

THE EXECUTIVE**On: 12 SEPTEMBER 2006**

Report Title: Overview and Scrutiny Report - Allocations and Lettings

Report of: Chair of Overview and Scrutiny – Cllr. Gideon Bull

Wards(s) affected: **All**Report for: **Key Decision****1. Purpose**

1.1 To report to the Executive the outcome of scrutiny involvement in the development of the new Housing Lettings Policy and to make recommendations on issues where scrutiny desire the policy to be extended, improved or more detail included. This report to be considered in conjunction to the report of the Director of Social Services.

2. Recommendations

Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend that:

1. **Subject to the incorporation of the changes recommended by the Scrutiny Review, the Lettings Policy be commended to the Executive for adoption.**
2. **The Action Plan arising from the Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA), be monitored in order to inform future policy and service development and to ensure that services are in step with the needs of communities and that all users or potential users have fair and equal access to allocations and lettings.**
- 3a. **Subject to the results of the modelling impact assessment and further legal advice, the Executive consider awarding a greater weighting to the local connections aspects of the new lettings policy, with a view to increasing the level of points (75) currently proposed.**
- 3b. **Local connection points be awarded only to applicants who have lived in Haringey for the two years immediately preceding their application.**
- 3c. **It is made clear in the policy that where applicants are placed in temporary accommodation outside the borough, they will be awarded Residency points, as long as they fulfil the residential qualification.**

- 3d. The policy state that Local Connection points will not be given to the following:**
- Those placed in Haringey in temporary accommodation by another council.
 - Those placed in Haringey in residential accommodation by another council.
 - Secure tenants of another council unless reciprocal arrangements have been agreed.
- 4. Subject to the results of the modelling impact assessment and further legal advice, the Executive consider awarding a greater weighting than the 50 points currently proposed, as a way of rewarding “good neighbour” transfers. Thereby increasing the points for those applicants who have abided by the terms of their tenancy conditions and have no rent arrears.**
- 5a. Greater incentive be given to achieve an increase in under-occupation transfers; consideration be given to increasing the financial reward and introducing other forms of assistance to tenants.**
- 5b. The under-occupation scheme be re-launched with an enhanced publicity campaign to ensure greater public awareness of the scheme.**
- 6. The Council consider each case of succession under-occupation on its merit and where appropriate, use the legal powers available to address the issue of under occupation of properties, when a succession to the tenancy has taken place.**
- 7a. The Re-housing Service ensure that an overall publicity and education campaign is undertaken with staff and residents to launch the policy. Also that a leaflet is produced and made available in major community languages. The leaflet should include a ready-reckoner to enable applicants to calculate their housing points. The leaflet should signpost where general advice and practical assistance on homelessness and prevention of homelessness is available. The leaflet should also explain the Choice Based Lettings schemes.**
- 7b. Support staff be fully trained/briefed in the policy as part of the implementation process. Training to include legal briefings on a regular basis, to ensure staff are knowledgeable and up to date with all relevant legislation.**
- 7c. The leaflet be produced and distributed at the same time as the Homes Connection scheme is launched.**
- 7d. The Scrutiny Review Panel would welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft leaflet produced.**

