- 6) The Task Group also **RECOMMENDS** early investigation of the 'citizens' link' mechanism for communication with rural areas, as currently being used in the East Riding, with a view to its adaptation to Wiltshire needs.
- 7) The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that responsibility for effective local information services be located managerially alongside the support for Community Boards, and preferably in 'democratic services' or its equivalent department

(e) **Development Control**

When considering Development Control the Task Group was mindful of the fact that a Joint Development Control Task Group had been set up and were keen that no duplication of effort took place.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The Task Group believes that recommendations in this area should be channelled through the Joint Scrutiny Task Group on Development Control. One of the members is also a member of that group, which facilitates this process.
- 2) The Task Group was impressed by the case made to it on one of the visits that changes to policy and practice after transition should be made gradually, to avoid disruption. Members heard of one authority where radical changes had been made early in the unitary council's life, and where the process had not settled down some 10 years down the track.
- 3) For example, there is a good case for beginning by locating Development Control in the four District areas and then considering the case for new geographical arrangements at a later date.
- 4) In a County of the size of Wiltshire, there is anyway a strong case for retaining at least front line planning services in the current District Council offices, to provide good access to the public. Consideration should also be give to planning officers visiting local information centres for regular 'planning days'.
- 5) The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that Planning Officers should be located in different areas around the County and not based in one central location.
- 6) The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that Highways engineers should also be located in the local planning teams to ensure that they work with the Planning Officers from an early stage.

(f) **Success Measures**

The Task Group felt that it was very important to be able to measure the success of the new Council in some way. Members looked to identify some areas in which the new Council could be challenged to improve. The Task Group felt that it was important to undertake some form of benchmarking using District Council data. The People's Voice methodology will also be helpful in measuring the success of the new authority. It will be important for

comparisons to be made between the old District Councils and the new unitary authority to identify improvements or reductions in levels of service.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Group supports the principle of identifying a few appropriate benchmarks against which the new authority's success can be measured. It **RECOMMENDS** that these should if possible take account of the large rural geography of the new authority. As the collection of local authority performance data is itself currently in transition, and because the Task Group did not have the resources to do this work itself, it **RECOMMENDS** that the Implementation Executive and / or the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board set up a working group to look into this and provide a list of 10-12 key performance indicators for the new authority which:

- Can draw on existing data (e.g. Best Value Performance Indicator Surveys) benchmarks
- Reflect the best performance areas of the five existing Councils
- Capture the challenges of a large scale rural authority

Examples from the limited data available to the Task Group are the general satisfaction levels in the Citizens' Panel and in District BVPI surveys, contact with the council, planning services, local decision making, waste and recycling, housing services, parks and open spaces and litter.

6. Final Recommendations

The Task Group proposes that the conclusions and recommendations be forwarded to the appropriate Committees as follows:

(a) Implementation Executive

- 1. The Task Group did not find a unitary authority of comparable size and geography⁴ from which direct evidence could be drawn about the Wiltshire move to Unitary status. Members were however able to have the benefit of evidence and ideas from the three rural unitary authorities which they visited.⁵**
- 2. From its enquiries the Task Group concluded that the new Council will be breaking new ground in terms of its proposals for devolved working in a large rural space.**
- 3. Distances and communication will be important. For example, it is a 48 mile round trip from Malmesbury to Trowbridge, 50 from Marlborough, 70 miles from Purton, and 96 from Cricklade.⁶**
- 4. The distances underline the importance of careful planning of local services and information.**

⁴ Wiltshire is 3485 sq km, with a current population of 635,300. East Riding, one of the largest current unitaries, is 2479 sq km, with a population of 587,100.

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5. The Task Group supports the principle of identifying a few appropriate benchmarks against which the new authority's success can be measured. It RECOMMENDS that these should if possible take account of the large rural geography of the new authority. As the collection of local authority performance data is itself currently in transition, and because the Task Group did not have the resources to do this work itself, it RECOMMENDS that the Implementation Executive and / or the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board set up a working group to look into this and provide a list of 10-12 key performance indicators for the new authority which:

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Examples from the limited data available to the Task Group are the general satisfaction levels in the Citizens' Panel and in District BVPI surveys, contact with the council, planning services, local decision making, waste and recycling, housing services, parks and open spaces and litter.

