

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

Summary of Report

The report sets out the findings and conclusions of the Rural Unitary Task Group.

Task Group Recommendations

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

(1) Accept the report.

(2) Agree that the recommendations be forwarded to the appropriate Committees as set out in paragraph 6 of the report.

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

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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 given 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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(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
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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

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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.
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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		