



Wear Valley District Council

Housing Strategy Development Project

Strategy Development Workshop

partnership

Prepared for:
Wear Valley Council Housing Services

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1. Introduction

Housing is a key service of Wear Valley District Council. The Council currently owns and manages 5172 homes and the Housing Department provides a range of housing management and general services, such as homelessness advice and support, debt advice and community safety projects. The council hopes to establish an ALMO to manage the council's housing stock on 1 April 2006.

In order to secure access to the potential £27M in additional funding to improve the council's homes, the council and the ALMO must achieve two stars at a full Best Value inspection of the housing service. Inspection will take place in October 2006.

When the ALMO is established there will be a split between the strategic function and the landlord function.

- The ALMO's primary objective will be the effective management of the council's housing stock, including the delivery of decent homes and high quality housing services to tenants.
- The council will retain responsibility for the strategic and enabling role including:
 - Preparing detailed housing strategies for the area
 - Undertaking housing needs assessments and cross tenure stock condition surveys
 - Working with the ALMO and other key stakeholders to enable the delivery of the housing objectives of regional, sub regional and local plans and strategies

The housing department must prepare for the considerable changes the ALMO will bring. The department must develop a strategic vision and set of priorities and identify actions to achieve these, whilst considering the ALMO's primary objective and the key strategic objectives of local housing strategies and plans. These must be transferable to the ALMO once the organisation goes live.

The KSA Partnership was commissioned to assist and a strategic planning workshop was designed to support the process. The workshop was attended by the Departmental Management Team, Senior Housing Management Team, an officer from the Management Support Unit, elected Members and representatives of the Customer Panel. This report summarises the output of that workshop.

2. Objectives

The Challenge

A clear challenge to moving forward has been determined:

- *To secure ALMO funding and achieve 2 stars at a full Best Value inspection, requiring:*
 - A clear plan to bring homes up to the decency standard by 2010
 - Well developed procurement and efficiency saving practices
 - Sound governance structures and a truly arms length relationship with the council
 - Active tenant inclusion in service design, delivery and review
 - Clear strategic objectives for the ALMO

At the onset of the workshop we elevated the challenge to:

- *To develop vision and strategy for Housing Services which delivers our community vision for Wear Valley and excellence in service for our customers and stakeholders*

Objectives

We agreed the objectives for the day as being:

- *A robust assessment of context and effectiveness of Housing Services*
- *Develop our vision for the future*
- *Develop priorities for action*
- *Reviewing the vision, priorities and actions and determining the actions needed over the next 6 months*

3. First Thoughts

We began with a quick collective assessment of how things are. Asking for examples of things we should celebrate and examples of things that needed to change. We said:

3.1 Things to celebrate

Service strengths were identified as:

- A strong customer focus
- Clear Capital Investment plan
- Stable and committed workforce
- Strong local agenda for change supported by wide involvement
- Incremental improvement in the performance of the repairs service
- Improved working relationships, underpinned by a 'culture of performance'
- Commitment to service

3.2 Things to change

The key areas of improvement include:

- Increased efficiency in service delivery
- Customer involvement at a deeper level
- Need to increase and build morale, through the recognition of success
- Strengthen aspirations
- Improve management and tenant relationships
- Improve effectiveness of medium and long term planning
- Strengthen working relationships between the staff

4. Facing reality

We began by evaluating current progress and perceptions by asking:

Success Criteria

- *How will we know when we've been exceptional?*

How well does what we do now match up?

- *What do we do well / not so well?*

What do we know about the future?

- *What assumptions and needs will guide us?*

What are the key issues to address?

4.1 How will we know when we have been exceptional?

A number of measures of success were identified. An exceptional Housing Services Function would:

Provide strategic leadership

- Housing contribution to the LSP Strategic Vision is seen as effective, and the Council commits to community led regeneration.

Be the partner and employer of choice

- WVDC is seen as the partner of choice on all housing matters, and the employer of choice

Deliver exceptional levels of customer led service

- High levels of recorded customer satisfaction and excellence ratings in all external assessments

Be effective and efficient

- Recognised for operational effectiveness, VFM services which are responsive and customer focussed

Success would be demonstrated on a balance of qualitative and quantitative measures:

Quantitative success measures included 'hard', measurable outputs, key national and local performance indicators, service performance indicators, such as repair times, vacancies, re-let times and costs etc.

Qualitative success measures included 'soft' measures of performance, such as customer perceptions, aspirations, satisfaction and levels of engagement indicators. These may be viewed as 'quality of life' and service satisfaction criteria.

Success requires exceptional performance in both of these performance areas.