(b) Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board

The Task Group RECOMMENDS that a single asset register should be produced and that this matter be included on the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board workplan.

(c) Area Boards Task Group

1. The apparent lack of exemplary devolved arrangements in large rural authorities underlines the importance of the planned Area Board experiments, and of careful learning from those experiments. The Task Group RECOMMENDS that those experiments be subject to independent comparative monitoring, and that this audit should be carried out by an external team, perhaps by an academic unit specialising in local government work.
2. The Task Group also RECOMMENDS that the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group keeps in close touch with these developments.
3. The Task Group notes that 'area forums' have struggled in some places, and have just been abandoned in East Riding. None had attempted the degree of local working which seems to be foreseen for Wiltshire Community Boards, and this may have contributed to their difficulties. But the mixed results elsewhere highlight the need for effective working at the interfaces between Community Boards and Community Partnerships and with other partners
4. There are lessons to be learnt about community leadership in large rural areas from the East Riding 'Local Area Team' (LAT) initiative. This brings together the Council, the police, the

PCT and other local actors under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) – as part of the Council’s community leadership role. However this initiative has only just been launched and the Task Group RECOMMENDS its progress be reviewed at the end of this year. The Task Group also suggests that a better name for an initiative of this kind could be Community Delivery Team.

- 5. The Task Group visits have shown the importance of high level championship and management of area working. Given the significance of the Community Boards and their innovative ambitions, the Task Group RECOMMENDS that they should be an explicit responsibility of one person in the political leadership (i.e. in a Cabinet portfolio) and in the Council’s management (i.e. at Director level).**

(d) Customer Access Task Group

- 1. The provision of local services will be a significant challenge for the new authority, given Wiltshire’s size and the distribution of its market towns and rural communities. All three rural authorities that the Task Group visited provided wide ranging information and services through ‘one-stop shops’, information centres or customer service centres in their market towns. There were interesting variations between them but all had in common a good quality environment, a central location, and professional staff trained to answer a range of queries and to provide access and signpost to information.**
- 2. From the Task Group’s observations it RECOMMENDS providing Wiltshire Council information centres in the town centres of all the market towns and main urban areas, and at least in Chippenham, Cricklade, Corsham, Malmesbury, Marlborough, Salisbury, Trowbridge.**
- 3. These and other local services should take advantage of the new high-speed ‘wireless area network’ (WAN) between the District and County Council offices, which is being introduced in the run-up to the unitary authority.**
- 4. The Task Group RECOMMENDS that the option of locating information centres in or alongside libraries should be positively encouraged, with obvious possible benefits to both services. Leisure centres are another possibility, where they are in the town centres.**
- 5. The Task Group RECOMMENDS that the information centres in the main areas of population should be led at sufficiently senior level to allow for integration of the senior staff with local community organisations and for easy access to Council management.**
- 6. The Task Group also RECOMMENDS early investigation of the ‘citizens’ link’ mechanism for communication with rural areas, as currently being used in the East Riding, with a view to its adaptation to Wiltshire needs.**

7. The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that responsibility for effective local information services be located managerially alongside the support for Community Boards, and preferably in 'democratic services' or its equivalent department

(e) Development Control Task Group

1. The Task Group believes that recommendations in this area should be channelled through the Joint Scrutiny Task Group on Development Control. One of the members is also a member of that group, which facilitates this process.
2. The Task Group was impressed by the case made to it on one of the visits that changes to policy and practice after transition should be made gradually, to avoid disruption. Members heard of one authority where radical changes had been made early in the unitary council's life, and where the process had not settled down some 10 years down the track.
3. For example, there is a good case for beginning by locating Development Control in the four District areas and then considering the case for new geographical arrangements at a later date.
4. In a County of the size of Wiltshire, there is anyway a strong case for retaining at least front line planning services in the current District Council offices, to provide good access to the public. Consideration should also be give to planning officers visiting local information centres for regular 'planning days'.
5. The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that Planning Officers should be located in different areas around the County and not based in one central location.
6. The Task Group **RECOMMENDS** that Highways engineers should also be located in the local planning teams to ensure that they work with the Planning Officers from an early stage.

Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Response from Westlea Housing Association Appendix 2 – Note of visit to Herefordshire Appendix 3 – Note of visit to Monmouthshire Appendix 4 – Note of visit to East Riding
Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:	One Council for Wiltshire document

Previous Decisions Connected with this Report

Report	Committee & Date	Minute Reference
None		

Westlea Housing Association Response

Unitary authority: Issues for transition

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.

