

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panel **DATE:** 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011

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### **PART I** **FOR INFORMATION**

#### **HOUSING FUTURES - PROVISION OF HOUSING SERVICES UPDATE REPORT**

##### **1. Purpose of Report**

This final report updates Members of the progress in developing the new Housing Service by combining the former People 1<sup>st</sup> Housing Management teams with their former SBC strategic housing counterparts.

##### **2. Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

The Panel is requested to note the progress to date on the Housing Futures project and that the ongoing improvement of the service will now fall to day to day operational management with the project status being closed down on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011

##### **3. Community Strategy Priorities**

The provision of good quality, inclusive and efficient housing services are fundamental to delivering the Council's community strategy priorities and as such, ongoing, meaningful consultation with staff, tenants and stakeholders is essential in the design of structures and services that will deliver services to meet identified need.

##### **4. Other Implications**

###### **(a) Financial**

There are no financial consequences inherent within this report and the costs associated with the project are being closely monitored by the project board. The proposed structure, having taken account of the 'Planning for the Future' programme will release staff who have chosen to opt for voluntary redundancy or early retirement and deliver savings to both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account. The exact level of savings will not be established until the process of recruitment and redeployment has been completed and the costs of

any additional compulsory redundancies become known. Members will be aware that at the outset of the project a commitment was given to tenants that any efficiency savings generated by the return to direct service provision would be reinvested to improve front line services.

#### (b) Risk Management

Since initiating the review of housing management service delivery in January of last year, the project has been managed tightly using Prince II principles and documentation. The project board initially met on a fortnightly basis which increased to weekly as the transfer date approached. Post transfer the Board reviewed its governance arrangements with the core project team meeting weekly but a wider project team including tenant and staff representatives and otherspecialist staff meeting monthly. This approach has minimised the time spent in meetings and allowed more time to be dedicated to achieving the end result by agreed deadlines. The project board has continued to meet as necessary through 2011 but with the 'go-live' date of 1<sup>st</sup> April approaching the Board can be disbanded with the few remaining issues being managed through normal operational avenues.

#### (c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

The TUPE transfer of staff was completed without a challenge by individual staff or trades union representatives. The due diligence process of closing down the People 1<sup>st</sup> company is now complete and was achieved without any significant issues. Face to face meetings were arranged early in the process with the Department for Community and Local Government (CLG) Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) the Audit Commission (AC) and we are maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) to appraise them of the situation in Slough and our proposals for future service delivery to ensure that we remain in accordance with the pseudo-legislative requirements for delivering front line services.

#### (d) Race Relations Amendments Act Implications

The future determination of the delivery method for housing services has been subject to Equalities Impact Assessments for both staff and service users and these have been shared with Trade Union representatives.

## **5. Supporting Information**

### **Background**

- 5.1 As the Housing Futures project is now coming to completion, it is proposed that this is the final update report on the specific issue of reintegrating staff and services from People 1<sup>st</sup> into the new Housing Service. While a few issues remain to be resolved these are merely operational and can be accommodated within the new structure which is rapidly becoming populated by new highly competent professional officers.

- 5.2 As an indication of the scale of work undertaken within this project the following issues have now been resolved
- 5.3 **Accommodation** – The corporate review of office accommodation, recommended that the new Housing Service be located at The Centre, Farnham Road. Relocation for the majority of staff occurred in January and once the refurbishment of St Martin’s Place is complete the remaining staff in Housing Needs and Private Sector Housing can be moved from Landmark Place and Airways House respectively to join the team at The Centre.
- 5.4 **Customer Access** – This aspect of the project was also linked to the corporate review of My Council. While the operational base will be at The Centre, face to face customer access will continue to be focused on Landmark Place which, being central is more convenient for the majority of customers and is in an area where people are naturally drawn to for retail purposes. Professional advice and support would be given to the public by staff attending from The Centre on a rota basis. With the creation of a customer service centre within the housing service discussions are continuing across the council to determine whether telephone access will continue to be handled at My Council or whether it would be more efficient to operate this from the Centre alongside the front line staff
- 5.5 **Consultation** - When tenants and leaseholders were originally consulted about the future delivery of housing services over 2,000 responded to the questionnaires and many took the opportunity to highlight service areas which they perceived as needing to be improved. These views were broadly supported by a number of workshops and drop in sessions held last Autumn which highlighted the key concerns to be,
- Anti Social Behaviour
  - Cleanliness and upkeep of estates
  - Access to staff – don’t know who to contact/ they don’t return our calls
  - Communication with leaseholders – they feel under valued and don’t get good information about what they are paying for
  - Mix of tenants in supported housing – de-designation is causing problems.
- 5.6 In response to each of these points, additional front line staff resources have now been introduced taking the number of Neighbourhood Housing Officers from six to twelve as well as a dedicated ASB officer being recruited and seconded to the Council’s Community Safety Team to ensure a joined up approach to tackling ASB issues. Two new posts were created within Leasehold Services to address the specific issues associated with that sector and this will allow greater transparency in how services are costed and deal with concerns that some services are not actually being delivered either in the way that leaseholders want them or in certain cases, at all. The creation of smaller patches (650 homes) for the Neighbourhood Housing Officers together with their generic responsibility for anything that occurs on that patch should

