

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**On 29 JANUARY 2007****Report Title: Scrutiny Review of Housing Lettings Policy****Report of:** The Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel – Councillor John BevanWards(s) affected: **All**Report for: **Key Decision****1. Purpose**

To report to the Committee the Scrutiny Review Panel recommendations regarding the new Housing Lettings Policy and to seek the Committee's endorsement of the recommendations contained in the report of the Scrutiny Review Panel

**2. Recommendations**

That the Committee consider and agree the recommendations of the Scrutiny Review Panel, as outlined in the attached report.

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**Telephone: 020 8489 2928****3. Executive Summary**

- 3.2 The Review was commissioned by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee as part of its work programme for 2006/07 with the aim of examining the proposed housing allocations and lettings policy, following challenges raised by the Audit Commission.
- 3.3 The Review Panel produced an initial report and recommendations which were considered and endorsed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 12 September 2006. At that time the Committee also agreed to vary the terms of reference of the Review to enable the Panel to ensure that the Lettings Policy is implemented successfully and fit for purpose. As part of this exercise the Panel met on a number of occasions and received progress reports on the implementation of the recommendations of the Review.

**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 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**

The background papers relating to this report are:

The DWP HB/CTB Guidance Manual (C8.90):

Housing Allocations & Lettings Policy Report September 2006

Minutes of the Allocations & Lettings Scrutiny Review Panel

**6. Consultation**

N/A

**7. Summary and Conclusions**

Please refer to the Scrutiny Review Report (attached)

**8. Recommendations**

Please refer to the Scrutiny Review Report (attached)

**9. Legal and Financial Comments**

- 9.1 There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations contained in this report save for recommendation 4.
- 9.2 Recommendation 4 suggests that a form of wording should be included on the Housing Registration Form to ensure that when applying for housing, applicants are aware of, and give consent to, the sharing of information between Council Departments, in particular Council Tax data, as a means of preventing and detecting fraud to protect public funds. It is expected that consideration would be given to any new guidance due to be issued at the end of January 2007 by the Information Commissioner's Office and any implications for the Authority.
- 9.3 Full legal and financial comments will be sought to recommendations agreed by the Executive in the Executive Response.

**10. Equalities Implications**

Equalities implications will be sought to recommendations agreed by the Executive in the Executive Response.

**11. Use of Appendices**

Please find attached the Scrutiny Review report.

## **SCRUTINY REVIEW OF HOUSING ALLOCATIONS AND LETTINGS POLICY**

This phase of the review concentrated on monitoring the implementation of the recommendations made in the main report of the panel. The Recommendations contained in the main report was presented to the Executive on 12 September 2006. The Panel was pleased to note progress made to date, however the following issues needed to be addressed.

### **1.0 FEEDBACK FROM CONNEXIONS DIRECT**

1.1 The panel first met with representatives of Connexions Direct on 12 August 2006 where they reported the issues facing vulnerable young people seeking accommodation in Haringey. Members wanted to find out how the new lettings policy would impact on this group and it was agreed that Connexions Direct would report back to the panel at the end of the year with their comments and experience of the policy.

- Connexions reported their findings and suggestions in a report to the Panel on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2006, Helen Wilson and Hilda Djada addressed the panel and outlined their concerns. The key observations included issues relating to the provision of emergency accommodation and the time gap in arranging interviews for this group when they present as homeless and in need of emergency accommodation. For example:
- Young people approaching Station Road are given P&O appointments several weeks after the initial approach date. This can mean that the situation becomes urgent in that the young person requires emergency accommodation before the appointment date.

1.2 Young people approaching Prevention and Options Service, who have been picked up by the Social Services out of hours Service, sometimes on several occasions, are not provided with emergency accommodation.

1.3 It was clear that effective joined up working is needed between Connexions, Social Services and Housing to ensure appropriate referrals are made and an adequate support package put into place. This is in the process of taking place in conjunction with relevant services. Clarity is needed around what constitutes an emergency.

1.4 It is the view of the Panel that the situation could be made less demanding if youths are placed in bed and breakfast accommodation for a longer period of time; say three days, during which time they would be interviewed and their housing needs assessed.