Structure and location

- Will there be local offices for the unitary authority, where will they be and which services will be based there?
- What will the staff structure be at county and local level?
- 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*.

Housing strategy and enabling

- 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?
- 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 register and homelessness

- What will happen in the short, medium and long term to the housing register as we move into a county based CBL system?
- Will there be a local service in North Wiltshire for homelessness and housing advice/enquiries?
- We would like to work with the new authority on developing a strategic approach to homelessness.

Existing arrangements

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

Communication and consultation

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

New homes

- 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.
- Are all NWDC commitments for allocations of funding going to be honoured?
- Will the housing capital budgets identified by NWDC be preserved or will they be re-directed to other uses?
- What is going to happen to the planned developments within NWDC of young persons hostel?
- What will future clawback arrangements be?

Managing estates

- Are there any plans to rationalise grounds maintenance work and other “public realm” management in the future?
- Will there be the opportunity for us to take over the management of some of the grassed and other communal areas within our estates?
- How will rubbish and recycling services be run?

Supporting People

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

Herefordshire Visit

The visit took place on 29th February 2008 at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford. The Task Group representatives were Councillor C.J. Caswill and J. Whittleton, who met with Mr M. Heuter (Senior Community Involvement Officer) and Ms L. Hack (Info Herefordshire Manager). After the Meeting, the Group were given a tour of the Info in Herefordshire Centre.

The two main areas of discussion and, indeed, the two main elements of area working in Herefordshire, were the Council's Info Centres (one stop shops) and Community Forums, run through the Herefordshire Partnership.

Herefordshire has a population of approximately 175,000. The principal urban area is Hereford City (67,000), with other significant populations at Kington (2,597), Leominster (11,000), Bromyard (4,000), Ross-on-Wye (8,000) and Ledbury (8,837).

Info In Herefordshire:

The Council has 6 Information Centres throughout the County at the following locations; Hereford City Centre, Kington, Leominster, Bromyard, Ross-on-Wye and Ledbury. Each of these centres is unique to its own area, for example in the Kington Centre staff also run the municipal library; In Leominster the premises are shared with the Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern; In Bromyard premises are shared (and staff administer some of the following services) with the library, youth centre, tourist information centre and leisure centre; and in both Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye a project is taking place to combine the information centres with libraries. Information Centres are known to the public as the Kington Centre, the Ledbury Centre etc.

Where libraries and Information Centres are run from the same premises, customer services staff are trained to carry out library duties. The administration of libraries is carried out by a different directorate, so a Service Level Agreement is drawn up to establish the service to be carried out by customer service staff.

Possible future developments include another Information Centre in the south of Hereford and a combined mobile information centre and library.

The information Centres are staffed with Customer Services Officers (Hereford 23, Kington 5, Leominster 6, Bromyard 11, Ross-on-Wye 6 and Ledbury 4). These staff are trained to deal with a variety of queries and the information centres are able to deal with the majority of queries/service requests. In total, the centres can administer over 700 services including those relating to planning, environmental health, trading standards, blue badges (disabled parking stickers), housing benefit, council tax payments and enquiries, pest control as well as general enquiries and help with filling in forms etc.

Customer Services staff undertake training supplied by Mary Gobar International, which the Council thoroughly recommends for this purpose.

The Centres open a dedicated planning desk for certain hours during the week, where planning applications and decision notices can be viewed, general enquiries can be made and planning officers undertake surgeries.

Many of the Council's operations based workers are issued with hand-held devices in which they can access their Outlook inbox. This enables staff at the information centres to arrange for services to be carried out when customers make requests e.g. pest control services.

The Council are running a project to bring elements of each of their services to the front line. In other words, they are looking to bring as many elements of service provision to the front line in order to allow professional officers to carry out their work with fewer distractions.

In addition to the Info in Herefordshire, the Council also runs the Info By Phone service; the Council's central call centre. This is managed as part of the same area as the Information Centres so the majority of customer contact takes place through the Corporate and Customer Services Directorate.

For all customer contact, Information in Herefordshire uses the SAP Customer Relationship Management system (which the Council are pleased with due to its knowledge management functions) and this is closely linked to the ICT department.

