

SUBJECT:	Review of the Joint Housing Solutions Service
MEETING:	Adults Select Committee
DATE:	12th July 2016
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To provide an update on the pilot joint Housing Solutions Service with Torfaen County Borough Council that started in March 2015. The report seeks to both highlight the achievements secured and key conclusions of the progress.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 Consider the achievements of the service, how the service has benefited the Council and community and the ongoing issues and risks identified.
- 2.2 To consider the proposal to end the pilot and withdraw from elements of the joint Housing Solutions service that are not delivering added value and to agree an exit plan with Torfaen.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 On 1st October 2014, Cabinet approved a proposal to deliver a combined Housing Solutions Service for Monmouthshire and Torfaen on a one year pilot basis, seeking to exploit the advantages of Housing & Community Services being co-located with Torfaen's Housing Service. A key priority was to meet the requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The aims of the service include:

- Establish a new customer led, joint Housing Solutions Service.....; build resilience and capacity.....; steam-line current business processes to improving efficiency and effectiveness.....; build a service with an increased focus on prevention of homelessness.....

- 3.2 The pilot has been jointly reviewed with Torfaen and in addition, the Council has undertaken a Monmouthshire only focused evaluation of the service.

- 3.3 The development of the service has been a significant challenge for staff due to the extent of procedures and the differences between the two Councils. The challenge was further increased by the need to implement new statutory duties of the new Housing Act. The following summarises key findings of the review:

Key Areas of Progress (See Appendix 1 for more detail)

- 3.4 The service has been operational since March 2015 through two new distinct teams, meeting the legal requirements of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The service includes pooled staffing, pooled accommodation, furniture storage and out of hours arrangements. Although current performance can't be directly compared with past performance due to the new legislation, performance particularly relating to homeless prevention has been positive. Other achievements include:

- MCC has bought into the Torfaen IT system for case recording and statistical reporting, allowing the Council to relinquish the previous homeless module that was no longer fit for purpose. TCBC provide system support.
- New Financial Inclusion and Prison Prep services, through grant funding, have been introduced to strengthen homeless prevention.
- Shared Housing has further developed, supporting the budget position.
- Although the joint service has supported some cost reductions, budget performance largely hasn't been dependent on the joint service.

3.4 The development of the service, however, can't be considered to be complete and further improvement has been identified in order that service efficiency is optimised and outcomes for service users are maximised. Examples of this include:

- The capacity to manage caseloads and re-housing has been difficult due to the level and the nature of a change in demand. MCC Housing Solutions staff caseload has been higher through the joint service than if it was an MCC only service. The situation has and continues to be compounded by staffing difficulties, which in part are inter-related. The Council is seeking to support staff, but the joint arrangement has an influence on the extent and nature of the support. The need to engage proactively with staff and support their well-being is an immediate priority.
- There continues to be a shortage of accommodation, particularly private rented housing to prevent homelessness. Whilst dealing with routine re-housing demand and day to day management issues, investing time to identify new private rented opportunities has been challenging. A key role of the Private Sector Housing team is market the service of the team to landlords and apply a more commercial and 'sales' approach. Supporting the team to adapt to a new way of thinking and working has been a priority. Training and development continues to be an ongoing priority. There was a small increase in Bed & Breakfast use (18 placements) in 15/16.
- There continues to be activity and procedures that aren't fully streamlined. The number of different procedures is considerable. This includes a number of IT based systems and performance management. Some won't be possible to align due to wider local authority systems. In some areas, this has and will continue to impact upon operational efficiency.
- Although the opportunity to share the TCBC IT homeless system was positive, the full benefits of buying into the TCBC IT system are still to be fully realised in terms of the ability to utilise for rent accounting purposes and statistical reporting. Although the initial costs (relating to caseload management) saved £3,500 for 15/16, there will be a short-term spike in costs relating to unforeseen provider relate licensing and implementation costs. The total IT costs are expected to be higher than prior to the joint service (£14,000), as and when the rent account facility becomes available.
- It has not been possible to establish a comprehensive joint performance management arrangement. It is considered that the performance management

arrangements for MCC have deteriorated (a view shared by TCBC) since the joint service commenced together with the intimate understanding of the service necessary to maximise the management effectiveness. It is understood this may be not be unique to MCC.

- Each Council has different priorities. It is recognised that MCC priorities dilutes the resources available for TCBC.

3.5 Having evaluated the findings there are a number of headline conclusions:

- Importantly, the requirements of the new legislation are being met and benefits have been realised. However, it is further concluded that some achievements (including the budget position) would have been achieved without the arrangement.
- The respective local authority priorities and systems can have an impact and influence on service delivery and impact on the other party.
- Both Council's do not necessarily need a joint service to continue meeting the statutory duty. In addition, where differing priorities exist, delivering separately has advantages.

3.6 It is, therefore, proposed to look to end the pilot arrangement and return to the Council delivering its own Housing Solutions service. There is a desire though to retain the benefits of the pilot, but whilst continuing to be open to opportunities for collaboration. The collaboration in its current format has been extremely insightful in terms of partnership working and has provided invaluable experience and learning to both re-establish a Monmouthshire focused service and inform any future partnership working.

4. REASONS:

4.1 The pilot also supported the Council to meet the new duties relating to the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. It also supported the implementation of the Housing & Communities Medium Term Financial Plan project mandate, as agreed by Cabinet on 8th January 2014 together with an additional project mandate for 2016/17.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

5.1 The cost centre delivered savings of £35,000 relating to 2014/15 and 2015/16, although these mostly aren't attributable to the joint service. For 2016/17, it is projected that a further £50,000 income will be generated. It is anticipated that the proposal to withdraw from the joint service will incur some short-term costs. For example, acquiring an alternative IT system. These, however, can largely be offset against direct costs relating to office accommodation which will be saved through the recommendation.

6. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS:

6.1 Implications have been identified. **See Appendix 2**

7. SAFEGUARDING & CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The service supports both safeguarding and corporate parenting.

8. **CONSULTEES:** Chief Officer for Enterprise; Head of Planning; Cabinet Member for Community Development; Head of Housing, Torfaen CBC.

9. **BACKGROUND PAPERS:** None
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