

**Select Committee on the Environment 4<sup>th</sup> March 2010**

**Review of Housing Allocations: Progress Report .**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To update Members on the work that is taking place to make the Housing Allocations Scheme simpler and more transparent.

**Background**

2. In March 2009, Cabinet approved proposals to implement a bandings scheme in place of the points scheme. It was also agreed to review the process for assessing medical needs for rehousing; improve the arrangements for exceptions, reviews and appeals; and produce a tenant incentive scheme.
3. This report will provide updates on each of these pieces of work.

**Replacement of the Points Scheme with a Bandings Scheme.**

4. This project has been delayed beyond its original target date for a number of reasons, including its complexity, delays in recruiting two specialist staff to work on the project and then in backfilling their substantive posts, and the need to work around other priority projects both in Housing and in ICT. Overall however, the work that is required is progressing well, and our main aim is to get the new scheme working correctly and to identify and eliminate any potential problems prior to implementation.
5. The main areas of work involved are
  - Computer programming changes
  - Testing the new scheme
  - Updating existing applications
  - Staff training
  - Customer and partner communications
6. The programming and testing have been carried out entirely by existing staff in Housing and ICT alongside their other duties, and have been ongoing since Cabinet gave approval for the change. In order for the new scheme to be simpler but maintain broadly the same housing outcomes, the series of rules by which the computerised system sorts housing applications into priority order has had to be extensively amended and repeatedly tested. This process is almost completed, although final testing will be required when the new system is refreshed in April with the data gathered from existing housing applicants.
7. The two specialist staff seconded to work on the project are mainly devoted to

8. updating existing applications, although they have also now begun the staff training programme. In November, we wrote to every applicant on the waiting and transfer lists (6722 in all), asking them to confirm whether they wished to remain on the list, and if so to supply additional information. This additional information included both data that was not previously held (eg whether customers who are under-occupying family houses will move to flats and one bedroom bungalows), and data that needed to be collected into different categories to meet our reporting obligations (eg disability and ethnicity). The response to this exercise has been very good, with over 4800 returns received, but the process of updating applications has proved extremely time-consuming. Many customers have used the form to report changes or ask questions, and the two staff have had to deal with these which has of course impacted upon their progress in updating the applications. Nevertheless, 2037 applications had been fully updated by 1<sup>st</sup> February, and we have at the same time been updating ethnicity data on tenancy records where this was not previously held but has now been submitted in connection with a transfer application.
9. Updating applications is now likely to continue until late March/early April, following which we will transfer the data into the test system, and write to everyone on the list again informing them of their band, their band start date, and the reason why they have been placed in that band. They will then have the opportunity of contacting us to correct any information or query anything they disagree with before the new scheme goes live. We have also begun the process requested by the Working Group of reviewing those applications where people have not responded to us, in order to identify any vulnerable customers who may need our help with the exercise.
10. Communications with partners and customers will also become a major element of the project in the remaining weeks up to and beyond implementation. This will include media releases, leaflets, posters, and Information Days in a variety of venues.
11. Progress on the project is reviewed every two weeks, and the project team is expecting the implementation of the Bandings Scheme to be achieved in June.

### **Assessment of Medical Needs for Rehousing**

12. Assessment of medical need for rehousing is currently undertaken by the PCT and the intention is to bring this in-house under the occupational therapy remit. The PCT are aware of our intentions and we are in discussions with regard to the changes and potential time scales.
13. This element of the review has recently commenced, and is likely to take around six months to complete. The first stage is to collect the views of customers and stakeholders, and to this end a survey has been conducted of housing applicants who have had medical needs assessed under the existing process over the past six months. Again, we have had a good response to this exercise, with 78 surveys returned, representing around a third of those sent out.
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The intention is to prepare a report and proposals which will be discussed with the Working Group in due course.

## **Exceptions, Reviews and Appeals**

15. A new policy for dealing with exceptional cases outside normal policy guidelines was discussed by Select Committee, approved by Decision Sheet, and implemented in February 2009. The majority can be dealt with at officer level (Head of Service) and the new process is working well. A total of 83 cases have been considered, with 68 being approved as exceptions, and 15 being rejected, withdrawn, or offered other solutions. So far there has only been one instance of a case being referred to the Director and Cabinet Member for a decision, because it had wider implications and could set a precedent for other cases. Even where the exception was not approved, there has to date been only one case where the applicant was ultimately dissatisfied and needed to appeal the decision.
16. The process for reviews and appeals has been considered in detail by the Working Group, and procedural changes have been made which did not require policy approvals. The main changes have been to give the customer the choice of a written submission or face to face discussion; to allow the customer to have a representative to speak on their behalf; and to provide a leaflet explaining the process and containing a template for the customer to set out their grievance. The Lettings Policy will also shortly be updated with these changes, and new staff guidance has been provided.

## **Introduction of an Incentive Scheme**

17. The first part of this project is to consider incentives for people who are under-occupying family homes and are willing to move to smaller properties, and it is being carried out as part of our government funded Overcrowding Pathfinder. Research has been undertaken by visiting such customers to ascertain their needs, and looking at best practice elsewhere. A set of proposals has been drawn up which will be discussed with the Working Group prior to a pilot exercise. We are also in discussions with RSLs with a view to all social landlords in the borough offering the same scheme.
18. In the future, it is intended to consider a wider scheme providing benefits for good tenants in order to incentivise positive conduct of tenancies, and this could include giving people with a good tenancy record some additional preference for rehousing.

## **Recommendations**

19. Members are requested to note the contents of this report.



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