



## South Hams District Council / West Devon Borough Council

### Local authority profile

**Local authority:** South Hams District Council / West Devon Borough Council

**First contact with local authorities:**  
19 October 2020

**Service Assessment completed:**  
25 November 2021

**Introductory meeting with Migration Delivery:** 15 December 2022

**Served notice:** South Hams: 6 February 2025 / West Devon: 17 March 2025

**Date of migration:** 15 April 2025

**Data type:** Digital

**Number of charges migrated:** South Hams: 85,753 / West Devon: 39,311

**Software supplier:** Initially, Civica App for planning and NEC M3 for local land charges. During migration, the local authorities changed supplier to DEF Mastergov for both planning and local land charges.

**Migration supplier:** DEF

**Delivery model:** HM Land Registry delivered

**Live operating mode:** API

### Before the programme

South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council share the same workforce despite being separate councils. All registrations required manual intervention across two separate systems, creating inefficiencies and an increased administrative burden. Their local land charges (LLC) function was well regarded but outdated. Modernising LLC software was a task both councils planned to do when the timing was right.

When HM Land Registry (HMLR) first approached the councils about the LLC migration project, opinions were mixed. They initially viewed HMLR's involvement as an imposed change. After conversations about the support available from HMLR and the benefits of a central service, the team embraced the initiative.

Before starting the project, the councils prioritised seamless data management. After scoping system requirements and consulting other local authorities (LAs), they selected DEF Software, a smaller provider with a proven track record for successfully integrating multiple systems. Typically, a software supplier change would happen separately to the LLC migration. However, following discussions with HMLR it was decided the transition to DEF could run alongside data cleansing.

Paul Beaney, the Customer Success Director at DEF worked closely with the councils and HMLR to help identify data complexities, inconsistencies and any specific issues. Together they reduced the dual handling of the data fix work as the migration progressed. This three-way working model allowed data to be transferred to DEF without delaying the LLC migration.

On 29 November 2023, after just 2 months, the councils went live with DEF's planning system. The move to DEF began in early 2024 and they went live with their new LLC system in July 2024.

## During the programme

Both councils' digital records varied in format and completeness so a thorough data review was necessary. Historically, planning applications were only registered when a search was requested. As the planning charges and LLC systems had not been integrated since 2015, approximately nine years' of registrations were missing from the LLC dataset. To address this, HMLR's Business Analyst (BA), Rochelle Hills, extracted planning data for analysis. The councils then introduced a new process to register new planning charges in the NEC M3 LLC module going forward. They continued with this approach until DEF's LLC system went live.

During data analysis Rochelle, identified several issues including approximately 2,500 missing charges. It was agreed that where fixes applied to more than 10 records in any category, DEF would create a script to fix them. Fewer than 10 records would be fixed manually by the councils.

When the councils struggled to identify flagged discrepancies in small polygons, Rochelle arranged screen-sharing sessions to demonstrate how the datasets appeared in HMLR's system. The magnification feature on HMLR's platform revealed inconsistencies that were invisible to the councils. This pivotal moment highlighted the value of collaboration and saved considerable time.

The councils made strategic use of their transition payment funding. The initial payment was used to purchase a specialised scanner, enabling more efficient in-house processing. They also recruited an additional staff member who worked through 4,500 listed building records to make sure that the curtilage policy was correctly applied to each one. While West Devon Borough Council passed their listed building checks, South Hams District Council initially failed. By analysing data patterns, the councils were able to prevent further failures, using the extra resource to accelerate the process.

From the outset, HMLR Delivery Manager Debbie Lissemore fostered a collaborative environment, making it clear that "there was no such thing as a stupid question". This open approach encouraged dialogue, accelerated issue resolution and enabled consistent progress by eliminating unnecessary intermediaries. The project demonstrated how strategic planning, targeted financial investment, and determination could drive rapid and effective progress.

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## After the programme

Both councils went live on 15 April 2025. Given the complexity of transitioning two councils simultaneously, it was a notably swift migration. Nearly 130,000 charges were migrated onto the live LLC Register.

Although treated as separate entities for most of the transition, since migrating the councils act as one unified authority with one Application Programming Interface. Helen Smart, Planning Business Manager at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council said: "it doesn't feel like a big dramatic change, but a different way of working."

Since go-live the councils have used HMLR dashboards to identify minor areas for improvement. With support from HMLR Relationship Managers they continue to improve data quality and now have full confidence in the information they hold and provide to customers.

Helen and the team have become advocates for the LLC Programme, sharing their experience with other LAs. Debbie and Rochelle joined the team on-site for go-live day. Helen encourages others to replicate this and reinforce the collaborative spirit of the project.

**"it doesn't feel like a big dramatic change, but a different way of working."**

**Helen Smart**

Planning Business Manager at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council

**Both councils went live on 15 April 2025.**

## What advice would you give to other authorities?

The team at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council offer the following lessons from their experience:

### Open communication:

Be open and honest with HMLR from the outset. Early conversations about change creates the transparency needed to build a realistic project plan, preventing unnecessary delays. Raise issues quickly rather than sitting on them and ask clarifying questions to avoid assumptions which can risk causing disruption to planned go-live dates.

### Positive morale:

Keep staff morale high especially when technical challenges arise. Helen described Debbie as someone who could “effortlessly motivate people with her warm, engaging approach.” Ensure the team understands the project structure, expectations and likely challenges. The councils experienced a “false dawn”, feeling the project was nearly complete before realising another phase remained. Setting clear expectations early can prevent this.

### Quality assurance:

Always include clear notes when reviewing charge queries in dashboard feedback. Document your thought process, what you have changed and why to prevent unnecessary back-and-forth with HMLR BAs. Detailed notes not only speed up data checks but improve efficiency, by creating a reliable audit trail for future decisions.

**The team at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council are happy to be contacted by councils seeking advice or support.**

### Connecting with advocates:

Helen praised the HMLR Advocates Scheme and upon reflection said she would have engaged with more LAs earlier. Project leaders should consider connecting with peers in live service to better understand the phases of implementation. While there is no single right approach, learning from those who have completed the process provides practical solutions and encouragement.

The team at South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council are happy to be contacted by councils seeking advice or support.

**To find out more about the HMLR Advocates Scheme, please contact your Delivery or Relationship Manager.**