

Overview and Scrutiny Committee 21st February 2011
Q 'N' A: Item 6, Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor John Bevan

No	Page/ Point	Question/Observation	Answer (Where applicable)
1	2	<p><u>Questions from Cllr David Winskill</u></p> <p>Void turnaround times: the improved times are to be greatly welcomed. In the past, it has proved difficult to sustain improvements in the longer term: how confident is the lead member that these improvements will continue? Please provide more information on what is meant by “improving accountability for the end-to-end voids process” and how the improvement will be achieved.</p>	<p>Void turnaround times have continued to improve, month by month, since August 2010. Including supported housing, the average time taken to repair and re-let routine voids has been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 2010: 46.13 days • September 2010: 34.02 days • October 2010: 32.46 days • November 2010: 31.94 days • December 2010: 19.76 days <p>During this period, average turnaround times for general needs properties reduced from 43 days to 18 days and average turnaround times for supported housing reduced from 45 days to 28 days.</p> <p>Although it may be a while before Haringey consistently achieves the average turnaround time it achieved in December 2010, I am confident that recent improvements will be sustained. Communication between Homes for Haringey and the Council’s Lettings Team has improved considerably, and closer liaison has resulted in improved co-ordination and monitoring, better scrutiny of the voids process, and more effective problem-solving. Weekly voids meetings and the creation of a New Tenant Liaison Team (responsible for property viewings and tenancy sign-ups) have underpinned these improvements.</p> <p>In recent months, changes have been made to the Housing Allocations</p>



			<p>Policy and auto-bidding arrangements with a view to minimising delays in re-letting and achieving further reductions in void turnaround times.</p> <p>During its inspection of Homes for Haringey last year, the Audit Commission suggested that voids performance would improve if one organisation is made accountable for the end-to-end voids process (from the point at which the departing tenant gives notice until the date that the incoming tenant's new tenancy starts).</p> <p>For the reasons set out in my answer to Question 4 (see below), I do not think that it is in the Council's best interests for Homes for Haringey to take on full responsibility for the letting of council homes.</p> <p>I consider it important, however, that Homes for Haringey's Director of Housing Management is given the opportunity to play a more formal and influential role in setting the targets and priorities of the Lettings Team and in monitoring its performance. This will include the authority to take over the day-to-day direction of the team if performance were to fall below the standard set out in the Service Level Agreement.</p>
2	2	<p>Under-occupation: another piece of good news. Please tell us what the current estimates of the numbers of under and over occupied properties are and how these successful reductions will be built on.</p>	<p>As the Housing Register was last reviewed in 2006/07, the data we hold on overcrowding and under-occupation is incomplete.</p> <p>On 1 April 2010, the Housing Register included 327 under-occupiers (one third of whom are willing to give up at least two bedrooms) and 940 overcrowded households (one third of whom are likely to be severely overcrowded and need at least two extra bedrooms).</p> <p>I am confident that the accuracy and completeness of this data will improve dramatically when the new Housing Allocations Policy comes into effect and housing applicants in Bands C, D & E re-register.</p> <p>When identifying under-occupiers and overcrowded households, our</p>



Housing Options Advisers make good use of the reports produced by Home Swapper (a national mutual exchange scheme) and of the referrals received from housing associations and Homes for Haringey.

In order to build on our past successes, we are now seeking to:

- Develop new ways of identifying social housing tenants who are under-occupying their homes
- Develop a tailored mutual exchange system that ‘matches’ overcrowded households who are living in properties and/or areas that are especially sought after with under-occupiers who are seeking to move into such properties
- Provide social housing tenants with the opportunity to meet the households who will benefit from the family homes and specially-adapted homes that they will ‘free up’ if they move to another, more suitable home
- Set aside a proportion of newly-built affordable rented housing for allocation to under-occupying social housing tenants, and promoting these through dedicated viewing days and the use of show homes
- Enhance the functionality of Home Swapper to enable more council tenants to achieve successful mutual exchanges
- Strengthen relationships with a wide range of social landlords (both inside and outside the borough) to maximise the mobility of under occupying and severely overcrowded tenants within the social housing stock, and to generate interest in homes (including sheltered housing) that are situated outside London.