### **1.5 Out of Hours Service**

1.6 The Council's Out of Hours Service team provides an emergency service outside of normal business hours when council offices are closed. The panel was informed that the procedures for the Service are currently under review and recommend that the new procedures should incorporate measures on how staff within the Service deal with vulnerable young people who need

emergency accommodation and that literature about the Prevention & Options Services should be made available and explained to them.

- 1.7 It was agreed that the Re-Housing Service would make contact with Connexions Direct to arrange delivery of P&O leaflets to Connexions' offices and that leaflets would also be made available in Bed and Breakfast accommodation used by the Council. It was also agreed that Connexions Direct should make arrangements to meet with officers in the Re-housing Service to discuss other outstanding issues.

#### **Recommendations:**

- (1) Consideration should be given to increasing the length of time a young person is booked into bed and breakfast accommodation, where they are vulnerable, in exceptional circumstances for more than 24 hours.
- (2) Staff in the Out of Hours Service should explain the Prevention and Options (P&O) Procedures when they are in contact with vulnerable young people seeking emergency accommodation. Provisions should be made to ensure that a supply of P&O leaflets is available to the Out of Hours Team to hand out to young people who come in contact with the service.
- (3) The Re-housing Service should ensure that Prevention & Options leaflets are made available in Bed and Breakfast accommodations as well as in the offices of Connexions Direct.
- (4) The Housing Service to meet with Connections to discuss outstanding issues raised by Connexions Direct relating to their dealing with vulnerable young people.

## **2.0 HOUSING REGISTRATION FORM**

### **2.1 Housing Registration Form and Housing Benefits**

- 2.2 The Panel is keen to ensure that the Council is taking steps to address weaknesses in the administrative systems to tackle and manage homelessness in the borough more efficiently. Where the administration of housing benefit and the provision of housing assistance are dealt with by different departments of the Council, it will be necessary for the Services to ensure that effective liaison arrangements between departments are in place.

- 2.3 Members acknowledge the data protection restrictions around the sharing of information electronically held in various databases. Nevertheless they expressed strong concerns regarding insufficient sharing of customer information between council departments. As a result, they sought clarification from the Benefits and Local Taxation Service who informed the Panel that at the present time, Council Tax data cannot be used for any other purpose unless specific statutory permission exists that allows secondary disclosure. Legal Services have also issued guidance which backs up this stance. Information given by, or held about, a member of the public should be used only for the purpose it was obtained or given. Local Authorities are expected to make information given to them for Housing Benefit or Council Tax purposes available

to those officers within the Authority who need it to administer or audit claims for benefit. Local Authorities may use Housing Benefit or Council Tax information for other purposes (.e.g. to assess entitlement to free school meals), but only if the claimant consents. This is specified on the relevant Claim form.

2.4 It was also noted that the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) was reviewing the issue of secondary (data) use and revised guidance is imminent. The Quality Assurance and Data Manager explained that the Data Protection issues could be overcome provided the Re-Housing Service provide a written statement documenting exactly which team/section required access to the data and the reasons why the sensitive personal data is being requested. It was agreed that once the guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office has been issued, a briefing should be produced for Members, outlining the implications for the Housing Service.

2.5 Draft copies of the new Housing Application Forms were distributed to the Panel Members wish to ensure that new tenants are required to indicate the likelihood of claiming housing benefit when they apply to Homes for Haringey and that the application form includes the necessary permissions required for the release of electronic data.

2.6 The Panel is aware that the Housing Services in other local authorities have overcome the Data Protection issues which served to convince that this was achievable. They were pleased to learn that the Housing Service was in the process of redesigning the Housing Registration Form and wished to ensure that all the necessary permissions required to carry out data checks on applicants are included on the new form and recommend that subject to legal advice, the following statement should be included on the form: *"The Council need to protect the public funds we handle, and we may use the information you have provided on this form to prevent and detect fraud. We may also share this information for the same purposes with other organisations that handle public funds. We may take steps to confirm the information you have given us and check that you do not owe the council money by looking at other relevant information available to the council (for example council tax, electoral register, benefits, or council tenancy records) or through an external agency on a confidential basis. We may also visit you in your home before making an offer."* (Subject to the necessary legal approval).