mean that tenants immediately see an improved response rate with officers being 'solution oriented' rather than in the past what appeared to be a culture of passing the buck to someone else. Tenants and leaseholders will in future only need to remember one name and one face to receive a service from Housing rather than the confusing mire that existed previously when different officers dealt with rent accounts, lettings, repairs, ASB, supported housing and arrears.

- 5.7 **Tenant Services Authority (TSA)** – The TSA have expressed concern regarding the development of local offers to tenants in accordance with the legislative timetable and while considerable work and effort was required, the local standards have been adopted along side a new proposal for informed and worthwhile engagement with tenants and leaseholders at the Customer Senate. Volunteer representatives are now being trained to participate in the co-regulation and scrutiny of the service and they will continue to be mentored and shadowed by staff and tenants from the Thames Valley Housing Association training unit until they feel competent to 'fly solo'. This is anticipated to be in October / November 2011.
- 5.8 **TUPE** – on the 1<sup>st</sup> July last year just over 100 staff were TUPE transferred to the Council from People 1<sup>st</sup>. with the process long since completed there have been no challenges to the process from individual staff or their trade union representatives. The project team made efforts to keep all staff consulted throughout the process and once the transfer had been completed all staff were offered an induction course to welcome and introduce them to the Council, it's staff and the services it provides.
- 5.9 **Staff Consultation and Restructuring** – the initial consultation and draft structure was released to staff in October 2010 and following consultation forums and over 40 1-2-1's between affected staff and the Assistant Director of Housing Services a further consultation was released in November which showed considerable changes to the draft structure based directly upon the concerns and responses from staff. The second structure was adopted by the middle of the month and immediately the council's redeployment policy was applied and staff were either confirmed in post or interviewed for alternative posts ensuring that all employees were given the maximum opportunity of securing continuing employment in a chosen work area.
- 5.10 **Recruitment** – Once the internal recruitment process was completed only three staff were left on the council's redeployment list remaining in search of alternative employment. The external advertisement process then began seeking experience staff for ;
- 3 x Area Housing Managers
  - Housing intervention Manager
  - Leasehold Services Manager
  - 5 x Neighbourhood Housing Officers
  - 2 x Tenancy Sustainment Officers

The response to the advertisement was extremely encouraging with a very high caliber of staff keen to join Slough at this time of great change. At the time of writing all manager posts have been filled along with the majority of Housing Officer posts. Within the next 12 weeks the newly recruited staff will join the service and this will enable managers to release the temporary staff currently employed for business continuity purposes. All external candidates shortlisted for interview were also required to attend the Assessment Centre previously used for the redeployment of internal staff and the impressive results obtained demonstrate that all new staff possess the skills, experience and core competencies required to deliver the step change in performance which was required by members and declared as the over riding aim at the outset of this project.

- 5.11 **Planning for the Future** – as part of the Housing Futures project the team were able to entertain requests for early retirement, redundancy or varied working hours from 13 staff. With the deletion of these posts together with those already vacant and not appearing within the new adopted structure, the overall project has delivered an estimated £200,000 saving to the General Fund and over £450,000 to the Housing Revenue Account.

## **6. Conclusion**

This report demonstrates that the project board has sustained the significant work rate associated with this proposal and has now completed the process such that the new integrated Housing Service will be formally launched in a week's time. The Scrutiny Panel or its successor will continue to receive reports as to the performance of the new service through arrangements to scrutinise the effectiveness of Resident Consultation proposals and should the new Customer Senate consider it necessary specific issues of concern will be referred to this panel for further investigation.