

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 9th May 2011

Q 'N' A: Item 6 – Cabinet Member Questions - Councillor John Bevan – Cabinet Member for Housing

No	Page/ Point	Question/Observation	Answer (Where applicable)
		<u>Questions from Cllr Winskill</u>	
1.		<p>The following appears in an invitation from officers invitation to the Overcrowding & Under-occupation Strategy Consultation Event (Thursday 12th May)</p> <p>"....our ability to delivery new affordable housing has been hampered by cuts in grant funding."</p> <p>Other than affordable housing units delivered by private developers as part of s106 funding arrangements, how many units were delivered in the past three years and by whom? Please tell us how many units were delivered by LB Haringey with government grant funding.</p>	<p>With or without S106 funding, affordable housing requires additional subsidy to make the schemes viable. Between 2008–11, this subsidy was provided through Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) grant funding as a capital investment.</p> <p>During the past three years, a total of 774 affordable homes were delivered in Haringey through the National Affordable Housing Programme. All of these were built with the assistance of S106 agreements and were dependent on the subsidy provided by HCA grant. Without it, the schemes built during this period would not have been viable and would not have delivered an affordable housing element.</p> <p>In October 2010, the Government announced that its annual investment in affordable housing will be reduced, during the period 2011-14, by more than 60%.</p> <p>Under the new Affordable Housing Programme (2011-2015), it is the registered providers and local authorities (rather than the HCA) that will be required to provide most of the subsidy that is needed.</p> <p>Registered providers will be required to borrow more money on the strength of their new freedom to charge much higher rents, equivalent to up to 80% of market rent. Local authorities will also be required to demonstrate that they are making appropriate levels of investment in affordable housing schemes in their area.</p>



			<p>As a result of the cuts in grant funding, the viability of S106 schemes in Haringey will be dependent upon substantial increases in tenants' rents, and the Council will be put under increased pressure to invest even more of its scarce capital resources in the development of new affordable housing. This will hamper our ability to deliver new affordable housing in the borough.</p> <p>Although the Council has applied to become an Investment Partner (as a first step to securing HCA investment in the provision of new council homes), it is not yet in a position to meet all of the requirements set out in the HCA's bidding document.</p>
2.	1	<p>One of the principle objectives of SCHS is <i>to maximise the development of affordable housing</i>.</p> <p>Three or four years ago, permission was sought and granted for housing units on Tottenham Lane at the junction with Ferme Park Road. Originally the development was targeted at key workers as small units to rent/buy, The development is now nearing completion and is being marketed as "luxury housing".</p> <p>Is there anything that SCHS and planning can do to ensure that applications originally made for social housing are actually built as an marketed as such?</p>	<p>The provision of affordable housing (including social rented housing) is normally included as part of a legally binding S106 agreement with the developer. If the developer does not comply with the conditions of the S106 agreement, the Council is able to take legal action against the developer for non-compliance.</p> <p>Furthermore, if an affordable housing scheme has been funded through the HCA, any change of tenure from the original bid submission would have to be renegotiated with the HCA and a waiver provided. Such changes may affect the Council's tenancy nomination rights and, if the planning permissions have to be varied, the development may be delayed.</p> <p>From your description of the Tottenham Lane development, I am assuming you are referring to the housing scheme at 158 Tottenham Lane, which was granted planning permission (for 9 x 4-bedroom, 3-storey townhouses) in March 2009..</p> <p>Unfortunately, as the Tottenham Lane scheme was below the threshold of 10, there is no requirement to provide affordable housing on the site. As a consequence, the scheme (which is nearing completion) has no affordable homes.</p>