We are continuing to work with Homes for Haringey to convert and/or



			<p>extend existing homes in order to alleviate overcrowding and increase the number of family-sized homes in the Council's housing stock. Broadwater Farm is the latest area to benefit from such work.</p>
3	3	<p>Meeting with Grant Shapps MP. Are there any updates on this meeting with regard to Haringey's homelessness problems and changes to welfare reforms.</p>	<p>Since the meeting on 7 December 2010, the Government has announced a number of changes to the Local Housing Allowance.</p> <p>The LHA 'caps' will apply to new LHA claims submitted on or after 1 April 2011. However, existing claimants will continue to receive the higher rate LHA until the anniversary of their claim or until their circumstances change (whichever is the sooner) and will then be entitled to 9 months' transitional protection.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the LHA will be calculated on the basis of the 30th percentile with effect from April 2011. This is six months earlier than the Government had originally proposed.</p> <p>At this stage, it is still unclear as to whether or not the Government will exclude housing costs from the £500 'cap' on Universal Credit. It is clear, however, that the Minister found his visit to Haringey informative.</p> <p>The Minister has requested details of how the Government's welfare reforms will affect the families he met in Haringey.</p> <p>With regard to the need for a Statutory Instrument (to restrict local housing authorities' use of out-of-borough temporary accommodation), the Assistant Director for Strategic & Community Housing Services has had a very positive meeting with civil servants at the CLG and is hopeful that Ministers can be persuaded to include the proposed measures in the Government's forthcoming Localism Bill.</p>
		<p><u>Questions from Cllr Richard Wilson</u></p>	
4	Page	<p>Does the cabinet member agree with Homes for Haringey that</p>	<p>No, I certainly do not agree with Homes for Haringey that the best way</p>



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Voids

the best way of reducing the time it takes to get void properties back into use would be to move the allocations process into the ALMO so that the process was seamless rather than divided between the two organisations?

of reducing void turnaround times is to transfer the housing allocations process to Homes for Haringey. Such a move would seriously compromise the Council's ability to prevent homelessness, improve safeguarding, reduce its use of temporary accommodation and make optimum use of the borough's social housing stock.

In common with most other local authorities, Haringey Council is responsible for assessing and verifying housing applications, ensuring the accuracy of the Housing Register, determining which properties should be let through the choice based lettings scheme, and shortlisting applicants in accordance with the Housing Allocations Policy. It is also responsible for reviewing decisions – and, where appropriate, discharging the Council's homelessness duties – in accordance with Parts 6 and 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended).

Homes for Haringey has already stated that it does not want to take on responsibility for the allocation of the Council's supported housing.

At present, the only parts of the housing allocations process that Homes for Haringey does not undertake for general needs council homes is the advertising of available properties, the shortlisting of Home Connections bidders, the selection of applicants for homes that are not let through Home Connections, and the issuing of tenancies.

One of the key objectives of the new Housing Allocations Policy is to encourage mobility in social rented housing and enable the Council to make optimum use of all social housing in the borough by organising 'chain moves' and freeing up under-used family homes and specially-adapted homes. This cannot be achieved if responsibility for letting council and housing association homes is shared between two different organisations (with: Homes for Haringey letting council homes and the Council letting housing association homes).

Without effective co-ordination of the processes involved in letting



council homes and nominating applicants to available housing association homes, there would be an unacceptable risk of applicants receiving more than one offer of housing. It will also severely limit the opportunities to organise imaginative, multiple moves involving a large number of council tenants, housing association tenants, households in temporary accommodation, and other housing applicants.

Transfer of the allocations role to Homes for Haringey would undermine the Housing Options Team's work with social housing tenants who are under-occupying their homes or living in overcrowded conditions, since this often requires a cross-tenure solution.

When Homes for Haringey is late in notifying the Council of the tenancy start date, temporary accommodation is withdrawn late and the Council incurs extra costs which it is unable to recover. If the Council is no longer involved in the letting of council homes, the risk of this happening is likely to increase.

Such a change will also make it difficult for Strategic & Community Housing Services to improve efficiency, effectiveness and value for money by limiting the opportunities for reorganising the teams responsible for managing the Housing Register, assessing housing applications and letting social housing and temporary accommodation.

