

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – CABINET QUESTIONS

Councillor Diakides (Cabinet Member for Housing)

QUESTION 1 – Councillor John Bevan

I note that the number of properties released re the UNDER OCCUPATION SCHEME was 96 in 2005/2006, 51 in 2006/2007 and 11 2007/2008 to date.

To provide a new property via the Housing Corporation requires an approximate subsidy of £150,000. The cost of the 11 cases in 2007/2008 was £19,000. In view of the enormous financial benefits, and also the benefits to residents living in overcrowded conditions, that result from increasing the numbers of properties that are removed from under occupation can the Cabinet Member for housing explain why the number of properties released has been decreasing for the last 3 years.

ANSWER

In 2005/06, under occupation moves were identified as a 'stretch target' for the Council's LPSA. A targeted approach resulted in 96 moves (a figure that exceeded the stretch target) during 2005/06 and 51 moves during 2006/07.

For a variety of reasons, the number of under occupation moves has declined during the past 18 months. One of the main reasons appears to be that many of the applicants who remained on the list after 2005/06 have high expectations and are only prepared to consider specific areas or particular types of property. With the introduction of Haringey's choice based lettings scheme, they seem to be quite happy to wait until they see a property that they are interested in.

The council has recently reviewed the whole allocations and pointing system (see response to the next question) and is putting into place additional measures to encourage more take up.

QUESTION 2 – Councillor John Bevan

Please also can the Cabinet Member explain that despite being accepted scrutiny recommendations, September 2006, why recommendations

5a GREATER INCENTIVE BE GIVEN TO ACHIEVING MORE UNDER OCCUPATION TRANSFERS CONSIDERATION BE GIVEN TO INCREASE THE FINANCIAL REWARD AND INTRODUCE OTHER FORMS OF ASSISTANCE TO TENANTS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS,

5b THE UNDER OCCUPATION SCHEME BE RE LAUNCHED WITH ENHANCED PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN TO ENSURE GREATER PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE SCHEME,

have still not been implemented.

The council decided to review the whole allocations and points system in a comprehensive way. This review has been recently completed and its recommendations already agreed by the Executive.

We have found that financial incentives on their own are not sufficient in the vast majority of the relevant cases, with many applicants being prepared to wait until they can access better quality units in areas of their choice. We are therefore putting emphasis on ways to increase the range of attractive choices we can provide in such cases.

I am pleased to confirm that we have increased the number of points awarded to under occupiers who are willing to transfer to a smaller property, and we have appointed a couple of Home Connections Support Officers to monitor applicants' bids and provide one-to-one advice and support for highly-pointed applicants (including under occupiers) who are not actively bidding for properties.

In addition we are exploring innovative ways of creating additional choices for people living in units larger than they strictly need eg we have started discussions with some of our RSL partners on exploring ways in which they can provide suitable choices for underoccupiers in other parts of the country, including seaside homes and also suitable sheltered accommodation options which may prove attractive in certain cases and so on.

On the financial incentives front, under our present under occupation scheme, we offer £2,000 to tenants who move into a one-bedroom home, and £1,000 to tenants who are willing to downsize to a home with more than one bedroom. We will also arrange, and pay for, the tenant's removals and we have made adequate budgetary provision for these.

In consultation with other local authorities in the North London sub region, we have been reviewing the financial incentives offered to under occupiers who are willing to move to accommodation with fewer bedrooms.

Haringey is to receive £16,000 of the £100,000 funding awarded to the North London sub region, and will be using this money to fund internal decorations, the re-direction of mail, and one week's overlapping rent. We are planning to consult with under occupiers before changing the financial incentives that we offer tenants for giving up one or more bedrooms.

A new leaflet, setting out the improved terms of Haringey's new under occupation scheme (including the financial incentives) will be published at the end of January 2008. The scheme will then be actively promoted to maximise take-up.