3.	2	<p>Since last years' announcement of the LHA caps and the initial estimates that Haringey made about increased migration from central London, has Haringey continued to revise these estimates and how have they changed over the period? What work is being done with Adult Services and CYPS in anticipation of the changes?</p>	<p>According to DWP figures, 82,000 households in London will be at risk of losing their homes as a result of all of the LHA changes. London Councils estimates that 10,500 households (including 7,000 families with children) in Central London could be forced to move to Outer London boroughs as a result of the cap.</p> <p>Within the North London Sub Region, there are three boroughs (Westminster, Camden and Islington) that will effectively become 'no-go' areas for any household that is living on a low income and looking to rent a home in the private rented sector. The obvious 'solution' for those boroughs whose households cannot afford to rent within their own boroughs is to help them to secure private rented accommodation in areas, such as Haringey, where housing costs are lower.</p> <p>Unfortunately, because such movement is unpredictable and difficult to quantify (since it is determined not just by the actions and policy decisions of local authorities but also the circumstances and preferences of the individual households), it is not yet possible to produce meaningful estimates of how many of the displaced households from Central London will 'migrate' to Haringey.</p> <p>As explained in my Briefing, however, Housing Services has worked hard to discourage other London boroughs from placing households in private rented accommodation (or out-of-borough temporary accommodation) in Haringey and to encourage boroughs to share information about any placements they do make.</p> <p>To date, most of the work that has been done with Adult Services and CYPS has concentrated on awareness raising and ensuring that Haringey is properly equipped to identify – and, where appropriate, assess – those households that have recently moved into Haringey from other London boroughs.</p>
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			<p>CYPS has shared information about transfers involving children that are subject to a child protection plan. Welfare reform (including the LHA changes) has also been discussed at the Local Safeguarding Childrens Board as one of the key issues for the Board to consider, during the coming year, in the light of its potential impacts on families and the borough.</p>
4.	2	<p>Void turnaround times. Is Cllr Bevan confident that these improving performances can be sustained into the medium/long-term? If so, why?</p>	<p>Although we still have some way to go before we consistently hit our void turnaround target of 25 days, I am pleased with the direction of travel and I am confident that the recent improvement in voids performance can be sustained in the medium / long-term.</p> <p>Officers from Homes for Haringey and the Council are still implementing an improvement plan that is designed to improve the management of voids. Haringey's new Housing Allocations Policy and Homes for Haringey's New Tenant Liaison Team have both helped to reduce re-let times.</p> <p>The relationship between the Council's Lettings Team and Homes for Haringey's New Tenant Liaison Team is now much stronger and regular meetings have improved communication between all of the teams involved in the voids process.</p> <p>Homes for Haringey has assured me that, when the restructure of its Repairs Service is fully embedded, productivity will increase and further reductions will be achieved in the time it takes to make homes 'ready to let'.</p>



		<u>Questions from Cllr Alexander</u>	
5.	2	<u>Recent events and developments</u> The reasons for the slowdown in the reduction of people in temporary accommodation are not likely to change in the foreseeable future – what strategies are council developing to reduce numbers given the difficult circumstances of the current financial and housing climate?	<p>The Council remains committed to reducing the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation by preventing homelessness, encouraging households that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to consider all available housing options, and maximising the amount of social housing that is let to homeless households living in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>During 2010/11, some 505 of the 862 units of social housing that became available were let to households living in temporary accommodation. Another 71 households in temporary accommodation accepted the offer of private rented accommodation as a discharge of the Council's homelessness duty.</p> <p>The focus on maximising social housing lets will be maintained throughout 2011/12. Although the situation has been helped by auto-bidding and the new Housing Allocations Policy, it continues to be very difficult to maintain the supply of social rented housing and affordable private rented accommodation.</p>
6.	2	Given the fact that we know there is likely to be an outward migration when the housing benefit changes take full effect what strategies (along side these mentioned in the briefing) are we developing to work with other council departments to deal with further pressures on school places, council services etc that outward migration will cause?	<p>Please see the response to Question 3 above.</p> <p>CYPS has been sharing information (in case conferences) about the children that are the subject of a child protection plan and have been 'transferred in' to Haringey from other London boroughs. Discussions are taking place on the merits of extending this information sharing to include children that have a statement of special educational needs.</p>



		Questions from Cllr Jenks	
7.	2	How is Cllr Bevan going to prioritise "Good Neighbour" housing for Decent Homes work. (My understanding is that the higher priority housing for vulnerable people such as sheltered housing is already programmed).	<p>As substantially less funding will be available for decent homes in Haringey, we are proposing to adopt an 'elemental' approach that prioritises essential health and safety works and key elements such as windows and roofs.</p> <p>We are in the process of revising our decent homes programme to take into account the reduced funding available and the investment that is required to ensure that homes are safe, warm and dry.</p> <p>Our decision making will be informed by the latest set of stock condition survey results – which will be available later in May 2011 – and will, of course, take into account the specific needs of vulnerable residents, including the residents of the Community Good Neighbour Schemes.</p> <p>Residents will be consulted on the changes to the Decent Homes programme. Proposals for this consultation are currently being developed and Members will be briefed ahead of this consultation.</p>
8.	2	In relation to temporary accommodation (particularly in relation to accommodation in the private sector) the state of much of it is very poor and often infested with mice and cockroaches. What is the council doing to improve the state of property to be used as temporary accommodation?	<p>I strongly dispute your statement that much of the temporary accommodation that the Council uses is "very poor and often infested with mice and cockroaches" as this is certainly not borne out by the results of our property inspections, by the complaints received from the residents of temporary accommodation or, indeed, by the Audit Commission which reviewed the Housing Service in May 2010.</p> <p>As the Housing Service sets very strict standards for the properties it procures, all properties should be of a good standard when they are taken on. As a lot of the accommodation the Council uses is managed by the housing supplier, we expect the supplier to attend to the repairs issues, and we have dedicated staff whose responsibility it is to ensure that properties are inspected and that complaints are</p>