Most local authorities that have established ALMOs have retained control of the housing allocations process. I believe that, if the housing allocations process was transferred to Homes for Haringey, this would seriously undermine our efforts to meet housing need, tackle homelessness and overcrowding, improve safeguarding and make best use of the borough's stock of social rented housing.

Improved communication and the creation of the New Tenancy Liaison



			<p>Team have enabled Homes for Haringey and the Council to deliver a more joined-up, streamlined repairs and re-letting service.</p> <p>As explained in my answer to Question 1 (above), void turnaround times have continued to improve, month by month, since August 2010. During this period, average turnaround times for general needs properties reduced from 43 days to 18 days and average turnaround times for supported housing reduced from 45 days to 28 days.</p> <p>Although I do not support a transfer of the allocations function to Homes for Haringey, I would like its Director of Housing Management to play a more formal and influential role in setting the targets and priorities of the Lettings Team and in monitoring its performance.</p>
5	Page 2, bullet 2, Temp accommodation	What estimate has been made of the amount that will have to be spent on temporary accommodation next year that will not be covered by the Government's temporary accommodation subsidy? How does this compare to the current year?	<p>It is estimated that the Council will need to spend £2.2m more on temporary accommodation than it will receive, for that accommodation, by way of housing benefit subsidy.</p> <p>During the past year, the Housing Service has significantly reduced the prices paid to housing suppliers and reduced its staffing levels in line with its reduced use of temporary accommodation.</p>
6	Page 1, bullet 5, housing advice	What assessment has his department made of whether housing advice services currently provided in house might be provided more effectively and efficiently by third sector, such as the CAB or Shelter?	<p>Haringey delivers a very effective housing advice service that has played a pivotal role in preventing homelessness and minimising the Council's use of temporary accommodation.</p> <p>During 2009/10, the average homelessness prevention rate in London (for each 1,000 of population) was 10.3 preventions. At 12.2 preventions per 1,000, Haringey was well above this average.</p> <p>We have not yet assessed whether or not the housing advice services</p>



that are currently provided in-house might be provided more effectively and/or efficiently by a third sector organisation. However, our Housing Advice & Options Service has been carefully tailored to meet the specific needs of Haringey and we currently have no evidence to suggest that it could be better provided by the third sector.

The merits of this option will be fully explored, however, as part of our plans to develop the strategic commissioning role in Housing Services.

In the meantime, we will continue to work closely with a number of third sector providers and ensure that our respective services continue to complement one another and have effective referral routes in place when a customer needs to move between services.

Our Housing Advice Team works collaboratively with the Citizens Advice Bureau which provides a specialised money advice service, funded through the Community Legal Service. The CAB is our preferred provider of money/debt advice and works very closely with us on cases that fall within the remit of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme.

As the CAB provides only generalist housing advice, our Housing Advice Team has recently trained 20 CAB volunteers and advisers on the work undertaken by the Housing Advice & Options Service.

During 2009/10, the CAB dealt with 1,816 customers with housing-related enquiries, some of which would need to be referred on to other agencies for specialist advice. During the same year, the Council's Housing Advice & Options Team provided more than 3,500 customers with specialised housing advice.

Shelter is not very active in Haringey and its rights-based approach to homelessness (which favours the pursuit of a homelessness



application, rather than proper consideration of all available options) is likely to lead to an increase in homelessness acceptances, a substantial reduction in the take-up of private rented housing and the Council's increased reliance on temporary accommodation.

Questions from Cllr. Karen Alexander

7 Page 2 point 2
Recent developments and events
 Given the reasons for the slowdown in the reduction of temporary accommodation during 2010/11 what strategies are the council putting to deal with these challenges – the reasons for the slowdown are only going to increase during the next couple of years

Securing good quality, sustainable private rented accommodation will continue to be an essential part of our work to prevent homelessness, provide a range of housing options and, of course, minimise the Council's use of temporary accommodation.

Unfortunately, the Government's plans are already having an impact on landlords' confidence and their willingness to continue letting their properties to households that rely on Housing Benefit. This will have a marked impact on the Council's ability to prevent homelessness and discharge its homelessness duty in the private rented sector.

We are also concerned by the prospect of 'outward migration' from Central London (caused by the Government's decision to 'cap' Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates from April 2011) and the impact that this – and the decision to base LHA rates on the 30th percentile – will have on the supply of private rented accommodation.

