

Title:	Presentation of the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee:	Cllr Ernie Clark
Reporting Officer:	Diana Jones (Policy Officer)

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present to Cabinet the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee concerning:

- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)
- Affordable housing
- Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs)
- Support for joint scrutiny work

Background

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 17 September 2008, members expressed concern about two issues, namely Houses in Multiple Occupation and the supply of affordable housing.

In the report on 'Migrant Workers and Houses in Multiple Occupation in West Wiltshire', the Community Development Officer and Principal Housing Renewal Officer outlined the consultants' findings. These included the need to ensure that work is done on HMOs, many of which contain category 1 hazards. The Housing Services Manager also presented an update concerning the effect of the 'credit crunch' on the availability of Section 106 affordable housing.

At its meeting on 15 October 2008, members expressed concern about the level of police staffing in NPTs. It also considered the need for more officer support for joint scrutiny work through the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Transition Board (JOSTB).

Main Issues

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

West Wiltshire District Council was awarded £17k funding by the government to commission research into the issue of migrant workers and HMOs in the district. The consultants reported that approximately 2,600 migrants live in West Wiltshire, mainly in Trowbridge. Of the 80 migrant workers surveyed, around half lived in HMOs. In addition, a survey of HMOs was carried out. Half of these HMOs were found to be unsatisfactory on health and safety criteria; one-third were a possible Category 1 hazard (excess cold or fire) and one-sixth were Category 2 hazards. On average it would cost £3,530 to remedy the defects identified at each property.

Under the Housing Act 2004, this Council has a statutory duty to inspect properties where it suspects there are Category 1 or 2 hazards, and to take enforcement action where they find Category 1 hazards. In addition, over a third of HMOs (36%) were found to be non-decent. To be 'decent', a property has to be wind- and weather-tight, warm and have modern facilities.

Officers are considering which issues can realistically be addressed by this Council before next April, but increasing the number of HMOs inspected is likely to be a priority. In some cases this may entail enforcement proceedings, which would give a clear message to landlords about their responsibilities.

Recommendation 5 of the consultants' report is as follows: "That attention is given to extending the capacity and capability for enforcing conditions in the private rented sector across Wiltshire. Suggested immediate action: that this area of work be considered as a growth item in the budgetary processes and that political support should be given to realistically supporting the sector."

The consultants' report contains a number of other recommendations, most of which could not be progressed by this Council before April. There was concern that these should be taken forward by the new Wiltshire Council. The Housing Services Manager told Members that the new council will have a dedicated HMO Officer and Landlords Accreditation Officer.

Affordable Housing

Affordable housing provided through Section 106 (s106) agreements linked to planning consents is just starting to flow, four years after the policy was introduced. However, under the current economic downturn, the larger house-builders have all but ceased construction, even on sites which have already started. As a result, although there are nearly 1,500 new affordable homes which have either been secured under s106 agreements, or are in negotiation, the delivery of these homes will fall.

This leaves the district facing an increased shortfall in the number of new s106 affordable homes. Meanwhile the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme is progressing, although its delay defers the availability of new affordable homes from this source.

At the same time, the need for affordable accommodation is increasing. The number of people registering on the Council's housing list is rising, as is the number presenting as homeless and the number housed in temporary accommodation. As home repossessions increase due to the economic slowdown, these numbers will rise.

The latest Housing Need Survey and Housing Market Assessment was completed in 2006 and indicates that there is a need for around 950 new affordable homes per annum. The Council is currently achieving around 100 per annum in line with targets.

Although the Housing Corporation is providing increasing amounts of grant funding for the 2008 – 2011 National Affordable Housing Programme, this is a temporary position and is not likely to continue for the length of the economic slowdown. Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are taking advantage of this position and seeking grant funding for 90 units on sites previously being considered for PFI. However, because they were holding available land in readiness for PFI, RSLs had only bid for 60 units in the main funding round for 2008-2011. Overall, this is still well below what is required to meet an increasing housing need.

Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs)

On 2 April this year, Cabinet approved the recommendations of a scrutiny task and finish group which reviewed partnership working in respect of tackling anti-social behaviour through NPTs. One recommendation related to police abstraction rates (whereby NPT officers are diverted into reactive policing). This recommendation was sent to Wiltshire Constabulary and a reply was received indicating that software was being developed to monitor the abstractions both of Police Community Beat Managers and Officers, and of Police Community Support Officers. Police assured this Council that this information would be shared with partner agencies such as ourselves.

However, when Scrutiny Members reviewed action on these recommendations at its meeting in October, several members reported that police presence on NPTs has diminished even further. In one case it was stated that one police constable was being shared between five NPTs in Trowbridge, because other officers were away on leave or training courses. Members believed that the public is starting to lose faith in community policing; a recent People's Voice survey in Trowbridge found only one-sixth of panellists (17%) thought NPTs had made the police more responsive in the last year, whereas more than twice as many (37%) thought the opposite.

Support to joint scrutiny work

Officer support is provided to both the work of the West Wiltshire Scrutiny Committee and to the work of Joint Overview and Scrutiny Board (JOSTB). Additional support is also provided to the scrutiny service redesign group which is looking at the future arrangements for overview and scrutiny beyond April 2009. However, as the importance and role of the Implementation Executive increases, so does the workload of JOSTB, particularly through its task groups. This requires increasing support from scrutiny members and officers.

Effects on Strategies and Codes

The Corporate Plan includes a number of spotlight areas which are affected by the issues raised. They include the spotlight areas 'meeting housing need' (objective 4 on decent homes and objective 3 on homeless people) and 'improving development control' (objective 4 on securing affordable housing). The Council will also fail to meet the following LAA targets: NI 155 to complete 116 affordable dwellings in 2008/9, and NI 516 to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation.

Risk Management Implications

A number of risks exist in respect of HMOs and in addressing the hazards identified.

Finance and Performance Implications

There may be resource implications in respect of HMOs, and in providing additional scrutiny officer support to JOSTB. Housing more people in temporary accommodation rather than affordable housing will increase caseloads and impact future Government funding. Meeting the shortfall in affordable housing would cost around £65,000 per unit.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

Under the Housing Act 2004, the Council has a statutory obligation to ensure that unlicensed HMOs are licensed and to enforce the licence conditions of HMOs. It also has a duty to inspect properties where there are suspected Category 1 or 2 hazards, and to take enforcement action where Category 1 hazards are found.

Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to consider the comments and recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee as follows:

HMOs

- Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that
 - Resources are directed towards enforcing statutory regulations regarding HMOs.
 - Work should be done to ensure that recommendations in the report concerning migrant workers and HMOs are taken forward by the new Wiltshire Council.

Affordable Housing

- Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that all possible ways of increasing the volume of affordable housing locally are investigated and pursued.

NPTs

- Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet that a letter is sent from the Council to the Chief Constable and Chair of the Police Authority:

- Expressing its strong support for the general principle of neighbourhood policing, and the desire that it should live up to its expectations.
- Expressing its concern about abstraction rates of officers from NPTs, as a result of the number of officers 'on the beat' appearing to have reduced across the district.

Support to joint scrutiny

- Scrutiny Committee requests that Cabinet consider whether additional officer support can be made available to support the work of JOSTB and associated task groups up to the end of March 2009.

Background papers

Scrutiny Committee reports - 17 September 2008 and 15 October 2008.

'Migrant Workers and Houses in Multiple Occupation in West Wiltshire' (August 2008), Michael Howard Associates commissioned by West Wiltshire District Council through IDeA's Migration Excellence Programme.

'Trowbridge Community Area Partnership Survey Report' July 2008 accessed from Wiltshire County Council Intelligence Network website on http://www.intelligencenetwork.org.uk/intelligentsearch/view_upload.aspx?upload=1299