

Towards One Council



OVERVIEW and SCRUTINY

Event: Housing Joint Overview and Scrutiny Task Group

Place: Committee Room V, County Hall

Date: Thursday 12th March 2009

Time: 2.30pm

MINUTES

Attendance: Cllr Mike Fowler (Salisbury District Council), Cllr Janet Giles (Kennet District Council) [Chairman], Cllr Nina Phillips (North Wiltshire District Council), and Cllr Pip Ridout (West Wiltshire District Council)

Officers: Graham Hogg (Housing Service Director), James Hudson (Head of Private Sector Housing), Karen Linaker (Scrutiny Support Officer), Angie Rawlings (Head of Housing Options), and Nicole Smith (Head of Housing Strategy & Support Service)

1. Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Pat Rugg.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

Members agreed the minutes of the last meeting held on the 13th February 2009. In doing so, members received further information from Graham Hogg regarding likely proposals for the future governance arrangements of Salisbury's housing stock. Also members noted the information received before the meeting regarding performance indicator NI160, as discussed in February – that the Salisbury tenants' satisfaction rating listed for 08/09 was lower than 07/08 because a different survey methodology had been applied, and not because tenants' satisfaction in the service had dropped – as evidenced in a recent SDC publication.

3. Chairman's Announcements

The chairman reminded the task group that the second half of its meeting would be to agree the final report and recommendations for submission to the 27th March 2009 Joint Overview & Scrutiny Transition Board meeting.

4. 2009/10 Budget Update

Members noted the budget levels that had been agreed for housing in 09/10 and that the £200,000 1C4W savings had been achieved through rationalisation of staffing costs in combining four housing services into one, and by absorbing next year's inflationary increases in a budget total frozen at the 08/09 budget level.

RESOLVED to note this budget update.

5. Housing Directorate Structure – Final Update

In considering this report the following comments were made and clarifications sought:

- (a) with the exception of the Head of New Housing, all of the other heads of service within the housing directorate structure had been appointed and would officially take up their posts from the 1st April 2009
- (b) precisely where each of the services would be based had yet to be agreed
- (c) at the staff day in December, approximately 70 housing officers had assembled to hear about proposals for the new housing directorate – its structure and objectives, and to receive further clarification regarding the appointments' process
- (d) Graham continued to visit staff across the county to discuss the future of the service and to provide support and reassurance during the transition period
- (e) out of the 147 housing officers working across the county in December, only 20 had yet to be confirmed in post in the new structure. However, there were more posts in the new structure than there were officers
- (f) the appointments process was inevitably a stressful time for officers.

RESOLVED to note this report

6. Updates from the Wiltshire Housing Reference Partnership

In considering these updates, the following comments were made and clarifications sought:

Interim Housing Renewal Strategy

- (a) an interim private sector housing renewal strategy would need to be in place for the 1st April 2009
- (b) the private sector housing renewal service would continue to provide the same services as previously, but the combined service had been shaped to draw out the best practices across the districts

Interim Homelessness Strategy

- (c) an interim homelessness strategy would need to be in place for the 1st April 2009
- (d) this interim strategy comprised the action plans of the current four homelessness strategies
- (e) the strategy would provide a uniform approach to homelessness in Wiltshire, whilst also ensuring tailored support for the different needs across the county

- (f) the recent series of workshops held in communities across Wiltshire regarding homelessness, to which all relevant agencies had been invited, was helping officers to identify gaps in current service provision

Homelessness Prevention Fix It Fund

- (g) this scheme was being renewed for the 1st April and was a number of schemes to help prevent homelessness, by providing small grants of up to £300 to help with matters such as travelling costs to view offers of accommodation, or to top up housing benefits

Homeless Medical Assessment

- (h) this harmonised policy would be reviewed annually to ensure that housing officers could effectively determine if a homeless applicant had a priority need for accommodation based on their state of vulnerability, i.e. due to old age, mental illness, disability or other special reasons

Sanctuary Scheme

- (i) this was another scheme to prevent homelessness for those subject to or at risk of domestic violence
- (j) there were two levels of service available from the scheme – level 1: to help make accommodation secure, and level 2: to provide a ‘safe room’ where victims of violence could wait safely for police response
- (k) the success of this scheme, as with other housing strategies and policies, depended upon good joint working with other agencies including the police and registered social landlords.

RESOLVED to note the updates from the Wiltshire Housing Reference Partnership

7. Options for Delivering Affordable Housing

In discussing this report, the following comments were made and clarifications sought:

- (a) the key issues for the strategic housing authority included – identifying the level of need for affordable housing, setting targets for affordable housing delivery, identifying resources for this delivery, and understanding / adopting an array of different delivery vehicles
- (b) the process for agreeing how many new affordable homes could be built in Wiltshire was dependent upon the development of a new Local Plan, which would be ready in 2011
- (c) this would need to take account of the LAA targets for affordable housing
- (d) there were a number of ways in which officers were working to maximise the opportunities for new affordable housing and to get ready for the economic upturn, particularly discussing options with housing associations and exploring the potential for funding from the Homes & Communities Agency

- (e) in addition to the traditional affordable housing delivery vehicle of development through housing associations, there were now a number of new vehicles which the council could pursue, including a 'special purpose vehicle'
- (f) also, recent government announcements had indicated a willingness to make it possible for local authorities to build their own affordable housing stock, without having to contribute to the national HRA subsidy system
- (g) it would be important to ensure development of affordable housing units in small rural communities as well as urban areas and the enabling strategy would need to promote the use of rural exception sites.

RESOLVED to note the report.

8. Key Risks & Issues Update

In discussing this report, the following comments were made and clarifications sought:

- (a) one of the risks indicated as 'high' on the risk register was 'failure to launch the new choice based lettings scheme – this however had been launched that morning
- (b) SAP training remained a 'high' risk for all services in the new council and this matter was being discussed with the Director of Resources
- (c) investment in social housing remained a high risk, with funding bids not being prioritised in the current capital programme. However senior officers continued to influence processes that would determine how land was used in Wiltshire and how capital funds should be prioritised in the hope that this would ensure future funding for social housing
- (d) whilst it would take time to appoint the Head of New Housing, an interim officer was in place to take this work forward.

RESOLVED to note the report.

9. Housing Project Plan Update

This update was noted.

10. Final Report & Recommendations

In agreeing the task group's final report and recommendations, members recorded their thanks to the officers who had provided support and information during the past 10 months.

*This meeting commenced at 2.30pm and concluded at 4.40pm
Karen Linaker is the Scrutiny Support Officer contact for queries concerning
these minutes (01225 713056 email: karenlinaker@wiltshire.gov.uk)*