

Minutes

SOCIAL SERVICES, HOUSING AND PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

23 March 2017



Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge UB8 1UW

	<p>MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors: Wayne Bridges (Chairman) Jane Palmer (Vice-Chairman) Teji Barnes Peter Davis Becky Haggart Shehryar Ahmad-Wallana Tony Eginton Jazz Dhillon</p> <p>CO-OPTED MEMBER: Mary O'Connor</p> <p>OFFICERS PRESENT: Debby Weller and Dan Kennedy - Head of Business Performance, Policy & Standards Neil Fraser - Democratic Services Officer</p>
54.	<p>CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS (<i>Agenda Item</i>)</p> <p>The Chairman advised the Committee that, following the previous meeting, the Chairman of the Hillingdon Safeguarding Adults Partnership Board had written to apologise for the poor quality of the responses to the Committee's written questions. The basic responses had been passed to a member of staff, (who was no longer with the organisation), with the mandate to expand upon the answers given before passing these to the Committee. Unfortunately, the original, basic answers were forwarded to the Committee in error. It was accepted that the responses were inadequate, and it was confirmed that care would be taken to ensure all future responses were of the correct standard.</p>
55.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TO REPORT THE PRESENCE OF ANY SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Beulah East (with Councillor Jazz Dhillon substituting) and Cllr Peter Money (no substitute).</p>
56.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>

57.	<p>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 23 FEBRUARY 2016 (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p>Referring to minute 50, Hillingdon Adult Safeguarding Board - Chairman Q&A Session, Councillor Eginton highlighted that Councillor Cooper's comments regarding the quality of the responses to the Committee's written questions had been omitted. Councillor Cooper had remarked that the written responses received had been hard to understand, and were lacking in relevant information.</p> <p>In addition, Councillor Eginton's statement that other Councils were making their ratified performance data available for review earlier than October had been omitted.</p> <p>RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be approved as a correct record, subject to the above additions.</p>
58.	<p>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED IN PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items would be considered in public.</p>
59.	<p>WITNESS SESSION FOR SECOND MAJOR REVIEW - THE IMPACT OF CHANGES TO HOUSING BENEFITS ON RESIDENTS AND THE COUNCIL (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Debby Weller, Policy and Strategy Manager - Housing, provided a witness report as part of the Committee's review into the changes to Housing Benefits. Ms Weller was supported by Dan Kennedy, Head of Business Performance, Policy and Standards.</p> <p>Members were informed that at the previous meeting, the witness session had provided evidence from a front-line service perspective, whilst the second witness session would consider how reforms to Housing Benefits fit within a wider policy framework for Housing.</p> <p>Ms Weller referred to the Homelessness Reduction Bill, currently being considered by Parliament. The Bill was designed to prioritise early intervention from councils to prevent people threatened with homelessness from actually becoming homeless. Under the Bill, councils in England would be required to help all eligible people, whether they were single or a family, for 56 days before they were threatened with homelessness. Those who were already homeless would receive support for a further 56 days, to help them secure accommodation. This was approximately double the support time currently offered, and would be advertised on the Council website, and via leaflets, partners, and other communication channels.</p> <p>The disparity between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in the private rented sector and the actual rents charged by landlords meant that there was an increased risk of homelessness due to evictions of households unable to meet rental costs and that the application of the lowered Household Benefit Cap posed a further risk. This had implications for the supply of housing and the steps that could be taken to assist potentially homeless households.</p>

Once the legislation was passed, a steering group, which would include local authority representatives, would assist in informing of the revised homelessness guidance. The group had not yet been constituted, and so it was unknown whether Hillingdon would be asked to contribute. The revised guidance was expected to include a more detailed understanding of what would be considered 'reasonable steps' to assist homeless households. There may also be an impact on 'suitability of accommodation' requirements including in relation to affordability and location. It was not unlikely that aspects would also be tested via case law.

Changes to the funding of Supported Housing, including hostels and refuges, would reduce funding via the benefits system. From 2019/20 onwards, core rent and service charges would only be paid up to the LHA rate (through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit), with the difference to be made up by Local Authorities through a discretionary fund. A Green Paper setting out the detailed arrangements, to allay uncertainty for supported housing providers, was expected this Spring.

The Government recently published regulations to remove the automatic entitlement to housing costs in the Universal Credit Full Service for some 18-21 year olds. This was designed to encourage young people who could stay at home to do so, to avoid moving out and passing those costs onto the tax payer. Exemptions to the policy included claimants who were orphans or whose parents lived abroad, or where it would be inappropriate for the claimant to live in the parental home due to a serious risk to their physical or mental wellbeing. Exemptions also applied in a variety of circumstances, including where claimants were responsible for a child or qualifying young person, were care leavers before the age of 18, or were subject to active multi-agency management. In addition, exemptions applied where the claimant was not expected to work full time, or where a claimant was earning a certain salary. These regulations would only apply in Universal Credit Full Service areas, which were gradually being rolled out across the country. Roll out in Hillingdon was scheduled to begin in July 2018.

Members were informed that from April 2017, the Temporary Accommodation Management Fee paid by DWP to local authorities would be replaced by a new DCLG grant; the Flexible Housing Support Fund, which would give local authorities greater flexibility to manage homelessness. The housing cost element would continue to be paid by DWP, though this would move to standard LHA rates as Universal Credit was rolled out.

