

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet
24 May 2011

Subject: Housing Improvement Plan

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Brady
Economic Development, Planning and Housing

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary

This paper sets out the New Plan for the necessary improvement to deliver a quality landlord service, the action taken in shaping the Plan and the progress since the inspection of the housing services in 2010.

Proposal

To approve the New Plan for Improvement for landlord services.

Reason for Proposal

Following a poor Audit Commission report in May 2010 an Improvement Plan was developed addressing every recommendation of the inspection and as many actions again, that reflected local aspirations. Although the Plan was originally intended to carry through to March 2012 it has been recently reported to the joint staff, tenant and member Housing Commission Board that good progress has been made to implement the actions in the Plan. Three quarters of the actions in the Plan have been completed.

In January 2011 the Housing Commission Board noted two significant developments: firstly there had been some major developments since the inspection around finance, regulation and changes to tenancies and allocations; secondly a conference in December of Tenants, staff and Councillors proposed a series of new developments and changes that they wanted to see built into future change.

Additionally in 2010 an Annual Report was prepared that responded to the new service standard framework developed by the Tenant Services Authority. It is clearly important that this Plan relates to those services standards.

The Board took the view that the Council needed to develop a New Plan that would still remain some of the ambitious goals for governance and high quality performance but set those in a new context.

MARK BODEN

Corporate Director
Department of Neighbourhood & Planning

Housing Improvement Plan

Purpose of Report

1. To seek approval for the New Plan for improvement of the Council's Landlord Service.

Background

2. In 2005 an Options Appraisal of the Council's housing stock concluded that the only way of securing sufficient investment in the housing stock to meet tenants' aspirations was to undertake a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer. In 2006 tenants voted against transfer and in order to meet the decent homes standard by 2010 and balance the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for as long as possible the Council made significant savings and efficiencies. This clearly had an impact on the level of service that has been delivered and in May 2010 the conclusion of an Audit Commission inspection was that Wiltshire Council's landlord service was poor with limited prospects for improvement.
3. The Council has reacted positively to this conclusion and with good prospects of the current restrictive subsidy system coming to an end, has invested resources to increase capacity to address the issues highlighted by the Audit Commission. It is recognised that the Inspection Report findings highlight a service that is not up to the standard which is acceptable or tenants expect. In fact the Council and tenants had aspirations to go beyond the requirements of the Audit Commission and consequently took the view that a new model for governance should be explored and that the process of developing a new Asset Management Strategy and Business Plan be used to confront some of the big investment challenges that lie ahead and through the development of comprehensive prospectus for housing offer tenants real choices around service delivery, standards, investment priorities and governance.
4. An Improvement Plan was developed that put in place over 100 actions, some that focused down on specific activities others on the bigger, more strategic. They addressed every recommendation of the inspection and as many actions again that reflected local aspirations. Although the Plan was originally intended to carry through to March 2012 it was recently reported to the joint staff, tenant and Member Housing Commission Board that good progress has been made to implement the actions in the Plan. Three quarters of the actions in the Plan have been completed.

5. In January 2011 the Housing Commission Board noted two significant developments: firstly there had been some major developments since the inspection around finance, regulation and changes to tenancies and allocations; secondly a conference in December of Tenants, staff and Councillors proposed a series of new developments and changes that they wanted to see built into future change. Consequently the Board took the view that the Council would need to develop a New Plan for Improvement that would still retain some of the ambitious goals for governance and high quality performance but set those in a new context.

