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Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 20 April 2009

Please find attached answers to advance submitted questions:

**6. CABINET MEMBER QUESTIONS: CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING SERVICES (PAGES 1 - 10)**

Briefing and answers to questions from Councillor John Bevan, Cabinet Member for Housing Services.

Yours sincerely

Helen Jones  
Principal Committee Coordinator

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## Questions to the Cabinet Member for Housing Services – for Overview and Scrutiny 20 April 2009

Page/ Point	Question/Observation	Answer (Where applicable)
	<u>Questions from Cllr Alexander</u>	
	1. How much of the council's temporary accommodation stock, including property sublet from private landlord, fails to meet the Decent Homes Standard. What is the timetable for addressing this?	<p>To date, no stock condition survey has been carried out to establish the extent to which Haringey's temporary accommodation meets the decent homes standard.</p> <p>During 2009/10, a stock condition survey will be carried out to assess the condition of our <b>hostels</b> and the extent to which they meet the decency standard. The survey will identify the improvements required to bring all hostel accommodation up to the decent homes standard and inform future decision making in respect of investment and disposal.</p> <p>At present, 158 <b>council homes</b> are being used as temporary accommodation and let to homeless households using non-secure tenancies. Over the coming months, 37 of these tenancies will be converted to secure tenancies. All council homes (including those let on non-secure tenancies) will be brought up to the decent homes standard by the year 2013 as part of Haringey's decent homes programme.</p> <p>Homes let to the Council under its <b>private sector leasing scheme</b> (including those offered for renewal) will only be taken on as temporary accommodation if they meet the decent homes standard and have a good SAP energy rating.</p>

	<p>A similar approach is being taken for homes that are let under the <b>housing association leasing scheme</b>, as a concerted effort is made to improve and standardise the quality of Haringey's temporary accommodation.</p> <p>Almost one third of Haringey's temporary accommodation is let from housing suppliers as self-contained, <b>nightly charged annex accommodation</b>. As there is quite a high turnover of such properties, it is not easy to determine (at any particular time) the proportion of these properties that meet the decent homes standard.</p> <p>We are planning to substantially reduce our use of nightly charged annex accommodation (from the current figure of 1,700 to less than 300) as part of our strategy to halve the number of households in temporary accommodation.</p>
2. How many properties are currently unfit for habitation and what is the timetable to get these properties back into a state where they can be inhabited again?	<p>The only properties we are aware of that are not fit for habitation are those that we are in the process of handing back to the owners. Where the owner has not co-operated with the Council, they are to be served with an Improvement Notice, prohibiting them from re-letting the property to anyone else before they have carried out repairs and improvements.</p> <p>Although the condition of some temporary accommodation will have deteriorated since it was last visited, new arrangements have recently been introduced to ensure that all temporary accommodation is visited / inspected at least once a year.</p>
3. How many council properties, both permanent and temporary accommodation have been treated by the Pest Control Department for infestation of cockroaches, mice and rats in the last 12 months?	<p>During 2008/09, the Council's Pest Control Service treated a total of <b>1,798 council homes</b> managed by Homes for Haringey. It is not known how many of these (if any) were let, on non-secure tenancies, as temporary accommodation.</p> <p>During 2008/09, the Council's Pest Control Service treated a total of <b>221 units of temporary accommodation</b>. This figure includes hostels and accommodation leased by the Council. We do not hold any data about the pest control treatment arranged by housing associations and housing suppliers during 2008/09. These will often use private contractors to</p>

	undertake pest control treatments.
4. How long are tenants currently in temporary accommodation before being housing in permanent accommodation?	<p>The length of time that homeless households spend in temporary accommodation is determined, to a large degree, by their specific requirements and preferences.</p> <p>If a household requires a one bedroom home, they will usually spend a lot less time in temporary accommodation than a family requiring a 3 or 4 bedroom home. This is because one bedroom homes account for approximately half of all social housing lettings completed during the year.</p> <p>If a household needs to live in a certain part of the borough, the length of stay will be affected by the amount of social housing (of the right size) that is located in that area.</p> <p>If a household has a disability and requires an adapted and/or ground floor home, this will also increase the amount of time they spend in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>During 2008/09, a total of 440 homeless households living in temporary accommodation were rehoused in social housing. Of these 440, the 150 households who required a one bedroom home waited an average of more than 2 years, the 167 households who required a two bedroom home waited an average of more than 5 years and the 104 households who required a three bedroom home waited an average of more than 7 years. Households who required a home with at least four bedrooms waited an average of 8 years.</p>
5. Who is currently managing the backlog of private sector leases and why is there such a backlog?	<p>The backlog of expired private sector leases has built up over a number of years and has occurred for a number of reasons, including the lack of effective performance management and the difficulty the Council has experienced in recruiting key staff. Both of these issues have now been addressed.</p> <p>This issue is being addressed as part of a raft of service improvements being made to Strategic &amp; Community Housing Services. We have recently completed a tendering process to</p>