The new grant would be allocated according to a formula which reflected relative homeless pressures, while at the same time ensuring that high pressure local authorities were protected. Hillingdon had recently received notice of its allocation for the next 2 years, though there was no information beyond that time. It was highlighted that the allocation would be granted each year, regardless of the actual numbers of households in temporary accommodation and how the fund had been used. The Council would be able to exercise discretion over how to use the fund.

The recent Government White Paper 'Fixing Our Broken Housing Market' focussed on increasing and speeding up the supply of housing over the long term, primarily through the planning system. Though these planning changes would take time to deliver, the paper also set out how the Government would

help people, including confirming support for the Homelessness Reduction Bill.

The Paper made it clear that Starter Homes were just one form of affordable ownership, and would only be available to households with an annual income below £90k in London. Cash buyers would be excluded, and the proportion of Starter Homes on developments would be decided locally. The Paper proposed a multi tenure approach rather than home ownership at all costs, as this was thought to be able to deliver development faster.

Highlighting the Affordable Homes Programme 2016-21, Members were advised that most London Affordable Rent homes were expected to be let at substantially below 80% of market value. In addition, London Living Rent (LLR) was a Rent to Buy product with sub-market rents on time-limited tenancies. LLR rents were based on one third of the local median income. Eligibility for the product was limited to social or private tenants with a maximum income of £60k. It was noted that the affordability of housing would interact with the changes to welfare benefits, particularly the freezing of LHA rates.

Members thanked Ms Weller for the report, and went on to ask a number of questions.

The Committee sought further information on how to safeguard public housing tenants who had to deal with landlords who may be in rent arrears at risk of homelessness. In response, it was highlighted that most homelessness was due to private sector evictions. Whilst the Council could appeal to landlords to not increase their rent charges, and could emphasise the benefits of a stable tenancy to the landlords, in a buoyant housing market it was inevitable that some private landlords would seek to increase the rent they charged. Hillingdon would work to encourage households to not ignore the risk of homelessness, but to face it and deal with it early. The Council could further help by assisting the household to find alternative tenancies, or help with deposits.

On occasion, landlords would approach the Council seeking further housing grants or discretionary payments. The White Paper sought to increase the number of institutional landlords, to increase stability for tenants. It had been recognised that some households presented to the Council very late in the eviction process, which gave the Council less time to negotiate with landlords. Often, this resulted in having to place the household into emergency housing, such as Bed and Breakfast accommodations. The new legislation set out the structure to engage with households earlier in the process, through regular dialogue and proactive working.

Members sought further information regarding the scale of the issue, including how many households were in need of support, and how many officers were involved in providing this support.

Officers provided an estimate that in the current year, approximately 1000 households presented as homeless, had a statutory priority need and were 'eligible', with 50% of these progressing to a formal homelessness assessment. Of these, approximately 270 were formally accepted, at which point the Council had a statutory duty to re-house them. Advice was offered to circa 2,400 residents. It was expected that the changes to legislation

could result in a significant increase in the workloads for housing prevention staff, given an increased focus for non priority homeless households and the reporting requirements as set out in the Bill. Officers may be required to record information on a case by case basis, in detail. Updates to systems would be required to record this data.

Dan Kennedy, Head of Business Performance, Policy and Standards, confirmed that a recent restructure within the Housing department had taken place, but that this had resulted in no reduction in staffing. The restructure had re-graded management roles in order to attract greater expertise and skills from the marketplace. A 'subject matter expert' would be placed within each team, to support casework and consistency in standards. The Cabinet had committed to continuing to resource the area, and the department was actively recruiting for 4 senior roles, which were expected to be filled in the next month. Recruitment for management roles was currently underway, with 2 of 6 to be filled permanently. The remaining 4 roles would be filled on an interim basis, pending permanent recruitment. It was recognised that filling roles with the requisite quality was difficult in such a competitive marketplace, a fact borne out by one of the candidates declining a role offered, due to their current employer offering a more competitive package.

Members sought details of the how Hillingdon encouraged tenants to consider alternative accommodation. Officers advised that there were a number of tactics employed, including financial incentives. Often, households would be offered incentives to look at downsizing to a smaller property, or to consider accommodation in new areas. Homeless households would have a suitability assessment carried out, and if it was deemed appropriate, could even be placed outside of the Borough. In certain situations, and where appropriate, the Council may take a harder stance towards those households who refused to move or downsize without good reason, particularly those who had few ties to their current area such as family or schools. In such instances, Hillingdon could pursue a discharge, though this could lead to complaints or legal challenges.

The Chairman requested confirmation that housing deposits were being returned to the Council at the end of a tenancy. Officers confirmed that the deposits were required to be returned to the tenant, (through the statutory Tenancy Deposit Scheme) often to aid them in securing a tenancy at another property. This was the case even if tenants had a change in financial circumstances and were no longer claiming benefits. Members felt that in such instances this money should be returned to the Council to help other deserving claimants, and it was agreed that this be recommended within the review's final report.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the report be noted;**
- 2. That the final report be drafted, inclusive of the suggested recommendation regarding the return of housing deposits.**

60. **CABINET FORWARD PLAN** (*Agenda Item 6*)

Noted.

61.	WORK PROGRAMME (<i>Agenda Item 7</i>) Noted.
	The meeting, which commenced at 7.00 pm, closed at 7.49 pm.

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Neil Fraser - Democratic Services Officer on 01895 250692. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and Members of the Public.