QUESTION 3 – Councillor Catherine Harris

Is the Lead Member for Housing confident that the ALMO, namely Homes for Haringey, have a senior management team currently in place, with the capability and

capacity to drive the Decent Homes capital programme through, improving tenants homes, and secondly to lead the ALMO to achieve a 3 housing service within the councils set targets for doing so?*

ANSWER

Yes I do have such confidence.

This confidence is based on the significant progress that the ALMO has made since its inception in April 2006, not least the achievement of a two star rating (with promising prospects for improvement) in the recent Audit Commission Inspection. It is worth pointing out that ours is the 1st (and still the only) round 6 ALMO to have secured the coveted 2 stars rating, (indeed 10 ALMO's from earlier rounds have still to achieve the 2 stars, despite repeated attempts).

A further reason for my confidence is the fact that we are the only Authority/ALMO that has planned ahead for the implementation of the Decent Homes Programme, by establishing a partnership with good contractors well in advance of the funds being made available, as well as adequate design and project management resources to ensure that we deliver as soon as the government confirms the funding. (A number of other earlier ALMOs that had funds already allocated to them last year, are struggling due to inadequate advance planning and quite a few are underspending on their allocations, to the despair of DCLG).

Our decent homes constructor partners, which were selected through a rigorous procurement process with tenants and leaseholders representatives fully involved, have already been appointed and are ready to progress the programme as soon as the government has confirmed the amount of decent homes funding that Haringey will receive. Next week we are also launching pilots in certain estates with some of the selected contractors consulting with residents in order to refine the arrangements and ensure that we are as ready as possible to hit the ground running.

Recent discussions with Communities and Local Government (CLG) demonstrate that the government is satisfied with Homes for Haringey's readiness to deliver the decent homes programme and we are confident that Haringey will receive a substantial funding allocation for 2008/09 and 2010/11.

The next positive factor I would like to bring to members attention is the fact that as soon as the results of the Audit Commission inspection were known to us the HfH board received a report on the actions needed in order to address the points raised by the inspectors and to achieve as soon as possible our next target of 3 stars. Work on that report had started already in advance of the formal publication of the inspection's findings, which is a very heartening indicator.

Of course we do not take anything for granted and I am determined to ensure that the council keeps a close eye. The Council and the Board of Homes for Haringey are committed to working together to achieve continuous improvement and ensure that Homes for Haringey provides its customers with

excellent services. To this end, I have asked the new Assistant Director for Strategic and Community Housing to further develop the Council's clienting role to help support and monitor the ALMO's progress against the delivery of the decent homes programme and our 3 stars target.

Finally members will be aware that Stephen Clarke, the Chief Executive of Homes for Haringey, will unfortunately be leaving Haringey in February 2008, to take on a new role with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. Homes for Haringey has a strong Senior Management Team and I am confident that it is undertaking a rigorous recruitment process, in consultation with the Council, to appoint a new Chief Executive for the ALMO.

QUESTION 4 – Councillor Catherine Harris

Is the Lead Member for Housing aware of any plans by Homes for Haringey to survey the 337 households currently without central heating to identify any vulnerable, disabled or chronically ill household members, for whom central heating may be considered a likely priority, within the 337 households?

ANSWER

There is a variety of reasons why, despite our efforts, a small proportion of our stock does not have full central heating facilities. Of course these properties form part of the DHS strategy. As the decent homes standard requires the provision of a degree of thermal comfort, the lack of an efficient heating system will result in the home's failure to meet the decent homes standard.

The decent homes constructor partners will be surveying all of the Council's homes as part of the decent homes programme, and the properties that are currently without central heating will be included in the programme for heating and any other works necessary to meet the decent homes standard.

We are currently awaiting confirmation of the decent homes funding available from Communities and Local Government and the timing of its release. However, we will of course seek to prioritise the homes of those residents who are vulnerable, disabled or chronically ill, ensuring that these properties are dealt with in the first phases of Haringey's decent homes programme.