These concerns were shared with the Minister for Housing and Local Government (the Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP) when I met with him and David Lammy MP on 7 December 2010.

Despite these difficulties, we are continuing to prevent homelessness wherever possible and we are working hard to build on our positive working relationships with local landlords and agents. We remain committed to ensuring that, when landlords and agents are letting their accommodation, Haringey is their preferred local authority partner.

At the last meeting of the Landlords Forum on 26 January 2011, we ran a series of workshops that enabled landlords to learn more about



			<p>the changes to LHA and to work with Housing Benefit & Housing staff to develop strategies for meeting need and sustaining tenancies.</p> <p>Our Homefinder rent deposit scheme was developed in consultation with local landlords and agents and has been designed in a way that addresses their concerns and meets their requirements.</p> <p>The fast-tracking of Housing Benefit assessments is a popular feature of the Homefinder scheme and is one of the key incentives for landlords to join the scheme. Landlords were delighted to hear, in January 2011, that Housing Benefit claims for the Homefinder scheme are currently being assessed within an average of just 10 days.</p> <p>The new Housing Allocations Policy, together with auto-bidding, will ensure that homeless households receive an appropriate share of the social rented housing that becomes available. This will affect the number of households living in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>Haringey's Private Sector Lettings Team, with its insurance-backed Homefinder scheme and dedicated Housing Benefit support, is well placed to make the most of the, albeit reduced, letting opportunities.</p>
8	Page 2 point 5	When the new Housing Allocations Policy comes into effect on 31 January 2011 by how much do you expect the Housing Register to reduce by and how much do you expect to save as a result of this reduction?	<p>There are more than 20,000 applicants on the Housing Register and, of these, just over 16,000 (in Housing Needs Bands C, D & E) will be required to re-register if they want to continue with their application.</p> <p>Although we are making it very clear to applicants that only a very small number of the applicants in Band C will be rehoused (and that the 15,000 applicants in Bands D & E have no realistic prospect of ever being offered social rented housing in the future) it is difficult to predict how many applicants will decide <u>not</u> to re-register.</p> <p>When re-registration was last undertaken in 2006/07, no attempt was made to discourage applicants from re-registering and everyone had</p>



			<p>plenty of time to re-register. Some 45% of applicants re-registered.</p> <p>For this year's re-registration exercise, we are providing a lot of support for vulnerable applicants who may experience difficulty with re-registration. However, unless there are extenuating circumstances, they will have only 4 weeks to re-register.</p> <p>As there are already a total of 3,900 applicants in Bands A & B, the Housing Register will reduce to approximately 8,700 if 30% of the applicants in Bands C, D & E decide to re-register. If 40% or 50% of the applicants in Bands C, D & E re-register, the Housing Register will contain in the region of 10,300 or 11,900 applicants. .</p> <p>Annual savings of approximately £100,000 will be achieved from cost reductions in respect of stationery, printing and staffing. However, as the cost of implementing the new Housing Allocations Policy and introducing on-line registration will be incurred in 2010/11 and 2011/12, the first full year of savings will be achieved in 2012/13.</p>
9	Page 3	<p><u>Audit Commission Inspection</u> Can you give a very brief (bullet points) outline of what the weakness are and how the council is planning to address them please?</p>	<p>The main weaknesses highlighted by the Audit Commission inspection of the Housing Allocations, Lettings and Homelessness Services as requiring improvement are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current allocations policy is not sufficiently transparent and needs updating • Housing registrations are not carried out promptly • There are lengthy average relet times for empty council homes • The speed of homelessness decision-making is not meeting targets. <p>Other points were also made in relation to the cross-cutting themes of customer access, diversity and value for money, including improving</p>



benchmarking, equalities monitoring and telephone answering.

Although all of the Audit Commissions' recommendations were already being addressed in existing business and service improvement plans, a 4-page action plan has been drawn up that brings together the improvement actions that address the Inspectors' recommendations.

The action plan identifies 32 actions, including:

- Implementation of the new Allocations Policy, with re-registration of all existing applicants and annual re-registration to keep the register up to date
- Actions to improve voids performance
- Improved processes, teamwork and monitoring of homelessness cases, by managers and by the Homelessness service improvement group.
- Initiatives to improve telephone answering, the completion of equality impact assessments, the diversity data we hold on our customers, and the development of a rolling benchmarking programme.