The Centres have become very much part of the community, and the inclusion of other services on the same premises increases awareness and importance in the locality.

The Information In Herefordshire project has been running since 1998 (starting with a pilot in Ross-on-Wye) and has received good support from Councillors. The Council undertakes a satisfaction survey twice a year and enjoys a good degree of customer satisfaction. It is rated 4th out of 17 in its group of benchmarking authorities.

Community Forums:

Herefordshire's Community Forums are based on 12 community areas. They came into being due to the Police starting to hold community meetings (without the Council present). It was felt that the image of the Council would suffer if the Council was not part of these meetings.

The Forums are now run by the Herefordshire Partnership; PACT (Partners and Communities Together). Responsibility was moved to the partnership as not all of the issues raised at the Forums are Council functions. The 12 Forums are held on a quarterly basis and have independent chairs drawn from the partnership. This arrangement is accepted by those in attendance, though there are a small number of councillors who are unhappy with this arrangement.

Initially, Forums were attended by the Council's Leader and Chief Executive. However, the focus quickly changed from local to strategic issues with this set-up.

The Forums are somewhat different to normal committee meetings; neither agendas nor reports are produced and it is rare to have any kind of presentation. Issues can be raised by anyone in attendance. There are no procedure rules, though guidelines are produced for the chair, in order to facilitate a useful and inclusive meeting; the main guideline being that everyone present should get the opportunity to speak.

The Forums are attended by a Community Forum Co-ordinator who sets up, supports and minutes the meeting, representatives from the Police (usually 2 reps – an Inspector and a PCSO) and a representative from the Council's Environment Directorate. Most questions usually relate to policing matters or matters which concern the Council's Environment Directorate (mainly street scene issues).

The Forums do not commit to providing answers to questions on the night, nor to finding solutions to the community's grievances, but will at all times seek to provide an explanation.

Any questions or matters for further investigation are summarised on a feedback sheet, which is made available on the Partnerships website and at the next meeting. They are able to refer issues to the Council's Committees, if they so wish. If there is a particularly pressing issues of local interest, that does not fit in with the quarterly cycle of meetings, a special meeting can be called to discuss the issue.

The Forums are reasonably well publicised. The meeting dates are published in the Council's newsletter (Herefordshire Matters), 2,000 leaflets are produced, which are circulated to parish councils, GPs surgeries, Info Centres etc, the Council and Partnership website are

also used to promote the meetings and a database of attendees is used to remind people of upcoming meetings. Publicity is carried out by both the Partnership and Police.

Initially, local radio was used to promote the meetings, but, it was felt that this did not have a significant impact on attendance.

The partnership do not use parish magazines to promote the meetings, though recognise the potential value of doing so and are considering using this method.

Attendance at the meetings averages about 25, but has shown a steady increase as the Forums have become better known. Turnout obviously increases when there is an issue of local significance; a recent meeting in Bromyard was attended by 150 people when a local school was threatened with closure. Forums are well attended by parish councils.

The Forums use feedback sheets to review their usefulness. Approximately 90% of responses are positive.

It has been noted that attendance is mainly from people over 40 years of age.

Compared to other formats of community governance/engagement, the Herefordshire Forums are relatively inexpensive. The Partnership has an annual £20,000 budget for the running of the meetings, which includes hall bookings and officer support.

Some problems encountered include:

- Councillors not being supportive of the Police;
- Not being able to get the appropriate officers to attend; and
- Not being able to secure buy-in from partners, for example housing associations.

The Council and Partnership are looking at the possibility of carrying out the Councillor Call for Action function at the Forums. The recent consultation paper on Petitions, may also be handled through this channel.

The current format has only been in operation for a year and a half (6 cycles of meetings). Although the Forums are not responsible for specific service provision, they have begun to have an effect in bringing issues to the fore and in some instances dealing with local problems.

Monmouthshire Council

The Task Group visit to Monmouthshire Council took place on the 28th January 2008. The Group comprised of Councillor R. Sanderson, Councillor C. Caswill and J. Whittleton. The Group met with the Area General Manager for Central Monmouthshire and the Area Services Manager for Central Monmouthshire. They were also given a tour of Central Monmouthshire One-Stop-Shop.

