



Haringey Council

Agenda item:

[No.]

Audit Committee

On 30 July 2009

Report Title: **Allocations and Lettings: progress in response to the Audit Commission's inspection recommendations**

Report of: **Phil Harris, Assistant Director Strategic and Community Housing**

Signed :

Contact Officer :

Wards(s) affected: **All**

Report for: **Non key decision**

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1. To consider the Audit Commission's recommendations for the Allocations and Lettings service and the progress that has been made as outlined in the action plan in Appendix 1.

2. State link(s) with Council Plan Priorities and actions and /or other Strategies:

- 2.1. The work being undertaken in response to the Audit Commission's Allocations and Lettings report contributes to two of the council's priorities to; *a thriving Haringey*, the allocations and lettings service plays a part in the improvement of housing within the borough. The service also contributes to; *a caring Haringey* which is focused on supporting vulnerable adults and includes initiatives to prevent homelessness.

3. Recommendations

3.1. That the Council's Audit Committee note the progress that has been made in response to the Audit Commission's Allocations and Lettings inspection from November 2008. The specific actions being undertaken to address the recommendations are set out in Appendix 1 - Housing Improvement Plan for 2009/10.

4. Reason for recommendation(s)

4.1. To demonstrate that progress has been made to the Allocations and Lettings service to improve this service area.

5. Other options considered

5.1. All the areas for improvement are contained in the Housing Improvement Plan for 2009/10.

6. Summary

6.1. The Audit Commission inspected Haringey's Allocations and Lettings service in 2007 and reported their findings in November 2008. The report judged the service to be 'poor', but with promising prospects for improvement.

6.2. The report pointed out areas of strength and weaknesses that needed to be addressed and these are contained in the action plan in Appendix 1.

6.3. The report recognised that the service has a good track record in making improvements as can be shown with the response to a previous inspection which resulted in the introduction of the Home Connections service, setting up a nominations and partnering agreement with housing associations, carrying out a re-registration exercise to update the housing register, introducing a new letting policy and the creation of the Preventions and Options service.

6.4. The Audit Commission's report pointed out positive aspects of the service for example:

- The service could be easily accessed through the website and through four Customer Service Centres (CSCs). There was generally a good approach to using Equality Impact Assessments. The service, often through partnerships, delivered positive outcomes for a range of diverse groups. There has been some good work to prevent homelessness, carry out occupancy checks and improvements to the

management of the housing register.

- There was a clear and visible commitment to driving improvement from both senior councillors and senior managers. The service demonstrated an openness to challenge and a high level of self-awareness, reflected in its future plans. The performance management, monitoring and reporting frameworks are all generally sound. The rate of improvement had increased, there was a good track record of responding to external recommendations and there have been some significant improvements for customers, although there remains more to do.
- The Council has taken positive steps to address capacity issues. It has restructured and appointed a new Assistant Director with knowledge and experience of these services and of leading change. Other important posts have also been filled. The ICT systems are capable of supporting the service well.

6.5 The report's recommendations, which have formed the focus for improvement are as follows:

The Council should improve the customer focus of its service by:

- Setting up systematic methods of keeping applicants informed of the progress of their cases, measuring satisfaction, and involving users in service improvement, including through the complaints procedure.
- Updating information provided to service users, improving telephone access to the service, and reducing the time taken to book appointments.
- Developing a proactive and holistic approach to preventions and options, linking outreach work carried out by the occupancy, preventions and options and housing management teams.
- Reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the Midlands, while being mindful of the individual wishes of temporary accommodation residents currently living there.

The Council should improve the choice-based letting service by:

- Developing a more efficient and equitable bidding process by: filtering out ineligible bidders, encouraging those with low points to seek alternatives, identifying and supporting those who have not bid, particularly vulnerable applicants.
- Making the verification process more simple, flexible and user-friendly, and ensuring that reasonable efforts are made to contact priority bidders to view properties.