Main Considerations for the Council

6. The New Plan for Improvement is **attached**. With the guidance of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), the social housing regulator, the Council wants to ensure that the New Plan for Improvement provides assurance that the regulatory standards set by the TSA are met but also that it is made very clear what actions will bring in terms of the tangible benefits for the tenants.
7. The Housing Management Team are ambitious for the future of the service and are currently working with the Chartered Institute of Housing to develop new approaches to putting tenants at the heart of how performance and work are assessed in a co-regulatory way. It is intended to continue to learn from best practice and to move forward with implementing this where appropriate.
8. This revised Plan for Improvement incorporates the remaining actions from the Initial Plan but focuses much more clearly on providing assurance that the regulatory standards are complied with and also what is planned has been agreed with and shaped by tenants, with clear outcomes for them as a result. It is recognised the importance to tenants to focus on arrangements for involving them and prepare now for the new arrangements for consumer and service regulation. Also highlighted, as a priority by tenants, staff and Members is that the transition to self financing for the service is managed and the risks and opportunities this will bring. The changes to social housing proposed in the Localism Bill are also an issue that needs to be worked through with tenants.
9. The Plan will reflect the ambitions and understanding of tenants' views at this point in time but will continually evolve and be updated particularly following some of the major consultation exercises included in the New Plan for Improvement around self financing and the prospectus for Council housing.
10. As well as ensuring that the TSA regulatory standards are met it is necessary to agree a revised "local offer" with tenants. Local offers represent a new way of tailoring the services of social housing providers based on what tenants in a local area want. Wiltshire Council has drawn up a set of local standards in consultation with the tenants, and with the Tenants Panel it has been agreed that the local offer will be based around these. The aim however is to continually review the local offer, learning from best practice elsewhere and working with the tenants to ensure that it is a true reflection of their priorities and can be monitored by them.

Key features of the New Plan For Improvement

11. The New Plan groups objectives under the 6 TSA Service Standard themes.
12. Wherever possible actions have SMART objectives.
13. Some of the key objectives from the original Plan have been retained such as to be a top quartile performing Local Authority landlord, to deliver an Asset Management Strategy; to re-structure the service and to consult with tenants on the Best Deal (a package of service standards and Investment Plan); to investigate a modern approach to governance.
14. It incorporates new ambitions such as introducing a new robust scrutiny role for tenants; ensuring that management and business planning is fit for the new purpose of self financing; re-modelling of sheltered schemes; improving debt advice; working with the Regional Government Advisor on anti-social behaviour to develop a really effective response.
15. Whilst the original Plan had over 100 actions ranging from the very strategic to the very detailed, the New Plan contains just over 40 key actions ensuring that the focus is on the areas of weakness.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

16. There are no known environmental issues.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

17. Equality impact assessments are an integral part of the Improvement Plan and will be undertaken as part of the development of any new strategies, policies and procedures.

Risk Assessment

18. The new regulatory arrangements set out by the TSA require housing organisations to ensure that they meet the service standards set up by the TSA and influenced at a local level by tenants. Throughout the New Plan it has sought to show where the standards are met and where it is felt there is a need to do more work to ensure full compliance with the standards and meet tenant priorities.

Financial Implications

19. Contained within the Improvement Plan is an action to agree a viable 30 year Business Plan that meets tenants' aspirations. Delivery of the Improvement Plan itself will require additional resources yet to be fully assessed but can be contained comfortably within HRA reserves. The resources required from this Improvement Plan will also have to be considered in light of the planned HRA self financing regime, as the impact of this change has not been finalised.

Legal Implications

20. There are no specific legal or human rights implications.

Consultation

21. Many of the new proposals in the Plan have been developed following good practice field trips that enabled staff, tenants and Councillors to visit high performing landlords. The visits led to a Conference at which staff tenants and Councillors proposed and discussed many new ideas for improvement.
22. The Housing Commission Board included Councillors, tenants and the external expertise of two landlord CEOs. This body has had a considerable influence on the ambitions going into the Plan and has also been able to consider the new Plan for Improvement as a whole.
23. The Tenants Panel has considered the New Plan and has collectively given support as well as some very strong individual endorsement.
24. The Tenant Services Authority have been invited to comment on the draft.
25. The report Draft Plan has been available on the Council's website providing an opportunity for tenants to make individual submissions.
26. The Tenant Housing Improvement Steering Group is a group of tenants with a specific focus on improvement and they have also been invited to look in detail at the Plan.
27. Full feedback arising from this consultation will not be available prior to circulation of Cabinet Reports; however, Cabinet will be provided with a full update of any strong proposals to make changes to the Draft Report arising from these consultations.

Conclusions

28. The New Plan for Improvement provides the opportunity for the landlord services at Wiltshire Council to build on the excellent progress already made since the Audit Commission inspection to ensure a high quality, customer focused service is provided to tenants.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report:

None.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – “Getting better all the time” – the New Plan for Improvement.