Monmouthshire:

Monmouthshire has a population of approximately 88,000. The largest settlements include Chepstow, Caldicot, Monmouth and Abergavenny.

Monmouthshire Council employs around 4,000 people at its main offices in Cwmbran (just outside the County). The Council is split into three directorates; Resources Environment & Regulations, Lifelong Learning & Leisure and Social Services and Housing.

Area Working In Monmouthshire:

Monmouthshire moved to an area based approach approximately five years ago. There were initially 4 areas, but budgetary constraints have meant the amalgamation of two areas. Areas now exist in the Abergavenny area, the Monmouth area and the Chepstow/Caldicot area (Chepstow and Caldicot were amalgamated).

Principally, area working is based around two main elements; one-stop-shops in each of the main towns and governance/community engagement arrangements by means of area committees and area forums.

CDRP'S are based on the Areas used by Monmouthshire Council. They are jointly chaired by the Police and the Area Services Manager and are attended by local councillors and a member of the Council's Youth Offending Team.

One-Stop-Shops:

There are one-stop-shops in each of the County's main towns. These act as the main point of contact between the Council and its public.

Each of the one-stop-shops is staffed by 5 customer serves officers, an admin officer, a team leader, an area community officer and an Area Manager (2nd tier officer). Area Managers are supposed to report to different directors (in an attempt to ensure area working is embedded throughout all the Council's services). In practise, they report to the Chief Executive. Area working has had the effect of bringing senior officers back to the front end of service provision.

Functions run through the one-stop-shops include the market, cemeteries, allotments, local projects (e.g. safe route to schools and the welcome centre in project in Monmouthshire) and public consultations.

As previously stated, they also act as the main point of contact between the Council and its public. Customer Services Officers are trained to deal with a variety of enquiries and will often put members of the public through to the right Council officer or arrange meetings between customers and Council officers. Officers from the main offices will regularly visit the one-stop-shops to conduct 'surgeries' on issues (such as housing).

Local Members (all single member wards) often use the one-stop-shops for surgeries.

Costs for Area Committees and Forums are met by the respective one-stop-shop budgets.

The relationship between the Council and public has improved as a result of area working. Officers in each of the one-stop-shops are known to the community and people have begun to identify with the officers in the one-stop-shops and the area which they serve. Officers recognise that to successfully use this system of area working, good customer relations are essential.

Area Committees:

Functions undertaken by Area Committees include allocating s106 money, prioritising road safety measures and small environmental projects. The Committees no longer allocate grants for community groups.

Meetings are currently held quarterly. However, the frequency of meetings is likely to increase to every 2 months as consultation with the Committees can be by-passed if the meeting cycle is not convenient.

There is provision for speaking at the beginning of each Area Committee, which is well used.

Decisions on local service provision (as suggested in the Wiltshire County Council Area Boards paper) are not a feature of the Monmouthshire system. Such an idea was suggested, but not taken up due to financial constraints and demands on officer time.

After each Area Committee meeting, a newsletter is produced to report on the main issues discussed at the meeting.

Area Committees are not promoted any more than other committees of the Council.

Area Committees are able to refer issues to both Overview & Scrutiny and to Cabinet (Executive).

Area Forums:

The Monmouth Area has two Forums – one based on the Town, the other on the surrounding rural area.

The Monmouth Area Forum is made up of 4 County Councillors, 4 Town Councillors, 4 representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and representatives from voluntary groups in the area (e.g. Friends of the Earth, residents associations, Monmouth Schools Bursar etc). There is currently a mailing list of about 109. Turnout at meetings varies between 20-60.

Forums are facilitated by the respective area officers.

The Monmouth Forum has a Chairman, elected independently by the Forum on an annual basis (A Chairman can only stand for two years). The Rural Forum is chaired by area officers. This reflects the flexibility of the approach – different formats are adopted to suit the preferences of each area.

When first introduced, the subject matter and format of the Forums was led by the area officers at the Council. Now the Forum members are more confident with the set up, they dictate the issues to be addressed (bottom up approach).

Forums will generally undertake community projects, for example the Rural Forum is responsible for a community transport project in the area.

The Council have noted that it is easier for Forums (rather than the Council) to secure funds through bids to Government agencies. However, there are concerns as to who will be responsible if projects undertaken by Forums should get into financial difficulties. The Local Service Board (Partnership) is looking into this issue.