	<p>select a private sector contractor to prepare schedules of condition in respect of up to 400 homes with a view to those properties either being handed back to the owners or retained for use as temporary accommodation with a new 3 or 5 year lease. Repairs and dilapidations will be dealt with as part of the handback / renewal process.</p> <p>It should be noted that, even though the initial lease period has expired, the lease arrangement has continued on a month-to-month basis, with neither party serving notice to bring the lease to an end.</p>
<p>6. Whilst I appreciate that the current downturn affects the ability to attract affordable housing development into the borough – how is the council addressing this and what strategies are in place to attract new development in?</p>	<p>The Council is addressing the housing market downturn (and reluctance of developers and RSLs to bring forward new housing schemes) in a number of ways:</p> <p>(a) By agreeing to review tenures in order to improve financial viability and reduce the sales risk that have deterred new starts and caused difficulty for schemes that are under construction or have recently completed.</p> <p>The Planning Committee has recently approved the variation of a number of Section 106 planning agreements, allowing those units earmarked for sale to be marketed as Rent-to-Homebuy. Under this scheme, prospective purchasers who are unable to purchase immediately will be permitted to rent the new homes for an agreed period (usually 3-5 years) at a maximum of 80% of the market rent, thereby having the opportunity to save a deposit and obtain a mortgage. The Planning Committee has also agreed a scheme of delegation to speed up the process and avoid the delay awaiting the Committee's consideration of future applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By agreeing to increased levels of affordable housing on new applications, in order to improve the viability of developments, whilst also achieving the long term objectives of low cost home ownership and sustainable</li> </ul>

		<p>communities (using Rent-to-Homebuy and intermediate tenures) in the most deprived areas of the borough. Examples of this include the major developments at Tottenham Town Hall and Hale Village which might otherwise have been substantially delayed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By supporting increased levels of Social Housing Grant (SHG) for affordable housing schemes in discussions with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).</li> </ul> <p>HCA was previously seeking to reduce grant levels under its programme for 2008/11, but is now working collaboratively with the Borough and reviewing each scheme on its merits in order to promote development. This has resulted in an increase in the level of subsidy to encourage and enable new development, including the redevelopment of the Narrow Boat/Reedham Close.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By working with the HCA, RSLs and developers on the evolution of new HCA funding models, such as equity stake holding and infrastructure loans, in order to improve viability and bring schemes forward.</li> </ul> <p>The Borough has recently been involved in intensive negotiations with the HCA and a developer to pilot a funding scheme at the major Hale Village development in Tottenham, ensuring the continuation of the project that may otherwise have faltered in the current climate.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By revising the preferred partnership arrangement with RSLs in order to establish a broader partnership agreement with social housing landlords and developers that will raise standards of development and day to day management of all social housing in the Borough and encourage existing and new providers that have the capacity and ability to manage homes satisfactorily homes in Haringey to bring forward new development opportunities. An initial draft of the new partnership proposal has been approved by the Integrated Housing</li> </ul>
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		<p>Board and is now the subject of consultation with affordable housing providers prior to adoption.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Council's Strategic &amp; Community Housing Service is now hosting regular quarterly RSL/Developer forums to discuss development issues and ways of overcoming current problems and bringing forward new schemes. The next meeting of this forum is planned for May 2009</li> </ul>
	7. How old is the current Lettings Policy? What are the reasons for developing a new policy?	<p>Haringey's existing Lettings Policy was approved in September 2006 but is no longer fit for purpose. The Policy needs to complement and support the implementation of Haringey's homelessness strategy and other key plans and strategies, encourage housing mobility, reduce people's dependency on social rented housing, and reflect new case law and changes in legislation and statutory guidance.</p> <p>Developed in consultation with service users, staff, Members, partner organisations and other stakeholders, the new Lettings Policy will be more transparent, easier to administer and understand, make better use of the social housing stock and support a series of operational changes that help improve the efficiency and quality of housing services, especially in relation to housing assessment, lettings and void turnaround times..</p> <p>The new Policy will encourage all residents of temporary accommodation to play an active role in looking for somewhere suitable to move on to. It will also include provision for the Council to carry out make 'automated' bidding for those residents of temporary accommodation who have enough points to make a successful bid but are either unwilling or unable to do so.</p>
	<b><u>Questions from Cllr David Winskill</u></b>	
	8. What discussions have there been with the Homes and Communities Agency to discuss attracting investment and funding to alleviate the housing pressures in the Borough.	<p>The Council is in regular contact with the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to discuss attracting investment and funding to alleviate the housing pressures in the Borough.</p>