4.2 How well does what we do now match up?

Service quality

In quantitative terms it the service has demonstrated real improvement and performs very well. It moved from the bottom quartile to the top within a short period of time. However, performance on qualitative indicators is less good. Customers do not recognise the descriptions of good service given by the department attributed to the perceptions which have not been managed and

rising expectations of the tenants. Levels of customer engagement and consultation could be improved. The gap between customer expectancies and actual performance needs to be managed to improve service ratings and image.

Overall, the balance between quantitative and qualitative performance has not been achieved.

Strategic leadership

Housing is contributing to the regeneration agenda in a positive way however the service has yet to establish recognition for this. In addition the relationship with the LSP has not been fully developed.

Areas for improvement

Specific areas of improvement:

- Need to develop further the customer focus of some areas of the service, and also manage more effectively customer expectations. Listen and Learn process, whereby services are designed and delivered, and spend focussed on what the customers want.
- Requirement for a robust and focussed Personal Development Programme, to increase competency, motivation and reward excellence in the department
- Improve effective partnership working across the Service
- Build on the improved performance of the KPI's, including rent arrears, void management and capital spend.

4.3 What do we know of the future?

A number of elements are known about the future:

- ALMO and Stock Options are being developed
- Best Value Inspections are approaching (2006) – a score of 2 is required
- Strategic Plans, already developed will impact on future provision. (e.g. Decent Homes Delivery Plan, Local Aspirations, Community Plan, Council Plan, Regional Spatial Plan etc.).
- Housing Strategy is being developed in the short term, although will impact upon activities in the medium to long term
- The population of the area is aging, which could increase the demands on supported housing provision

- Social Housing provision is undergoing a period of change, although Government policy changes do not easily allow longer term service planning
Partnership working is an increasingly important feature of service provision
Customer expectations are continuing to increase, across the whole range of Council provision

4.4 What are the key issues to address?

Key issues include:

- The application process for ALMO status, and the requirement to achieve the 2 stars in VFM assessments
- Develop an agreed Housing Strategy and implement it effectively
- Clarify and adopt the strategic role of Housing, ensuring the ALMO itself has a lead role in the delivery of a strategic housing function.
- Strengthening Value For Money
- Identify and agree who are the customers and then target interventions effectively
- Developing in partnership with customers, the design, delivery and review of service provision
- Development of medium and long term planning from what we know of strategic needs for Wear Valley

5. The Vision

Building on what we know and aspire to, a realistic but challenge vision was developed: The essence of this is:

'leading the way to the very best housing of choice for everyone and contributing to a clean healthy and safe environment that enables communities to learn and grow'

In practice this means working to achieve a number of key outcomes:

- Securing the 'beacon' or leadership function that a realigned housing service would provide for all customers, tenants and stakeholders
- Managing housing stock and services to develop choice for all sectors of community, within safe and sustainable communities

- Delivering in the areas which create exceptional presence:
 - Providing strategic leadership
 - Being the partner and employer of choice
 - Ensuring exceptional levels of customer led service with high levels of satisfaction and regard
 - Be effective and efficient
- Ensuring that housing strategy and services impact effectively within the wider strategic agenda of:
- Population
 - Environment
 - Economy
 - Community Safety
 - Health
 - Lifelong Learning
 - Organisational Development

6. Strategic Objectives

Building on the vision we developed strategic objectives to take the service forward. These following were identified:

Service objectives:

Service

- Achieving an optimum balance and choice of housing

Environment

- Delivering ever improving Community safety and reducing fear of crime
- Delivering ever improving greener, cleaner and healthier environment

People and Community

- Developing people and communities who can work together, able to say what is needed and make it happen

Organisational objectives

Strategy and Plans

- Shaping up the strategy and plans which people feel part of, value and believe will work