The Forums are becoming better known in the community as time passes. However, they are not so well known in new areas and specific efforts are not made to reach 'hard to reach' groups.

A special effort is made to promote forum meetings when issues of public interest are due to be discussed.

Meetings of the Monmouthshire Forum take place every 2 months. The Rural Monmouthshire Forum meets every 6 weeks.

It is hoped that the Forums will become the principle means of engagement between neighbourhood policing teams and the public, however, a definitive format has yet to be worked out.

Development Control:

Development Control decisions are taken centrally at the Councils offices. Town and Parish Councils are consulted on applications in their area.

Occasionally representations are received on planning matters at the area committees (Members of the Development Control Committee leave during these representations). On these occasions, local members will often attend the Development Control Committee to pass on these views.

Overview & Scrutiny:

There is no area based approach to Scrutiny. The Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board meets in Cwmbran and has three select Committees, which discharge functions delegated to them by the Co-ordinating Board.

Leisure Centres:

There is a leisure centre in each of the County's main towns, which are under joint use arrangements with local schools.

Flexible Working:

Due to the geographical characteristics, the bad repair of the Council's offices and the cost of building new offices, the Council is looking to move to a flexible way of working.

This will involve a flexible approach to staff accommodation, with more home working and staff based at various locations around the County.

The Council owns a lot of buildings around the County, which could be used for office space. It is anticipated that staff will work from offices close to their homes in order to cut down on travel times.

The Council is currently undertaking an audit for hot-desking and will look at all posts to assess their suitability for flexible working. Some of the Council's buildings will need to be adapted for office use.

Notes of a visit to the East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Beverley, on 3c

Rural Unitary Task Force Visiting Group : Councillors Chris Caswill, Patrick Coleman and Ray Sanderson

We met :

Cllr Symon Fraser, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Street Scene and Development Control

Kate Bowden, O&S Team Leader⁷

Paul Drury, Principal Officer for Local Action Teams

Philip Parker, Head of Planning and Development Control

John Whiley , Senior Committee Officer

We heard presentations from Paul Drury and Philip Parker. We also visited the Beverley Customer Service Centre (see below).

East Riding : A unitary authority, which was created in 1997. It is a four star council. It covers the area between York and the east coast, excluding Hull. County Hall is in Beverley, where almost all the services and activities are centralised. Other towns include Bridlington, Goole, Great Driffield and Hornsea. There are 168 Town and Parish Councils. There is a majority Conservative administration, which had moved from a minority administration at the last election.

Devolved Governance: The Council is in the process of abandoning Area Forums and introducing 'Local Action Teams' (LATs). Area Forums had recently been reviewed and found not to be delivering. These Forums had in any case not included all councillors, but had consisted of smaller groups elected by the group of area councillors.

LATs were just about to go live at the time of our visit. They are the Council's response to 'place shaping' and the challenge of community leadership.⁸ A LAT will be made up of a unitary ward Councillor⁹, a police inspector, a non-exec member of the PCT, a representative of the voluntary sector and a 'community champion' (not clear how that person would be selected but maybe by the LSP). There will be six of them and were given a map of their areas. The LATs will at first be chaired by the ward councillor. Each LAT will essentially have a co-ordinating role, aiming to deliver the best service from the wide range of local community activities and initiatives ("everyone is trying to do engagement"). It will consult about local issues which need attention and seek to provide joined-up solutions from the various agencies. It will meet every 6 weeks and every other meeting will be held in public to encourage public engagement. The LAT chairs will also meet together monthly to provide coordination.

LATs will pay particular attention to 'hard to hear groups', including isolated rural groups. Issues which are the direct responsibility of a particular agency (eg the Council or the police) will be directed to that agency. The Council has been encouraged to go down this route by the positive results of a consultation with town and parish councils, of which 80 responded positively to the question of how the Council could work with them and share information. There has also been early interest from other agencies – the police have asked that the LATs organise their engagement with town and parish councils.

LATs are being set up jointly by the Council and the East Riding LSP and will report to both. Half the LAT staffing of six is being funded by external partners. LATs will also work closely with the East Riding Neighbourhood Action Teams, which focus on crime reduction, and bring together the police and ASBO officers.¹⁰ Within the Council, the LATs staff are housed

⁷ Who had organised the meetings for us, in a very efficient way

⁸ They are expected to hit 'community and empowerment' targets, and specifically the new targets N1,N2 and N4

⁹ Appointed by the Leader

¹⁰ There was acknowledged to be some risk of confusion about the shortened titles.

in the Communication Team, in the Corporate Policy and Strategy Directorate. They will be reviewed in 12 months time.