	<p>The Housing Enabling Team has regular liaison meetings with the HCA to discuss investment in affordable housing in Haringey. The next meeting is scheduled for 1 May 2009.</p> <p>The Council has worked closely with the HCA and other stakeholders on a support package for the Lee Valley Estates project at Tottenham Hale to ensure the continuation of this strategically important housing scheme.</p> <p>On 24 February 2009, the Chief Executive's Management Board (CEMB) also considered an issues paper on the HCA's request for a 'single conversation' and Haringey's model for engagement with the HCA. During that meeting, it was agreed that the Council would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a clear understanding for how Haringey engages with the 'single conversation' in order to establish clear lines of communication.</li> <li>• Allocate enough staff and resources to create a short practical action plan.</li> <li>• Offer to pilot the new 'single conversation' model in Haringey and potentially capture and lead this approach for the North London sub-region.</li> <li>• Review the capacity for housing development in Haringey and reassess the Borough's ability to bring forward sites for housing (council owned and otherwise) in the short term for 2009-10 and 2010-11, and in the longer term in our 5 year and 10 year plans.</li> <li>• Establish a 'Haringey Housing Proactive Network' drawn from existing teams (supported by external skills where necessary) to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make assessments of development potential;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• give free, specialist planning advice;</li> <li>• promote and deliver site action;</li> <li>• liaise with RSL partners, land owners and the HCA to bring sites and funding forward for housing, including affordable housing.</li> <li>• Start to consider the implications for the Council's corporate finances and the availability of subsidy for construction of new council homes, should the Government decide to remove financial disincentives to local authority borrowing and investment.</li> </ul>
9. Are figures been kept of home reposessions in Haringey? If so, please give them	<p>At present, we are reviewing the type of information we collect on homelessness and the causes of homelessness, and plan to pull together the data from a number of sources, including the Courts and local advice services.</p> <p>During 2008/09, the Council's Prevention &amp; Options Service saw an average of 60 - 70 private tenants and social housing tenants a month who were at risk of becoming homeless. In many cases, homelessness was prevented.</p> <p>Although the Housing Service does not separately record the number of private tenants made homeless by their landlord's mortgage company, we know that it is a growing problem and are now arranging for this information to be collated.</p> <p>During 2008/09, a total of 22 home owners sought help from the Preventions &amp; Options Team after becoming homeless due to mortgage arrears. Another 43 tenants became homeless due to rent arrears.</p> <p>The new staffing structure of Strategic &amp; Community Housing Services (due to be implemented from May 2009 onwards) and the excellent partnership working that has been taking place since the publication of Haringey's homelessness strategy in July 2008 will increase the Borough's capacity to</p>

	<p>prevent home owners and tenants from becoming homeless due to mortgage arrears and rent arrears.</p> <p>A multi agency rent arrears forum (attended by representatives from Homes for Haringey, the larger RSLs, local advice services, the Benefits &amp; Local Taxation Service and the Department for Work &amp; Pensions) has been established to improve liaison, promote good practice and reduce the number of social housing tenants who become homeless due to rent arrears.</p>
<p>10. Despite Cllr Bevan's response to Cllr Edge's Council question (30 March) there has been a great deal of confusion about when the revised 3.1% rent rise will come into effect. Please give us an update on the position; why the Government announced the revised figure without having the funding in place and the mechanics of implementing the changes. Can he assure council house tenants that the overall rent rise for 2009/10 will be 3.1%?</p>	<p>On 6 March 2009, the government made the following announcement regarding the level of council rents:</p> <p><b>The average guideline rent increase for 2009/10 will be halved from 6.2 per cent to 3.1 per cent for local authority tenants, to encourage councils to reduce the amount tenants would have to pay for the coming year.</b></p> <p><b>Mrs Beckett announced that the Government would make funding available to support local authorities to make the changes, and revise their rents for 2009/10 accordingly.</b></p> <p>Homes for Haringey received a revised draft subsidy determination from the government on 26 March 2009, and is working closely with the Council to respond to this within the four week deadline of 24 April 2009.</p> <p>As the final subsidy determination has not yet been released by the government, it is unclear how the reduction will be made. We do not know, for example, whether the inflation figure in the rent restructuring calculation will be amended, or a flat rate increase applied.</p> <p>Based on the announced reduction of the average rent increase from 6.2% to 3.1%, the proposed change would reduce the average increase in Haringey from £4.78 per week to £2.39 per week. The announcement will not, however, have any impact on the level of service charges already been agreed, since these are based on actual and estimated</p>

	<p>charges rather than on a government formula.</p> <p>In consultation with the Council's Chief Financial Officer and Homes for Haringey (and after taking into consideration the approach adopted by other local authorities and ALMOs), I have agreed that tenants' rents will initially be increased by the amounts shown in the letters that have already been sent out, but will then be decreased as soon as the appropriate notification and decision making processes are completed.</p> <p><b>The next steps</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Amount to Pay letters that are due to be despatched will be amended to include an explanation of what the Council is planning to do in respect of the rent increase.</li> <li>• A briefing will be prepared for frontline staff so that they can deal with enquires from tenants, and a briefing will be prepared for the Press outlining the council's intention.</li> <li>• Homes for Haringey will work with the council to produce an updated statement for the Haringey Council website advising residents on rents.</li> <li>• When Homes for Haringey receives the government's final subsidy determination and obtained legal advice on it, the relevant reports will be drafted to obtain the appropriate authority to implement the recommended change.</li> </ul>
	<p>11. Council House sales. Can Cllr Bevan tell us if the budgeted figures for council, house sales (cash and numbers) were achieved – please give figures.</p> <p>The 2008/09 budget included an assumption that the Council would receive £2m of usable capital receipts from the sale of 40 council homes. However, during the year, only 14 homes were sold, resulting in usable capital receipts of just £502k.</p>