Organisation

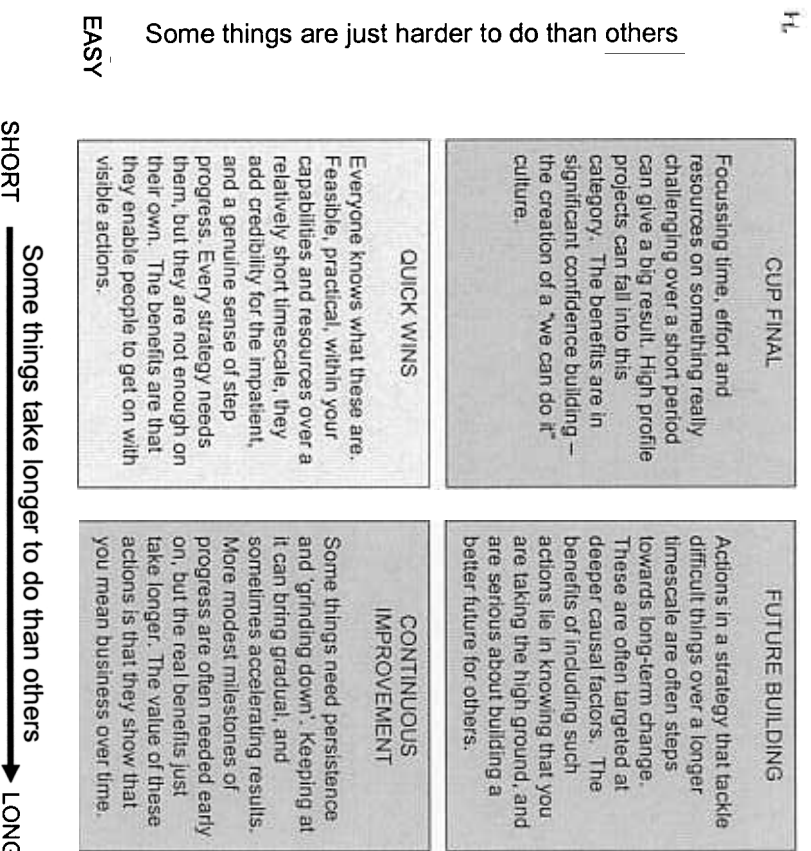
- Shape up the organisation to have a business like approach to stock management which is inclusive, impacts economically and is valued

Culture

- Develop a culture of excellence, customer service and continuous improvement

7. Priorities and Actions

Building on the strategic objectives we moved forward by developing a balanced set of proposals for action using the following planning frame:



Proposals were:

Cup Finals: (Hard / Short Term):

- Detail housing strategy
- Ongoing Housing Market assessment
- Establishment of the ALMO
- Successful transition to the ALMO

Future Building (Hard / Long Term)

- Position Housing at centre of Regeneration activity
- Achieve and maintain Decent Homes Standard
- Develop strategic capacity and function
- Achieve 2-3*
- Balance the market
- Conduct Housing Needs Survey and assess its messages/impact
- Develop the 'soft' qualitative measures
- Engage with hard to reach groups
- Develop Partnerships and build Community Capacity (learning community)
- Local development framework

Quick Wins (Easy / Short Term)

- Successful indicative assessment and the use of the findings
- Introduction of the ALMO
- Engage customers in the ALMO and the review of service
- Develop service standards
- Agree Vision, Objectives and Agenda
- Agree review of the role and Governance of the ALMO and its relationship to the Council

Continuous Improvement (Easy / Long Term)

- Identify Area Based operational arrangements
- Use existing schemes (e.g. capital programme) to meet decency standards and contribute to sustainability 'proofing' of areas
- Delivery of training programmes to staff and customers
- Keep the 'show on the road' in terms on incremental improvements ion performance
- Agree new Housing Strategy

8. Next steps

Finally in moving forward:

- KSA would provide a summary report from this event for consideration by the Senior Management Team
 - Copies of the report would be forward to everyone who attended
 - KSA would highlight key messages from the day (see annex 1)
- Michael and the Senior Management Team would continue to work on the detailed plans for service development (particularly preparation for the ALMO) in the light of the thinking on vision and strategy which was developed at this workshop. In particular:
 - Communicate the principles generated through the workshop to key staff and appropriate Council Members
 - Develop the concept and constitution of the shadow ALMO Board
 - Develop and agree the actions plan to deliver the strategic objectives
 - Maintain the momentum of continuous improvement....'keep the eye on the ball'. Improved Performance + Presence + Influence = Excellence

Annex 1: Key themes

Ten key themes identified during the strategy workshop were:

- 1) The service needs to develop a strategy that is relevant to the Wear Valley, its customers, stakeholders and has regard for the regional strategic dimension
- 2) Customers and tenants are central to the services strategic intentions and operational priorities
- 3) The staff are committed to the delivery of improved housing services, whilst requiring support to improve their performance and be valued for their endeavours
- 4) Housing has a central role to play in the regeneration of the Wear Valley communities
- 5) There is a commitment to build upon recently achieved performance improvements
- 6) The realigned service will act as a beacon for its tenants, the Council, stakeholders and customers in all matters relating to housing
- 7) The service will adopt an appropriate business like approach to its operations, offering improved Value for Money and an appropriate range of services
- 8) The service will manage the ever increasing expectations of its customers, utilising their views and concerns to improve the service
- 9) The respective roles of the Council and the ALMO will be clearly defined and respected
- 10) The service will strive to gain recognition for its contribution to the communities of Wear Valley through positive action and partnership development