We established that there are no other devolved arrangements in East riding, beyond the DC and customer access arrangements described below. There are no area committees.

Customer Access : The Council's approach to customer access and service helps frame their LATs policy. There are Customer Service Centres in the main conurbations , provided as part of a package of activities outsourced to a company called Arvato.¹¹ These centres are supplemented by an interesting system of 'Citizen Links', which are small enclosed spaces providing individual members of the public with electronic access to the Council and its services. There can be in existing locations (such as supermarkets or libraries) or in purpose built huts.¹² Access to these spaces seems to be controlled in that you have to state the nature of your business before being allowed in, and is overseen by CCTV. Inside there is video access via a webcam and virtual face to face discussions can be held with council staff. Each also has a scanner so that documents can be transmitted to the council offices if needed. These facilities were funded by a Lord Chancellor's Office initiative, though its not clear if that is an ongoing option.

Other access points are mobile libraries and occasional outreach visits by the Leader and a group of officers.

As mentioned above, we visited the Beverley Customer Service Centre, which was just across the road from County Hall. It had a welcoming atmosphere and a number of open plan but sheltered locations where members of the public can talk to Service Centre staff. There were also closed meeting rooms, some of which had webcam video links, and a cashier's counter for making payments , and racks for information leaflets, including bus timetables.¹³ The staff at the centre provide signposting for the public and are not specialists in any one area. They also alternate between meeting members of the public and answering the phones.

Development Control: DC has always met government targets, though the Audit Commission had expressed some concerns about the direction of travel. They have some difficulties with staff retention, attributed to the salaries emerging from the corporate job evaluation. After working with four Planning Committees which covered areas similar to the old District Boundaries, East Riding has moved to a system of two committees (East and West), working under a main strategic committee. 90% of applications are handled under officer delegation. Previously 30% went to committee. Applications can be called in by a single member, but this has to be on identifiable planning grounds. Decisions go up to the main committee if they have particular strategic importance or if they have differed 'significantly' from established policy.¹⁴ We were told that about 50% of recommendations referred upwards were supported . The public can address DC meetings but only one statement is heard on each side. Three minutes is allowed at the sub-committee meetings and three or five minutes at the main committee, depending on the circumstances.

For large scale applications 'pre-presentation' meetings are arranged, held in public, in the presence of the main committee present. These provide a chance for issues to be brought out and councillors and members of the public to air their concerns. They also help planning officers to develop their recommendations.

¹¹ Other outsourced services are financial services and IT.

¹² We had a picture of one that looked much like a bus shelter

¹³ This facility seemed to have a lot in common with the facilities provided by Hereford Council (see the note of that visit).

¹⁴ This seemed to be a grey area, with the significance determined by planning officers

All meetings are held in Beverley. The sub-committees meet in the afternoon and the main committee in the morning.¹⁵ In an earlier consultation with town and parish councils, there had only been about half a dozen objections to meeting in Beverley.

Currently the system of public notification is under review. They send out about 82000 neighbour notifications each year and receive about 5000 responses, which they consider to be a small number. They are also reconsidering newspaper advertising. On the other hand, we were told that it was important that the public should get to know that the customers of the planning service 'are everybody', and not just the applicants. A lot of the problems arise because of public suspicion and lack of information.

The Council employs eight planning enforcement officers.

We were told that the main issue for DC is to get effective policies in place. This had taken them about five years. They had deliberately kicked off with the established policies, working towards consistency, rather than starting from scratch. Apparently a neighbouring authority had gone down the more radical route and had many years of 'total chaos'.

General issues: There was a brief discussion of lessons for going unitary. IT was seen as critical. It had taken the East riding three years to 'plateau the IT base'. Starting with established polices and moving gradually to innovation was also seen as important, even if this means there are some different mechanisms in place for a while.

As a footnote, East Riding Councillors get an allowance of £10,321; cabinet members an additional £13,391 and the Leader is paid £33,000.

Chris Caswill
03.05.08

¹⁵ There are no formal committee meetings in the evening.