

Report for: Housing, Planning & Development Scrutiny Panel

Title: Under-occupation in council housing

Report authorised by: Director of Placemaking and Housing / Director of Adults and Health

Lead Officer: Assistant Director of Housing Demand / Assistant Director of Housing

Ward(s) affected: All

Report for Key/ Non Key Decision: No

1. Describe the issue under consideration

1.1. This report presents findings from council held and census data on under-occupation in council and other social housing, sets out the Council's policies to support under-occupying council tenants to move to smaller homes and sets out the Council's ambition to develop a new rightsizing strategy.

2. Recommendations

2.1. That Scrutiny note the report.

3. Background information

Under-occupation in Council housing

3.1. Haringey is the landlord of c.15,000 tenanted council homes. When tenants are granted a tenancy it is on the basis of their household size and needs. For example, a household made up of two parents and two children of the same sex would be able to bid for, be offered and then become tenants of a 2-bed council home.

3.2. Household make-ups change, in particular as parents have more children – or adult children who have remained at home have children of their own. And adult children also move out to their own homes. If households remain in the home they were first assigned they will therefore be in a home of the wrong size – either by lacking bedrooms (in which case we would refer to them as being 'overcrowded') or by having spare bedrooms (in which case we would refer to them as 'under-occupying').

3.3. If households are overcrowded they can apply to join the housing register to be rehoused in a home that is the right size. Households are placed in band B if they are severely overcrowded (short 2 or more bedrooms) and in band C if they are short one bedroom.

- 3.4. Households who are underoccupying are also eligible to join the housing register in order to move to a smaller home than their current one.
- 3.5. Haringey council tenants have secure tenancies: this means that – barring issues such as anti-social behaviour – tenants can remain in their home for their whole life. This means that even if the original household has changed in size and become much smaller, there is no requirement for tenants to move to a smaller home. There are tenants living in large family homes who do not need a home of this size, however the Council cannot require that they move to a smaller home.
- 3.6. Given the significant demand for larger family homes (with 2648 households on the housing register requiring a 3-bed home, 579 requiring a 4-bed home and 162 requiring a home with 5 beds or more), it is in the Council's interest to support tenants who are living in a home that is larger than they need to move to a smaller home.

Census data

- 3.7. Data from the 2021 census has revealed the extent of both under-occupation and overcrowding in housing across the borough. In the social sector, strikingly, the degree of overall under-occupation and over-crowding are nearly identical – meaning that if under-occupying households were able and willing to move to a smaller home, overcrowded households would be able to move into those larger homes. For example, just under 1600 households living in a 2-bed social rented home (rented from either the Council or another registered provider) have a spare bedroom. Just under 900 households in socially rented 1-bed homes need a 2-bed home. For larger homes, there is more overcrowding, with around 330 households in 4 beds with spare bedrooms and around 770 households lacking bedrooms.
- 3.8. The census data is particularly rich since the council does not always have accurate data on the number of under-occupying households. We know how many are on the housing register due to under-occupation, but households who are not interested in downsizing would not join the register.

Incentives for downsizing

- 3.9. The Council does offer incentives to encourage people to downsize. Tenants are given £1000 for moving to a smaller home, and an additional £1000 for each bedroom they give up. For example a household moving from a 2-bed to a 1-bed or a 4-bed to a 3-bed would be awarded £2000, while a household moving from a 4-bed to a 1-bed would be awarded £4000. Additionally, households are given £500 to support them with the move.
- 3.10. There is an under-occupation officer at the Council who works to support these households to move to a smaller home that meets their needs. They work with anyone who joins the register who is under occupying and with residents who are referred by Tenancy Management, by the Housing Benefit Service who identify households who are under occupying, and by partner agencies. We are also delivering a series of sessions jointly with Tenancy management to encourage under occupiers to come along and discuss their options.

The Neighbourhood Moves Scheme

3.11. The Council introduced the 'Neighbourhood Moves Scheme' in 2021. This introduced an amendment to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy and set out that when new council housing developments where at least 4 new council homes would be delivered were to be let, existing council tenants living in close proximity to the new homes have first priority to these. Households who are underoccupying have first priority, in order of the number of bedrooms they are releasing, followed by overcrowded households, and then any other households. One of the aims of the Neighbourhood Moves Scheme has been to support households living in homes that are too large or too small to move to a new, local, home that suits their needs.

Under occupation moves this financial year

3.12. The number of actual moves achieved so far in this financial year is 18. Moves were made to smaller Council properties, sheltered accommodation and through the seaside and Country Homes Scheme. We have a further 13 moves pending. 8 of these pending moves are at Walter Tull House, three of whom are waiting to view adapted properties. Three residents are under offer for Sheltered Housing properties. Two residents are under offer for General Needs properties.

Future work

3.13. More work is needed to broaden the Council's offer to under-occupiers. A rightsizing strategy and policy will be developed in 2024. This will be developed with Haringey social tenants who are underoccupying their homes, and will use their experience to ensure that the council takes a flexible and supportive approach to helping these residents move to homes that meet their needs, while freeing up larger social homes to house Haringey's families on the housing register. Once developed, this strategy and policy will be presented to Cabinet.