Since the Inspection, the new Housing Allocations Policy has been approved by Cabinet, been the subject of three months' consultation and is about to come into effect. This will address the issues relating to the transparency of the policy, the accuracy of the Housing Register and the speed of housing registration.

As I have explained in my answer to Question 1 (above), void turnaround times have reduced significantly since the Inspection.

The speed of homelessness decisions has already improved. Further measures are set out in the action plan.



10	Page 4 points 1 & 2	<p><u>Key issues and challenges for 2011/2012</u> In relation to this point on temporary accommodation and homeless households what other avenues have been explored in terms of possible funding. How are other boroughs with similar problems dealing with this issue?</p>	<p>As the terms of the subsidy system are determined nationally, we are unable to increase the amount of money that we receive in subsidy for each unit of temporary accommodation (TA). It is for this reason that, during the past year, we have taken positive steps to reduce the cost of procuring and maintaining TA and, in order to maximise rental income, we have closed the Workers Rebate Scheme.</p> <p>Our success in negotiating rent reductions with the suppliers of nightly-purchased Emergency Accommodation has attracted the interest of other London boroughs (Camden, Barnet and Enfield) which are keen to enter into a joint procurement arrangement with Haringey that involves a common pricing policy and consistent standards of service and accommodation. Such an arrangement will eliminate the risk of those boroughs offering suppliers more money than Haringey or accepting properties in Haringey that do not meet our letting standard.</p> <p>Although the Council would be able to reduce its financial exposure if it is able to increase the proportion of its TA stock that is managed by housing associations and private housing suppliers, the three housing associations and six private housing suppliers whose tenders were accepted in 2009 have supplied, between them, less than 200 of the 700 homes that they promised to supply in 2010.</p> <p>The situation has not been helped by the fact that, from 1 April 2011, temporary accommodation provided through Housing Association Leasing Schemes (HALS) will be subject to the same housing subsidy regime as has applied to local authorities since 1 April 2010. This has discouraged housing associations from providing temporary accommodation and led to a significant number of properties being handed back to the owners, leaving the Council with the problem of having to find an alternative supply. .</p>
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As we have now almost cleared the large backlog of expired leases, it is hoped that the Procurement & Compliance Team will have sufficient staffing capacity to start procuring private sector leased accommodation again in April 2011. This will ensure that the Council is less dependent on others to meet the demand for suitable, competitively priced temporary accommodation.

In common with many other London boroughs, Haringey is considering the financial benefits of placing homeless households in temporary accommodation in less expensive areas outside London. However, at present, we are continuing to place all households in London and, where the cost of the accommodation is reasonable, we are trying to place households in Haringey or within a few miles of it.

In order to make best use of the private rented sector, the Council has continued to improve the services provided for landlords through its Homefinder rent deposit scheme and Private Lettings Team. Excellent joint working between the Council's Housing Benefit and Housing Advice & Options teams has impressed landlords and has given Haringey a distinct advantage over other local authorities.

Although we are constantly looking at the strategies adopted by other local authorities in a similar situation to Haringey, our strategy for dealing with these problems is consistent with what is being done elsewhere and we are confident that we are doing everything we can to reduce the Council's financial exposure.



11	<p><u>HMOs</u> I am delighted that the work of the pilot scheme in Haringay ward is going to result in the additional licensing of HMOs in Haringay ward. This is a great step forward. I have no doubt of its success – will it be used as a template for other problem areas in the borough?</p>	<p>If the additional HMO licensing scheme in the Haringay ward is successful, I would be very keen for it to be adopted in other wards. We are already gathering information about all wards – to help us determine which wards would benefit most from licensing – and, now that we have devised and agreed the process for adopting a scheme, it will be quicker and easier to introduce other schemes in the future.</p> <p>As the additional HMO licensing scheme needs to be self-financing, we will need to strike the right balance between enforcement and the collection of fee income. To this end, we must work with not only those co-operative landlords who require minimal advice / prompting, but also with bad landlords who have no intention of making an application and will need to be prosecuted to achieve the desired outcome.</p>
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