			<p>dealt with, and resolved, as quickly as possible. If a supplier fails to resolve the problem or the works are of a nature that cannot be carried out with the household in occupation, the household will be moved and the property handed back.</p> <p>If the accommodation is leased from a private landlord, the Council is entitled to carry out works in default if the landlord fails to meet their repairing obligations. As a further sanction, it can also suspend the lease payments and/or move the tenant to alternative accommodation and terminate the lease.</p> <p>Although there will always be properties that fall into disrepair, we are committed to ensuring that all of the Council's temporary accommodation is well managed and in a good state of repair. It is important that, where there are serious concerns about the standard of temporary accommodation, these concerns are reported to the Temporary Accommodation Team straight away.</p>
9.	4	<p><u>Housing Revenue Business Plan</u></p> <p>With changing housing and financial markets why is the business plan made for as long as 30 years – surely it will constantly have to be revised over that lengthy period?</p>	<p>At present, the Council is presented with an updated 5 year medium term financial plan during each budget setting cycle.</p> <p>The extended 30 year plan will be revised each year and support better decision making in respect of the housing assets. It will also be regularly updated to reflect key decisions and prevailing conditions.</p>
		<u>Questions from Cllr Wilson</u>	
10.	2	<p>Decent Homes: How will the council ensure that the programme is prioritised properly, with the most vulnerable residents and the most dilapidated properties being prioritised first?</p>	<p>Please see the response to Question 7 above.</p> <p>At its meeting on 26 April 2011, the Cabinet agreed that a borough-wide stock options appraisal will be commissioned in order to enable the Council to determine how best to address the short term and long term investment needs of its housing stock, including those homes that are in the poorest condition and require very high levels of investment.</p>



11.	2	<p>Would the council consider some more radical solutions in relation to some of the worst estates such as demolishing and rebuilding? Other boroughs have done this possibly involving private finance?</p>	<p>Please see the response to Question 10 above.</p> <p>The stock options appraisal will consider a wide range of available options for the future delivery of sustainable investment in the housing stock. Options that may be explored could include regeneration initiatives, managed disposal and reinvestment, local stock transfer, and increased rents. This work will tie in with the work that Strategic & Community Housing Services is leading on to develop regeneration sustainability indices to highlight the regeneration potential of Haringey's housing stock.</p>
12.	3	<p>How is the council addressing the slow turnover of properties? Could this be caused by illegal subletting? How is the council tackling this? Is there government money available to tackle housing fraud?</p>	<p>Given the severe shortage of affordable housing in London, it is difficult to know what more we can do than we are doing at the moment to persuade existing tenants to give up their homes and meet their needs in the private sector.</p> <p>In order to detect and prevent illegal sub-letting, Homes for Haringey has a rolling programme of occupancy checks that ensures that 20% of council homes are checked during the year and that, as a result, all properties have an occupancy check at least once every five years. Since 2007, all new tenants have been required to have their photo taken at the time a property is allocated to them and this is attached to the tenancy records</p> <p>The Housing Service and Homes for Haringey participate in the annual National Fraud Initiative involving the cross-referencing of a wide range of databases managed by government departments / agencies, local authorities and social landlords. This initiative identifies individuals who are connected to a number of addresses and/or are claiming Housing Benefit for more than one home, and it highlights anomalies (such as conflicting dates of birth) that merit investigation.</p>



		<p>Two dedicated housing fraud officers have recently been appointed within the Council's Internal Audit Team and they undertake more detailed investigations where suspicions have been raised. A fraud hotline enables people to report issues to Homes for Haringey and the Council, anonymously if preferred</p> <p>The Government has provided Haringey with £100,000 to support its work on housing fraud. This money will be spent on staff training, publicity, specialist counter-fraud initiatives targeted at particular parts of the borough, and the provision of incentives for staff and members of the public who report suspicions which lead to the recovery of homes that are being sublet illegally.</p>
		<u>Questions from Cllr Ejiofor</u>
13.	<p>What work is Strategic and Community Housing Services doing with Housing Associations and the Third Sector to alleviate the long term housing needs of survivors of domestic violence?</p>	<p>Survivors of domestic violence from all tenures can obtain advice on their housing options from Hearthstone. This can include a move to alternative social housing, the private rented sector or, in an emergency, into temporary accommodation or a refuge while a housing solution is found.</p> <p>For survivors who feel that they can remain in their current home, advice and support can be given to take injunctive action and install additional security measures through the Sanctuary Scheme. Where survivors need to move to escape violence, Hearthstone works with HARTs to provide support at the time of the move and to help them establish links in the new area.</p> <p>Haringey's new Housing Allocations Policy awards priority to social housing tenants who need to move due to domestic violence. Decisions on this are made by the Management Transfer Panel. Although these arrangements have been in place for quite a while for council tenants, they will soon be extended to include housing association tenants.</p>