## **2.7 The Housing Register**

2.8 As documented elsewhere the Housing Register had not been reviewed for a number of years and needed to be re-evaluated. The purpose of the re-evaluation was to ensure that the register was up to date and reviewed on a regular basis thereafter. Letters were sent to all tenants on the Housing Register; the closing date for response from tenants was 8<sup>th</sup> October 2006. Tenants were asked to respond to the letter indicating whether they wished to remain on the Housing Register and to enable the Re-housing Service to check that the correct awarding of priority points and accurate matching of individual housing needs. The introduction of the new Choice Based Lettings scheme also provided the Service with the right opportunity to refresh the register.

- 2.9 The Policy and Procedures Manager gave a verbal update on the outcome of the review. It was noted that a more rigorous approach will be taken to verify the details of all tenants. The register now stands at approximately 10,230 applicants (reduced from 24,000), however the final figure could be in the region of 11,300 once all outstanding issues are dealt with.

## **2.10 Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 211 Members are keen to ensure that the new Housing Registration Form includes information to capture data on ethnicity to ensure monitoring targets are achieved for all lettings.

### **Recommendations**

- (5) That the following statement be incorporated onto the new Housing Registration Form: *“The Council need to protect the public funds we handle, and we may use the information you have provided on this form to prevent and detect fraud. We may also share this information for the same purposes with other organisations that handle public funds. We may take steps to confirm the information you have given us and check that you do not owe the council money by looking at other relevant information available to the council (for example council tax, electoral register, ,benefits, or council tenancy records) or through an external agency on a confidential basis. We may also visit you in your home before making an offer.”* (Subject to the necessary legal approval).
- (6) That the new Housing Registration Form be explicit in asking whether applicants are like to apply for housing benefit, so that officers in the Re-Housing Service are able to be better prepared to assist applicants in their claims and to reduce the risks and level of housing arrears.
- (7) The new Housing Registration Form will capture sufficient information to ensure compliance with the Equalities Impact Assessment criteria.

## **3.0 GOOD NEIGHBOUR TRANSFERS**

- 3.1 During the course of the scrutiny review, the Panel sought legal advice about the inclusion of “good neighbours” transfers in the policy and was informed that whilst this is a legitimate aim of the Council, those applying for a transfer must be treated on the same basis as other applicants. The allocations scheme must reflect a sensible balance between meeting the housing needs of existing tenants and new applicants, whilst ensuring the efficient use of the housing stock. The panel wanted a greater degree of weighting to be given to this category in the new policy. Members are extremely disappointed to note that after the Executive agreed to this recommendation the matter was reconsidered by Officers and the Executive Member for Housing. They decided that the recommendation that the Good Neighbour Transfer factor is not appropriate and it was therefore deleted from the policy The Panel feel very strongly that this should be reinstated into the policy as originally agreed by the Executive in September.

**Recommendation:**

- (8) That the 'good neighbour' factor of the allocations and lettings policy should be reinstated.

**4.0 CUSTOMER CALL CENTRE**

- 4.1 Members of the Panel visited the Customer Service Centre in Wood Green and witnessed interviews by officers. It was unclear to Members whether there was a target timescale between initial inquiry and formal interview. The Panel was of the view that targets should be introduced and monitored on a regular basis to ensure that applicants are not left waiting for long periods of time before being interviewed. The Panel suggested a target of ten working days.

**Recommendation**

- (9) That a target of 10 working days be introduced and monitored appropriately to ensure that applicants are not left waiting for long periods of time between making an initial housing inquiry and formal interview.

**5.0 DRAFT LEAFLET – YOUR CHOICE, YOUR MOVE**

- 5.1 With reference to the 'points' leaflet, the Panel was satisfied that on-line self assessment will be made available for applicants to calculate the number of points allocated, and agreed that this recommendation should not be pursued.

**Recommendation:**

- (10) In view of the fact that on-line self assessment will be made available for applicants to calculate the number of points allocated, the original recommendation should be deleted.