- 8a. At the signing of the tenancy, if applicable, the applicants' housing benefit application form also be completed. This will allow the applicant to have benefits quickly assessed and in place and is likely to reduce the incidences of rent arrears and to assist in maintaining their tenancies. Vulnerable new tenants will be assisted by staff ensuring that housing benefit applications are completed correctly.**
- 8b. The Re-housing Service improve the administration of Housing Benefit and homelessness application processes, by ensuring that the application form for housing, when completed, gives all the necessary permissions required to carry out relevant data checks, including legal access to electronic databases.**
- 8c. The housing application form be redesigned to enable applicants to state whether they are likely to apply for Housing Benefit, so that officers are able to be better prepared to assist applicants with their claims.**
- 8d. An application be cancelled if the applicant has failed to provide documentary evidence or other information reasonably required by the Council, in order to validate the applications, including Housing Benefit.**
- 8e. The Re-housing Service, IT Department and Legal Services work in collaboration to develop a protocol that achieves a balance between the needs of the Council to alleviate homelessness and rent arrears, and the rights of applicants under the Data Protection Act.**
- 9a. The Lettings Policy be reviewed between at least twelve and eighteen months interval to ensure that it remains in keeping with current regulations and practices.**
- 9b. An action plan including the operating instructions (procedures) and progress report be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2006. That the Action Plan include feedback from Connexions Direct.**
- 10a. The review of the Housing Register be undertaken as a matter of urgency and the Re-housing Service ensure that the register is reviewed on a regular basis.**
- 10b. A modelling impact assessment of the applicants on the Housing Register be carried out before implementation of the policy, ensuring that applicants are re-pointed using the new lettings policy, to ascertain whether the aims of the new policy have been achieved.**
- 11. An explanation regarding Homes for Haringey be included in the Lettings Policy, to enable applicants to distinguish clearly between the Council's Strategic Housing Services and Homes for Haringey.**

Report Authorised by: **Gideon Bull**

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3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 At the request of the Council the Audit Commission looked at specific areas of the Strategic Housing Service (SHS). These areas were allocations and lettings, resident involvement and supported housing. When the SHS received the Audit commission report they began work to develop a new lettings policy. At the same time the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had identified the allocation and lettings service as an area where scrutiny involvement was likely to have a tangible and positive outcome. In June 2006 it commissioned a Scrutiny review Panel to look at this area.
- 3.2 It was apparent from the outset that a radical and pragmatic approach was required with a highly focussed review, to ensure that it concluded and complied with the timescales required. Initial discussions with management resulted in agreement that it would be productive if the Scrutiny Review Panel was involved in the development of the new Lettings Policy and would also form part of the consultation process necessary before the new policy was endorsed by the Executive.
- 3.3 Therefore during the course of the review many positive scrutiny suggestions to improve the policy have been incorporated into the latest version of the policy put before the Executive. These suggestions are not repeated in any detail in this report, which concentrates on making recommendations on issues that remain outstanding and requiring Executive decision.

4. Reasons for any change in policy or for new policy development (if applicable)

- 4.1 A new policy reflecting the legal requirements placed on the Council and the Councils preferred, but limited, Lettings priorities and the need to work with private sector partners to tackle homelessness and overcrowding, was required.

5. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 5.1 Background information report – Scrutiny Review Panel July 2006
- 5.2 Homelessness Prevention – a guide to good practice (DCLG)
- 5.3 Haringey Homelessness Strategy 2003 -2008
- 5.4 L B Islington, LB Barnet, LB Waltham Forest, LB Camden and, LB Enfield Allocations and Lettings schemes.

6. Overview and Scrutiny Report – Attached

7. Legal and Financial Comments

- 7.1 There are no financial implications as a result of recommendations in the report.
- 7.2 **The Head of Legal Services has been consulted in the preparation of this report.**
- 7.3 There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report save for recommendations 3a and 4.
- 7.4 Recommendation 3a, suggests greater weighting be given for local connection above the 75 points currently allocated. Local connection points are lawful but should not be pitched at a level that fails to preserve the reasonable preference categories which reflect housing need and give priority to overcrowding, homelessness, medical need etc. The 75 points currently proposed is proportionate to the points awarded for housing need and to increase the local connection points beyond this level would increase the risk of successful challenge by way of judicial review.
- 7.5 Recommendation 4 suggests an increase in the good neighbour transfer points, however the policy behind the Homelessness Act 2002 is that transfer applications should be treated the same as new applicants. The level of points should not therefore be increased to a level that gives this category of applicants a significant advantage over new applicants or other transfer applicants. The above comments regarding the preservation of the reasonable preference categories also apply.

8. Equalities Implications

- 8.1 Contained in the body of the report.

9. Use of Appendices

- 9.1 Overview and Scrutiny Report