			<p>Some survivors of domestic violence need to move a long way away to escape from the perpetrator. To meet their needs, we are developing a sub regional protocol that will encourage reciprocal arrangements between social landlords that enable survivors to move to places of safety outside of the borough without the need to give up their security of tenure.</p> <p>Hearthstone makes referrals to Women's Refuges as a way of providing an immediate place of safety when survivors need to leave home quickly. Discussions have taken place with Women's Aid about the need for move-on accommodation and we are exploring ways of helping those survivors who are assessed as not being in priority need under the homelessness legislation with a view to helping them move into private rented accommodation through our Rent Deposit Scheme.</p>
14.	3	<p>Could the Cabinet member provide a break down of what should be happening each day during the 25 day target for turning around and re-letting void properties? Could the Cabinet member highlight the activities where performance exceeds target?</p>	<p>Although there is often an overlap between the repairs and lettings process (with properties being advertised and sometimes viewed before the property is 'ready to let') the breakdown of activity can be summarised as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Days 1/ 2 : keys collected; locks changed; specification prepared; Lettings Team notified if suitable for advertising now • Days 2/3 : clearance; gas and electricity check; asbestos survey; Lettings Team will prepare the property for advertising • Days 3-14: works carried out according to specification; viewings arranged; final clean • Days 15-25: viewings; property offered; sign up arranged



			<p>Taking 2010/11 as a whole, two aspects of void performance exceeded the target:</p> <p>(a) Against the indicator measuring rent loss due to voids, the outturn was 1.14% against a 1.5% target. This is because, although void turnaround times are higher than we would want, the total number of voids is relatively low.</p> <p>(b) The average cost of repairing a void was £1570 against a £2200 target.</p>
15.	3	<p>What work has been done to alleviate these pinch-points that cause the extended delays that we see re-letting void properties?</p>	<p>The biggest impact on void turnaround times is the time it takes to repair the property and the time it takes to let it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repairs performance improved overall during 2010/11, but the service has recently been restructured and this led to a deterioration of the team's performance in April 2011. Although there is an urgent need to improve the reliability of expected completion dates, Homes for Haringey expects productivity and performance to improve steadily from the end of May 2011. • Lettings performance improved significantly during 2010/11 and has been assisted by the new Housing Allocations Policy which introduced a 'banding' system and has enabled the Council to review and verify all of the applicants in Bands A and B. As these applicants are the most likely to be offered accommodation, this new way of working has eliminated most of the delays that had previously arisen, under the old system, when discrepancies and errors would only come to light at the time the property was being offered and applicants' circumstances were being verified. Improvements have also been made to another 'pinch-point', auto-bidding, to ensure that the Council benefits from the scheme but without it impacting too much on re-let times.



16.		<p>How many Council properties were being squatted at 26th April 2011? What is the longest time that a council property has been squatted at 26/04/11</p>	<p>As at 26 April 2011, a total of 4 council owned properties (managed by Homes for Haringey) were being squatted. Of these, the longest that a property has been squatted is 4 months; the shortest is 10 days. The average time lost due to squatting is 2 months.</p>
17.		<p>How many Council properties were squatted whilst they were voids? What precautions does the Council take to prevent the squatting of void properties?</p>	<p>Based on analysis carried out in 2010/11 (covering the period 2007 to 2010) there are, on average, 18 squatting incidents a year.</p> <p>In 2010/11, there were 24 squatting incidents.</p> <p>Experience has shown that the most effective strategy for managing squatting is to allocate the property before it is ready for occupation. This enables the Council to argue that the void is immediately needed for someone to occupy and, under this procedure, the Council is normally able to arrange a hearing in less than a week and to recover possession immediately.</p> <p>The most significant problem that the Council has with squatting relates to those properties that have been empty for a long time, where it is clear that the property is being worked on and that the works are likely to take a long time to complete.</p> <p>We have been looking at how we might reduce the incidents of squatting in these properties, including additional security measures. We have recently shared the costs of using a dog security service with one of our contractors, for example, on a void that is especially vulnerable to squatting.</p> <p>For short term voids, our strategy is to secure the properties as necessary. However, for the most part, we do not want to draw unnecessary attention to the fact that the property is empty. Where curtains are in place, we will leave them in situ and, where there are no curtains, we will put some up. Where a property is particularly vulnerable, we will use metal door and window coverings.</p> <p>Neighbouring tenants are provided with details of who to contact, within Homes for Haringey, to report any suspicious activity.</p>