The Council should improve its use of resources by:

- Maximising the supply of permanent accommodation by: closely monitoring nominations to housing associations, facilitating a balance between transfer and homeless applicants, developing a comprehensive under-occupation scheme and increasing outcomes from mobility schemes.
- Building an analysis of risk into the budgeting process in regard to subsidy changes, and maximising rechargeable income.
- Improving data collection by ensuring that documentation is not lost, that data is input accurately onto IT systems and that information is consistent across different databases.

The Council should improve its approach to staffing by:

- Taking steps to reduce the reliance on temporary and agency staff, and addressing high levels of sickness absence in the service.
- Developing and resourcing a training plan for staff, clearly linked to the aims of the service.

6.6 The Strategic and Community Housing Service has developed a Housing Improvement Plan for 2009/10 which addresses the business plan objectives and areas for improvement from the Allocations and Lettings inspection. (see Appendix 1 for details). Lead officers have been identified, together with service improvement groups to carry out the identified actions.

6.7 Following the inspection progress has been made against the areas outlined in particular:

- The production of a temporary accommodation reduction strategy..
- Review of the rationale for TA placements outside the borough with a view to ensuring that all families placed in Birmingham and Luton will be enabled to either settle in the area of their placement or return to the Borough. Following from changes in our procurement policy, by March 2010 all of the households living in temporary accommodation will be either within the Borough or within a one and a half mile radius of the Borough boundary.
- The production of a multi agency Homelessness Strategy which was developed with the full involvement of partners. Delivery of the Strategy is driven by nine Delivery Groups, many of which are chaired by partner agencies. .

- Improvements to choice based lettings leading to a simplification of the process.
- Improvement in telephone performance, which has made the service more accessible to customers.
- A significant reduction in the employment of temporary staff and addressing levels of sickness.
- Permanent recruitment to key management posts leading to greater stability at all levels of management.
- Implementation of a full service restructure with all staff receiving new JDs and giving a greater clarity of direction.
- Developing service user engagement through the establishment of a TA User Forum.
- Simplification of the verification process and a move to pre verification, which has benefited customers and increased efficiency.
- Significant reduction in the number of direct lets made and support in place to allow customers to be able to participate in Home Connections.
- The establishment of a Private Sector Lettings Team which has led to a significant increase in the number of assured shorthold tenancies accessed both by households facing homelessness and households who have chosen to move on from TA.

6.8 As part of the work of the improvement plan the Strategic and Community Housing Service is:

- Addressing value for money through the effective procurement of accommodation. The delivery of both an Emergency Accommodation Reduction Project and a PSL renewals project will drive the procurement of TA in 2009/10 leading to improved value for money and better standards.
- Reviewing the approach to under occupation and over crowding. .
- Further improving choice based lettings by developing a more efficient and equitable bidding process.
- Developing a new Lettings Policy.
- Producing information which will allow customers to assess their prospects of rehousing and promoting alternative housing options.

- Delivering an extensive training programme to support the implementation of the new structure.

6.9 The Strategic and Community Housing Service has tackled and is continuing to address the issues raised in the inspection report by linking improvements to business plan objectives for the homelessness and lettings service, the ALMO client monitoring function and the overall aims of the Strategic and Community Housing Service.

7. Chief Financial Officer Comments

7.1.

8. Head of Legal Services Comments

8.1.

9. Head of Procurement Comments –[Required for Procurement Committee]

9.1.

10. Equalities & Community Cohesion Comments

10.1. There is considerable pressure for affordable housing in Haringey with the need outstripping supply. A large number of households, some 30% are in the social rented sector and there is a relatively small owner occupied sector. Nearly half of the borough's population is from black and minority communities and housing need disproportionately affects these groups. Considering the specific housing pressures that exist in Haringey improvements to the Allocations and Lettings service are important to create a service that supports the reduction of homelessness and ensures those in need are appropriately housed.

11. Consultation

11.1.

12. Service Financial Comments

12.1.

13. Use of appendices /Tables and photographs

13.1. Appendix 1 - Housing Improvement Plan for 2009/10.

14. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 14.1. Allocations and Lettings, Audit Commission inspection report, November 2008.