

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRANSITION BOARD
8 MAY 2009**

**RESPONSE OF THE DIRECTOR OF HOUSING TO THE JOINT OVERVIEW
AND SCRUTINY TASK GROUP - HOUSING**

FINAL REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

The work, interest, care and enthusiasm that the Task Group have put into their role has been very welcome and certainly appreciated by all those involved in the delivery of the housing service. It has been evident from the outset that this group has been motivated to want to see an effective housing service established from day one of the new council.

Having consulted with colleagues and Housing Portfolio Holders on the report I have brought together a number of comments on the recommendations that I hope will be aid the committee in considering the final report. These are set out below

Recommendations

1. That JOSTB endorse the recommendations of the report at appendix 1 and agree that there should be further scrutiny of the strategy for extra care housing, for the modernisation of accommodation contracted out to the Orders of St John's Care Home Trust and for the overarching accommodation strategy in due course (*see paragraph 10(a)(ix)*).
2. That the Director of Housing and the Director of Finance ensure that the risks associated with the HRA Business Plan are carefully considered as part of medium term financial planning from 2009/10 and that plans are developed further to mitigate these risks (*see parargraph 10(d)(viii)*).

DoH comment – We are aware of the future issues associated with the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan. Whilst the plan allows the Council to achieve the Decent Homes standard by 2010, there is a significant question mark over the ability of the HRA to sustain this standard over the lifetime of the business.

Consequently when the IE considered they business plan they asked for further work to be carried out in this area. Of particular relevance to this is the Government's review of the HRA subsidy system. It is hoped that a report will be published in the near future on this matter and offers are due to meet soon with the Government Office to discuss this very issue. Ultimately the council will need to be presented with and adopt a business plan that does safeguard the future standards of these homes and can present an option that will achieve this.

3. That the Director of Housing provide clarification to the JOSTB regarding the way in which decisions on Salisbury's council housing stock will be made in the new council, so as to provide reassurance that tenants' consultative rights and ability to influence decisions will be preserved and further strengthened (*paragraph 10(d)(x)*).

DoH comment – I have already given reassurances to the tenants of Salisbury that the Salisbury District Council arrangements for consultation and tenant involvement would be safeguarded on change over to the new council. That is the existing Tenants Panel would continue. I am pleased to say that the new council has been able to enhance the level of involvement as tenant representatives are now taking part in the Wiltshire Housing Reference Partnership. This provides an opportunity for tenant reps to meet and consider policy and other matters in a new partnership involving housing portfolio holders and other housing Stakeholders. This takes place monthly. Additionally tenants have been briefed on the new Area Boards and Partnerships and are encouraged to become involved in their communities at a local level. I am very keen that tenants should have a high quality and effective involvement in the governance of their service. I would like to ask the panel to invite myself and housing portfolio holders along to discuss possible options for future involvement in the governance of their housing; in particular the panel could give consideration to a model that parallels the board arrangements used for other forms of social housing. This could involve tenant board members, councillors and independent board members having a real say in the future strategic management of their homes.

4. That the Director of Housing provide a report to the new overview and scrutiny committee tasked with scrutinising housing regarding how affordable housing targets will be met from 09/10, bearing in mind the lack of capital funding prioritised in the council's capital programme (*paragraph 12(b)(i)*).

DoH comments - The Government has recently announced a number of opportunities to fund new affordable homes in the budget and brief discussions have already taken place with the Homes and Communities Agency. In addition the Council is also benefiting from a PFI scheme that is coming to fruition and has also put in an expression of interest to deliver extra care housing through PFI. New Homes are clearly a big challenge under the current economic climate, however Wiltshire is arguably better placed than many councils. I will be happy to update overview and Scrutiny on these matters in the future.

5. In order to ensure a strong voice for tenants within the Wiltshire Housing Reference Partnership arrangements, the Director of Housing consider

inviting a representative from the Tenants' Services' Authority to sit on this partnership (*paragraph 12(d)(v)*).

DoH comments – I agree that the involvement of the TSA would be valuable. Currently we invite the Homes and Communities Agency to the Housing Steering Group, and it may be more appropriate to invite the TSA to the Steering Group.

6. In order to ensure ongoing good partnership relations with Sarsen, Westlea and Selwood Housing Associations, the Director of Housing ensure that a sufficient number of unitary councillors are nominated to the boards of these associations, and that these councillors are selected based on their experience in housing matters (*paragraph 12(d)(vi)*).

DoH Comments – Representation on housing association boards is determined by the stock transfer agreements or subsequent variations to those agreements. Currently this allows for two council nominees to Sarsen and 5 nominees to Selwood, there is no provision for nominees to Westlea. I will of course seek to ensure that the new council takes up its nominations with these associations.

7. That the Director of Housing ensure that senior housing managers give high priority to area boards in the new council, so as to minimise the risk of the boards becoming ineffective 'talking shops' but instead developed to become meetings of real purpose and action (*paragraph 12(e)(iii)*).

DoH comments – I attach great importance to the relationship between housing and area boards. I will be the lead Service Director for the South West Wiltshire Area Board based around Mere. I have also ensured that all the new job descriptions in Housing have the following provisions in them in relation to area boards. –

- Heads of Service are to take on a lead responsibility for three area boards each. Area Board members will all know who their primary housing contact is and they will be able to involve the primary contact on all housing matters. Primary contacts will ensure that an appropriate member of staff from housing attends area board when it is necessary
- All front line and more senior staff have a role in attending area boards and being a communications conduit.
- All members of housing staff have a section in their job Description encouraging them to provide one day's service a year on specific community projects that have been prioritised by the area boards. There are approximately 170 staff working in housing and if each member of staff provides a day's work in this way

that will mean that housing can provide 170 days work on community projects.

8. That the IE members for housing consider whether or not there is any merit in writing to MPs to ask that housing benefit applicants be required to sign an agreement before being approved for benefit assistance, which would guarantee rent payments as a first call on their benefit (*paragraph 12(f)(iii)*).

DoH comments – The recent changes in the way Housing Benefit is paid have been hugely controversial. This was the case while the pilots were running and also through the Government's preparations to introduce the changes. The philosophy behind the change is one of rights and responsibilities. The tenant can only genuinely be responsible for their own housekeeping if they have the cash paid to them for their rent and then actively are involved in paying for their bills. It is unlikely that the Government will wish to change course however it may be that we as a council first need to carry out our own research into the effect of this new approach.

9. That the following matters be included within the work programme of the committee tasked with scrutinising the Housing Directorate in the new council (*paragraphs 11(e), 12(g)(v) and 14*):

- (a) new overarching housing strategy
- (b) new homelessness strategy
- (c) new private sector housing renewal strategy
- (d) strategic delivery of affordable housing where there is a proven local need
- (e) provision of housing in rural areas
- (f) HRA business plan
- (g) performance, budget and risk monitoring
- (h) the 'lean review' of aspects of the new housing directorate