

Overview of consultation responses to Property Shared Service business case

Introduction

The business case for a Property Shared Service was made available to staff and unions for consultation and comment on 10th/ 11th November 2009. By the extended closing date of 21st December 2009 a total of 6 responses had been received from unions and individuals.

All responses have been analysed to identify issues of concern. These issues have been grouped together into related themes and are set out in detail in the accompanying matrix showing the issues of concern to the various respondents. The detailed individual responses have also been made available for inspection by Members at each of the councils.

This paper provides a high level overview of the themes of concern to consultation respondents along with observations from the WETT Property Services Project Team which are shown in italics. To avoid duplication, staff responses and Project Team observations regarding the consultation process and timescales are the same as for Regulatory Services and so have not been repeated here.

Staff/ union consultation process and timescale

As for Regulatory Services. In addition, some comments were made about unclear wording and inconsistencies in the Business Case.

Project Team observations: Given the nature of the task, and the number of individuals involved in producing the different elements of the Business Case, some inconsistency / lack of clarity is perhaps inevitable.

Business model, structure and capacity

Concerns were expressed about the TUPE process, and particularly the implementation timescale, given the present commitments regarding the number of initiatives that the County's Property Services are undertaking.

Project Team observations: Assuming the decision is taken to proceed with a shared Property service, a consultation exercise will be conducted specifically to deal with TUPE issues – a statutory requirement in such circumstances. One of the challenges of all change programmes is to prioritise the work to enable a number of workstreams to proceed in parallel. The transition to a shared Property service will be no different.

Impact on service delivery and performance

There are concerns about claims that a shared service will be better placed to meet local service needs, and that it might be too remote and less responsive to the needs of service users and members. A number of respondents expressed concern about the general lack of detail regarding structures, and the lack of clarity that the staffing levels would be adequate to deliver the required service levels. Differences between District and County property portfolios were also highlighted as an issue.

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Project Team observations: The key benefit of a shared Property service is the increased flexibility of staff and resources that it offers. This provides the opportunity to allocate resources where they are needed, when they are needed, and enables timely responses to service users and members' requirements. It is this flexibility that enables economies of scale to deliver the savings whilst protecting service levels. The differences in portfolios are to do with scale and in some cases the nature of the portfolio as stated in the business case. The skills of the Property personnel however are readily transferrable across the combined portfolios.

Finance, savings and investment

Some respondents express concern over the accuracy of data upon which the financial model is built, given the different accounting structures of the participating authorities. The combination of delivering fixed savings and implementation being different in practice than theory is felt to be a high risk. The hidden costs of change are also felt to be an issue, particularly training / skills transfer.

Project Team observations: The financial model is considered robust and fit for purpose having been produced by Finance Managers and scrutinised by Treasurers from the participating councils. It is planned that the process of change during the implementation phase be gradual, and will take into account the need to develop and train staff as required.

ICT and technology

Concern was expressed regarding the capacity of the shared service to cope with the implementation of the new iProp system, during the TUPE process. The potential impact on management time was highlighted.

Project Team observations: The project to implement the County's iProp system is well established and progressing as planned. Officers will attend both iProp and WETT implementation project groups to ensure continuity. As referred to above, one of the challenges of all change programmes is to prioritise the work to enable a number of work streams to proceed in parallel. The transition to a shared Property service will be no different.

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Not applicable for Property Services.

Impact on staff terms, conditions and career prospects

As for Regulatory Services, there are broad concerns about the adequacy of safeguards for employees facing relocation, reductions in pay or redundancy and the honouring of existing pay and grading mechanisms. Specific concerns have been expressed about changes such as "hot-desking" and additional travel time arising from relocation / flexible working arrangements. Some concerns were expressed regarding the proposed

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reduction in the numbers of agency staff, and a potential consequential reduction in skills and capacity; and the possible impact on future training and development of staff.

Project Team observations: It is proposed to transfer staff in accordance with TUPE and with ongoing consultation with staff and unions. We recognise the need to reach an early agreement on many of the issues identified and will work to achieve this. We are confident that the experiences of staff in other services, where “hot-desking” and more flexible working is standard practice, will be a reassurance to staff. The references to a possible reduction in agency staff is a general point in the Business Case which demonstrates the intention to protect permanent staff. Ongoing training and development of staff will be crucial to the flexibility of resources on which the future success of the service will depend.

Hosting proposals

Concern was expressed that the host (in this case the County Council) would not have sufficient capacity to house all of the additional staff.

Project Team observations: The County’s use of accommodation is based on flexibility. It is not anticipated that this will cause any problems.

Governance

In addition to the general concerns as for Regulatory Services, most respondents expressed concern about proposal for a Service Level Agreement (SLA), rather than a joint Committee form of governance for Property Services.

Project Team observations: SLAs are a tried and tested method of delivering Property Services. In this case, the imbalance between the resources of the partners – 70% County; 30% Districts – makes it the most practicable arrangement.

Equalities

Many respondents were concerned there was no evidence of equalities impact assessment of the proposals.

Project Team observations: Equality impact assessments are for each council to carry out and report on in accordance with their own policies / arrangements. It is recognised that full equality impact assessments will need to be carried out following further consultation with stakeholders in order to minimise any adverse impacts of the proposals. The impact of the proposals on staff following this first consultation can now be carried out and for some councils this has already taken place and the results made available.

Stakeholder consultation

No issues were raised with regard to Property Services.

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Conclusion

There has been a wide ranging and detailed response to the consultation process that has raised many issues, with a good deal of common concerns. Many of the issues and concerns raised are understandable given the nature of the proposals and the impact they will have on individual employees. It was with this in mind that a commitment was given to staff and unions that the outcome of the consultation would be made fully available prior to decision making by the councils. The issues and concerns raised will be fully addressed in implementing the proposals should all partners commit to the Regulatory Shared Service.

WETT Property Services Project Team

4th January 2010